Then an individual stepped in. Adolfo Sansolini is one of the quietly charismatic personalities in the animal welfare movement. He has spent his life campaigning for animal and human rights, seeing them as indivisibly part of one overall movement towards compassion. Philip Lymbery asked Sansolini to head the southern European arm of their campaigns from his native Italy. As well as motivating all the branches of the Italian animal campaigning group, Lega Anti Vivisezione (LAV), to join the fight, Sansolini joined Hetty the Hen on her tour around the country, carefully targeting first the towns where the MEPs with crucial agricultural responsibilities were based. The hen immediately attracted attention. There were volunteers showing people the size of the cage and emphasizing the fact that the hen could not even stretch a wing. That there were problems with her feet. That the wire floors meant the hen could get injuries and infections and lameness. That leg weakness and the cage conditions and the heavy egg laying meant the bird's bones would get broken. That the careless, mass haul to the slaughterhouse would mean more broken bones. 'They were mostly small towns close to the countryside,' Adolfo says. 'People had contact with real hens and so of course they said they would never eat a battery cage egg.'

After the tour and accompanying campaign were almost complete, and hundreds of thousands of signatures were delivered to the politicians, and the politicians had made promising, positive noises, it looked as though everything was going well. Then came bad news. Sansolini and his fellow workers learnt that the civil servants were not, after all, going to include a ban on battery cages in the Italian position on the Laying Hens Directive.

It was then that Adolfo took matters into his own hands. He sent a letter to all the relevant ministers, telling them there was something urgent to do. What's happening now, he said, will destroy everything that we have discussed up to now. All your commitment, all your attention, will be to no avail. The civil servants are simply going in the opposite direction. I know it's difficult, he said, but you have to do something. The only thing I can do now is to help you. But I will not ask without giving. So what I can give to you is my hunger, my thirst. From midnight tomorrow I will stop drinking and eating. I want a meeting with you and I want a different position.

When I met Sansolini in London more than fifteen years later, he said, 'I knew I was risking a lot. But living is about using life. Between birth and death you should live. I think that's about sharing. If you believe in something you should invest in it to make it happen. What I could invest at that moment wasn't anything else but putting my life on the table.' Sansolini is not a crazed martyr; Philip Lymbery describes him as 'a maverick rational radical'. His approach is to lobby and to inform, not to rant. He knew that a thirst strike put his health in imminent danger, but considered it a necessary act in order to pressurize the Italian government at a crucial point in the negotiations over a ban on the battery cage.

On the second day of his strike, already frighteningly weak, Sansolini got a meeting at the prime minister's office but collapsed twice on the way. The official put a glass of water in front of him, told him to drink it now and said they would do something. 'I refused to do that,' Sansolini told me, 'and I said: "If you do something before I leave, I'll be happy to drink it. But I won't drink it now."' The relevant phone call was made. Adolfo drank the glass of

water. In the afternoon, he went to the Ministry of Agriculture. He said he would drink one more glass of water, as a mark of trust, and then await official confirmation of the new position before stopping the strike. 'I went back home. I felt very tired – it had been thirty-eight hours. I felt not very well and waited for a reply in bed. They rang around 8.30 to 9p.m. from the Prime Minister's office saying: "We called the others, the agreement is reached, this is the official position." I asked them to issue a press release, which they did. I started to drink and eat again.'

Two days later, in the crucial meeting of permanent representatives of the European Commission, the Italian representative stood up and said the Italian position had changed: they wanted a ban on the battery cage. The Italian position was hugely influential amongst the other southern European states. France, Portugal and Greece all now decided in favour of a ban.

After years of campaigning, and this final, dramatic turn, the story played out in 1999. Philip Lymbery remembers standing outside the meeting room in Luxembourg when the British Agriculture Minister, Nick Brown, emerged. 'It was a surreal moment of hanging on every word to hear that this apparent defeat had turned into a huge victory,' he recalls. Only one country had voted against banning the cages. Austria said no – because they didn't think the directive went far enough. And Spain abstained. The agricultural ministers' decision would release the 300 million birds kept in battery cages in Europe.