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Why can't we know the truth about a strike that happened 40 years ago?

Ricky Tomlinson

I was one of the 24 Shrewsbury building workers jailed after industrial action. And I won't know why for another 10 years

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Forty years and still no justice. It's a part of history now, but a history that has never been fully told. The [Shrewsbury building workers' strikes of 1972](#), which saw 24 working men convicted for crimes they did not commit, are nothing short of a state-sanctioned conspiracy. And as the youngest of us is now 68, I'm nearly 74 and the eldest of us is 84, we worry that the truth will not out before it's too late.

We now know, thanks to the current government, that papers pivotal to the case will not be released for another 10 years - a decision that was taken by the Ministry of Justice without consulting any of us who have survived. And so the question remains: who is this government, like [Edward Heath's government of the early 1970s](#), trying to protect? What are they hiding? Why is it that in a modern democracy, in a so-called age of transparency, that we have to struggle for the truth?

The strikes of 72 were the first and only organised building workers' strikes in Britain. I am proud to have been part of them. What's rarely remembered is what we were striking against. Not only low pay, but dehumanising conditions. On a site with hundreds of men, we'd be given two rat-infested, filthy toilets. Should you get soaked in the rain as you worked, there was nowhere to change. Either you headed home and lost your pay or continued to work, sodden and freezing. [In 1973 alone, there were 231 fatal accidents in construction](#). I used to say that the then baron, Sir Edwin McAlpine, would not be allowed to keep his race horses in such conditions. It was a national disgrace.

In September of 1972 we organised what was a fractured workforce, labouring sporadically on temporary sites. We hired six coaches and picketed each of the large sites around Shrewsbury. The police accompanied us at every step but it was peaceful throughout - nobody was even cautioned. A few weeks later I found myself charged with 27 offences and was later thrown into Leicester prison on a two-year sentence for "conspiracy to intimidate".

Of course all the convictions were based on lies and fabrication. Many of the men on trial had never even met before but stood accused of conspiring together. Little Mackie Jones, our union treasurer who went from site to site, raising funds, wasn't even present at the time our conspiracy was supposed to have taken place. And so the impression of an organised conspiracy was created. The reality couldn't have been further from this picture. I was held in solitary confinement as I refused to work or wear clothes. The prison governor, a former bricklayer who retired from the trade after developing arthritis in his hands, took pity and handed me a copy of Robert Tressell's [The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists](#) - a book that remains the building worker's bible.

My treatment was not the worst. Des Warren, another organiser and close friend of mine who received three years in prison - the harshest sentence of all - was regularly made to drink the "liquid cosh", a cocktail of tranquillisers that numbed inmates and gave you the hundred-mile stare. Dezzie died in 2004, of what his wife describes as "drug-induced Parkinson's" - and we're still fighting to see his prison records to prove the link between his death and his treatment in prison. The imprisonment and sustained intimidation destroyed families and communities. My children would often have disapproving fingers wagged in their directions, and even now my two beautiful grandchildren experience it. People still don't know the truth. The stigma of arrest and imprisonment was so great that some of the convicted hid it from their children for decades. I only came to my career in entertainment as I could not find any work elsewhere - I was turned away at the gates many times.

What now? As the [victims of the Hillsborough tragedy begin to receive justice](#) and the [IPCC launches an investigation into Orgreave](#), it is time for the government to grant truth to us as well. We want the evidence laid bare. That our prosecutions and imprisonment were brought about through collaboration between government, police and the construction industry. That myself and Dezzie were put under surveillance by MI5, and that what happened was a an organised attack against trade unionism. That we were the victims, not the perpetrators of a conspiracy. If it were any other country we'd read this secret history with contempt.

A member of our campaign committee, Eileen Turnbull, has carried out extensive research into our case. She has discovered evidence which indicates there was government interference in the charges that were brought against the 24 pickets in 1973. Based on this evidence, we lodged an application to the [Criminal Cases Review Commission](#) on 3 April 2012. We believe the commission after considering the evidence will refer the case to the court of appeal, where after 40 years the miscarriage of justice will once and for all be overturned.

As I stood in the dock 40 years ago I told the court before sentencing that I had "been led to believe [we] had the finest legal system in the world. Now I can only fear for the working people of this country ..." The establishment's continued attempt at a cover-up makes me feel the same way again.

- This article was amended on 24 January 2013 because it used the word "corroboration" where "collaboration" was meant.

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