Working Class Heroes, Mick Lynch, and the Unions – An Interview with Gregor Gall

Abstract

Interview with Gregor Gall on his book *Mick Lynch – The Making of a Working-Class Hero* (Manchester University Press, 2024). Mick Lynch is General Secretary of the UK's National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT), seen as one of the most active, high-profile and militant of unions. 2022 saw a series of rail industrial actions, the media coverage of which thrust Lynch into the media spotlight. His blunt, reasoned and reasonable, performance and deft handling of TV journalists saw various incidents go viral. Acclaim from some quarters followed and the moniker 'working-class hero' was frequently employed online and in mainstream commentary. Gall discusses this nomination of herodom and union leadership drawing on his political biography of Lynch.

Introduction

Gregor Gall is Visiting Professor of Industrial Relations at the University of Leeds and author of *Bob Crow: Socialist, leader, fighter* (2017) and *The Punk Rock Politics of Joe Strummer* (2022). He has regularly contributed to the *Morning Star*, *The Guardian*, and other media outlets on matters of unions and industrial conflict. He provides research and consultancy to several unions, particularly the Fire Brigades Union.

Keywords

Mick Lynch, RMT, unions, working-class, Marxism, heroism

Jon Baldwin (JB): *In your new book, Mick Lynch – The Making of a Working-Class Hero (Manchester University Press, 2024), you analyse Lynch's path to working-class herodom. Acclaimed a folk hero, a working-class super-hero, with Mick Lynch 'working-class hero' mugs and tote bags, 46 million views of Lynch clips, hundreds of thousands of likes, and so forth. This was the phenomenon. As you note, there is no application process, no adjudication committee, and no use of referees or references in the proposal or establishment of a working-class hero. What is your working definition of working-class hero? And what was instrumental in Lynch's nomination?*

Gregor Gall (GG): The most authentic and convincing 'working-class hero' is a person who not only promotes and prosecutes the interests of workers as a social class but is also a person from the working-class and is still of the working-class in terms of their social class location. This means that they still have a material or economic connection to those whose interests they promote. Put bluntly, there is nothing to protect them from the vagaries of the market so that they still experience the same fortunes as those they seek to represent. Sometimes working-class heroes come into existence precisely at the time when the individual leaves the working-class in terms of their economic and social position. Examples can be found from the fields of sport, acting and music. This change of class position means that their herodom is more concerned with their ability to rise out of their class – in other words, concerned with collective admiration for their individual merits and success.

This is why issues like 'a worker's MP on a worker's wage' or a union leader that takes only the average of their members' wages is important because MPs and union leaders perform roles that do disconnect them from those they seek to represent in terms of economic resources (salaries), distance from the workplace and being managers for their (union) staff. So, the more a working-class hero can meet all three criteria the more they will be authentic, and all other things being equal, also effective. On this basis, no matter how admirable Tony Benn might have been as an individual and in terms of his politics, he was not and could not be a working-class hero. Rather, he was a left-wing social democrat, and a supporter of workers.

But just as important as this point is what can be discerned about what the need or existence of working-class heroes signifies. No socialist or social scientist can credibly believe that forms of leadership are not needed in order to make social progress. But matters are considerably more complex than this bald statement. Comparing the context of Mick Lynch to that of Arthur Scargill is instructive. Lynch leads the RMT at time of the profound defeat of unions and the working-class in Britain (no matter the slight uptick in strike activity since 2022). This means that though both individuals have widely been denoted as working-class heroes, this has important differences. Lynch stands out for his simplified social democratic critique of the neo-liberal phase of capitalism. He resonates rhetorically precisely because others are not engaged in their own mass struggles. They lack the collective confidence, the enhanced political class consciousness, and coherent organisational forms to do so. By contrast, Scargill led mass struggles of miners at time of other mass struggles, enhanced political class consciousness and independent forms of political organisation. His leadership was in the heat of actual class war, both economic and political, whereas Lynch's leadership has been primarily in the form of media interviews in the ideological arena. For this, I recall the miners and others sang: 'Arthur Scargill walks on water' during the 1984-1985 strike.

From this we can glean that not only can the leadership embodied in working-class herodom take different forms but even at a time of the highest level of post-war class struggle in Britain, leadership is needed at many levels including critically that of national leadership. Given how radical working-class consciousness is unevenly distributed within the working-class, there will always be the need for leaders at all levels. The question then becomes how accountable they are to those they represent and whether they can take instruction from their followers rather they just give their followers instruction.

***JB**: What are, or should be, the actions of a working-class hero?*

GG: They must be more than to merely 'represent' the interests of the workers as modern parlance has it. It's common for a musician or actor receiving an award or accolade to say in their acceptance speech that they are 'there representing' x or y. This merely means that they, with a certain identity (of race, gender, class, sexual orientation etc), have broken through into another world through their own individual merit and wish to be seen implicitly or otherwise as a 'role model' or 'inspiration' for others of this identity. The importance of this is to highlight that actions must be more – and much more – than words and rhetoric. The deeds must follow too.

Now, words and deeds have a very intimate and necessary connection, and words as the primary form of human communication can constitute an action. To go back to the example of Arthur Scargill, he not only called for solidarity action from other workers during the epic battles of the miners in the 1970s and 1980s – he made speeches that implored if not demanded such action -

but he was also there directing those efforts on the ground, acting as a general marshalling his army. In other words, there was a physical and demonstrative side to his actions.

More broadly, the actions of a working-class hero should be able to build up the radical, oppositional forces of the working-class. This involves more than just inspiring and exhorting but also education and training and capacity building through practice. This is a challenging set of criteria for any individual who has a 'day job' of leading a union etc. It suggests that the working-class hero must be part of a wider collective or network (not necessarily a political party) in order to work with others to create the human, financial and organisational resources necessary for such work.

***JB**: The social semiotics of Lynch include the classic signifiers of working-class masculinity - a cockney 'geezer' edge, Cheeky-Chappy, stocky bald football supporter, straight-talking, and straight, ordinary working bloke. You note that "working-class heroes are pretty much all white males." Can you elaborate on these issues around race, gender, and sexuality? What are the structures, identity politics, or forces that seem to prevent the emergence of a black, female, or gay working-class hero?*

GG: In the book, I point out that Jayaben Desai, leader of the Grunwick workers' strike in London between 1976 and 1978, is just about the only (relatively) well-known non-white woman who has been called a working-class hero. Even then she was often referred to as 'Mrs Desai' in a way which sought to undermine her significance and demean her. Fast-forward to 2005 and the Gate Gourmet strike at Heathrow airport. A similar strike in many ways in terms of the composition of the strikers being mainly women of a south Asian heritage, the strike leader being a woman, a long-drawn out fight and, ultimately, a defeat. The leader of this strike is not well-known at all because, amongst other things, the strike took place in the context of the continued defeat of unions and so on. In other words, a woman leading a strike was not seen as sufficiently heroic by others given, ironically, the debilitated state of the union movement. In this sense, the same act of leadership did not resonate because in the Gate Gourmet case it did not affirmatively 'speak' to the consciousness of workers. By contrast, Ann Harper, married to Scargill between (1961-2001), was sometimes called a working-class hero because of her role in organising National Women Against Pit Closures. Her appellation stemmed from what she was doing in a more opportune moment, namely, a women leader organising resistance when resistance itself was more commonplace.

This helps highlight one of the contextual aspects that need to be considered when accounting for the absence of black, female, or gay working-class heroes. Put bluntly, and notwithstanding the continuation of racism, sexism, and homophobia, black, female, or gay individuals are now more prominent in the labour and union movement – and so potentially eligible to be working-class heroes – at a time when unions are weaker and the Labour Party more right-wing than for many decades. For example, there are now more women leaders of unions that ever before – as of early 2024, 19 of the 48 unions affiliated to the Trades Union Congress (TUC) are led by women. This includes the two biggest unions, UNISON and UNITE, amounting to 2.867m members (56% of TUC affiliated members) and a host of other small and medium unions, with the non-TUC affiliated union, the Royal College of Nurses (RCN) as well as the Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC), Wales TUC and Northern Ireland Public Services Alliance (NIPSA) union also being led by women. But neither Christina McAnea nor Sharon Graham, the latter being considerably more left-wing than the former and leading many more strikes too, have been called working-class

heroes. Though there is also the issue of each individual's persona and personal abilities to be taken into account, the elevation of these women union leaders has happened at a time when unions are still on the backfoot and not engaged in mass, generalised struggles of the likes of the 1970s and 1980s.

***JB**: You have also published a political biography of Bob Crow (Bob Crow – Socialist, Leader, Fighter, 2017). What are the differences and similarities between Crow and Lynch?*

GG: They key differences between Crow and Lynch are that Crow was far more of a mobiliser and Lynch is far more of a negotiator, and that Crow believed in Soviet-style socialism/communism while Lynch believes in 'old' Labour-style social democracy. Lynch's negotiating strategy is more based upon problem-solving within the confines of the room in which the bargaining table is to be found. When the bargaining table is not available because of employer intransigence, he countenances industrial action, but this is not his natural way. Crow understood far more that the results of what happens around the bargaining table are far more dependent upon what happens outside the room in which the table is. Lynch believes he has mastered the art and skills of negotiating. Crow was the firebrand speaker in order to help mobilise his members for collective action to get what they wanted through subsequent negotiations. Politically, the RMT is a left-led union, but Lynch is not from the left of the union like Crow was. Lynch's path to the general secretaryship came from a series of historical accidents like Crow's untimely death and Mick Cash's resignation. Crow's came from being at the head of a left faction that wanted to take control of the union and was successful in doing so.

With the exception of James Connolly (where he ignores that Connolly was amongst other things a revolutionary socialist), Lynch's political heroes are mainstream Labour Party leaders like Attlee, Wilson and Callaghan. Crow's were those associated with the Communist Party. This has a bearing on the aforementioned issue of mobilisation and negotiation because socialism/communism is based upon the self-emancipation of the working class while social democracy is about representative democracy where leaders do things on behalf of others – this explains why Hal Draper theorised each respectively as 'socialism from below' and 'socialism from above'.

***JB**: The book is both a celebration and critique of Lynch. In terms of celebration, you suggest two contributions Lynch has made: i) to reboot social democracy as a counter-narrative and alternate ideology to neo-liberalism; and ii) to rekindle trade unionism, and galvanise the working-class, albeit fleetingly, in imparting collective self-confidence. Can you say more about these successes and Lynch's politics of social democracy?*

GG: Lynch seems to have a cutting public edge to his politics because - although they are merely social democratic - they seem much more radical because Labour has moved so far to the right. Lynch reminds me of Roy Hattersley – when Kinnock was elected Labour leader in 1983, part of the so-called 'dream ticket,' Hattersley was his deputy. Kinnock was the 'left-wing' and Hattersley the 'right-wing'. Hattersley stayed the same over the years as Labour leaders (save Corbyn) galloped past him on their rush to the right. His columns in the *Guardian* criticising Thatcher and Thatcherism from a social democratic perspective seem increasingly radical even though they were from the right-wing side of social democracy.

That said, Lynch's particular take on Starmer undermines this cutting edge. He often says things like 'Labour has to find a way to connect with working-class people' which bizarrely suggests there is something in the means of communication that is amiss when the issue is, rather, the content of the policies and politics. Or, if it is about Labour policies and politics, he chooses to ignore the nature of the contemporary Labour Party. It is a no longer a social democratic party because it is a social liberal party because it has accommodated to the ideology of neo-liberalism. Indeed, Lynch often has said that Starmer must reveal his true self, again naively not recognising that Starmer has done precisely that by being a social liberal and not social democrat.

All this speaks to Lynch having a partial grasp of how the tectonic plates of politics can be moved by the working-class and the left. This is even though he says that he wants politics to go back to the situation of the 1970s when unions, tenants' associations, cooperative and community organisations were more widespread and much stronger. What he lacks is a firm understanding of how working-class, collective struggle built these organisations in the first place because he shows no appreciation of how they can be rebuilt the next time around. Instead, he falls back on the notion that we need the return of social democratic Labour government – which again begs the question of how it came about in the first place, and highlights Draper's notion of 'socialism from above'.

By contrast, Bob Crow did have some notion about how to rebuild the forces of the working-class and left by initiating a series of conferences out of which came the National Shop Stewards' Network, the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition and No2EU electoral organisation. Many criticisms can rightly be made of these organisations in terms of their impact and success but at least Crow set the ball rolling. Lynch is contemptuous of such initiatives. Instead, Lynch's speeches are full of platitudes about, for example, 'the working-class being back'. He has never attempted to put any meat on the bones of these platitudes because his only strategy for political change is to vote for Labour as it currently is.

***JB**: 'Unhappy is the land that needs a hero.' (Brecht's Galileo) You contextualise and explain Lynch's emergence as precisely within such an unhappy land for the working class: a class beaten down by years of austerity, with a poor state of strike action, a low in workers' collective struggle, a low in class confidence, and lack of (working) class consciousness. What does this tell us about the state of the left in the county?*

GG: The blunt answer must be that the left is at such a low point – not just the left outside the Labour Party but inside it too – compared to the early 1980s when Tony Benn came within a whisker (49.6% to 50.4%) of winning the 1981 election for deputy Labour leader. To use a phrase of Tony Cliff, the founder of the International Socialists/Socialist Workers Party: 'In the kingdom of the blind, the one-eyed man is king'. Consequently, all things are relative and Lynch with his lowly aspirations still looks so much better than he actually is. He has given people a 'voice' when they had no voice but that is all he has given them because, unlike Crow, he is not trying to organise an organisational alternative to Labour.

***JB**: The comedian Stewart Lee named Lynch as the "best spokesman for workers' rights and leftwing values this century," but also called Lynch a "Brexit arse made good." What do you make of the RMT support, not just under Lynch, for Brexit due to the belief that rail nationalisation would only occur again under such conditions? And what do you make of the announcement recently (25 April 2024) that an incoming Labour government would nominally at least, renationalise much of the rail network?*

GG: As I outline in the book, there was only one way to have a left exit from the EU and that was by being expelled for bringing back into public ownership sectors of the economy. To believe that the left could influence the nature of Brexit was a fallacy – it was a right-wing, reactionary movement from the very start and was bankrolled by some elements of big business. When Lynch says the problem with Brexit is not Brexit itself but who is implementing it, that is sheer non-sense. It was clear from day one that the likes of Gove, Johnson, and Farage – and no one else - would be implementing it the vote was won because they were the main drivers of the Brexit campaign. Gove, Johnson, and Farage had no intention of bringing rail back into public ownership. What they wanted was 'Singapore on the Thames', that is an even more deregulated, 'free' market economy.

***JB**: You make the point that unlike the very limited strike fund of the RMT, UNITE, under both Len McCluskey and Sharon Graham's leadership, has been able to pay £70 a day strike pay which of course helps in all-out strike action to secure victories. What strategic planning can unions learn to best generate and utilise power?*

GG: Asking workers to strike for higher pay during a cost-of-living crisis sharply highlights the need for decent levels of non-means tested strike from the first day of striking. If the union's resources are not capable of delivering this for all striking members, then a strategy of selective striking needs to be created. For example, Network Rail signallers on the main inter-city lines — rather than the rural routes — could have been kept out on strike. Meanwhile, train operating company members in the southeast of England — covering commuters going into London — could have been paid to do likewise. Those non-striking RMT members in the two national disputes could have paid a levy to fund those striking in order to keep the national strike fund from depleting too quickly.

But the broader lesson about strike pay is that unions are asking their members to sustain a loss in wages (if there is no strike pay) for something that have not yet gained. That is a risk, especially when considerable days of strike action are often needed to shift intransigent employers. You can, therefore, have situations where a couple of days action is taken with no discernible leverage created and the sacrificed wages are wasted because workers are then not prepared to take any more days of strikes given the loss of earnings.

***JB**: You suggest that there are six essential functions of leadership relevant to unions and the position of general secretary. These are i) agenda setting and framing of arguments; ii) public speaking and communicating; iii) negotiating; iv) strategizing and strategic planning; v) caucusing and alliance building; and vi) managing people and organisational resources. You say that Crow excelled in all these functions. How well has Lynch performed? In terms of union government, bargaining power, strike cost-benefit analysis, but also other assessment criteria, in terms of*

wider politics and popular opinion on union action, employer perceptions, union membership, participation, and morale levels.

GG: Where Lynch has come up short are on strategizing and strategic planning, and on caucusing and alliance building. Behind the issue of strike pay, Lynch did not recognise that the 'power to' disrupt was not synonymous with the 'power over' the bargaining partner. There are specific power contours to the railways such as the indemnification of the train operating companies from losses on strike days but there are also more general ones too – the willingness of the Westminster Tory government to spend massive sums of public money trying to withstand strike action in order to try to gain some electoral advantage. Lynch never proffered a strategy that could deal with these contours. In terms of alliance building, he was successful within his own union in creating a faction to dominate the union but he was not good at working with others in the union movement to create a grassroots movement to pressurise Labour and the Tories with – see the failure of *Enough is Enough*! to develop from its initial embryonic stage.

***JB**: On union power, you constantly make the distinction in the book between 'power to' disrupt and 'power over' one's bargaining opponent. Can you elaborate here?*

GG: Contrary to common perception, rail strikes are not as effective in gaining bargaining objectives as one might think. Signallers can shut down the network as can drivers but when these strikes are national ones and the government is ultimately the employer (through public subsidy or public ownership), the task of gaining bargaining demands is that much harder compared to a strike against a single isolated employer. All unions need to develop strategies to enhance the power of their strikes otherwise they will remain looking like 'one day wonders' that do not change the equilibrium of the bargaining relationship with the employer. Tactics will need to be more varied, action escalated and coordination between unions achieved. The most coordinated action in recent times was the 30 November 2011 public sector one-day strike over pensions. No action since 2011 has come anywhere near that level of coordination.

***JB**: Lynch agreed to be interviewed by countless journalists and broadcasters, appeared on panel-shows, and so forth yet did not engage with you in the writing of the book, despite your many appeals. This is, of course, his right, but why do you think he declined discussion with you? Do you think he sees academics in the same anti-intellectual way he sees the figure of the far-left – as the "boring left-wing activist with a plastic bag … stuffed full of papers"?*

GG: Yes, and he believes that left public intellectuals are antithetical to the labour and union movement which is abject nonsense. They have many academics that have played the role of 'critical friend' to the unions – Vic Allen and the miners being an obvious case. I think some of this does come from his disdain of the far left as he see them similarly as coming from outside the labour and union movement. But there is another dimension here – he like many in the RMT think that no one outside the RMT or no one that is not commissioned by the RMT has the right to write about the RMT. When I wrote the Bob Crow biography, his widow who works for the RMT asked that no one in the RMT cooperate with anyone writing a biography of Crow because she was going to do her own book. When she went to Pluto with her proposal, it was rejected because it was basically just a collection of Crow's speeches in which he pretty much (correctly) said the same thing again and again. I took the view that Crow was such an important figure that a constructive

critical analysis was needed of him for the benefit of the wider left. Consequently, that put some backs up in the RMT including seemingly that of Lynch.

***JB**: What should be the role of the union for the working classes today? As Marx suggested (Resolution of the I.W.A. on Trade Unions, Geneva, 1866), trade unions "originally sprang up from the spontaneous attempts of workmen" to check competition amongst themselves and to raise them at "least above the condition of mere slaves." Unions, "unconsciously to themselves," formed "centres of organisation of the working class." But they did not expand or exploit this organisational potential, becoming instead, too "exclusively bent upon the local and immediate struggles with capital" and did not fully appreciate the possibility of "their power of acting against the system of wages slavery itself." The potential of trade unions is anticipated by Marx: "Apart from their original purposes, they must now learn to act deliberately as organising centres of the working class in the broad interest of its complete emancipation." Does anything in your work on the contemporary trade union movement give any hint of this future hoped for by Marx?*

GG: Unions should be the first line of defence of workers' sectional and class interests because they are the more, if not most, direct form of interest organisations workers have. Political parties are a far more indirect, representative forms of interest organisations and the potential power of workers is most easily generated in the workplaces of the means of production, distribution and exchange. However, acting sectionally is far easier in unions terms than acting in a class-wide way because despite the professing of solidarity and class, the manifestations of class interests and action are far more difficult given that unions are inherently sectional, including even industrial unionism (but save the attempts at syndicalism by the likes of the Wobblies). Workers – via their unions or not - still need political representation in order to contest the control and use of the state. Labour is not a socialist party, never has been and never will be. So, for those that believe only a socialist party can more fully represent the collective interests of the working-class and ultimately help deliver socialism, a historical problem exists because if unions affiliate to a political party, 99 times out of 100 times, it has been and will be the Labour Party. Unions remain the only mass organisations of workers with potential power in the workplace as already mentioned. So, to directly answer the question about Marx, the answer is no. Only the RMT under Crow sought to tackle this task but without much in the way of success. Even if it had been successful at some level, the RMT is but one union and a small, if strategic, one at that.

***JB**: You have been called a critical friend of the unions. What brought you to the study of unions? Would you consider yourself a working-class academic?*

GG: My belief as a Marxist is that if workers are to have meaningful power under the quintessentially economic system called capitalism where accumulation of surplus value (profits) is the rationale, with ultimately the potential to use that to abolish capitalism, this power must be generated in the workplace first and foremost. Of course, other forms of power are important – they are necessary but not sufficient for this project by comparison to power at the points of production, distribution and exchange. This is the location for where the emancipation of the working-class must be an act of self-emancipation. This is what has drawn me to first study unions and to continues to do so in these inopportune neo-liberal times and notwithstanding all the foibles and flaws that unions have. I am not a working-class academic – my class background

by parentage is middle-class and my own 'independent' class position is also middle-class given my position as a professor. My choice of politics is entirely down to my own volition.

***JB**: Thank you, Gregor. What are your future research plans?*

GG: I have just published an edited *Handbook of Labour Unions* (Agenda, 2024) and I'm beginning work on projects on UNITE's strike efficacy; the rise of women union leaders in Britain; and another monograph on music and politics in terms of *The Redskins*. Following my *Punk Rock Politics of Joe Strummer* (Manchester University Press, 2022), I will be investigating further the thesis that the left does not recognise the need for itself to engage in cultural reproduction in order to provide an easier route into socialist politics than reading a political tract.