

10. Gil Anderson (1944-2012), formerly Branch Secretary, Liquor, Hospitality & Miscellaneous Workers Union (LHMU). (Interviewed by Ted Forbes, Australian Society for the Study of Labour History - 14 August 1997)

Mr Forbes – Gil, when did you first join a union? How old were you and where did you join it?

Mr Anderson - I first joined a union in 1960 when I was 16 years old. I joined the Association of Scientific Workers in Scotland at the University of Edinburgh where I was a junior assistant laboratory attendant.

Mr Forbes - That is similar to my background.

Mr Anderson - Yes, it was the same year.

Mr Forbes - So is that when you joined the union?

Mr Anderson - Yes. It was the Association of Scientific Workers, which was a bit like the British equivalent of the old ADSTE I guess.

Mr Forbes - Or the old FSTW before ADSTE, which was the Federated, Scientific and Technical Workers. I joined that. What other unions have you belonged to since then?

Mr Anderson - That was the only union that I belonged to in the United Kingdom. When I came to Australia, I took up laboratory work again at Flinders University in Adelaide and joined the local branch of ADSTE. However, we were very unhappy in our workplace with the South Australian Branch of ADSTE at that time and we were amongst the first members of the Flinders University General Staff Association which over many years tried to gain registration but I think I read in *Workforce* two years ago were finally knocked back.

Mr Forbes - Were you a workplace delegate before you became an official of the union?

Mr Anderson - Yes, I was the workplace delegate at Flinders University with ADSTE and then the renegade union, if you like, the General Staff Association.

Mr Forbes - What made you decide to become an officer of the union as you are now?

Mr Anderson - I was told by the then branch secretary, a guy called Ted Forbes, that there was a vacancy in our New South Wales branch which involved organising in the Riverina and far south coast, and operating out of the Canberra branch office. I applied for the position and I believe Ted put a word in for me. I went up to Sydney for an interview and was successful in getting the job.

Mr Forbes - The organisers are not elected positions in the LHMU, are they? You are elected by your branch council, aren't you?

Mr Anderson - Yes.

Mr Forbes - My next question is really for people who have left the union. Of course, you have not so that only applies to ...

Mr Anderson - Do you know something that I don't?

Mr Forbes - That only applies to some of the oldies. Did you have any political affiliations during the time that you were active in the union?

Mr Anderson - Not prior to coming to Australia. In the UK, I was a member of the Scottish Nationalist Party as a young and romantic nationalist. I suppose everybody has got an excuse and that's mine!

Mr Forbes - What about in Australia?

Mr Anderson - In Australia I was active in student politics at Flinders University. I was not a member of the Australian Labor Party at that time but I was active in left politics. I took an active role in the occupation of the Flinders University Registry which was the longest occupation since the occupation of Paris University by the students there in 1968.

Mr Forbes - One of my questions concerns family and kids but I know you are single. So instead of that question, perhaps I'll ask about when you were a member of the Missos, you were working part-time at the High Court. What period was that? It must have been a fair time because you did a university course in the meantime, didn't you?

Mr Anderson - Yes, I finished an arts degree that I had started in South Australia, again at Flinders Uni. I worked in the High Court for a period of three years, from when it opened to August 1984 when I applied for and was successful in getting the NSW organiser's job.

Mr Forbes - Do you think that degree, not so much the degree itself, but the study entailed in it, has aided you in your work as a union official?

Mr Anderson - I think perhaps latterly it has. For the last three years, the branch has been increasingly taking responsibility for doing its own research and advocacy work.

Mr Forbes - That leads into the next question. Do you present matters or get involved in matters before the Industrial Relations Commission or the Federal Court?

Mr Anderson - We certainly present matters as a matter of routine before the IRC. We have had one or two trips to the Federal Court. We usually seek the assistance of our national office advocates in those cases. But the branch is responsible for the housekeeping, if you like, of the awards. We are also responsible for pursuing variations to the awards and the pursuit of wage claims, the negotiation of these and their translation into the various awards. Basically, we do the whole thing now. But our comrades up in the national office are always available in a mentor role. We have some very experienced and very talented people up there.

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

Mr Anderson - In determining the policy of the LHMU on a national basis?

Mr Forbes - I suppose even in a branch you would have policies arrived at through branch council and so forth.

Mr Anderson - Certainly at the branch level, there is a very direct involvement in that. Policies are decided in our organisation by the branch council, which is the supreme decision making body of the branch. Very often, if it is an important decision, it is discussed with the executive, and we go to branch council as an executive, supporting the policy or whatever words we have come to agree on. As a full-time official, and as branch secretary, I have a considerable input into the policies of the ACT branch. However, there are certain parameters within which we can operate. The LHMU, or the Missos - I am from the Miscellaneous Workers Union part of the LHMU - has had a long history, certainly since 1955, of centralism, but very much democratic centralism. That means that we cannot go off on some tangent in the ACT which would find us at odds with the federal policies of the union.

Mr Forbes - Do you believe the 13 years of a Labor government - I am thinking here about the Accord of course - was a help or a hindrance to the trade union movement? If you do, in what way was it a problem?

Mr Anderson - I guess like everything there were positives and negatives. Looking back, it is pretty hard to put your finger on the positives, but I am sure if we looked hard enough we would find some. The idea was that the trade union movement would become an equal partner with the Labor government in making important decisions concerning, not just industrial matters, but also economic matters, indeed all government matters, whether it was social security or whatever. The reality has been that those 13 years have, in a sense, divorced the union leadership from the rank and file.

The wage rises were national wage rises. They were negotiated in parliament or in Swanston Street (ACTU), and then they were processed through the Commission. Your average worker sitting watching Channel 9 news would see a lot of guys in suits walking into the IRC. They would see them come out and a month or two later, he or she would get a wage rise. They had not participated in any way in winning that wage rise. So they said, 'We get our wage rises from these guys in suits - we're not quite sure who they are - they might be something to do with the government, and we get the wage rises that way.' It really did harm the union movement considerably. And also, it made union officials lazy.

From the early part when I started with the union, which was just at the start of the Hawke years, 1984, I can remember going to a factory somewhere in the western suburbs of Sydney with one of the proper organisers - I was a trainee at the time. We had a meeting with about 20 workers there and we drew up a log of claims. It was great. But of course, in all my time as an organiser, we have never had to draw up a log of claims. So guys like me, who came in as a full-time official at the start of the Accord, have had to re-learn how to be a union official.

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

Mr Anderson - I think the reply to that it is very much linked to the Accord. Again, it is divorcing both the rank and file unionists and branch officials - in fact, all union officials who theoretically are the representatives of the workers - from the real decision-making process. There were a select few on the ACTU executive, usually the general secretaries of the major unions, who sat down with Kelty and the like, and made these very important policy decisions - decisions concerning wages policy - which they would then take to the ACTU Congress.

Deals were done, the numbers were there. We would have a formal vote on it and no discussion. Very unhealthy indeed!

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

Mr Anderson - Enterprise bargaining has been for the most part a disaster for the Missos. Our main membership, particularly here in the ACT, is contract cleaning. A smaller group, but still an important one, is contract security. In the contract industries, it is simply not achievable. Enterprise bargaining is not possible. If you negotiate a wage rise for, say, workers with one cleaning company, that means it is going to cost that employer more when they put their tender in. So all you are doing is ensuring that the workers, your members with that company, in the medium to long-term, are going to be out of work.

We have overcome that to a certain extent using various strategies in the Commission to have increases in the award rates, and we have been successful in cleaning to a certain extent. We are now working on trying to pass that on to security. Where I think it has had a good effect, to a degree, is in the non-contract areas. We don't have a large manufacturing area here but one area in manufacturing where we have the most members is in the bakeries. We now have enterprise agreements in place at both Tip Top and Buttercup. During that time, the union was able to increase its membership in baking by, I think it was about 20 members, which is a lot given that there are only two bakeries here. And it did bring us closer to the membership.

In the child care area, we have something like 12 enterprise agreements up. That again was a good process. However, it was a considerable drain on our organising resources because you have to go through the whole process of enterprise bargaining for a child-care centre with say 10 or 15 employees and it takes the same amount of work as for a factory with 150 workers.

Mr Forbes - On that subject, do you think that the union officials were suitably skilled and resourced to handle decentralised bargaining? Was there any specific training necessary to enable officials to cope with this change?

Mr Anderson - I'll deal with the skills and then move to the resources. There were new skills and knowledge that had to be attained by the individual organisers. That was done through the training provided by national office, and we do that rather well in our union. The training was there, the knowledge of the documentation etc. Where we hit a problem was with resources. As I said previously, particularly in areas like child care where you have got all these small employers, it is an incredible drain on resources to engage in enterprise bargaining. The union has adopted a policy of, as far as possible, involving the union delegates and the activist members. However, when it comes down to the documentation, there is no way that we can expect the delegates to do the documentation and all that technical stuff. They just don't have the training for it, and it would simply be inappropriate for them to do it.

Mr Forbes - Do you think that decentralised bargaining enhanced the relationship between the union and its members or did it distance the two?

Mr Anderson - I think it distanced the two and it caused considerable feelings of resentment in cleaning, in the contract industries, which along with contract security, are the heart of this branch of the union.

These members read in the papers, they saw on the TV, they spoke to public servants and their next door neighbours. Some of these other workers were achieving wage rises through enterprise bargaining. But our members in these key industries, all they were getting were the crumbs from the table - the safety net wage rises.

Mr Forbes - Those are the service industries you are talking about?

Mr Anderson - Yes.

Mr Forbes - Let me put the same question to you with regard to your manufacturing area, small as it is. Was there a tendency for members, say in the baking industry, to know what was going on?

Mr Anderson - Yes, certainly the bakery members did know what was going on, particularly with the Tip Top bakery enterprise agreement which has proven quite a considerable success.

Mr Forbes - And the members knew what you were doing, and understood the process?

Mr Anderson - They understood the process very much. We had more contact with our members at Tip Top and Buttercup during that intensive three-month period than we normally had. We were there on a weekly basis.

Mr Forbes - Could it be said then that they made progress in industrial knowledge and also political judgment?

Mr Anderson - Yes, I believe you could say that, certainly industrial knowledge and, to a certain extent, their political judgment. I was out at Tip Top last week talking to the boys - it is all male on the manufacturing side of things, there are women merchandisers - and they are very pleased with themselves out there because we got a three-year agreement which delivers 15 per cent plus a lot of other goodies. I was very reluctant to go into a three-year agreement but the blokes were keen to do it and they have been proven correct.

Mr Forbes - Equally, was management skilled enough, educated enough, to bargain effectively at the site level?

Mr Anderson - Again, in manufacturing they were skilled. George Weston Foods is a huge multinational company as are QBA, the Buttercup people. There was no problem there. But when you get down to the community services area, where you are dealing with amateur employers - that is the mums and dads who are on the committees - it is abysmal. The worst thing is that this town is full of bush lawyers in the sense that we have got chaps who work at DIR who think they are industrial relations experts, and they are the biggest pain in the arse.

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

Mr Anderson - It is not true for the bulk of our membership. In fact decentralised bargaining made the award even more important in the sense that I believe there was a feeling of embitterment amongst cleaners and security officers that they were missing out. So the award has become their focus. And the focus right now for the security industry is on getting an increase through their award because there is no other option.

Enterprise bargaining has simply not been an option for these thousands of workers that we have in these two areas.

Mr Forbes - With regard to employers in service industries, do you think there is a feeling, expressed or not, that they would rather have the award system operating to provide them with the so-called level playing field?

Mr Anderson - Absolutely, and it is expressed. In fact, earlier today I was talking to Colin McJannet, as it so happens a former branch secretary of the union, and now with the local employers federation. He had a meeting of his contract cleaning members. He has got 46 contractors who are members of Confact - the employers federation. They harped on at some length about their desire to have a level playing field, and for the good boys and girls to be rewarded and for the naughty ones to get a smack. To that end, I had a successful meeting with Colin in that, provided his boss agrees, he is going to assist in promoting a union list for contractors in schools. That list will show the contractors who do the right thing and who are also the members of their association. We could be accused of corporatism. In fact, certain elements within the employers federation will scream corporatism, but the fact of the matter is that the cleaning contractors themselves are comfortable with that. They can go on and make a reasonable profit, and that is what they are interested in.

Mr Forbes – It's not the union's problem if those employers are longing for the good old days, is it?

Mr Anderson - That is exactly right.

Mr Forbes - What do you believe is behind the declining rates of union membership which we have seen referred to recently in the press? What in your view needs to be done to rectify this decline?

Mr Anderson - There is no one answer. It is a whole mish-mash of things. I think the macro-view is that the world of work has changed beyond recognition. I was thinking back the other day to when I was a boy and a sign of manhood for me was the fact that my Dad and my Uncle Willy, and all the other male adults that I came across, had rough hands, the hands of toil. That was 40-odd years ago, but that's not a long time. The world of work has changed. People work in small units now, they do different things.

There are legions of workers who in times gone by would have been working in factory situations and, to a greater or lesser extent, would have been organised. The information technology industry is basically unorganised. There are all sorts of problems there in organising workers in small groups. That is at the macro level.

Coming back to our union, Australia wide, we have had some shocking drops in membership. It has been mainly in the liquor and hospitality area and that is because of incompetence. It is not in the entire liquor and hospitality division but it is notable in NSW, the ACT and in WA. That is where the biggest drops have taken place. We are clawing that back and I believe within the LHMU - the new Missos - there is an almost religious zeal. There is a sense of mission. I think Martin Ferguson, our former general secretary, has actually articulated that, to an extent, and a not inconsiderable extent, the future of the union movement lies with the success or the failure of the LHMU in organising the hospitality industry.

That industry has all the hallmarks or the areas where we are failing at the moment. It is mostly young people, large numbers of females, and large numbers of people from non-English speaking backgrounds. The old Missos have been remarkable in their success in organising female workers from non-English speaking backgrounds in industries like cleaning and, while we know it is not going to be easy, we are going to have to go backwards in a sense and then level out before we can go forwards. We are already having successes in Queensland, for example, where the hospitality membership is up. I think I have deviated quite a bit from the question.

Mr Forbes - The next question is tied up with those two questions. The ACTU plan for the creation of 20 super unions is now complete. What is your view of this change? Has it fulfilled expectations of applying greater resources and efficiencies into the trade union movement? What affect did it have on you as an official and how do you think it was received by the membership? How do you think they see this move to super unions?

Mr Anderson - Generally speaking, I think most members, with a few notable exceptions, were quite amenable to the idea of amalgamation. You just need to look at the figures achieved by the various unions, the 20 super unions, during the amalgamation ballots. However, it has turned sour in a few notable areas. One of these was the great right wing - the 'white hope' of FIME and the AWU. Our friends in the metals have had problems with the vehicle building division.

There have been notable successes. I believe one of those, although it has been patchy, is the Australian Services Union. Particularly in Victoria, that union is proving itself to be very resilient and capable of lateral thinking and of having a new approach to things. That was very much needed because the Federated Clerks around the country were on their last legs. The ASU is not a success in every state though. I guess where you've had officials with the energy and the vision, it has been a success. Where you've had people who are not willing to change and not willing to try new ways of doing things, it has been a failure. And also, I might say, that for people who are a bit too concerned about their own little empires, it has been a problem.

With our union, our amalgamation, that was illustrated very clearly. Generally, I think it was good thing to do and I think it was one of the things that historians will look back on and say, 'Well done, Bill Kelty.' Because it was Bill Kelty who was the driving force behind it.

Mr Forbes - If you had the choice, Gil, what bargaining system would you prefer to work in and why?

Mr Anderson - I guess, obviously, collective bargaining. There is no such thing as individual bargaining in a true bargaining system because true bargaining has got to take place between people who are at least roughly equal and that is certainly not the case in our industries. It has got to be collective bargaining and it has got to be bargaining which allows both the employers and the employees, through their unions, to decide what is best for them. For example, we have the ridiculous situation in the contract industries where employers are saying, 'Yes, we know they need a wage rise but we can't get a wage rise because the only way to get a wage rise these days is through enterprise bargaining.' That is just plain silly.

Gil Anderson, LHMU

It is because the legislators refuse to listen to the people who are at the coalface - that is, our members. They refuse to listen to them.

An ideal system would be one that has the flexibility to provide enterprise agreements. There is nothing new about enterprise agreements. Soon after I started with the union they were called section 113s. The previous secretary, Ted Forbes, I am sure can go back to 1960 or beyond and say that there were site agreements. It is just a new name, a new section of the Act. But the present system is an outrage. I am very pleased to hear, for example, that the ACTU has decided to take both the Western Australian legislation and the federal legislation to the International Labour Organisation because it contravenes the undertakings to allow a basic democratic freedom for working people to collectively bargain and come to collective agreements. And Australia is a signatory to that. It is an outrage.

Mr Forbes - Would you be pleased if one of your children was interested in becoming a union official? The fact that you are a single man does not mean that you don't have an opinion. You have a brother in Scotland. Does he have children?

Mr Anderson - Yes, I have one nephew.

Mr Forbes – I suppose the reason we are asking this question is to see whether people think union organising is a respectable trade to follow.

Mr Anderson - I think it is respectable. It is honourable and it is exciting. If I did have any offspring, I would be thrilled and very happy if they took an active part in the labour movement.