

9. Des Heaney, past Secretary, Association of Draughting, Supervisory and Technical Employees (ADSTE) and the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU). (Interviewed by Ted Forbes, Australian Society for the Study of Labour History – 1997)

Mr Forbes - Des is now working in industrial relations in a consultant capacity. When did you first join a union, Des? How old were you and where was it?

Mr Heaney - I joined when I was about 19. I came back from Israel and began psychiatric nursing at Callan Park in Sydney. So the nurses association was the first union I joined.

Mr Forbes - What about other unions?

Mr Heaney - They had dual coverage of nurses with the Health and Research Employees Association (HREA) at the time - now called the Health Services Union (HSUA). I joined HREA because it was a more go-ahead union. I joined that union and became active in it.

Mr Forbes - You came to Canberra in about 1982-83, didn't you?

Mr Heaney - That's right. Before then, as a senior registered nurse at Callan Park, I became the secretary of the HREA sub-committee which was a localised branch of the union and was extremely active at the hospital. In fact, we were the first psychiatric hospital in 30 years to have a total walk-out of nursing staff.

Mr Forbes - One of the questions was whether you were a workplace delegate before you became an officer. I guess that will do for that. You were sort of a sub-branch secretary, or a local, like the American term?

Mr Heaney - It was very much like the American system where you would negotiate with the secretaries of Departments of Health about problems affecting your areas. I became so interested in that and at the same time became less interested in and less enjoying psyche nursing that I got a position as an organiser with the Australian Theatrical and Amusement Employees Association (ATAEA) in Sydney. I worked for them for about three years looking after television, opera, race courses, outdoor workers.

Mr Forbes - I didn't know you did that. How did you find your way down here? You were an officer when you came here, weren't you? How did you become an officer of ADSTE?

Mr Heaney - I was an organiser with the Australian Theatrical and Amusement Employees in Sydney and they had gone through a massive election campaign and defeat of the incumbent secretary with whom I was aligned. And whilst working under the new federal secretary, the tensions between the organising staff and the elected officials were such that it became politically untenable. I was made aware of a position being vacant in ADSTE Canberra.

I contacted the then secretary of ADSTE, Donna Valentine, and was successful in being appointed as an industrial officer with that union on the basis that I would be an industrial officer for two weeks and then appointed secretary. That two weeks was effectively a handover between myself and Donna Valentine.

Mr Forbes - So she handed that over to you. You didn't defeat her?

Mr Heaney - No, I was employed as an industrial officer with the expectation that within two weeks, I would be the appointed secretary.

Mr Forbes - Why did you leave the union?

Mr Heaney - Having worked for so long, nearly 17 years as a union official and then subsequently the secretary of the metal workers in Canberra, the situation between our branch, the autonomy guaranteed to our branch under the amalgamation plan,¹ was breached by George Campbell, the then federal secretary of the metal workers, by virtue of him centralising all the funds and decision making in Sydney and not allowing our branch to continue to act autonomously, and him not replacing lost resources. I took the decision that it simply was not worth the internal political fight because we never would have the numbers and, more importantly, I could never deliver the level of service to those rank and file members that I thought was necessary. So I took a decision to resign, and once that was known in the office, the whole office decided to resign. So we went into private practice, as we say.

Mr Forbes - You might like to come back to that at the end of the questions. I have one question on the creation of the 20 super unions and perhaps it might be apposite to touch on that again. Did you have political affiliations during the time you were active as an official?

Mr Heaney - I was always a member of the Labor Party but not a particularly active one, only active to the extent that it was necessary as a union official to be active. I've never thought that the politicians or the political wing of the Labor movement was all that effective and beneficial to the Labor movement itself.

Mr Forbes - But were you a member of the Labor Party right throughout?

Mr Heaney - Since I was 16.

Mr Forbes - And your political affiliations didn't change during this time? Was it always the Labor Party?

Mr Heaney - No, it was always the Labor Party.

Mr Forbes - You were a family man with children during your time as an official?

Mr Heaney - Yes, we had our first child in Sydney so I had been a family man from the start of being an active full-time official.

Mr Forbes - Did union work affect your family life?

Mr Heaney - I think it had, in retrospect. You become very caught up in your union work to the extent that you don't realise the impact it is having until you stop doing it. I think my family paid a fairly high price in terms of my absence, and when I was there, the degree of tiredness that the job creates. Yes, I think we did pay a price for it.

¹ The amalgamation was finally completed in 1991, after a referendum in which 60 percent of participating ADSTE members voted to support the amalgamation proposal. The merged organisation was named the [Metals and Engineering Workers' Union](#) (MEWU) and had a total of 167,500 members. The membership previously represented by ADSTE became the 'Technical and Supervisory Division' of the MEWU. Immediately following the merger the Division lost a significant proportion of its members with approximately 40 percent of former ADSTE members choosing not to continue membership in the amalgamated body. (DH)

Mr Forbes - You feel that your family did miss out on something. Are they conscious of that or is it just a feeling you have got? Do they regret it?

Mr Heaney - The answer is yes to both. My wife resented the amount of time and energy, particularly the amount of energy that the job took out of you, and the constant early starts and late arrivals at home, particularly when the children were very young. But by the same token, their attitude changed a bit after I stopped being a union official. They noticed the change in me in terms of being available a lot more, not having the hassles, but also not having the sense of job satisfaction and involvement that the job created. So it was both a benefit and a disadvantage.

Mr Forbes – Des, did you present matters or get involved in matters before the Industrial Relations Commission or the Federal Court?

Mr Heaney - Yes, I had been to the Federal Court about half a dozen times. In terms of the commission, it was one of the few aspects of the job that I thoroughly enjoyed - the theatre of presenting a case, the sharp end of argument before a third party and trying to win it on merit was a very exhilarating experience, and that's one part that I do actually miss.

Mr Forbes - The question here about the Federal Court, we would have only gone to the Federal Court as witnesses, wouldn't we?

Mr Heaney – No, I've taken two federal secretaries to the Federal Court in my time over perceived breaches of the rules.

Mr Forbes - And led the matter?

Mr Heaney - No, in the Federal Court we had barristers leading the matter.

Mr Forbes - That's what I say. It is a court and you can't lead.

Mr Heaney - No, you must be represented by a legally qualified counsel.

Mr Forbes – Yes, I have been in the court as a witness and I think it was called the Industrial Court. As a full-time official, what role and responsibility did you have in determining union policy and practice?

Mr Heaney - A very significant role in terms of being secretary of ADSTE and the metal workers in the Territory. Effectively, one wouldn't like to say it, but it was a near dictatorial role on the basis that it seemed the approving bodies, the branch councils, had views and aspirations that were very clearly linked to mine. Because there was that very sympathetic and close relationship, as secretary you could determine policies quite extensively. It changed dramatically when you moved to the national level because the national priorities were not so clearly directed to rank and file outcomes but more macro/political outcomes.

Mr Forbes - Could I ask you to think again about your use of the word dictatorial there. You went on to say that you knew your local branch council very well and saw a lot of them. The fact that you were in step so much with that group of people, does that suggest that there was anything dictatorial or was it that you just seemed to agree?

Mr Heaney – Yes, I take your point on that. It probably is not dictatorial in that sense, but the ability to make decisions autonomously was there because they were always made against a background of knowing what the branch council could do or wouldn't do in a certain matter.

One of the benefits of working for a union, particularly like ADSTE and the metal workers when it did have its autonomy, was that you were actually talking to the people who would live and work under those decisions that you and the council made. So that closeness, which is not there now, was very much a great asset.

Mr Forbes – Yes, I know the feeling. I thought I had it myself in my own job. Do you believe that the 13 years of a Labor government was a help or a hindrance to the trade union movement? What we are doing there is putting some emphasis on the Accord.

Mr Heaney - I think it has been a dramatic assistance. With a Liberal government or a conservative government, the labour movement would never have got into place those various essential changes such as superannuation for employees, occupational health and safety legislation, maternity leave legislation. Those are Acts that only a federal government can put into place and there was an absolutely undeniable benefit of having a Labor government there. But if I was being absolutely honest about the long-term results, I think 13 years of Labor, coupled with the close relationship with the ACTU, has actually been a disadvantage because it has taken away the need for organisers to organise at the workplace and has effectively made them lazy.

Mr Forbes - Has it made the whole movement lazy, do you think?

Mr Heaney - I think it made them complacent. It didn't develop the skills of the new organisers coming through within those 13 years. The requirement to have the skills to organise, the ideological background, was something that people didn't necessarily develop in themselves, but they took it on as a mantle. I don't think, therefore, they held it very coherently or sensibly. Effectively, the leadership of the Labor movement in my view, Kelty particularly, lost track of the day-to-day price that organisers had to pay to organise labour, and lost that very sharp analysis as to what your average member wants out of a trade union.

Mr Forbes - You seem to be addressing my next question. What do you believe was the role and the result of the ACTU involvement in determining trade union policy and practice during that time that I alluded to?

Mr Heaney - I think they had an incredibly powerful influence and essentially a very negative one. I believe the role of many federal officers of unions and therefore the role of the ACTU - because they made up the ACTU, the decision making body and Kelty - took an organisational view of unions as opposed to an industrial view. They were more concerned about creating efficient organisations across a broad front rather than efficient organisations representing their membership. The power that large organisations gave those officials, and therefore Kelty, became too much of a driving force. Effectively, to answer that, the organisations became more important than what the organisations were designed to do.

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

Mr Heaney - I believe in the long-term, enterprise bargaining had a remarkably detrimental effect. I don't think people really understood what it meant. I think there was and still is a lot of rhetoric about the issues.

I don't believe your average organiser was skilled up enough to be able to bargain successfully at the enterprise level. I don't believe the organisations or the union movement itself was resourced up sufficiently because enterprise bargaining demands a massive net increase in resources to be able to put it into place successfully. And effectively, I don't believe the employers themselves were particularly skilled or knowledgeable in knowing what they wanted out of industrial relations. Enterprise bargaining's fundamental flaw is that it has an arrogant position of assuming that industrial relations is one of the driving forces within a business where, in effect, that is not the case. We gave it an undue influence and profile and couldn't meet the demands that that profile created.

Mr Forbes - My next question was were union officials suitably skilled and resourced to handle decentralised bargaining and was training given to them to cope with the change? You have half answered that already. Did the union at any stage, even if latterly, attempt to give organisers and branch officers the training to enable them to do the bargaining?

Mr Heaney - Some would say yes, but I would say no. The training that we got, and I understand other officials got, was one of the ideology and the conceptual background to enterprise bargaining which, unto itself, is necessary. What it didn't do is to give industrial and organising staff the skill to be able to effectively sit down and read a balance sheet. If you were going to bargain at an enterprise level, you have to understand the enterprise. I don't believe your average union official either had the time and resources and, in many cases, the intellect to be able to sit down, pull apart an organisation, and rebuild it in industrial terms to make it more efficient. They simply didn't understand the concepts in an entrepreneurial sense as to what they were dealing with.

Mr Forbes - Apropos your reference to balance sheets, and the capacity to read them, I have heard it said that balance sheets are not interesting for the things that they reveal, but for the things that they don't reveal. The great skill is in interpreting a balance sheet.

Mr Heaney - That's right.

Mr Forbes - I think they hide, I should say.

Mr Heaney - I can't understand how one can bargain at the enterprise unless you understand that detail. And the average organiser had neither the time, resources or training to do so.

Mr Forbes - You have to know how they're going, don't you?

Mr Heaney - That's right.

Mr Forbes - And assess their capacity to pay.

Mr Heaney - Yes, that. And one of the other things about enterprise bargaining that people didn't really take on board, and I don't think many people understand, is that what the ACTU and the metal workers, through people like George Campbell, were saying is that we actually have to help businessmen run their businesses to be more efficient so we can get more wage increases and job security. What that does in a very practical sense is that an organiser has to be a de-facto member of the board of directors and that creates a perceptual problem between him or her and the rank and file. Now I don't think your average rank and file member really understood the need to be that close to management to do a good deal. They saw it in some ways as being collaborative.

Mr Forbes - Was management skilled enough to bargain effectively at the site level during this period?

Mr Heaney - My view on that before I left the metal workers was that yes they were, that they were successful in so far as we found it hard to get what we perceived to be decent wage increases. But having worked as a private industrial relations consultant for the last three years, I now realise that, in the main, most managers were as disorganised in terms of their approach to industrial relations as most union organisers were, and paid very scant attention to it. I tend to believe that the parties themselves, as that full bench decision said in 1991, simply weren't mature enough to handle the debate.

Mr Forbes - Do you think that decentralised bargaining enhanced the relationship between the union and its members or did it distance them during the time that you were there?

Mr Heaney - Given the premise that you had sufficient resources to do the bargaining properly - that is, you didn't just skirt across the issues and go from one workplace to the next - if you accept that you had enough resources to do it properly within each enterprise, it did increase the bond between the official and the rank and file. But the reality is that there was never enough time and resources to really do that job properly, and it meant your average delegate had to take on a net additional role that many of them couldn't afford to do in terms of time and many of them simply didn't want to. At the end of the day, I'd have to say your average union activist has been burnt out by the demands created by enterprise bargaining.

Mr Forbes - That's an interesting statement, yes. Decentralised bargaining reduced the relevance of the award system: what do you think about that statement?

Mr Heaney - As a political answer, I've held the view for quite a number of years, and argued it through at the national level at the metal workers to great criticisms of myself, that effectively, Kely and Keating have been responsible for the demise of the award system. They have encouraged enterprise bargaining to the extent that the award is now something that people don't even regard as a document worth enforcing. The site based deals have moved away so much from the award or the award has not been kept up-to-date to the extent that we now no longer have that broad front ability to bring up those workplaces that haven't bargained well or haven't bargained at all by use of the award, because the award has been effectively made industrially redundant. I believe the Accord can be held responsible for that.

Mr Forbes - What do you believe are the reasons behind the declining rates of union membership? What, in your view, needs to be done to rectify this decline?

Mr Heaney - If you're going to take unions out of the industry focus and put them more in a workplace focus, it's actually a matter that the unions have to be closer to the rank and file and have the time and resources to do that. I don't believe that's the case, as I have said earlier. The demise of the award in some ways correlates to the demise of being ideologically driven within unions.

Very few unions now are ideologically based or coherently based in terms of being able to say, 'Yes, I know what that union stands for.' Society has changed dramatically as well, there is no doubt about that. There are very few ideologically committed trade unionists.

So many trade union members now are members of their trade union and the NRMA for the same reasons: principally for insurance, protection.

That means you simply aren't getting that throughput at the delegate level to organise labour on the union's behalf at the work site. There is more reliance on the union official who simply has less and less time to devote to that.

And my strongest criticism of the Kelty plan, and the federal secretaries of big unions who were also part of this, is that they ceased to realise that the union had to be part of the community. They thought industrial relations was such a big issue, and such an important social event, that it should exist in its own right. The fundamental flaw in the last 10 years of trade unions is that they have distanced themselves from the community in which they work. They aren't seen by the community as a normal, viable, essential part of being in the workforce. They are regarded as specialist and isolationist, and they have isolated themselves from the community generally. I think that is a very high price to be paid and can't be paid.

Mr Forbes - This next question might be tied in with that previous one. 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 trade union movement? What effect did it have on you as an official? How do you think it was received by the rank and file, your membership?

Mr Heaney - I think there were far too many unions. So many of those unions simply didn't have the capacity to do the job properly. There is no doubt about that. They had outlived their usefulness. Having said that, I don't believe the current situation of having 20 or 22 super unions was the answer. The way they were organised was done too much on a political basis rather than on the nature of the work that their members did. The AWU/FIME was a classic example. The issue of the 20 super unions rose or fell on the basis that they would be more effective organisationally. I believe, particularly after working in the metal workers for quite a number of years, the fundamental flaw there was that whilst they created these large organisations, they didn't create the knowledge and the expertise within the union movement to be able to run those organisations well. Effectively, and no disrespect to the individuals involved, you had boiler makers running multi-million dollar organisations, who had no managerial or administrative expertise at all, and I don't believe that was an effective use of the resources.

The other major problem was, and we didn't realise that until quite deeply into the process, that we had alienated our rank and file, particularly that rank and file that was based on skill. They felt that their particular skills, rightly or wrongly, were so special that only they and a specialised union could look after them. I think the super unions showed no sympathy or empathy with that position and, typically, subsumed those craft based aspirations into a generalist union and by doing that, alienated their membership.

The metal workers is a classic example. ADSTE was a technical engineering based, science based union for para-professionals and above. We amalgamated with a trade based union, where our branch and the Tasmanian branch were instrumental in opposing that amalgamation, not the creation of a super union, but the super union on the basis of an industry that many of our members didn't see themselves in. We wanted to create a super union based on a horizontal cut across industry - that is, of technical officers. We believed that your average member didn't see themselves primarily as working in a particular industry. They saw themselves as having a particular type of skill that they could transport to any industry. If we had been successful in getting the super union based on technical workers, as opposed to an industry base, it would have been a far more successful operation.

Mr Forbes - That was your view at the time five or six years ago. Do you think that history has borne that out?

Mr Heaney – Yes, I think it has, surprisingly. We are now involved in and paid by employers to give advice. But we go around and talk to a lot of union members, a lot of delegates and staff. What we see now is the natural organics within a workplace of staff, with or without unions, organising themselves within workplaces based on their skill profile. Technical officers are getting together. Science workers are getting together. They aren't seeing themselves necessarily as organising themselves within the industry in which they may work, but around their craft or skill, and we are noticing that informal organising taking on a much higher and rapid profile.

Mr Forbes – Des, if you were still a union official, what bargaining system would you prefer to work in?

Mr Heaney - This may sound very conservative but I believe that, for unions, the most effective form of bargaining is on the basis of free market IR. That means you get what you can get. Now, people say that doesn't allow widespread application of results. Well, if you look at the effect of enterprise bargaining, there is a very large and significant proportion of workers in Australia who have not got any increase through enterprise bargaining but the \$8 safety net. So I don't believe enterprise bargaining has been more universally applied and successful than free market industrial relations.

Mr Forbes - Would you be pleased if one of your children was interested in becoming a union official? If they came along at a later stage and said, 'Dad, I've been offered a job from my union. I'm going to take it.'

Mr Heaney - I would be very pleased.

Mr Forbes - Why?

Mr Heaney - I suppose the union movement that I joined no longer exists. But the union movement my daughter or my son might join, for them, would be sufficient. It would be quite relevant and a correct thing to support. I suppose I would be pleased for two things: from a personal point of view, there are very few jobs that would give you the range of experiences, packed into the very short period of time that a union organiser has. You see parts of life as a union official that your average person would never see, let alone understand. So I think it is a great developmental position.

On top of that, I think good unions - and there should be a distinction between good and bad unions - are very effective organisations in representing employees. I believe that whether people are members of a union or not, they need representation. They need assistance, and to have an organisation there to do that effectively, and to have one of my children part of that, I would be very pleased.

Mr Forbes – That's good. Are there any other comments that you would like to make? Anything you think we have missed?

Mr Heaney - Going back to my earlier comment about lack of service, my view has always been that the metal workers should base themselves on an organisation like the NRMA. Why do people join the NRMA? They're not ideologically committed. They join it because there is a service. It is very sad to see so few people in unions or joining unions. The major criticism is that unions don't offer a service or an efficient service. To see employees frustrated, and sometimes abused in workplaces, and not have the capacity for them to have those problems resolved, is very sad.

Des Heaney, ADSTE &AMWU

Mr Forbes - One of the interviewees suggested that it needs more of the union organiser and less of the labour manager.

Mr Heaney - I think that is very true. But I don't see it changing. I think, over time, unions appropriate to the circumstances will be re-created.

Mr Forbes - That's an interesting point, Des.

Mr Heaney - Thank you very much.

Mr Forbes - Thanks very much, Des.