

**7. Peter O'Dea, former ACT Branch Secretary, Builders Labourers Federation (BLF) and President of the ACT Trades and Labour Council (TLC). (Interviewed by Ewan Maidment for the Australian Society for the Study Labour History – 29 May 1998)**

**Mr Maidment** – Peter, when did you join the union?

**Mr O'Dea** - I joined the union in about 1966.

**Mr Maidment** - How old were you then and what was the union?

**Mr O'Dea** - I was 20 and it was the Australian Workers Union. I was a council worker.

**Mr Maidment** - How long did you stay with that union?

**Mr O'Dea** - About two years.

**Mr Maidment** - What happened then in terms of your union affiliations?

**Mr O'Dea** - I joined the Liquor Trades Union because I worked as a barman for seven years. Then I joined the Builders Labourers Union and I remained a member of the BLF until the late 1980s.

**Mr Maidment** - Where were those first union affiliations?

**Mr O'Dea** - My first affiliations were in South Australia.

**Mr Maidment** - Were you involved in politics in the AWU?

**Mr O'Dea** - Only in terms of the depot. I was a candidate for workplace delegate, which is why I got the sack in the end. I did some leaflets about various work issues at the depot but no, I had no political affiliations at that time.

**Mr Maidment** - When did you first become an officer of a union?

**Mr O'Dea** - It was in 1973 for the BLF in South Australia.

**Mr Maidment** - What was the position?

**Mr O'Dea** - It was actually called ombudsman. The union, as a public relations exercise, decided to investigate complaints by home owners about shoddy workmanship and I was taken on to do that.

**Mr Maidment** - What was your career in the BLF after that position?

**Mr O'Dea** - I didn't stay in that position very long. Within 12 months, I was the acting secretary of the South Australian branch of the BLF. There was a federal intervention into the NSW branch against Jack Mundy and his group. The officials from the South Australian branch went up to participate in that and that's how I got elevated to be acting secretary.

**Mr Maidment** - What was your next position with the BLF?

**Peter O'Dea, BLF**

**Mr O'Dea** - When the intervention settled down in 1975, I became an organiser for the South Australian branch and I came to Canberra as a federal organiser in 1976, as part of the federal intervention into the ACT branch of the BLF caused by an attempted takeover of our membership here by the Building Workers' Industrial Union.

**Mr Maidment** - Did you have any political affiliations during that time with the BLF?

**Mr O'Dea** - Yes, about the time that I joined the BLF, I joined the Communist Party of Australia (Marxist-Leninist).

**Mr Maidment** - Did you have any official position within that party?

**Mr O'Dea** - Pariah!

**Mr Maidment** - When did you leave the BLF?

**Mr O'Dea** - The union was deregistered in 1986 and I continued to try and defend the situation until about 1988-89.

**Mr Maidment** - Did you maintain your political affiliations during this period?

**Mr O'Dea** - No, I managed to get expelled from the Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist) in 1986.

**Mr Maidment** - Why was that?

**Mr O'Dea** - Largely because of my outspoken criticisms about the negative role that the party had played in events leading up to the deregistration of the BLF.

**Mr Maidment** - Were they spoken or written?

**Mr O'Dea** - Written.

**Mr Maidment** - Where were they written?

**Mr O'Dea** - There was a booklet put out in 1986<sup>1</sup> in the ACT called 'Swimming against the Tide - the history of the Builders Labourers in the ACT'. The final sin I made was that a draft of it, which was leaked by someone out of the branch, had mentioned that most of the federal executive of the BLF were members of the CPA-ML.

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

**Mr O'Dea** - Yes.

**Mr Maidment** - Did the union work affect your family life?

**Mr O'Dea** - I think my family paid a dreadful price for my union work, to the extent that there were death threats against my children.

---

<sup>1</sup> A booklet titled 'Swimming against the tide – Defending the builders labourers' was published in Feb 1989 (Ed)

**Peter O'Dea, BLF**

We had an unlisted number but when I was away on business, my wife would get calls in the middle of the night, someone breathing heavily into the phone et cetera. Yes, we paid a terrible price.

**Mr Maidment** - Is that price still felt?

**Mr O'Dea** - Yes.

**Mr Maidment** - You mentioned earlier that you were a workplace delegate before you became an official. Do you think that had any effect on your later career?

**Mr O'Dea** - I actually didn't get to be a workplace delegate. They had a workplace delegate in the council depot who was the original boss's stooge. There were a group of workers who tried to supplant him with me. But that was obviously seen by management fairly quickly and nipped in the bud and I was 'let go'. Yes, that was my first exposure to that sort of stuff.

**Mr Maidment** - Did that sort of stuff have any effect on your industrial activities?

**Mr O'Dea** - No, I learned some valuable things working at the council. I didn't have much union experience when I was a member of the Liquor Trades Union as a barman. That was simply a matter of the boss taking the money out of my pay. I can safely say that in the whole seven years that I was a barman I never saw anybody associated with the union. It was purely a transaction which the employer organised and I just paid. My first real exposure to strong trade unionism was the Builders Labourers Federation. I got retrenched as a barman and someone got me a job as a builder's labourer and I was absolutely stunned at the level of organisation that was there.

**Mr Maidment** - How did that level of organisation show itself?

**Mr O'Dea** - With things like regular bulletins. The most staggering thing for me were the monthly general meetings of the membership, which were decision making meetings and quite powerful. In fact, a huge amount of organising needed to be done because you could never predict the outcome of general meetings. People had to make sure that they had numbers there and that the issues were thoroughly debated, but the rank and file could virtually pass any proposition that they liked.

**Mr Maidment** - Did that sort of organisation carry through to the ACT branch of the BLF?

**Mr O'Dea** - That's what I attempted to bring here. We set the branch up as a result of the federal intervention in 1976 and became an autonomous branch again in 1977. That particular form of organisation, like monthly general meetings of the membership which was to be the decision making body, that carried through and was standard in all our branches. Yes, we had very strong participation of the membership here. Obviously it varied. If there was nothing on, we might have a meeting at which we only got 12 or 15 people a month, but if there was something on we might get 60 or 70. We also coupled that with lots of regular stop-work meetings on sites to discuss issues and give out heaps of information, and not just information, we weren't shy about making propaganda. We recognised that the employer made propaganda and that the union had to do the same thing. It was a battle for hearts and minds.

**Mr Maidment** - Before 1986 in the ACT branch of the BLF, was it factionalised?

**Peter O'Dea, BLF**

**Mr O'Dea** - No.

**Mr Maidment** - What about after that time?

**Mr O'Dea** - After 1986, the organisation was placed under intolerable strain when the union was deregistered. All of the rules went out the window and that created transitory tensions inside the organisation because we were all thrashing around trying to find a direction out of the trap we were in and were not able to find one. People had various views about what to do, the money was going down and it was just too hard. There were some minor recriminations about what could have been done and what should not have been done at the time of the deregistration but, quite clearly, with hindsight, with the level of force that was used against us, there was nothing that we could have done anyway.

**Mr Maidment** - Did you present matters to the Industrial Relations Commission or the Federal Court during this time as a union official?

**Mr O'Dea** - Regularly to the commission but never to the court. In fact, you can't present to the Federal Court. You have to be legally trained to appear before the Federal Court.

**Mr Maidment** - Have you any comments on that role in the IRC?

**Mr O'Dea** - Only that it's a different role from what it was then to what it is now. I quite liked appearing in the commission. I always preferred to be dragged into the commission to answer someone else's case than to actually try and get my own off the ground. But the commission was a big feature of my work and the commissioners in that period were not so much like the commissioners that I see today. There was a lot more wheeling and dealing and a lot more pragmatism, a lot less legalism.

**Mr Maidment** - As a full-time official, what role and responsibilities did you have in determining union policy and practice?

**Mr O'Dea** - Quite large. I was the secretary of the branch and I was also a member of the federal executive of the union and a member of the federal conference of the union. I would prepare policy positions for the general meetings and take propositions both to the federal executive and the federal council.

**Mr Maidment** - 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?

**Mr O'Dea** - I guess it is one of those things about the road to hell being paved with good intentions. I mean, I could take a dogmatic view about the Accord as a communist, but if I were to be a bit more practical about it, I think the Accord was a device used to justify self-governance of the labour movement if you like. And it proved that there could be a reliable partnership between the labour movement and the forces of production - the employers and the capitalist class. But it was always doomed in my opinion. It was always doomed and unfortunately it disarmed the workers, because that self-reliance ceased and it has proved very difficult to get it going again.

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

**Mr O'Dea** - I think the ACTU was the other half of the Accord with the Labor government and they actually fulfilled the function of corralling the unions. They corralled them into not only abiding by the Accord and not making any claims outside of the Accord - which is why the builders labourers got trashed anyway, because they were not prepared to abide by the Accord - and, secondly, the ACTU played the role of rounding the unions into the larger groupings to deal at a corporate level with the Labor government - that is, the mega-unions, the super unions.

**Mr Maidment** - The ACTU plan for creation of the 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 and what effect has it had on you as a trade union official?

**Mr O'Dea** - I think the union movement was conned. I don't think the super unions are actually meeting the role that they were intended to do. They have massive bureaucracies. I think they further distanced the rank and file from the leaders of power in a general sense. I won't say that that is a universal thing across all of the large unions but as a general proposition. I think they were also designed to meet what people saw as a lasting era of corporate co-operation between central government and central employer bodies and large unions. The joke is that no sooner had we gone through all the agony as trade unionists of setting up all those mega-bodies than the other side abandoned all of that. We had built ourselves a huge battle cruiser and they had all shifted to fast missile attack boats and we are trying to deal with that right now.

**Mr Maidment** - In dealing with that right now can you give us some examples?

**Mr O'Dea** - Yes. The unions are being run ragged by the requirement to have what are virtually awards - that is, certified agreements which have now gone so far as to actually resemble full awards in each workplace rather than in an industry or a section of an industry. It has meant that there has been a massive demand on union resources. It has also meant that there is no consistency of approach any more. It has meant that the relationship between unionists and non-unionists has changed and it has placed a whole lot of power both in the hands of employers and, to a lesser extent, in the hands of employees not directly related to union structures.

**Mr Maidment** - In your current association and experience with the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) in Canberra, do you believe that the union is handling those pressures well?

**Mr O'Dea** - No, we are not handling them well at all. I can safely say that for the last four years that I have been an organiser of the CPSU, we have not essentially won anything. In fact, we have become quite good at dressing up our defeats in terms of scale and presenting some of them as victories even. No, I don't think we have done well at all. We have been in a period where the public sector has been cut to ribbons, where working conditions have been cut to ribbons. I was at an opening of our national office only two days ago at which Kim Beazley made a speech, and I think he had a damn gall - as they say in the movies - when he made the analogy that, in opening the union office, he was opening a bunker. He predicted that, if the Labor government wins the forthcoming federal election, we would move from being in a bunker to being on a balcony. I think that is just the most utter disingenuous crap I have ever heard. It was the Labor government that took the lid off the bottle and let the genie out on all the economic rationalism and what has flowed from it in this country.

I do not believe that simply getting them back in power is going to take the unions from bunker to balcony. It is a fallacious argument.

**Mr Maidment** - What is the impact of enterprise bargaining on union membership numbers and on methods of organising?

**Mr O'Dea** - In terms of union membership numbers, I don't think it has made a great deal of difference in the public sector at the moment. If the job is done well, there is the opportunity to recruit because the new Workplace Relations Act forces non-union members to actually participate in industrial processes and the challenge for us is to show them that that should translate into union membership. The problem is that I don't think that a great number of organisers that I work with are actually trained or qualified to work like that. The ethos of the mega-unions has not died. We are trying to apply some new methods about dealing with decentralised wages but we are still doing it from a psychology of the mega-unions and it doesn't work.

**Mr Maidment** - Was there any specific training given to enable union officials to cope with this change of industrial organisation?

**Mr O'Dea** - None, nil, zilch. In fact, it was close to six months after the commencement of the Workplace Relations Act that our organisation was still trying to come to terms with the meaning of the Act and what the ramifications for us were. Our organisers per se, we have 15 of them, are not given any training. You go for an interview, you win a job as an industrial organiser, and you may never have done it before. If you win the job, you get a nameplate saying 'Industrial Organiser', and you become an industrial organiser and you invent yourself. And everybody does it differently.

**Mr Maidment** - Do you think that decentralised bargaining either enhanced the relationship between the union and its members or did it result in distancing the two? If so, why and how?

**Mr O'Dea** - It should have been able to enhance the relationship between members because it made the attack on members much more visible in individual workplaces and it also stopped that thing about people saying 'The union hasn't done this or the union did that.' You can directly translate it now to being the responsibility of people in the individual workplaces. Having said that, I don't think we have capitalised on that, and I would think that we have probably strained relationships with quite a lot of members who are not quite sure what the union stands for any more. Given that we have gone from being quite rigid about central control of decisions about what wages and conditions were acceptable for workers in our industry, to actually tagging along and accepting a whole raft of things in individual agreements that we wouldn't have countenanced two years ago. Yes, I think we are playing catch-up.

**Mr Maidment** - How strong is the delegate structure in the CPSU and how does it compare to the delegate structure in the BLF?

**Mr O'Dea** - The delegate structure in the CPSU is not as strong. Two years ago, we moved to a new structure in the union which was moving away from the central office and branch structure to sections where parts of the union were defined in terms of them being an agency. For example, the Department of Social Security was a self-contained section. The ABC, the Tax Office, CSIRO - they would have had their own section secretary who would be a full-time official.

They would generally, within the broad parameters of the union, run their own affairs. What has happened, largely as a result of that, is that there has been a redefinition and people see themselves as being members of a union which is confined to their own agency, and not to an industry. And that lends itself to what the government is doing anyway in splitting up an industry - that being the public sector - to work on particular wages and conditions in a particular agency and being hired and dismissed by that particular agency. They have turned it into the private sector model.

In the BLF, we were very big on solidarity with other workers and with each other. I mean, there were endless disputes. I can remember work being stopped on lots of Theiss Watkins jobs here in the ACT because someone had brought back photographs of the safety conditions of a Theiss Watkins site on the Gold Coast and bans were put on jobs here until Theiss Watkins agreed to pay a site allowance and clean up their act in Queensland. The delegates supported the liberation struggle in South Africa. They supported the nurses and organised a full industry strike for the nurses when they were going for a larger pay increase in the early 1980s. So it is quite different. In my view, it is partly to do with the constituency too. With blue-collar workers, if you convince them that you are genuine and trustworthy, they will give you a much larger mandate than white-collar workers will. They tend to want to spend a lot of time on process and procedure and words and often, in my opinion, the action gets completely forgotten.

**Mr Maidment** - Coming back to negotiating enterprise bargains, what do you think is the level of skill amongst the management negotiators?

**Mr O’Dea** - It is not high but it doesn’t need to be. The irony of this is that, while we are being told that we have to reinvent the wheel in every agency, the employers are actually engaged in pattern bargaining, because there are so many instructions from the central agency - the Department of Workplace Relations and Small Business - about things that must or must not be in certified agreements. We are actually in a game that is rigged against us.

**Mr Maidment** - I have a quotation here that says ‘Decentralised bargaining reduced the relevance of the award system.’ What is your view of this statement?

**Mr O’Dea** – Well, it was always intended to. We got into this enterprise bargaining under a Labor government which told us that it was a way of tinkering around the edges of employment, that if you could be imaginative and find some extra savings, you could all share in the benefits. But it was actually the first step in moving people away from award protection, and that has gone quite a distance now with award stripping back, with the June 30 deadline only a short time away.<sup>2</sup>

**Mr Maidment** - What do you believe are the reasons behind the declining rates of union membership?

**Mr O’Dea** - They are declining significantly. There have been some claims that the situation is stabilising but I don’t see it. I keep in frequent contact with trade unionists in America and the numbers are still declining in the US, and I have every reason to believe that will continue here. There has been a lot of navel gazing. There have been lots of attempts to change the way that we do work in the trade union movement. I might say change the way we work without changing the power equations, which strikes me as being the real answer in the long term. But I have to say, I think the major reason for a decline in trade union membership is probably

---

<sup>2</sup> The *Workplace Relations Act 1996* reduced the content of awards to 20 ‘allowable’ matters (Ed)

**Peter O'Dea, BLF**

outside the control of trade unions. I think it probably reflects - if you stand back from our society - a devaluation of the worth of relationships between people per se. I think it is just another indication of alienation of people in general from each other. I know that sounds really 'touchy feely' but I see all of the dysfunctional young people around, I see the rates of unemployment, I see that the sense of community that once existed in a place like the ACT has gone to a large extent. The values of the marketplace, economic rationalism, all those things, are mitigating against union membership. Turning people into shareholders mitigates against union membership.

So I guess there is also a sense out there that, culturally, the unions do not have to offer what they used to. We were also a cultural reflection of our society and we are becoming increasingly a cultureless society. I think in large measure, this is outside the control of the trade unions at the moment. It requires a quite significant change in some sort of physical circumstances, for example, the market globally doing something strange or a break up of economic blocks or further wars as there are likely to be. It will require some significant social change before something comes back.

**Mr Maidment** - If you had a choice, what bargaining system would you prefer to work with and why?

**Mr O'Dea** - This is a very difficult question because, unlike my colleagues, I quite like some of the features of the present system. There are some ironies. I have got an agency in mind at the moment where I am involved in an agency agreement and there are staff representatives as distinct from union representatives, shop stewards or whatever, and there are four people - three of them are non-unionists and one is a union member. I am enjoying working with them immensely. They are behaving like trade unionists in all respects, other than they have not signed a piece of paper or paying their dues. I know that is a significant omission but, having said that, it is an entirely refreshing thing. These people, for the first time, are actually taking control of a whole lot of stuff in their workplace. I get to address meetings of all of the staff now as distinct from just the union members, and I find them all very interested and interesting. And they value my contribution. In fact they have on several occasions, when the employer has tried to exclude the union, insisted that the union has to have a central role.

How I get them to sign cards and pay their dues is another matter, but they certainly see the worth of it. And that is the sort of organising that I think is worthwhile. You actually have a dialogue with people. Before we used to shut ourselves in a room. This agency that I am talking about has 80 people and 18 of them are union members. The 18 never all turned up for meetings. There might have only been nine and we would sit in a room and make decisions in glorious splendour that meant absolutely nothing to anybody really. Now I have 80 people in the room who do turn up, who hang on my every word and who are actually taking very thoughtful and principled decisions about issues. So it is a mixed bag. What I do worry about though is that it is a system that could work well if we placed a lot of emphasis on skilling organisers, but it is also a system which obviously gives the employer a *lay down misere* if the organisers are not really top shelf, because the employer then drives the agenda and simply erodes conditions. I don't particularly hold with the central thing of the erosion of conditions being the big one; it is what people learn from it all that is the big one. I don't mind if the employers take things away as long as people draw the necessary lessons from that, because if they do, eventually they'll get the will to get it all back.

**Mr Maidment** – Lastly, would you be pleased if one of your children was interested in becoming a union official?



**Peter O'Dea, BLF**

**Mr O'Dea** - I would be pleased if one of my children was interested in becoming a union member! I don't know what to say! It was a great shock to me that my eldest son - he is the only one of my three children who is working and he has been working for about four or five years – but neither he nor any of his friends are union members. They do not see the relevance of it. They think it is something that related to another world. My eldest boy was brought up on picket lines and with union people and union talk, but he simply sees it as something associated with yesterday. At the same time, he is being terribly exploited. I know that he and his friends are being terribly exploited but we don't reach them now. We don't reach them as well as we once would have.

**Mr Maidment** - Is there any other comment you would like to make in relation to the pattern of questions that I have been asking in this interview?

**Mr O'Dea** - No.

**Mr Maidment** – Thank you.

**Supplementary Section<sup>3</sup> to the interview with Peter O’Dea, former Branch Secretary, Builders Labourers’ Federation (BLF) and President of the ACT Trades and Labour Council (TLC) – Interviewed by Ewan Maidment - 29 May 1998**

**Mr Maidment** – I just want to add a few minutes to the tape talking about Peter O’Dea’s experiences in the Trades and Labour Council.

Peter, I think you were elected as President of the TLC in 1979. Do you remember the circumstances of your choosing to go for that position?

**Mr O’Dea** – I can’t remember the dates but if you say it was 1979 I believe you. I think I had been Vice-President for two years before that. It wasn’t long after I came to the ACT. I think it might even have been in the first year, but certainly in the second year I became Vice-President. I don’t entirely remember the circumstances but the Builders Labourers’ were rejuvenating a lot of the union movement in the ACT and we were essentially welcomed with open arms. At that particular point in time, the Building Workers Industrial Union (BWIU), which is now the CFMEU, had considered itself a sufficient force in its own right not to need the Trades and Labour Council. They were not even affiliated, they were not in the game. So it was a ‘green field site’ in some ways.

**Mr Maidment** – How was the TLC used in political and social activities during this period before deregistration?

**Mr O’Dea** – It was a very organic little TLC. It was a bit like the mouse that roared in some ways. It did quite a lot. It wasn’t a prescriptive organisation. It didn’t play power politics. There were no strident divisions between left and right wings. Propositions were generally dealt with on their merits. Some of them were a little bit loopy on occasions. But the TLC saw its role as promoting struggles and promoting unions, and it was actually quite emphatic about it. It didn’t see its role as limiting people. We were not there to corral people. We were not there to tell unions that their claims were outrageous or needed to be modified. I think that was one of our biggest sins in the 1980’s. We took the view that we were there to support the affiliates and that we didn’t need to draw the strings together in the way that the ACTU did with the Accord. In fact, that set the ACT TLC apart from the ACTU and the Labor Government because our attitude was that we supported each other in struggle.

**Mr Maidment** – Did it have a wider role in the community over and above immediate industrial matters?

**Mr O’Dea** – Yes, it did. The Trades and Labour Council was involved in a whole raft of things. It was heavily involved in the anti-apartheid struggle. It was involved in questions of redevelopment of Civic *vis-à-vis* the removal of houses. It supported homeless people, it supported squatters, it supported unemployed people, and in quite substantial ways. There was material support and there was also political support. There would not have been an ordinary peoples’ struggle in the ACT where a telegram wouldn’t have turned up from the Trades and Labour Council congratulating people and promising support. We dealt with lots of residents associations, the Ginninderra Creek Residents Association etc about green space issues and redevelopment.

---

<sup>3</sup> This section was not part of the original 1998 transcript and is not indexed.

We dealt with a whole lot of Occupational Health and Safety issues, such as asbestos. There were big campaigns on asbestos. We dealt with issues about the value of public education. I mean, the Trades and Labour Council was active in heaps of different directions.

**Mr Maidment** – Within the TLC, what support was there for this range of activities outside of the Builders Labourers' Federation?

**Mr O'Dea** – I think I'd be lying if I were to say that the BLF was not the engine for this. It was the engine. There were people who were happy to be associated with what we did well who would not have undertaken these activities on their own initiative. That's the truth of the matter. And in fact that was our weakness in the end because, notwithstanding the high esteem that we were held in within the ACT generally, and in the TLC particularly, when the deregistration came, the national offices of unions just put their weight on their local officials and local branches and our support evaporated overnight.

But certainly there was no shortage of supporters for the things we did well in the late 1970's and early 1980's, and there was no shortage of people who tried to emulate it. There was Wayne Berry getting the fire trucks to barricade Parliament House and trying to drive out the national parliament with all their sirens going. That sort of stuff. Locking the Commissioner out of his office for a year and a half. It was that sort of environment that had been created.

**Mr Maidment** – Which Commissioner was that?

**Mr O'Dea** – The fire fighters didn't like the new Commissioner who had been appointed. They refused to co-operate with him and locked him out of his office for nearly two years I think from memory.

**Mr Maidment** – Just coming forward now to the deregistration of the BLF. What was the role of the TLC in that dispute?

**Mr O'Dea** – Its role was that it was unable to protect us. It was unable to protect the builders labourers. It was unable to repay all the contributions that the builders labourers had made to the trade union movement in the ACT. And it went very quickly from being stridently against the deregistration to accepting it as a *fait accompli* and making new alliances with the BWIU after it happened.

**Mr Maidment** – And Charles McDonald went along with that movement? Or did he try to hold out?

**Mr O'Dea** – Charles was a good friend to the BLF for many years. His problem was with the deregistration. Immediately at the point of deregistration, Charles was very good. I can recall he was arrested on the Parliament House site for trespass. I can also recall him making a presentation to the affiliates on the Labour Council describing the BWIU as 'those grubs across the road' and displaying a lot of anger. But he drew his bread and butter from being Secretary of the Trades and Labour Council and when it was clear that sufficient force had been used to crush the Builders Labourers, in particular police force - the deregistration would not have succeeded without the use of massive police force - similar to what happened to the MUA in some respects - but when that all became an obvious *fait accompli*, it all dissolved.

**Mr Maidment** – How has this shift in orientation of the Trades and Labour Council shown itself since 1986?

**Mr O'Dea** – It took me a while to recognise the signs because in 1986, I was not only the Secretary of the Builders Labourers, I was Secretary of the Furnishing Trades Union and also the President of the Trades and Labour Council, and essentially overnight I became a pariah with a lot of people. In fact literally there would be trade union officials who had been 'hail fellow - well met' the week before who would walk down the street and cross over to the other side as soon as they saw me. So I guess I was cut out of the loop pretty quickly on what was going on. But the thing I had noticed was that there were some rewards given to the Trades and Labour Council in the form of a quite substantial amount of government funding.

The Trades and Labour Council received government funding for its occupational health and safety training centre, and for some other projects, its trade union training etcetera. So I guess it was welcome back into the fold, into the Accord fold, and it was quite richly rewarded for a while. Those rewards have lasted the best part of a decade before they were weaned off them again and the money has all been taken away again.

**Mr Maidment** – Do you have any comments on the TLC's industrial and social activities since you ceased being President of the Trades and Labour Council?

**Mr O'Dea** – I've got to be careful not to inject sour grapes into it and secondly I've got to acknowledge that I haven't been close to it for a long time. But it strikes me that it's not in anyone's face. There's not a great deal of controversy surrounding the Trades and Labour Council and it doesn't have a high profile.

I guess the point I'd make is that at the time of deregistration, the Trades and Labour Council unanimously passed a resolution here in respect of the Builders Labourers' Federation about the major contribution that they have made to the trade union movement. And I distinctly recall that the resolution included that the Trades and Labour Council was at that point in time more vibrant than it had ever been in its history.

We had positions on community issues, on industrial issues, and we offered pretty well unqualified support to our affiliates in their battles. We didn't criticise people unless they were behaving entirely outrageously. We would support them and try to help them win their disputes. I don't see that at the moment. I think the power politics and the move of the ALP into the Trades and Labour Council killed all that.

**Mr Maidment** – Finally, do you think that the introduction of self-government into the ACT has marginalised the role of the TLC in the Territory?

**Mr O'Dea** – It was designed to do that. I have to say I can chuckle when I sit back and think of occasions when Peter O'Dea of the Builders Labourers was sitting around the table at Parliament House with six Federal Government Ministers at one stage all on the other side of the table. And it was over things like asbestos and charges against trade unionists on the asbestos picket lines and the removal of asbestos from Watson High School etc. At that particular time, we'd had people arrested on the picket line, a quite lengthy 16-week picket line at the National Library over asbestos. And people had been charged with offences, including myself, for resisting arrest and obstruction.

And as a reprisal the Trades and Labour Council had stopped the construction of the Australian Federal Police computer centre, stopped it for a year and a half. And we ended up sitting around a table with six federal government ministers. These people were normally running the nation and dealing with Washington and Moscow or whatever, and here they were sitting down negotiating with us about dropping the charges against the trade unionists and the spending of six million dollars to take all the asbestos out of two buildings and a raft of other things. I knew at that point, quite apart from the issue of wanting to increase the amount of funding that local residents had to pay for the upkeep of the federal capital, that they weren't going to wear this situation for too much longer.

**Mr Maidment** – OK thank you.