

A photograph of three people in a city street. On the left, a man in a dark suit, white shirt, and brown tie wears dark sunglasses and holds a large red flag. In the center, another man in a dark suit and dark sunglasses looks upwards. In the foreground, a woman with long brown hair, wearing a dark suit, a blue and white striped tie, and bright yellow sunglasses, looks directly at the camera. The background shows a brick wall and a city street with other people in the distance.

PAUL FARMER

AFTER THE MINERS' STRIKE

A39 AND CORNISH POLITICAL THEATRE
VERSUS THATCHER'S BRITAIN

VOLUME 1



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©2023 Paul Farmer. @2023 Rebecca Hillman (Preface). @2023 Mark Kilburn 'Plays' section



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Cover image: A39 in street theatre mode at Camborne Trevithick Day, 1985

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7. A39 and the Tin Crisis

On 24 October 1985, the tin market collapsed after the buffer stock manager of the International Tin Council ran out of money and could no longer buy up tin on the London Metal Exchange to maintain the high price that kept Cornish mines viable.¹

To quote the revisions we would be forced to make to the programme of *One & All!*, 'We were aware we would be chronicling a story of decline; we had no idea we would have to deal with the Fall as well'.² Without artificial maintenance through manipulation of the markets, Cornish clean, unionised, and safe hard rock mining could not compete with quick-buck open cast ripping of the rain forests and landscapes of the Far East perpetrated by international mining companies exploiting neo-colonialism. It became clear that this event threatened the absolute end of thousands of years of Cornish mining, the industry that provided Cornwall with an image of itself to resist the self-interested wheedling of the tourist industry—a parasite making ever more demands and wreaking more destruction on the fabric of its weakened host, already emptying its homes into holiday cottages, closing schools and local shops by filling Cornish villages with absence.

The remaining mining operations—Wheal Jane and Mount Wellington just down the road around Bissoe and Twelveheads, South Crofty at Pool in the industrial heartlands, Wheal Pendarves in Camborne, Geevor in the far west at Pendeen and the more mysterious

1 For an analysis of the collapse of the International Tin Agreement see for example Ian A. Mallory, 'Conduct Unbecoming: The Collapse of the International Tin Agreement', *American University International Law Review*, 5.3 (1990), 835–892, <https://digitalcommons.wcl.american.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1593&context=auilr#:~:text=In%20October%201985%20the%20International,activi-%20ties%20in%20the%20market>.

2 Paul Farmer and Mark Kilburn, *Programme for 'One & All!'*, 2nd edn (Cornwall: A39, 1985). Author's holdings.

operations, Wheal Concord at Blackwater, Tolgus Tin (a streaming works between Redruth and Portreath), and dredging operations off the coast—paid the best wages in Cornwall and supported a highly-skilled engineering industry. This was a crisis of all the things Cornwall felt itself to be.

In the face of this, A39—with an original play in *One & All!* that was effectively a chronology of the industry—decided to take it back on the road with a new section to follow the *Ode to Wheal Jane*, now proved to be an all-too accurate warning of the fragility of the industry. This new element would adopt the old Blue Blouse theatre form of the Living Newspaper. For this section we used an urgent guitar ‘carrier wave’ backing over which we ran narration and a sung element. The content changed from performance to performance as the crisis developed; the sung aspect framed the tale in terms of the stakes of the games being enacted, circling back to the active question: ‘Will the government intervene?’³

It was becoming ever more apparent that only such an intervention would prevent the complete collapse of Cornish mining. Previous administrations might have nationalised the tin mines, but Thatcher professed a macho hatred for ‘lame ducks’. The International Tin Council was dissolving in an acid mire of recrimination and the growling threats of international bully boys like the United States and China, both of whom bore blame for the situation, while small fry like Bolivia and Cornwall could only look on.

An extra aim in this revival of *One & All!* was to show the workings of capital and international commodity trading as they manifested themselves in the everyday lives of people who did not exploit the arcane properties of markets to make the enormous riches that built palaces on Cornwall’s coasts and populated her marinas with mysterious yachts. It was for those with a simpler view of the world in terms of labour and due reward—who maintained some belief in justice, that it was the business of governments and regulators to make sure that they kept

3 For discussion of the Blue Blouse movement and its Living Newspaper practice, including its influence on John McGrath and 7:84, see Rania Karoula, ‘From Meyerhold and Blue Blouse to McGrath and 7:84: Political Theatre in Russia and Scotland’, *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 44.1 (2018), 21–28, available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol44/iss1/4>



Fig. 21. *One & All!*—the Tinnners' Jig live at Geevor Mine, days before closure. Photo by George J. Greene (CC BY 4.0).



Fig. 22. *One & All!*—the tin crisis explained at Geevor. The 'Tin Not Dole' placard echoes the 'Coal Not Dole' Miners' Strike sticker on my guitar. Photo by George J. Greene (CC BY 4.0).

their side of the bargain that there would be work that gave a living. Of course, this is no part of capitalism, which is based on profit; on wealth being rewarded with more wealth. Any other benefit was an incidental by-product or the result of statutory constraints. As wealthy commodity traders lobbied for their own interests in fora far from Cornwall, her voices calling for justice—detailed in the new programme—seemed more and more powerless.

So we toured again over the winter of 1985/86. We also presented this new crisis section of the show live on Radio Cornwall to explain what was happening. Thatcher's government eventually agreed to support South Crofty in the form of loans for capital improvement that allowed it to stagger on for a few years. The other mines soon closed, beginning with Wheal Pendarves. In the spring, almost exactly a year after its first performance, we presented *One & All!* at the miners' social club at Geevor, the most westerly working mine on the cliffs overlooking distant Scilly and spreading two thousand feet beneath the sea bed. The audience was the miners and their families, and the Mayor—Jack Hendy ('The only Marxist mayor in the UK', as he told me)—and Town Council of St Just; and we told the tale of the history of mining right up to the latest events in the current disaster by way of all the disasters that had befallen the forerunners of those watching (see Figs. 21, 22).

This was probably the fulfilment of all A39 had set out to achieve by building a voice into events that represented and spoke with the Cornish working class. But it didn't feel like any kind of success. Just a few days later, productive mining would cease at Geevor. A few miners would remain to pick over the stones and the rest of the workforce would fall away to drift over the seas or out of the industry. Here, now, was the end of hard rock mining in Cornwall and Geevor was destined to become a museum of itself. The great Adventure was over.