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Athol Williams, ACT organiser, Shop Distributive and Allied Employees Association (SDA) NSW Branch. (Interviewed by Ted Forbes, Australian Society for the Study of Labour History in 1997)

Mr Forbes – Athol, when did you first join a union? How old were you?

Mr Williams – When I first joined a union it was this union back in 1971. I think it was called the Shop Assistants and Warehouse Employees Federation then.

Mr Forbes - I ought to remember better than you. But it has not changed a lot, has it?

Mr Williams – No, it hasn't really changed.

Mr Forbes - We used to call it the Missos and Shoppoos.

Mr Williams - Even back in the days of Ernie O'Dea in Sydney, I think it was called something like the Shop Assistants and Warehouse Federation, but it has always been the Shoppoos.

Mr Forbes – The conditions of your joining, was it a risk you took at the time?

Mr Williams - It was a bit unique. I was working at J.B. Young Ltd out at Fyshwick.

Mr Forbes - You weren't born here, were you?

Mr Williams - Yes, I was born here in 1951.

Mr Forbes - One of those rare individuals born in Canberra!

Mr Williams - Yes, I was born here and reared here. I only ever left the place for six months to run a small tyre sales place at Tumut and Nowra for a period, and then came back. Basically, I have been here all of my life. I used to come home on the weekends anyway, so I couldn't really say that I had left Canberra. So I have been here for 46 years.

I started at J.B. Young Ltd, which was a large group of department stores throughout the ACT and country NSW. They eventually took over Fosseys and then they were both taken over by Grace Bros, which was then taken over by Coles-Myer. When I started out at the Fyshwick discount store selling major appliances, there were no union members there at all.

Paul Whalan and a woman called Maryanne Ryan came around and introduced themselves and said they were on a recruitment drive and that they had recently got an agreement with J.B. Youngs to have a membership agreement. They held some meetings, which I attended, and I think three of us joined out of what they had to say.

Mr Forbes - How many did not join?

Mr Williams - In that store there were probably about 14 at the time.

Mr Forbes - So you were part of a minority that joined.

Mr Williams - Yes. Three of us joined at the time, and I was elected as the delegate.

Mr Forbes - That was to be my next question.

Mr Williams - I was elected by the three people as the delegate. It was a bit of a tenuous position because my father was a buyer for J.B. Youngs. He bought the major electrical appliances for all of their 30-odd stores but his office was situated at the Fyshwick store. Although he did not have direct control over me, his office was there and they thought it rather strange that his son was the union delegate. But that's the way it went. At that stage, there were six J.B. Young outlets in Fyshwick. There was a retail furniture place, a repair area where they used to repair washing machines and fridges and all of that, a big warehouse, a big bulk food warehouse and there was another place for carpets.

Paul Whalan and co went around to all these places and held meetings but had very little success in signing people up. They had a bit better success in the food warehouse and the bulk electrical warehouse. I went around in my lunch breaks and talked to the people. I would tell them that I was the delegate from the Fyshwick discount store and I had a fair bit of success in signing people up. I think in one month I signed up about 20 people.

Mr Forbes - That is good at any time.

Mr Williams - It would be good for an official these days. And considering that I was doing it in my lunch break ...

Mr Forbes - In my best days, to have signed up 20 members in a day, that would be worth a beer after work on the Secretary.

Mr Williams - You were doing very well, that's right. These days you know that if you sign up 20 people there must be a blue on somewhere or there are problems.

Mr Forbes - What made you decide to become a union officer or how were you made one?

Mr Williams - What happened was I became pretty active and so did Alf (Robbie). We would go along to all of the delegates meetings, training courses and whatever. A woman called Anne Sullivan - I don't know whether you remember her - she became a TUTA trainer ...

Mr Forbes - Yes, we certainly do remember Anne. We think we ought to talk to her as well. She is certainly part of the history.

Mr Williams - Yes, well Anne was a part-time organiser for the Shoppas at the time.

Mr Forbes - Was she really?

Mr Williams - Yes, she was part-time with us for probably four or five years, certainly until the split with the AWU came along, which I'll get to shortly. Anyway, I suppose Anne took a liking to the way I was operating and the way I related to people. There were a number of NSW Labour Council trade union training courses, and the training officer at the time was a bloke called Bob Carr. We used to go on the weekends to some of the training courses.

We would fly down and spend the weekend at the Sydney Uni and go to some of the training courses that Bob Carr and, after him, John McBean used to run.

Anne could see that I was catching on and taking on with those, and that I appreciated it and I was keen. So when Maryanne Ryan moved to Sydney her position became vacant. They called for interested applicants and Maryanne convinced me to put in an application. Funny thing about it was that I liked my job at J.B Youngs. I was being paid commission so I was on fairly good wages. In those days, the early 1970s, Whitlam had come to power and things were really taking off. We were selling and I was earning one and a half times my weekly wage in commission. So I was earning a fair whack. We achieved \$100 a week in wages for shop assistants while I was working at J.B. Youngs. I think that was in 1974, not long after Whitlam was elected. So I considered the move carefully because I was quite happy with the job I was doing. But I was becoming more and more involved with the union. I was becoming keener to be involved with the industrial relations scene for shop assistants, so I applied and was selected.

Mr Forbes - And that was 24 years ago?

Mr Williams – I actually joined on 30 June 1975 as a full-time official. So I've been involved for 24 years, including as a delegate.

Mr Forbes - My next question about leaving the union probably doesn't apply to you. That is a question for all of us old blokes, like my good self.

Mr Williams - That doesn't apply to me because I am still current.

Mr Forbes - Did you have political affiliations during the time that you were a union official?

Mr Williams - I joined the ALP just prior to becoming a full-time official, while I was still a delegate. Even prior to becoming active, I remember the Whitlam campaign and a number of us out there used to wear '*It's time*' badges during the campaign. That was very revolutionary at J.B Youngs to be wearing an '*It's time*' badge on the floor while you are selling to people. It's probably even revolutionary these days. You wouldn't get too many people who would do it.

Mr Forbes – Actually, just to interpose there, it is probably more revolutionary now because it *was* time in most people's eyes for that very brief brilliant period, wasn't it.

Mr Williams – That's right, it was. I remember the Colemans who used to run J.B Youngs came down and while they didn't say anything directly to us, they went back to the management and said 'We don't think our employees should be wearing political badges on the floor.' The manager came down and had a word to us and we said 'We are going to continue to wear them.' Nothing was done but, as you said, not too many would wear them these days.

Mr Forbes - It was the euphoria of the time.

Athol Williams, SDA

Mr Williams - Yes, that's right. And the Colemans, to their credit, weren't too bad as far as blokes who were running a big company were concerned. They didn't do any more than make that comment.

Mr Forbes - They knew what would happen.

Mr Williams - Yes, they probably did. So they didn't do anything.

Mr Forbes - If you're in a government town, and you know that the new Prime Minister is being mirrored on your employees' badges, and you want to sell millions of dollars' worth of goods ...

Mr Williams - Yes, and you want to keep in with all the bureaucrats and everything. There were some tremendous changes then.

Mr Forbes - Wasn't there ever. So you have been a member of the Labor Party since 1973 and did those affiliations continued unaltered during the period of your activity in the union?

Mr Williams - Yes.

Mr Forbes - Some officials join more than one party or drop in and out of them.

Mr Williams - No, it's always been the Labor Party and I've always been a member. I have never let it lapse and then come back or anything like that. I have obviously become more active in the party and taken different positions. But I have never been in any other political party and I have never really been interested in any other party. I can remember when I was in high school, my oldest brother who is now a doctor on the North Shore of Sydney, was interested in the Liberal Party. But of course he has since given them up. He used to go along to the Young Liberal Party meetings and come home and talk about it. But the Liberal Party never interested me, even before I was really *au fait* with the difference, and with the struggle of the workers and so forth. I just didn't like what I heard about the Liberals from my brother. And as I said, he's given them away too now. He is probably in a position now where he would be far better off supporting them but he has given them away.

Mr Forbes - Bring him over! Were you a family man with children during this time?

Mr Williams - I got married in 1973. I have two daughters. One came along in 1976 and the other one three years later in 1979.

Mr Forbes - Did union work affect your family life?

Mr Williams - Yes, especially when the union went through a period of upheaval with the split from the Barry Egan Australian Workers Union. That was quite a time of turmoil and it did have an effect, not to the degree of splitting up the marriage or anything, but my wife often reminds me of those stresses and strains.

Mr Forbes - Were the strains caused by you being absent or was it the effect that the strains were having on you? Or was it the fact that you were in Sydney a fair bit?

Mr Williams - I think it was both. Plus we had the usual things that go on with inter-union fights.

Mr Forbes - I was a Victorian so I wasn't up there, but I recall that. Over what period did that happen? How long did it take for Barry and Charlie Oliver to

Mr Williams – The whole thing started before I was a full-time official. At a federal level there were blues going on before I even became an official, and then it went through until after all the court cases were finished and the AWU SD Branch was found to be null and void. That went right through into the mid-1980s. We weren't really rid of it all until ...

Mr Forbes - How long did it affect you, though?

Mr Williams – Less towards the end but probably from about 1976 to 1978-79.

Mr Forbes - I note that you have been away to Cooma. I guess you are down at Cooma for days. Do you also visit Goulburn?

Mr Williams - Yes, and I go down the far south coast.

Mr Forbes - When you and your colleague go away, do you stay overnight?

Mr Williams - Yes.

Mr Forbes - How often do you do that now?

Mr Williams – Probably once or twice a month we stay away somewhere. It is usually just overnight and sometimes it is a two-night stay. It is not usually more than that, unless we go to a union conference or something which goes for three or four days. Basically, for the organising duties, it is usually only one or two nights.

Mr Forbes - So you don't have the nights away that you might have had in the past.

Mr Williams - Not as many. I think a lot of that has got to do with modern technology. With mobile phones and that type of thing, a lot of the work that we used to do, where we had to hop in a car and drive for three hours to go and sort something out, can now be done over a mobile phone or over the fax. Documents can be faxed backwards and forwards to sort things out rather than having to go to a place and get it written up while you are there and that type of thing. It has helped that somewhat.

Mr Forbes - Did you ever present matters or get involved in matters before the Industrial Relations Commission or the Federal Court?

Mr Williams - Yes. At first, I got involved in a relief industrial officer type position here. Paul Whalan used to do that work but if he was away, I would have to go and stand in for him. I helped research a number of wage cases and so forth that we had, but eventually they got specialist industrial people for that. My part would then be either giving evidence or going in to the hearing to assist the advocate. That is probably the position now, although prior to the change in the unlawful dismissal laws in the past six months or so, we were running those cases before judicial registrars.

Mr Forbes - As a full-time organiser, what role or responsibilities do you have in determining union policy and practice?

Mr Williams - I suppose it is not a great role. Obviously we have a chance to report back at the monthly meetings we have about things that are happening in the industry. A number of those things are then taken up at a state or federal level in the various forums, and that may have some effect on the policy. That does happen from time to time. I was also a national councillor of the union for two four-year terms, so obviously had some input there.

Mr Forbes - Do you go to Sydney to attend any branch council meetings?

Mr Williams - No. We have a delegate in Canberra, a rank and file member, who is on the branch council and she goes down to the meetings.

Mr Forbes - So if you wanted to have something to say, you would confer with her. So there is an input there.

Mr Williams - Yes, and we can confer of course with the Secretary.

Mr Forbes - Do you believe that the 13 years of a Labor government was a help or a hindrance to the trade union movement? I guess we are talking particularly there about the Accord. How do you think we emerged from those years?

Mr Williams - I think that in the early part, the Accord probably was good for the union movement. I think it achieved its goals and it did make things much easier. But of course towards the end when there was so much altering of the rules or the boundaries governing the Accord, the achievements and the goals started to slip away from where it was helping to where it perhaps wasn't such a help any longer.

Obviously, if you look at this present government, there is no accord with them. They just want discord with the union movement. The Minister is actively promoting employers to take on the unions. So it is a complete contrast to what we had. I found that people who were working in our industry through that era and are still in the industry, the rank and file, have a bit of trouble adapting to that. If they are not politically minded and are not in tune with what's going on, they can't readily understand the change all of a sudden from a situation where we had input and constant contact with the government to what we've got now.

Mr Forbes - It has been said by some of the interviewees that it has left us a bit fat and flabby and that we're out of condition, that our rank and file are not used to fighting and yet they're demanding of us the same results that we've been turning up over a long period of time.

Mr Williams - That is probably true. It is probably more evident in those unions where they took more direct action in the past as to what has been happening in the past 12 to 18 months. But even in our union, as I said, I find that the rank and file who have been through that are now saying, 'Why has this changed, why are we doing this and why are we doing that?' When I have been out presenting enterprise agreement proposals, I have had to explain the difference between what they are now and what we had before.

Mr Forbes - What do you believe was the role and result of the ACTU involvement in determining trade union policy and practice?

Mr Williams - I think they had a very dominant role while the Labor government was in power.

Mr Forbes - Did you feel comfortable with that role? I know what you are saying because we all had to wait for our general secretary to come back and tell us what we were going to do next week. Did you feel comfortable with that at the time?

Mr Williams - I think there were times when we didn't. I think that's probably the case with the various secretaries, both federal and state. They went along with things to a large degree because they could see that it was obviously being worked out for the betterment. I think there were a few areas where they went off on a certain course of action which was obviously the wrong one. There are obviously lessons to be learnt for the future, once the Labor Party gets back in government again.

Mr Forbes - If we survive long enough! What effect did the push for enterprise bargaining have on your union, both the officers and the rank and file? What impact did it have on your membership numbers and your method of organising?

Mr Williams - Initially, our union was really opposed to it. We were quite happy with the award system and the award based CPI pay rises and so forth that were going on. Obviously, we had to adapt to the changes and I feel that we have adapted well. As I said earlier, it is a matter of going out and explaining to the rank and file where the differences are and why we have to do this bargaining. It has been difficult but it is getting easier now. We are now into our second and, in some cases, third round of enterprise agreements. People who were there with the first one now understand what we are all about and what we have to do - the give and take nature of what we are trying to achieve. It was a battle at first to explain the difference.

Mr Forbes - Were union officials suitably skilled and resourced to handle decentralised bargaining? What, if any, specific training was given to enable officers to cope with the change? It seems to me that you, the officers, were quite aware of what it meant and possessed early skills in handling this.

Mr Williams - The officials were quite well-informed by our leaders, our secretaries and so forth about what it all meant and there was some training given. A number of us had been in the industry for a long while and had been to a number of training courses. I remember right back when I first started that I went to collective bargaining training courses. The collective bargaining idea was coming out of the USA then.

Mr Forbes - Yes, I remember it. They put out some films on it for the clothing trade.

Mr Williams - Yes, that is right. A number of us had already been trained in similar things. But as you said, at first there were problems with resources to get things up and going and out to the membership. They have now got that down to a pretty fine tune.

Mr Forbes - You seem to have answered this next question in the affirmative but I will ask it just the same. Do you think that decentralised bargaining enhanced the relationship between the union and its members or did it distance them?

Mr Williams - Our union is one of the few unions that has actually grown rapidly over the last few years and I put that down to the decentralised bargaining, the enterprise agreements.

They come along to the meetings and get involved with the process. They listen to us going through the proposals and they have to vote on them. These days there is a two week wait before we go back and have another meeting to vote. I think they appreciate that more. They know they are being involved and we have been picking up membership. I think that part of it is an advantage over the old system with award changes. There might have been some delegates meetings about the award changes but rarely was there wholesale rank and file meetings in the stores or company by company or whatever. We had facilities for meetings but they wouldn't come and attend. Where we can go into the workplace, and the management has arranged the meetings so that the employees can come along and have their say, that is working for us.

Mr Forbes - I asked whether the union officials were skilled and resourced to handle the bargaining but equally, was management skilled enough to bargain effectively at the site level in your industry?

Mr Williams - Only in a few stores and a few companies. Some companies did not have the slightest idea. David Jones was one where they just didn't have the management skills in industrial relations to handle the agreement.

Mr Forbes - Most managers who didn't have the skills knew where to go to get it.

Mr Williams - They eventually did, but it took them so long to go and do that. They seemed to be stymied within their company about doing that and making decisions. It just delayed them for several years compared with Grace Bros and others. There were others where the store managers had no idea what was going on. They used to come and sit in on our sessions and talk to us about what was going on so that they could learn because the company wouldn't tell them what was going on. I don't think they were trying to keep it from them, they just weren't communicating with them.

Mr Forbes - What is your view of the statement that decentralised bargaining reduces the relevance of the award system?

Mr Williams - It probably does to some degree. In our case, the enterprise bargaining system might be different from one area to another, whereas the awards always covered all kinds of areas. So the shop awards covered areas from supermarkets to lolly shops and hardware shops, right across the spectrum in the same one award, even where there were so many different types of work going on, and so many different skills in those areas. In the past, one award covered it. But now they have their own enterprise agreements that are particular to their own area. For instance, the BBC Hardware people have got their own which is particular to them. Some of the things that happen at a Woolworths supermarket would never happen at a BBC Hardware store. And so that tends to make the old single award, the industry award, irrelevant.

Mr Forbes - What do you believe are the reasons behind the declining rate of union membership, if in fact that is the case for you? It might not have done so. You suggested earlier that it did not.

But anyway, there is nationally a declining rate of union membership through the union movement generally. What in your view needs to be done to rectify the decline? You can speak from the macro or the micro view, if you like.

Mr Williams - Firstly, with our union, it has not happened that way, it has gone the opposite way. Obviously there are areas in our union where I have noticed changes. In the past people might have joined automatically because their parents had suggested it or whatever. Now you go and talk to the young ones and there has never been a suggestion from their parents or from any person in their background. In the past, especially in some of the industrialised areas, it was virtually like a religion. You got a job and the first thing you did was join the union because that is what Mum and Dad did, because the union was there to protect you.

A lot of people now do not know a great deal about what a union is. I think there is a need to start more promotion and more education in the school years, say in the high school years. We do that through our junior delegate systems and I think that is helping us overcome those problems. A lot of our delegates are very active in colleges and high schools and so forth. The other obvious thing is the service. Our officials at the top have always pressed home the need for organisers to get out and service the membership, to get out amongst the membership, to hold general meetings, to hold delegate meetings, to elect delegates.

Mr Forbes - The secretaries like you to do that, don't they? They don't like to see you in the office too much.

Mr Williams – Yes, I think the shoppas have been good at that. I think by and large the officials have got out there and done that, whereas in some other unions perhaps, some of the officials want to get more involved in the inter-union activities, the peak councils and so forth. That's all very good, there is a need for that and a place for that, but there is also more and more these days a need to have the basic organisers on the ground, amongst the membership, doing the jobs, getting the backpay claims, getting the disputes settled, and getting the reinstatements, so that the people who are not in the union can see it being done and say, 'There is the union doing something. I really need to be in there to get my protection as well.' There is nothing that can better that. There have been times when I have thought that perhaps I would like to get more involved in the Trades and Labour Council and things like that, but that would obviously have some effect on my organising work and the basic representation work that I do with the membership. So I have not actively pursued that.

Mr Forbes - The ACTU plan for the creation of 20 super unions is now complete. What is your view of the change? Has it fulfilled expectations of applying greater resources and efficiencies into the movement? What effect did it have on you as an official? What was the effect on the membership, if there was one?

Mr Williams – No, there wasn't one in ours. We haven't amalgamated with anyone.

Mr Forbes - You had the lot, did you?

Mr Williams - There have been a few small unions that have amalgamated with us, such as the models and mannequins. The hairdressers were going to but I think they have gone with the AWU. I can only comment from listening to what officials in other unions say.

Mr Forbes - The politician in you might have a view but the organiser does not.

Mr Williams – Really I don't have a first-hand view because it has not happened. We have been the big union, we remain the big union in the retail industry. If anything, some smaller unions are amalgamating with us but we are not going out seeking to amalgamate with other big unions.

Mr Forbes - What is your national membership?

Mr Williams - It is about 240,000 now. It is the biggest union.

Mr Forbes - If you had the choice, what bargaining system would you prefer to work in and why? I suppose we are talking there about the award system or the bargaining system.

Mr Williams - It changes with the climate. At the present moment it is very difficult ...

Mr Forbes - I should be fair and tell you that it is not just one or the other, it could be a mixture.

Mr Williams - Yes. The award system was good for a long while. It had a stabilising effect and it was easy to administer. The NSW organisers used to think we were really badly off because we used to have three awards here in the ACT and probably three in NSW where they only had three to look after in the whole of NSW. They thought we were in a bad way because we had six awards to look after. Now I am carrying around two briefcases full of enterprise agreements. I think we have got about 35 enterprise agreements at the moment. If someone rings me up and says 'How much sick leave do I get?' I say, 'Where do you work?' and they say, 'I work at Woolworths' or 'I work at Coles.' I then have to go and get the agreement out and read it. I used to know it off by heart. It is quite unwieldy but I think for the present time it is doing the job. With the conservatives in power and things getting tighter with the economy, we are more at a disadvantage with respect to what we have got to bargain with to get wage increases and to get better conditions. The awards of old would probably be handy now. But if things pick up and there is a change of government perhaps enterprise agreements will be back on the run and we will be achieving more than we would under the award system.

Mr Forbes - Some awards always had a certain amount of scope. The building industry always had a bit of scope in their award.

Mr Williams - That is right.

Mr Forbes - Looking back over your fairly long union involvement - you are not very old so you have a lot of years ahead of you but you also have a number of years behind you - would you be pleased if one of your children, or in the more distant future your grandchildren, became interested in becoming a union official?

Mr Williams - I think so. My eldest daughter is a delegate. She is at uni doing a bachelor of education degree. But she works part-time at K-Mart and she is a union delegate. She is pretty keen and active and that pleases me. The youngest one is also keen, and that pleases me too.

Mr Forbes - A girl also?

Athol Williams, SDA

Mr Williams – Yes.

Mr Forbes - Why does it please you?

Mr Williams - I suppose it is because I know that there's a need for it. There is a need for people to be actively involved in determining their own rights in the workplace, in looking after their own health and welfare and bettering their conditions. If I had daughters or sons who were not interested in that, who took it for granted, were apathetic and did nothing about it, I would be a bit upset about it. I had a certain spirit I feel and I have still got it. I think you've got to have it to be a union official. You have to have a sort of drive and spirit. I think that is coming out in my daughters and I am glad to see it. If they came to me and said 'Dad, I would like to try and pursue some industrial courses with the hope of getting involved in the union movement,' I would encourage them.

I have known some union officials who are no longer officials, who have discouraged their children. That's their own business but that's just what I feel about it. It is a funny thing but my father-in-law, when I first got involved in the union movement, used to give me a hard time. He was from a pretty conservative background but he was always a member of the Institute of Engineers. He felt that if you worked for an employer then the employer was doing you a favour so you should really be at his beck and call. He used to give me a hard time at first about being a union official but he has now changed because he realises the value of it. Often when he comes around, he discusses what I am up to and what is going on in the industry. He is very keen to listen and talk about it.

Mr Forbes - So you are of the view that being a union organiser, a union officer, is a respectable calling?

Mr Williams – Oh yes. I know that when they do those ratings about what is considered to be a top job and what is considered to be a lowly job, we are down there with the politicians!

Mr Forbes - I never agreed that we were.

Mr Williams - I never did either. Unfortunately, there are rotten apples in every profession.

Mr Forbes – Whatever they say about the union movement, if it withered away tomorrow the workers would have to reinvent it.

Mr Williams - That is right.

Mr Forbes - Thank you for your time.