

**6. Dave Cunningham, Organiser, Building Workers Industrial Union (BWIU)
(Interviewed by Ted Forbes, Australian Society for the Study of Labour History -
13 August 1997)**

Mr Forbes – Dave, when did you first join the union and how old were you?

Mr Cunningham - I was 19 years of age when I first joined the union, when I was doing my apprenticeship. That was in Scotland. It would have been 1950.

Mr Forbes – That's about the time I joined the union myself. Where and when did you become an officer of the union? With a fellow like you, it is not only when, it is where as well because you've been around a bit.

Mr Cunningham - I first became an officer of the union in Dunedin in New Zealand. I became an executive member of the New Zealand Council of Trade Unions.

Mr Forbes - You are a carpenter by trade?

Mr Cunningham - Yes, I am.

Mr Forbes - Have you always done that?

Mr Cunningham – Always done that, yes.

Mr Forbes - You have never been outside the trade at all?

Mr Cunningham - Only a few years in the Army and a period as a union official.

Mr Forbes - Were you a workplace delegate or shop steward before you became a full-time official?

Mr Cunningham - Yes, I was a job steward in Scotland.

Mr Forbes - How old were you when you left Scotland to go to New Zealand?

Mr Cunningham - I was 27.

Mr Forbes - So most of your time has been spent outside of Australia.

Mr Cunningham - Yes.

Mr Forbes - Of course, I knew you as an organiser in Dickson in the ACT. How long were you an organiser here?

Mr Cunningham - I was an organiser in the ACT for 11 years.

Mr Forbes - Why did you eventually leave the union?

Mr Cunningham - I retired and went back to New Zealand.

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Mr Forbes - So it was retirement that finished you.

Mr Cunningham - Yes.

Mr Forbes - There will be other people we will be speaking to who have gone on to other work. But you finished up, like me.

Did you have any political affiliations during the time you were active?

Mr Cunningham – Yes, I was a member of the Labour Party. I first joined the Labour Party in 1947, in Scotland.

Mr Forbes - Is that the British or Scottish Labour Party?

Mr Cunningham – The British Labour Party.

Mr Forbes - What about in New Zealand?

Mr Cunningham- Yes, I was a full member of the Labour Party there as well.

Mr Forbes - And those affiliations never altered; you were a member all the way through?

Mr Cunningham - Yes, that's correct Ted, always a member. I never thought of joining any other political party, although I must admit I had a close liaison with the Socialist Unity Party which is the Communist group in New Zealand. What prevented me from joining that was that I was in a position where it would not have been prudent to do so.

Mr Forbes - In Melbourne, I had a close working relationship with people in the Communist Party and some other left-wing parties. But that does not happen so much here in Canberra. People seem to stick with a party and they continue down that track. There is not a cross-dissemination of ideas.

Mr Cunningham - I was probably more interested to join the Communist Party in Australia than I was in New Zealand because it was a pretty radical thing to do in New Zealand.

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

Mr Cunningham - Yes, I was married with two girls.

Mr Forbes - Did union work affect your family life?

Mr Cunningham - It certainly did, yes. Very badly sometimes because I was away from home a lot, especially in New Zealand.

Mr Forbes - Did you travel into the countryside there, did you?

Mr Cunningham- Yes.

Mr Forbes - But it worked out all right in the long run, did it?

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Mr Cunningham- Yes, it worked out all right in the long run.

Mr Forbes - During your time as an official, did you ever present matters or get involved in matters before the Industrial Relations Commission or the Federal Court?

Mr Cunningham - Yes I did, very often, especially in Australia. I was the court advocate for the BWIU in the ACT for 10 years. But a lot of the major cases were handled in Sydney.

Mr Forbes - In award making you would not have done it, but do you mean in dispute situations?

Mr Cunningham - Yes, mostly disputes, site allowances and so on.

Mr Forbes - So you were getting agreements and seeking to have them endorsed and incorporated into the award.

Mr Cunningham – Yes, or arbitrated.

Mr Forbes - As a full-time official, what role and responsibility did you have in determining union policy and practice? I think that might mean different things to different people in different unions.

Mr Cunningham - Very much so in New Zealand but not so much in Australia. In New Zealand, as the local branch secretary, I was involved in national conferences where the policy of the union was made. We had a rank and file system through the branch where policy was made by way of grievance that went to national conference where the policy was made. So at branch level, the rank and file had quite an input into policy making and, as the secretary, I was pretty involved in that.

Mr Forbes – Secretaries do have a big influence, don't they. But as an organiser, did you find that you still had that capacity to get ideas in?

Mr Cunningham - Yes. Every organiser gets ideas on the job from the rank and file, whether they be ideas that were no bloody good or (indistinct). There was always something that the union was not doing that it should be doing and that was day-to-day life among the membership.

Mr Forbes - A good organiser knows how to get his ideas up, even if he doesn't put them up himself.

Mr Cunningham - Yes, that is right.

Mr Forbes - When I was an organiser, we couldn't vote or move anything at branch council but we had no trouble getting our ideas up.

Mr Cunningham – That's right, there are ways and means.

Mr Forbes - Do you think the 13 years of a Labor government was a help or a hindrance to the trade union movement?

Mr Cunningham - In retrospect, some of the chickens have come home to roost, and some of the unions are saying that it was a very bad period. But if you look at the democratic set-up of the ACTU and the input that the unions were making into the ACTU, I am very reluctant to say that it was no good, because that is the way the people were thinking in conjunction with the Labor Party and that is the way things turned out. At this stage, I don't agree with people who say that it was bad for the unions. It might have been a bloody sight worse if they had not done what they had to do. At least they kept the Labor Party in power for 13 years.

Mr Forbes - I suppose that question is really about the fact that during those 13 years we had the Accord.

Mr Cunningham - Yes, that's right. That is what I was talking about.

Mr Forbes - Some people have observed that the Accord made us lazy, that it sidelined unions, that we got a bit fat and we were not used to fighting.

Mr Cunningham - I think that might apply to some unions but the union I was with, the BWIU and later the CFMEU, just weren't in that position because there was always something to fight for. During that 13-year period of the Accord, there were a lot of gains made by the BWIU, especially the superannuation gains in 1984, and maternity leave. There was long service leave. There were other gains through redundancy pay, increases in fares and allowances and various other increases. There was always a side issue that could be battled for outside the award and the BWIU were experts at doing that. We achieved quite substantial gains during that period. I might say that we could have achieved higher wage increases but there were certain policies of the hierarchy of the BWIU that had to be taken into consideration, the *quid pro quo* through the Joint Council of Labour where the BWIU advocated increased pensions for old people and that was part of the trade-off. I am not of the opinion that it was a disastrous period for the unions.

Mr Forbes - That is fine. What do you believe was the role and the result of ACTU involvement in determining union policies and practice? Do you think they had a greater input than they ought to have had? Do you believe that they determined our position rather than us determining theirs.

Mr Cunningham - I consider that the leadership for change certainly came from the ACTU but through the democratic process. There was plenty of opportunity for unions to oppose or debate any subject. The policies were reached through a democratic process. While some of them were very good advocates, I don't think there was any ulterior motive. I consider that what they were doing, they were doing for the best. I certainly had no cause to blame them for what happened, although in retrospect, maybe the finger could be pointed at some of the policies that ensued.

Mr Forbes - What effect did the push for enterprise bargaining have on your union? What was its impact on your membership numbers and your method of organising?

Mr Cunningham - Of course it had a big effect on our union because it tied up the organisers in negotiations. It took up a lot of time and resources of the union. They couldn't settle down and they got led up the garden path two or three times by major employers trying for instance to get a collective agreement through the Master Builders Association. When that failed it certainly had a big effect on the way the union worked, because it meant that the organisers then had their time taken up negotiating enterprise agreements.

Mr Forbes - Yes, I noticed that myself. Were union officials suitably skilled and resourced to handle decentralised bargaining? Was there a need to give the officers specific training to enable them to cope with the change?

Mr Cunningham - I can only speak for my own branch and that would be the case. I don't think they were trained up for the responsibilities that they had to accept. However, there were reasons for that because when the BLF was deregistered in 1986, the membership of the BWIU literally doubled, and a lot of new and young officials came on the scene, and they certainly weren't up to the sudden influx of duties that were thrust upon them. However, as far as the union was concerned, there was plenty of tuition through TUTA, through courses that were run and seminars that were held to try to bring them up to the standard that was required. And they were partially successful in doing that.

Mr Forbes - It is interesting to hear you mention TUTA. Did you make fair use of TUTA?

Mr Cunningham – Yes, the BWIU held classes at TUTA two or three times a year.

Mr Forbes - Was that especially for enterprise bargaining - to run your organisers through it?

Mr Cunningham – Yes, especially for that. There were three different levels that had to be done. The organisers went to the first level, three months later they went to the second level and three months after that they went to the third level. Not only branch organisers but shop stewards, job stewards went to them.

Mr Forbes - About what time was this then?

Mr Cunningham - That was in the late 1980s and it carried on into the 1990s.

Mr Forbes - Do you think decentralised bargaining affected the relationship between the members and the officers, that is, did it enhance it or worsen it? Did it result in distancing the two or did it bring you closer together?

Mr Cunningham - I wasn't involved personally in that since 1990, but in my opinion it enhanced the relationship between officials and members in the big job areas. I think there was more contact and more involvement between the officials and union members. Whether that has done any good, I don't know, because other things have become involved. Large numbers of the rank and file do not want to become involved in enterprise bargaining. They are reluctant to be seen to be involved in union affairs at the job level.

Mr Forbes – Is it too hard for them? Do you think they have got used to having their thinking done for them and just getting the money?

Mr Cunningham - I think that is what it was. I think they were quite prepared if something major came up to march down the street or march on some politician, but to become involved in the actual negotiations, I think a number were very reluctant to do that.

Mr Forbes - No confidence in their own capacity to judge things?

Mr Cunningham – That's right.

Mr Forbes - It is an education process, isn't it?

Mr Cunningham - It is an education process, exactly, as I mentioned.

Mr Forbes - When the decentralised bargaining process began, did you notice whether management was skilled enough to bargain effectively at the site level? Did you find that they were up with the principles of enterprise bargaining?

Mr Cunningham - I wasn't directly involved in that really but, from the experience that I have had, I would say yes, not in the larger companies, but certainly in the middle companies and the smaller companies the bosses just weren't capable of understanding what it was all about and were very reluctant about it. They certainly sought information and advice from other sources. I think the membership of the employers groups that the union had to deal with had to get increased advice and assistance.

Mr Forbes - Would you agree that many of the employers, especially the smaller ones, saw enterprise bargaining as an opportunity to claw back things that they had given before?

Mr Cunningham - Yes, that is right. Some of them thought it was great because they could get (indistinct) in the negotiations. The majority of the decisions, some of them, reportedly, were no bloody good for workers (indistinct). Some of the more antagonistic bosses took a great deal of time and energy to negotiate an agreement because they used every little flaw, procrastination, (indistinct).

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

Mr Cunningham - I think decentralised bargaining does reduce the relevance of the award system. Yes I agree with that, and I think it goes further than that because what our forebears fought for and won many years ago has been watered down because of getting away from the centralised system. There has always been an inequality between the workers and the bosses. The courts and the methods of centralised bargaining through the awards was a means of protection – to give workers a fairer go and to increase the standard of living, a better share of the spoils as it were, the profits, and increase the standard of living. I think it is going to be detrimental in the long run.

Mr Forbes - Would you agree that the award system, as set-up earlier in this century, in order to have value, had to be understood and supported strongly by the workers? Because as soon as they relied on it as a law of the state and they turned their back, it has been taken away. They do not really yet understand what has been taken away, do they?

Mr Cunningham – No, they don't know what has been taken away. But one of the faults with what has happened to the workers in relation to the award system is that I don't think they were ever involved enough in the award system. I have always been of the opinion that too much say was left in the hands of the hierarchy of the unions in relation to award negotiations. There were a lot of ideological claims made: 'We've got to go for this and we've got to go for that' without getting the real input from the rank and file through the branch meetings. I think that if there was a remit situation where the branches considered claims in the awards at branch meetings and forwarded them to the union conference to be compiled and put forward

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in award negotiations, I think it would be better. I don't think the rank and file have had enough say in the actual claims for awards.

Mr Forbes - Would you say that they did not have enough say or that they had too much done for them - that the officials went and did it without involving the rank and file?

Mr Cunningham- Yes, that is right.

Mr Forbes - Your statement might suggest that the rank and file were clamouring for the right to have input but were denied it.

Mr Cunningham - No, the rank and file have never clamoured for an input. They had to be guided and educated along but these methods would have at least created some interest in that award so that they could understand it. Perhaps we could have a special meeting called once a year so that the rank and file could put forward their views on what should be in the award. It might be something on the job - asbestos, travelling time, maternity leave, anything that they felt should be in the award but is not in the award. It would give them a say. But no-one really had an avenue to make submissions to the union hierarchy for award negotiation.

Mr Forbes - I think the award system in Australia should have been taught to children in school as a very important part of our social system and an important part of their education so that they did understand it.

What do you believe are the reasons behind the declining rates of union membership? What do you think ought to be done about it? They are falling rather badly. The ACTU's big campaign over the last couple of years has not produced the goods and they are still declining.

Mr Cunningham - Of course, I think they are doing all they can do about it. I see that they have said that they are going to do something more about it. The last campaign I heard was that they were going to put on a couple of hundred organisers and that they were thinking about spending \$10 million but that hasn't proven to be very successful. We have got to go by statistics. The manufacturing industry which employs large numbers of members has been decimated since 1981, 82 and 83. Membership of the industry, blue-collar workers, has declined. The numbers in the hospitality areas have increased. Have a look at the people who work in the hospitality areas and service industries, and you've been involved in that Ted, they are casual workers, part-time this and part-time that. Students have gone in and they are not interested in union membership and, of course, they have been subject to a lot of propaganda too about the declining union membership.

Mr Forbes - What do you think we ought to do about it? I agree my union in hospitality should do something about it, but what?

Mr Cunningham - We are getting away from the traditional methods that we used under the protection of the award system. What we should do is a very difficult question, Ted. I'm quite sure a lot of people ...

Mr Forbes - I bloody know it is! Interviews aren't meant to be easy Dave.

Mr Cunningham - I have read several books about when the miners were being organised. I forget the name of the lawyer guy who was involved in advocating on behalf of American miners.

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But what they used to do there, with all the problems that they had, was to hire an extra hundred union organisers to go on the site and sign up workers and agitate and so on. We haven't got the intestinal fortitude of the American organisers. We are not up against the same problems. We are not up against the thugs of the Pinkertons. But I think the ACTU and its affiliates have to put more effort into it. I read a paper a year ago - I think it may have been one of your fellows, Ted - written by a fellow who went to the US to do a study. He wrote an excellent paper about union organisers in America. There is not the fire in the belly today. There is a big strike in America at the moment with the Teamsters involved with these couriers and transport workers. If you can just involve the rank and file in two or three victories. You have got to get that boss by the short and curlys to get anything.

Mr Forbes - Yes, after a successful dispute – that's the time to put the pressure on.

The ACTU plan for the creation of 20 super unions is virtually complete. What is your view of this change? Has it fulfilled expectations for concentrating resources and efficiencies in the movement? What effect did it have on you as an official? How do you think the rank and file received it when the many unions became few?

Mr Cunningham - I can only speak for my own organisation where I think it has been very successful. The amalgamations that took place with the BWIU, the FEDFA, painters and plasterers, timber workers, miners and so on – I think it has been highly successful. But I have not got the confidence to say that it has been highly successful in other organisations. The policy of the BWIU for at least 40 or 50 years has been to have all building workers in the one union. We have been more or less successful in that. I can see the problems for other organisations who have not been as successful as we have, for instance the AWU, and there are probably reasons for that. In some areas it has been successful and in others it has not.

Mr Forbes - If you had a choice - referring to the two wage systems: the award system and enterprise bargaining - what system would you prefer to work in and why?

Mr Cunningham - I would prefer to work under the award system. I am not too sure why I say that. They are very different. The world changes and I'm getting older. But the award system, to me, was simpler. It offered protection to the people that I was interested in getting protected. The enterprise bargaining system opens up all sorts of other problems. It is very easy to get a good enterprise agreement from a brewery for instance, because they make a profit of \$150 million a year so it is easy enough. But in an industry that struggles - let us say the footwear and clothing industry - that creates all sorts of inadequacies. It means division in the workforce - some people are going to be better off and some are going to be a hell of a lot worse off. I think an all-embracing award system is far more humanitarian.

Mr Forbes - It is certainly more comfortable for an official to work in, isn't it? However, as you were saying, and I agree with you, it would be highly desirable to have more rank and file participation in what we organisers do. But I guess enterprise bargaining does tend to bring rank and filers in because they've got to have a say, haven't they?

Mr Cunningham - Yes, they have, that's right.

Mr Forbes – Whereas under the award system, there were times when you had members saying, 'The court gave us that.'

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Mr Cunningham - That is right, you could. On the other hand, if you're working in an industry that cannot afford to pay any more, winning a wage increase for your members will mean you are going to be ratshit anyway!

Mr Forbes - It is an awful position to be in when the boss shows you the balance sheet and says, 'I can't afford to pay any more' and you know he can't.

Mr Cunningham – That's for sure.

Mr Forbes - What a dreadful thing to have to go out and say to the rank and file, 'Hey, he said he can't pay and I believe him.' They would say, 'Stand out of the way. Let someone else go in.'

Mr Cunningham - A difficult position. A lot of bosses are not bastards you know.

Mr Forbes - I know that, but most of them! We are not talking about individuals here, we are talking about a system.

This last question is about how you feel having spent your life doing what you have been doing. Would you be pleased if one of your children was interested in becoming a union official?

Mr Cunningham - I wouldn't be unhappy about that. In fact, one of them has acted in the secondary teachers union in New Zealand.

Mr Forbes - You have two girls?

Mr Cunningham – Yes, both in New Zealand. She was very successful. At that time her employer was the government and the Labour government was cutting education under 'Rogernomics' so she did very well standing up against them. She has a social conscience, which she sometimes blames me for. I would be quite happy to see them out there advocating on behalf of the workers, that's for sure.

Mr Forbes - So there is nothing disreputable about the line of work that you and I have done all our working lives?

Mr Cunningham – Not a bloody thing. It was the only thing to do.

Mr Forbes - Yes, it was indeed. All right Dave, thank you.

