

On February 15, 234 ACTT members were sacked by TV-am after a 10-week lock-out. Today, the picket line has disappeared and the technicians' plight no longer makes headlines. Few of those sacked have found permanent jobs and rely instead on an uncertain freelance market. Sean Moncrieff reports

Life after TV-am



‘Much as I hate to say it, Maggie would be proud of us’



In the Elephant's Head, across the road from the TV-am building's carnival struts, Stephen "Spike" Geilinger looks around and says it's weird to be back. With the other ACTT pickets, he used to come here for warmth and sandwiches during their long winter dispute. At the bar he sees a few people who still work for the company. None of them say hello.

Geilinger is a cameraman and, with sound engineer Neil Burn, director Ron Fisher and 231 others, was sacked from TV-am on February 15 this year.

All three started when TV-am was still a fledgling company and remember it as friendly but chaotic. There was a pioneering feel to the place, compounded by constant money worries ("you never knew if you were going to get paid") and the odd disaster — such as missing the Brighton bombing. "You felt the whole time — especially because of the way it was started — that you were always trying to prove you were serious," says Geilinger.

But it was pleasant. Neil Burn remembers it as "the best working atmosphere I was ever in". Being fired came as a considerable shock.

With hindsight there were clues to what was to come. Geilinger, an ACTT committee member for three

years, recalls that industrial relations had become increasingly uneven in the six months before the dismissals. "Normally you would go in and whine about somebody being asked to do this or that; niggly things, just routine stuff. But towards the end there was something new every week. It was always brinkmanship, with the company continually changing something we had been doing for a long time, and producing the most babyish reason for doing it," he says.

"It was just that the last time, they were absolutely determined that no compromise would be reached."

The ACTT members organised themselves, still believing the dispute would be over in a few days — two weeks at the most. The union provided a 'battle bus' with a portable phone, and the technicians split themselves up into 17 six-hour shifts for picket duty. Geilinger, Burn and Fisher were on shift four.

It was even fun: Neil has fond memories of breakfast fry-ups after the 12 to 6 shift. And there were sing-songs at night, with a wind-up gramophone and 78s, bringing complaints from the company's security guards.

But as each day passed, the confidence began to crumble. Geilinger was shift leader: "I was eternally optimistic. I kept saying, we'll be

back by the end of the week, the end of the month — Christmas.

"But then we went through Christmas, so I used to say to these guys: 'If they were serious, they would sack us'. They did. What could I say?"

The move into full-time freelancing was inevitable. Burn and Geilinger teamed up under the name Shift 4, while Fisher set up his own production company, Mind's Eye Films. It was a course followed by most of the sacked ACTT members; of the 234, only 85 now have full-time jobs.

It was estimated last year that there were approximately 1,500 freelance technicians, a figure which will grow as the market expands. However, no-one is prepared to make any more detailed predictions: the summer is traditionally a boom time for freelancers, and so new labour can be easily absorbed. It is when the winter comes that the cracks start to show.

That is why getting as much work as possible during the summer months is vitally important to Shift 4, not only to provide financial support for later in the year, but for the crucial business of building up contacts. While there are bookings agencies and some facilities that hire freelance crews, word of mouth and reputation is still the main method of attracting work.

Thus hustling is a new skill Shift 4

has had to learn. And like many other TV-am-spawned freelancers, Burn and Geilinger realise that the corporate market will play an increasingly important part in their careers. So far its work has been divided 50-50 between broadcast and corporate, but Burn feels that the industrial work "will really grow".

To attract more work, having kit is a major advantage. With smaller budgets, corporate producers like to hire the equipment and crew all in the one package, and so Shift 4 is currently in pursuit of good equipment at bargain prices. They even chased up a prospect at TV-am ("We won't work for them, but we'll buy off them"), though when the company realised who they were, the shutters were slammed down, they say.

It is a tough market, but they consider themselves lucky as the work is regular now — often it comes from Fisher's company. This is vital, not just for the money, but for peace of mind. "It is the best thing that ever happened to me," says Burn. "It was really important for us to get off our arses and do something. And the more we did it, the more enthusiastic we got. It's taken months to adjust to this, but we know of people who haven't, and who are still doing nothing."

Having each other has also been a

distinct advantage: "At least we have somebody who can come up with a counter argument," says Geilinger. "You know when you wake up on a Monday and there is nothing in the diary, you can get really pissed off. We can bounce off each other and keep it going. And usually by mid-day someone rings up and books you for tomorrow."

They also consider themselves lucky to be in early on what will be a freelance surplus over the next year — as each ITV company rationalises its operation, more and more freelance technicians will come on the market. "Managements have got carte blanche now after what happened to us," says Burn. "They can point to TV-am and say, 'Look: a complete workforce thrown out, and there was nothing they could do about it.'"

All three feel there was political will behind what happened to them, that it was an integral part of the Government's intention to turn television into a 'free' market. Now competing on the open market against their own ex-colleagues, they are not unaware of the irony of their position. "Much as I hate to say it," says Burn, "Maggie would be proud of us."

They say they are more sorry for TV-am than anything, viewing it as the loser with a badly produced

programme. At public events, they claim, TV-am crews are ignored by the others.

But beneath this lies the realisation that their union — and in the end their jobs and livelihoods — was floored by a punch it never saw coming. "It was the inevitable end," says Geilinger, "because they had everything on their side. It's what is happening all through the country, not just in television."

But it should also be remembered that the TV-am technicians were well-paid people, and perhaps there is a tendency now to bleed a little too much. It is easy to claim the moral high-ground when you're the underdog.

"I remember hearing at the time of Wapping that 90 per cent of the printers had got jobs, so you say, 'That's all right'. But that just eases our consciences; it does not make what the company did right. One per cent might have topped themselves. We have all been shit on from a great height," says Geilinger.

The men say the whole experience has left a bond between them, and perhaps also injected them with a large dose of stoicism. On one of the last occasions Shift 4 was on picket duty, a lorry driver slowed his vehicle down, leaned out the window and shouted "Ere, haven't you heard? Strikin' is old-fashioned now!"