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William Bernard (Bill) Spellman (1928–2012), former ACT Branch Organiser, Australian Workers Union (AWU). (Interviewed by Ted Forbes, Australian Society for the Study of Labour History - 20 August 1997).

Mr Forbes - Bill, when did you first join a union? Which one was it and when did you do it?

Mr Spellman - I first joined the AWU when I was 15 years old, working in a shearing shed.

Mr Forbes - Where was that?

Mr Spellman - That was up around Cooma; a shearing shed called Cottage Creek.

Mr Forbes - And you were 15?

Mr Spellman - I was 15 when I first joined. I started off in the shearing sheds as a roustabout and later became a shearer. The shearing sheds were a great training ground for trade unionists, especially at that time, which is more than 50 years ago. I remained a member of the AWU and, of course, I read all of those stirring editorials in the *Worker* over the years. I stayed a member of the AWU all of my life, although between about 1953 and 1956, I really had no need to be a member of the AWU. I had left shearing and was working for myself. But I remained a member.

Then in 1956, there was a big dispute in the pastoral industry and the union was forming local committees all around the country. That had been going on for a few months when I noticed that nobody was forming a committee in the Cooma district, and I saw the need for one there. So I was responsible for forming the local AWU at Cooma and was active in the union in the conduct of that dispute right through until late in 1956. For some reason or other, during the conduct of that dispute, I came to the notice of the hierarchy of the union in Sydney and, when they wanted an official in 1959, they contacted me.

Mr Forbes - Did you then come to Canberra?

Mr Spellman - I came to Canberra then. But in the meantime, as part of my early training I guess, even though I had always been interested in the union right from the time I first took out a ticket, my early activities were in the ALP rather than in the union.

Mr Forbes - One of my questions was about why you left the union. You have already said that you spent all of your life in it. So you just retired?

Mr Spellman - Yes, I just retired because of ill health.

Mr Forbes - Did you have political affiliations during the time that you were active?

Mr Spellman – Yes, as I said, I'd had some early interest in the Labor Party. I had become secretary of the Cooma branch of the ALP and I was also interested in local government. I became an alderman on the Cooma Municipal Council, director of the Cooma Public Hospital Board, delegate to the federal electorate council and state electorate council and delegate to the state ALP conference. I had been active in all those things before I became an official

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of the union. I remained reasonably active in the ALP until two or three years before I retired, when I, like about 600,000 other people, tended to become a little bit disgusted with the Labor Party.

Mr Forbes - We will talk about that in a minute. Tell me, your affiliations did not alter through your activities? I mean, it was the ALP that you belonged to. Were you ever a member of any other party?

Mr Spellman - No.

Mr Forbes - Were you a family man with children during this time?

Mr Spellman - Yes, I was a family man before I became a union official. We already had five kids at that time. That was at the end of 1958. We had two more kids after that so all up we had seven kids.

Mr Forbes - Did union work affect your family life?

Mr Spellman - I can see my wife over there nodding her head. I think ...

Mr Forbes - I might put her on tape afterwards and see whether she has something special to say about it!

Mr Spellman - I never ever saw a union official during all of my years of activity where the job didn't affect his family life in some way or other, especially if he was any good. It just goes with the territory I think. You are often away from home, and you are too distracted with other things to pay attention to the kids and all that sort of thing. I think it is almost universal.

Mr Forbes - You are right. I haven't heard anybody answer that in the negative - that is to say 'No, it did not interfere.' Did you present matters or get involved in matters before the Industrial Relations Commission or the Federal Court during your stewardship?

Mr Spellman - Almost exclusively with the Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Commission, which is what it was then. I was responsible for a few jobs out in the state of New South Wales. I very occasionally got involved in the state industrial commission of NSW but that was a very rare occurrence. The best tallying up that I could do at the end of about 33 years of service as a union official was that I must have got very close to a thousand appearances before the Conciliation and Arbitration Commission.

Mr Forbes - Locally, here?

Mr Spellman - Yes.

Mr Forbes - Before Findlay, I suppose, most of the time?

Mr Spellman - No. Findlay died in 1966. That was only seven years after I started.

Mr Forbes - So early. I didn't know that.

Mr Spellman - But like all union officials, whoever the arbitration commissioner happens to

be, you find fault with him at the time. But as time went on, and I saw a lot of other people in the job, I developed a very soft spot for old Tom.

Mr Forbes - Yes, I have heard him fondly remembered. Of course, he was gone long before I got here. As a full-time official, what role and responsibility did you have in determining union policy and practice? Did you have an input there?

Mr Spellman - Not a lot. I guess I had a fair bit of influence in determining what the union did in the ACT. I think I tended to be regarded by the union as a whole as the union's expert in this area. But on a national basis, I did not have a lot of influence, although I did go to quite a number of our annual conventions, which were supposed to be the deliberative body of the organisation, the policy making body. But I can't say that I believed I had a lot of influence on the policies that were made.

Mr Forbes - I suppose you sat there and said, 'Oh, heck ...

Mr Spellman - I used to get stuck in occasionally but I don't know whether anybody took too much notice.

Mr Forbes - With regard to practice, around locally, you would have had a great input because the members would have asked for your guidance. In lots of dispute situations, even if you do not give a view, they will ask you what you think, especially if they trust you.

Mr Spellman - That's right.

Mr Forbes - Do you believe that the 13 years of a Labor government was a help or a hindrance to the trade union movement and in what way was it? We have not mentioned the Accord there but that is a very important factor in the 13 years that influenced how we view it now.

Mr Spellman - You have to be a bit ambivalent about answering that question because, on the one hand, you felt that you had to be supportive of the Labor government, having waited so long to get somebody there, and on the other hand - this seemed to be almost universal among trade union officials that I had contact with - it seemed that the Labor Party, in many respects, was being a hindrance rather than a help to the trade union movement. Although you did not want to believe it, the real facts of the matter were that, as far as managing a trade union was concerned, after helping to run a trade union for 20 years or more under Liberal governments, the horrible facts were that it became more difficult to run an organisation under the Labor Party than it had been under the Libs.

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

Mr Spellman - I think the ACTU's involvement had to be very significant in determining policies over that period.

Mr Forbes - Do you think at that time we were leaving most of the decisions about how far we co-operated with the Accord to our general secretaries to go down there and make an agreement?

Mr Spellman - I think there were a lot of us who didn't want to do it that way but that's the way we were pushed into working.

Mr Forbes - Do you think then that it has left us in a position where it is being said that our muscles have shrunk a bit and our rank and file are in no condition to have a decent stoush, especially in this present climate where probably we need to be fairly determined?

Mr Spellman - I think we have shrunk to the stage where I fear very much for our future, or whether there is a future for the trade union movement.

Mr Forbes – Well there is a future for workers. They're always going to be there so what are we going to do about that?

Mr Spellman - I don't think I've got an answer to what we're going to do about it, Ted.

Mr Forbes - Do you think that Forbes and Spellman ought to go down there and get themselves elected back into the union.

Mr Spellman – I think it wouldn't hurt, if we were young enough to do it.

Mr Forbes - I don't know whether you have had much experience with this but at least you might have a view about it. What effect did the push for enterprise bargaining have on your union, both on the union officers and the rank and file? Did it have an impact on the membership numbers and the method you used for organising?

Mr Spellman - Yes, I think it had an impact. The simple facts of life were that we were forced into a situation where we had to double our activities, our workload increased without the necessary facilities or increase in staff to cope with it. Whereas previously, a lot of our time would have been spent in the actual business of organising, which is basically to ensure that your membership stays up and to ensure that you get new ones, a lot of that work went by the board because we were too bloody busy trying to handle the enterprise bargaining situation.

Mr Forbes - Do you think the union officials were suitably skilled and resourced to handle decentralised bargaining? Did your union have to provide specific training to enable officials to cope with the change?

Mr Spellman - I think they tried to provide some training but I think they failed miserably. I was never happy about the situation of what they called 'skilled negotiators' taking over the work that organisers had been doing, where they did come up with them, that is. I always felt that you got a better result out of the system where an organiser who had a fairly long term in the job, did all of the work that concerned the members in his area, including the negotiating. With respect to the Arbitration Commission hearings and whatever, I was never happy at all about any union work going to legal people.

Mr Forbes - So you didn't believe in over-specialisation?

Mr Spellman - I didn't believe in over-specialisation. I was very much against union work going to legal people.

Mr Forbes - That is an interesting comment because some other interviewees have said that.

Equally, was management skilled enough to bargain effectively at the site level? If it was a problem for our local people in some cases, do you think management was skilled?

Mr Spellman - Quite often not. But of course management, in most cases, where they were not skilled at that level, were generally able to get the back-up.

Mr Forbes - Yes, I found a lot of the management didn't. They thought of claw-back, that's what they wanted. Do you think that the centralised bargaining enhanced the relationship between the union and its members? Did it bring them closer together or did it distance them a bit? From an internal solidarity point of view, do you think decentralised bargaining affected that in any way?

Mr Spellman - I think the idea was that it was going to bring them closer together but I think the reality was that it didn't. As far as the system of trade union bargaining was concerned, I think that's the area that the Labor Party made a great cock-up of. I believe they started all the bloody nonsense that is getting thrown at us now from a Liberal government. It was all started by our own people.

Mr Forbes - I think it's important to note that too. I'm glad you said that.

Mr Spellman - I have always felt that the old Conciliation and Arbitration Commission had a few faults but I don't think it needed the tampering that it has been given. It worked fairly well.

Mr Forbes - The next question says: decentralised bargaining reduced the relevancy of the award system. Your view on that would be positive, that it has?

Mr Spellman - Yes.

Mr Forbes - What do you believe are the reasons behind the declining rates of union membership? What do you think needs to be done to rectify it?

Mr Spellman - Go back to your comments of 10 minutes ago, Ted. Elect more people like you and me.

Mr Forbes - Of course, some people have made the observation that the union membership in the particular callings that the union covers has not shrunk. It is the other areas of work ...

Mr Spellman - It is the work that has shrunk.

Mr Forbes - And other areas of work have appeared. These new areas of work are not organised because they are new industries. It is a big question. The ACTU plan for the creation of 20 super unions is now almost complete. What is your view of this change? Has it fulfilled expectations of applying greater resources and efficiencies into the trade union movement? How do you think the idea was received by the membership of the union?

Mr Spellman - The idea of the super unions was only in its infancy at the time that I retired and I haven't taken a great interest in it since. But I always had the view that we should certainly have had a lot of amalgamations of trade unions.

I don't know whether, specifically, 20 super unions was the answer. I was always concerned, and I still hold the view, that there was too much political activity in the amalgamation of unions to line up factions - left with left, left with right, and right with right. Whereas some of the best combinations would obviously have been on an industrial basis. And I think all of the infighting about that sort of thing killed the whole process.

Mr Forbes - As a matter of fact, if that had happened, it would have been the Australian Workers and Miscellaneous Workers Union because they were the big two general conglomerates. If you had the choice, what bargaining system would you prefer and why? I am talking there about enterprise bargaining or the award system.

Mr Spellman - The system that I would prefer, with only a minor modification, is the system that operated before the Labor Party started tampering with it.

Mr Forbes - Right, so that is the award system. It's necessary, I suppose Bill, if the award system was underpinned and preserved, we would have to do a better job than we've done in the past in educating workers to understand how it got there and to protect it.

Mr Spellman - Well, you've always got to do a better job than you've done in the past, haven't you.

Mr Forbes - Yes. Would you be pleased - this is a philosophical question - if one of your children, or a grandchild perhaps, became interested in becoming a union official?

Mr Spellman - None of my crowd have shown any desire ...

Mr Forbes - What about if one of your grandsons or your granddaughters came up to you and said, 'Listen Pa, my union has offered me a job as an organiser and I am going to take it.' Would you be pleased?

Mr Spellman - None of them have shown any signs that they would want to do that but I would be quite pleased if they did.

Mr Forbes - Why would you be pleased?

Mr Spellman - I think it is a worthwhile task. It is getting harder all the time because of the times that we are living in, but somebody has to do it.

Mr Forbes - What happens if that work isn't done?

Mr Spellman - We will go in the direction that we are going now, only faster.

Mr Forbes - Do you think then that if unions, through neglect or attack, went out of existence, with the fact that there is a class struggle going on, they would have to be reinvented by somebody?

Mr Spellman - I think so. I've thought a lot about that. I think that if we follow the path that we're on at the present time that, after a few years, there would have to be a resurgence. Or else there are a lot of wishy-washy people about, one of the two.

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Mr Forbes – Or Australians would be slaves. It would be a slave state.

Mr Spellman - Yes.

Mr Forbes – All right Bill, that's the end of my questions. I have a couple of questions on another matter. I arrived up here a year or so after a certain individual by the name of Ray O'Shannassy. I think he died.

Mr Spellman - He died in gaol, poor old Ray.

Mr Forbes - I believe he was an AWU member and a very colourful person.

Mr Spellman - Yes, he was a member for a while.

Mr Forbes - I still hear references to him but I never saw him. Was he a character?

Mr Spellman - He was a character. He was a funny man, old Ray. He had a great knowledge of the trade union movement and he was a real militant. Of course, Ray was one of those fellows that everybody wanted to get rid of. He had been on jobs on the BLF, and this union and that union. He did the sorts of things that people said were causing trouble and, of course, they wouldn't have him back. He came to me and said, 'Could you get me a job with the AWU?' I got him a job with the water and sewerage section down at Fyshwick. Ray was there for three or four years and he caused me no bloody end of problems. But he had a good knowledge of the union and could be an enormous help in a dispute situation, while you could keep control of him! But sometimes you weren't able to keep control.

Mr Forbes – Yes, so the reports go. Was he a delegate to the Trades and Labour Council?

Mr Spellman - Yes. I think we might have made him a delegate to council.

Mr Forbes - I think he might have been one of your delegates. Like I said, I completely missed him.

Mr Spellman - We were about the only bloody union left in Canberra that would put up with him.

Mr Forbes - He must have died about 1980 then?

Mr Spellman - I think it was later than that.

Mr Forbes - I came up in 1981 and I never saw him.

Mr Spellman - Well, 1980 is 17 years ago, it has got to be after that that Ray O'Shannassy died.¹

Mr Forbes - Did he go to gaol?

Mr Spellman - He spent quite a lot of time in gaol.

Mr Forbes - He might have been doing time when I came up.

¹ Ray O'Shannassy died in Long Bay gaol on 31 July 1990 (ADB)

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Mr Spellman - He used to do things like go and sit in people's offices, which he called 'occupying' the office. If he couldn't get in, he would kick the door down. One time, he went to see the Director of Works over at Barton when they were still there. Of course, he had been there 150 times before, and they had got sick of him and they shut him out. So Ray put the boot into the door.

Mr Forbes - You won't remember this - you and I are about the same age and I am certainly too young to remember it - but there is something about the AWU that I want to read about from having seen the pictures of the old conferences. Before you and I were born, not too long before, there was a union organiser for the AWU called Darky Richardson. Did you ever hear about him? He was a black man. In all of the photographs he shows up and he's very dark.

Mr Spellman - Do you know what State he was from?

Mr Forbes - No, probably from Queensland but it might have been down the Riverina.

Mr Spellman - I have a vague sort of memory about the name.

Mr Forbes - He could have been a Jamaican or West Indian fellow. He couldn't have been Aboriginal because they were not citizens at that time. There are photographs of him and the note says that he is Jamaican - Darky Richardson - and an organiser for over 10 years. But there are no other biographical details of him.

Mr Spellman - No, I don't know anything about him.

Mr Forbes - Well, thanks very much. That was very interesting and so were the additional comments, particularly about Ray O'Shannassy. He is both fondly and unfondly remembered by quite a number. I am just sorry that I missed out on him.

