

8. Ted Forbes, former ACT Secretary, Federated Miscellaneous Workers Union (FMWU) and President, ACT Trades and Labour Council. (Interviewed by Frank Mines, Australian Society for the Study of Labour History - 16 November 1997)

Mr Forbes - In your introduction, Frank, you said that I was secretary of the Miscellaneous Workers Union and president of the Trades and Labour Council for three or four years. It might be of interest to people who may wish to use this interview to know that I was secretary of the union here for 13 years and an officer of the union in Victoria from 1960 to 1994.¹

Mr Mines - When did you join the union and how old were you?

Mr Forbes - I came from a union orientated family. My mother never thought much of it but my father was a very unionised man in every way. My father was a tram conductor and the driver of his tram was Clarrie O'Shea, who later became the secretary of the tramways union. He was the Clarrie O'Shea who was goaled in the late 1960s for defying a court order to produce his bank balance and union books and so forth. I personally remember Clarrie O'Shea coming to our house when I was a boy of six. I think he was checking up to see that Dad was holding solid in a tramways strike. Apart from that, my father was always a very solid union bloke and it went without saying that when you worked, you joined your union. So I joined my first union soon after the war. I could have joined a union during the war if someone had come near me. I was only a kid then but I did start work in the war as a clerk up at the Essendon airport, or aerodrome as we called it then.

There was no way you would ever get a Clerks Union person to call at the airport during the war. But that was in fact the first union I joined when I was at Angliss's meatworks in Footscray when I was 20, which was in 1948. I joined it when 93 clerks were called together in the fellmongery of the meatworks. When the Clerks Union representative finished addressing us they asked us if we would step forward and sign up. So myself and a bloke called Ray, I can't remember his other name now, we stepped forward and 91 stayed where they were. So two of us joined. Without the solidarity of the butchers on the chain and the meatworkers there, we would certainly have got the sack. But two out of 93 joined! Ray Moffat was his name! Nobody else remembers it but I am glad to remember it and register it now. Ray Moffat and Teddy Forbes joined the bloody union and 91 didn't! And I was in unions continuously from then. I joined the Miscellaneous Workers Union in 1957. I was in a little union called the FSTW - Federated Scientific and Technical Workers - because by then I was working as a quality control tester in a laboratory on an oil refinery. I joined and brought those members into the Miscellaneous Workers Union in about 1957.

Mr Mines - What made you decide to become an officer of a union?

Mr Forbes - I had been an active delegate and a member of a highly clandestine shop committee on that refinery I mentioned for a number of years and we had published a very anti-Yankee and anti-company paper called 'The Good Oil' and the company had threatened to sue the editor if they found out who it was. They knew very well that it was me but they could not prove it. But they were getting uncomfortably close and, as with all battles, when you have the rank and file in battle for a number of years, they eventually get tired of it and they weaken. At least, that has been my experience. That might reflect on my leadership too. I certainly hope that that is not a general principle. We want enlightened rank and filers to be able to keep up their resistance to attack for as long as it takes.

¹ Mr Forbes was an officer of the FMWU in Victoria from 1960 to 1981 and in the ACT from 1981 to 1994. (Ed)

Ted Forbes, LHMU

Anyway, in this case it got so that I was getting nearer and nearer to the gate. An organiser in the union left, I was offered the job and I took it, in 1960. I became branch organiser for the Missos.

Mr Mines - Why did you leave the union, if you have left it?

Mr Forbes - I turned into an imbecile on my 65th birthday! Although by that time you could not sack anybody anywhere for being guilty of being 65, the union rules remained unaltered and you couldn't stand for office after 65. So I supported somebody else who was elected and suddenly found myself unemployed and have remained so ever since.

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

Mr Forbes - Yes, I was a member of the Communist Party. First of all I joined the Labor Party in the early 1950s and I found it not to my liking. So I joined the Communist Party and with a number of comrades set up the first branch of the Communist Party in Altona, Victoria. I don't know whether they have one there now. We left and I don't know whether anybody has bothered to refound it. Anyway, I was in the Communist Party when I first became an organiser. That was during the time of the split and the Communist Party was in a state where it was either not interested or unable to keep contact with its cadres, as they called them. I suppose I drifted into the Labor Party because all of my union colleagues were in it and there didn't seem much point in not being in it. I joined it in the early 1960s and have remained in it ever since.

Mr Mines - Did those affiliations alter during the period of your union activity?

Mr Forbes - No, I stayed, as I have stated. When I rejoined the Labor Party in the early 1960s I remained in it and I am still in it.

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

Mr Forbes - Yes, all that time. I was married and had four children. They were all born between 1956 and 1966.

Mr Mines - Did union work affect your family life?

Mr Forbes - Yes, it did.

Mr Mines - For good or ill?

Mr Forbes - I'd say for ill. I was a fanatical man. I can say this to you, Frank. If you asked me the question, 'Would you do it exactly the same way again?' I would say, 'Certainly not.' I was a fanatical man and should never have married. I thought that the union and the class struggle could substitute for all other activities in life. If I had thought that through and refrained from marrying, it might have been a good thing. But eventually it broke up my marriage and caused some sadness, which I am still having, with my children, a man and three women now, aged between 31 and 41. I am sorry that I haven't had and enjoyed a closer relationship with them. Although they were fairly grown when I went, I could have been a better Dad. I think the union work should have allowed that. But it was my judgment, not the union's. I am not blaming anyone else. I wouldn't have done it that way. I would have given the union less time if I did it again.

Ted Forbes, LHMU

Mr Mines - Were you a workplace delegate before you became an official?

Mr Forbes – Yes, I was a workplace delegate in nearly every job I went on. If I wasn't the delegate, I was on his right hand side breathing in his earhole. Yes I was the workplace delegate, especially at that oil refinery where I spent many years. I was on the works committee and I was always very active in organising workers.

Mr Mines - Did you present matters or get involved in matters before the Industrial Relations Commission or the Federal Court?

Mr Forbes - Yes, I did. I appeared at the Federal Court only once. That was in 1961 as a witness in a case where I had trouble with the Dunlop Rubber Company down in Port Melbourne. It became a test case against us and the rubber workers union and I went only as a witness. Lionel Murphy acted for us in Sydney.

Otherwise I was a member of the Wages Board system in Victoria from 1960 through to 1976. I was a member of six or seven or eight Wages Boards and knew that system fairly well. I didn't understand the federal system very well. I used to present short, simple appearances and statements of position in the Commonwealth commission through the 1960s and 1970s. I became much more active there during the 1980s as secretary here in Canberra where I had to represent the union in all of our disputes and in some aspects of award making. Although with our union, in those matters of award making, a federal research officer or industrial officer would appear for us. So I made quite a number of appearances, yes.

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

Mr Forbes - As branch secretary I had an enormous amount of responsibility. The Missos have always been very good. Our federal secretary Ray Gietzelt particularly, who I worked with for most of my years there, was always very adamant that you have to control the union but it must be done democratically. There is no point in us having control of an undemocratic union.

Having said that, if you really do everything you can to look after your members, it is pretty hard to get them to come to meetings. You go around trying to get them to come to meetings and they say, 'Oh, you'll look after us, we trust you. You make the decision for us.' So you become a bureaucrat and you are locked into your bureaucracy and you can't get out of it, especially when your members trust you. Let me say this, Frank, as an officer of the union, I was never opposed. I never won an election because I was never opposed. I'm proud of that because the position was always advertised well and all the members knew about it. All members who were interested knew I was standing and I was never opposed. But that sort of trust brings with it problems because people don't bother coming to the meetings. They trust you. They say, 'You do it, Ted.' And that isn't really what you want. Does that answer your question? I'm not sure now what the question was.

Mr Mines - The question was: as a full-time official, what role and responsibilities did you have in determining union policy and practice?

Mr Forbes – I had a good executive and branch council. If you asked any one of them now, I think they would say that there was no important question on which they would consider that they were not fully briefed or their opinions were not invited. But there was a tendency for them to leave it up to me.

Ted Forbes, LHMU

As branch secretary, you are in a position of being able to have a broader view, so you have enormous influence over the union. As my interest was always in the union - I lived for the union for reasons I have given you - I think I can say that I never used it badly, or to its detriment. Of course, I was also the delegate to the federal conference and I was a member of the federal executive so I was in a position where I was able to influence the policies and philosophy of the branch.

Mr Mines - Do you believe that the 13 years of Labor government was a help or a hindrance to the trade union movement, and in what way?

Mr Forbes - It was a hindrance.

Mr Mines - Would you like to elaborate on that?

Mr Forbes - Yes, I would. I didn't think it was at the beginning. I knew many other good union officials, but I didn't know a group of men and women who were so attentive to their work or who put in the hours that I and all the officials in the Miscellaneous Workers Union did. When the Hawke government came in, to a certain extent our labours were lightened. We had looked forward to a bit of a respite where we could go around and have a cup of tea with our members and get to know them personally and have them get to know you as a person, rather than just the union man. But it went on too long. Even the most thoughtful union officials, and ones certainly more experienced than I was at the time, probably thought that the Accord for a year or two wouldn't do any harm. I don't think anybody expected that it would go on for as long as it did. And we got used to it. And it was so easy. It was just backing in the barrow. The members got used to it and they got fat and lazy. We got lazy too and in the end we'd lost our capacity to fight, and the union officials lost their capacity to incite people to resist the attack of this current Liberal Howard government - and they are carrying out their promises. It really is an attack.

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

Mr Forbes - We gave it all of the power to resolve it. I don't want to say that it was all Martin Ferguson's fault - Martin was our secretary through most of this time - or load it onto the general secretaries, but really it was upon them to know. As a provincial secretary, I know this now; they should have known it then. Someone should have known that this was the process and that we were debilitating ourselves. Someone should have known that the sorcerer's apprentice was shaping policy for the whole of the nation. Not only has he turned out to have done this, and we know it, but he has still got the job. For goodness sake, it is not a matter of admitting a past debility; it is trying to explain a present one. Anybody who gives an answer like I have just given, that is, that this period has left us in a weakened position, where we are untrained and unused to giving significant resistance or mobilising resistance, would be able to explain what they thought at that time. I admit that I knew it was going too far. I'd have to say that the ACTU and federal secretaries must have known it too.

Mr Mines - Do you have any comments on Bill Kelty's role during this period? Was he around?

Mr Forbes - Certainly he was there. He was known as the 'sorcerer's apprentice'. He was shaped by Hawke and he attempted to take on all of the characteristics of his old master but was unable to do that. And I think he was seriously lacking in judgment. As I have already observed, I am astonished that he is still there. It indicates to me that the ACTU is not a significant force in Australian trade unionism today.

Mr Mines - 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 method of organising?

Mr Forbes - I had a bit to do with it, Frank, but it did not build up when I was there. I retired before it became very significant. It burst upon us in the bakers industry. I was also secretary of the Bakers Union. It was a separate union and a separate function. I was unpaid; it was always honorary. That didn't make any difference to us. It didn't make any difference to me at that time. I don't know what present colleagues would say. Perhaps your other questions might enable me to deal better with that in the round.

Mr Mines - Were union officials suitably skilled and resourced to handle decentralised bargaining? What, if any, specific training was given to enable officials to cope with this change?

Mr Forbes - I can't say exactly because I wasn't there. But I believe that union officials have been briefed on how to give significant assistance to delegates and members on the job, to make sure that in enterprise bargaining the significance of union organisation is kept in mind by the rank and file. More than kept in mind, but is believed in and is seen to be significant, that its significance is not lost to our rank and file. I believe our union, maybe belatedly - I am unable to say - has covered that since. I didn't have much involvement, but I had a good federal office and research component that was able to advise me in the early days of it. But I went out soon after.

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

Mr Forbes - With the Bakers Union, it assisted us to come closer because the men - they were all men - saw that they were in a bind. They knew their employers to be exploitative and felt the danger and drew closer to the union. It was good. However, I would not say that that would have been so with others. The Bakers Union was a production line job. In the services like cleaning and security et cetera, that might not have been the same experience. Your next question might enable me to deal with it. But however I deal with it, it won't be from a personal point of view because it was dealt with by other officers after my retirement.

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

Mr Forbes - They were bloody hopeless! It didn't take much reading to understand that the whole idea of enterprise bargaining was for both parties to look at the production process and various areas of connection and cooperation between aspects of production, to see what they could do together to make a better product, to make more of the product and to market it in a better and quicker manner. The employers I knew all thought it was clawback. They said, 'What are you blokes prepared to give back? We've got this big thick award here and we are sick and tired of it. There are a lot of things in there that we're sick of. What are you prepared to give?' That wasn't the idea at all. We were not prepared to give anything from the award away. Of course, that is different with this Howard government. To my mind, even now, that is all it means to employers - clawback. They want to get things away from the employees that they had to give during the period of employee strength. Of course, we are no longer in that time; we are in the days of workers' weakness. We have to find how to reorganise ourselves to regain our former determination and strength.

Mr Mines - 'Decentralised bargaining reduced the relevance of the award system.' What is your view on this statement?

Mr Forbes - Yes, it has of course. As an old organiser - I did my organising all through the 1960s - enterprise bargaining presents no problem to me. If I had a bag in my hand with a bundle of awards and I was going around the jobs in the suburbs that I used to do in the 1960s, this would present me with no problem. Even then workers would say to me - like at Enwhite Paints back in 1962-63 in Port Melbourne - 'Listen, Teddy, we're working well. He's not a bad boss but he's got a ton of orders. He's sending that much paint up to the islands. We're making it and he's making a bloody million. We want an over-award payment. Put it on him, we want another 10 quid a week.'

I used to go in and do that every couple of weeks - put in an over-award payment on it. The boss would say, 'We're paying the award.' I'd say, 'Yes you are but that's the legal minimum. Your blokes have worked it out. They've done their sums and they won't work unless you provide another tenner a week.' There were often negotiations or threats of a strike and you would get six or seven quid, which was something like 8-10 per cent, pretty good rise, if they were determined of course. If the blokes went flat on it, you didn't get it.

So enterprise bargaining brings the union to relevance, whereas this other business of the Accord was an unnatural way for a union to exist. On more than one occasion during the 1980s, members would say, 'We reckon our bosses can afford to pay us a bit more than the award. We are doing pretty good work for him. How about an over-award payment?' And as an experienced officer with nearly 30 years' experience, I didn't know what to do because of the politics that were obtaining at the time. I wouldn't want to see that happen again. I don't want those times to come back again. If there is a class war on, so be it.

Mr Mines - 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 Forbes - First of all, I am inclined to believe, but I will take correction on it because I am out of the game now, that in the unions that exist, the union membership has not fallen. In fact, I would guess that it has probably risen, except in a couple of lazy unions like the Liquor Trades and some other right-wing lazy unions that have always traditionally only signed up enough people to pay their wages bill but have in mind that the more members you've got, the more problems you've got. But those sorts of unions are in a minority, have always been in the minority, thank God, in Australia. The good progressive unions that take their role seriously will be signing up members. I don't think that their numbers have fallen, especially under Howard I think they have grown.

It is mainly in those areas where new industries have grown up that nobody has ventured out into them. I don't know the areas but I suppose we are talking about computers, people who service them and programmers. The clerks union, because there is ostensibly coverage there, might have got a foothold there but have not exploited it. In many cases it really requires the setting up of new unions to dedicate themselves to the problems that new industries present. I would be surprised if the membership of general unions has fallen. I don't think it has. I don't know if that satisfactorily answers your question, Frank. You will have to remember that I am retired and I am not quite up-to-date on those things. You would have to be inside to know.

Mr Mines - The ACTU plan for the creation of 20 super unions is now complete. What is your view on this change? Has it fulfilled expectations of applying greater resources and/or efficiencies into the trade union movement? What effect did it have on you as an official? How do you think it was received by your members and what was the effect on your membership?

Mr Forbes - It was a great thing. There is no doubt about it. It came on time. There was so much bloody effort going into servicing similar areas. Goodness me, the Missos had about 60 per cent of the cleaners in Australia, the liquor trades had another 20 per cent, the AWU had some. It was just absurd, all under different awards, in the same cities. So much effort was going into servicing not just the awards but physically going around and seeing people. It had to come and I thought it was a good idea. I remember the coopers, the people who make barrels. There were 21 members in 1962 when I visited a group in Richmond, Victoria. They eventually joined the Storemen and Packers and not us, but never mind. It was just absurd, still staying out on their own. It was very costly and they were not being represented at all well. I believe that the move was a good one. What was the other question?

Mr Mines - Has it fulfilled expectations of applying greater resources and/or efficiencies into the trade union movement?

Mr Forbes - Yes, I agree with it all and I think it has all come true. The only thing is that I would not want that to be confused with the signing on by the ACTU of those many dozens of young people a couple of years ago, which was an absolute fizzer because I am not sure that they were used in the right way. For instance, they went out into fields that were already organised instead of presenting ourselves and the movement to people in new areas of work that probably did not have awards. I agreed with it in the first place and can't see any reason to change my view.

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

Mr Forbes - I would prefer to work in an award system.

Mr Mines - Industry awards?

Mr Forbes - Yes, industry awards. Notwithstanding what I said about my capacity to work within enterprise agreements, I have no problem with them since they took the place of the over-award payments that we used to have. The awards have always been only the basic minimum. That is all they ever were. It never stopped us reaching agreements and having those agreements subsequently registered. I would rather work in the award system where we didn't have that great inhibition of the agreement that we had with the Hawke government. Under the award system we had an ongoing understanding of the Australian organised workers - where their award system started and how it was developed - and it was through that understanding and effort that the awards were maintained and kept. That is what we lost in the 1980s. That was generally understood by workers up until that time and we lost it then. That is why I denigrate that period absolutely and don't dodge my own responsibility for accepting it overlong.

My ideal system is to have those awards made with the full understanding of their conception and of their maintenance by the solidarity and the strength of the workers and their trade union basis.

Ted Forbes, LHMU

Mr Mines - Would you be pleased if one of your children was interested in becoming a union official?

Mr Forbes - That sounds like a final question. Is it the final question?

Mr Mines - Not quite.

Mr Forbes - I would love it. It's a bit late for them now because they are all set on other things. I would have loved it because, to me, a trade union functionary doing his or her work with dedication is as respectable as the best of professions in this society. I would have been thrilled to bits if any of my kids had done that, and would still be thrilled if any of my grandchildren come up and said, 'Hey, Grandpa, I'm gonna be a trade union official like you.' I'd say, 'Don't be one like me; be better than me.' I think it's a great game to lead the working class in what is inevitable but if more people involve themselves at official level as delegates or at the active unionist level, we will win it the sooner, but it will be won inevitably.

Mr Mines - You have been involved very much in the ACT Trades and Labour Council. Do you have anything you wanted to say about activities on the Trades and Labour Council?

Mr Forbes - Yes, I have been a delegate there ever since I got here in 1981, and still am, and this is 1997. I will remain there I guess as long as my union wants me to stay there and as long as I remain in Canberra. I was President there for three or four years. It is quite different from any other council. There's no right-wing here. I was a newcomer - I came in 1981 - and there were all these lefties of all kinds and persuasions - old communists, new ones, old Maoists, those that may have been new ones, various representatives of the three traditional brands of Trotskyist and some others, ALP lefties, all kicking each other to death down one corner. And there was no activity from the right. I never really got used to that, and I have been here a long time.

Even my own people in Melbourne think I have changed. They say, 'You have become 'Canberrafied'. You're really quite different now, Ted.' But really I'm not. I'm in no-man's-land. I could never understand why there has never been any significant right-wing activity here. It's just so hard to make an appeal for unity here and to have all of your members feel that great feeling that you have when, in the face of a really dangerous enemy, you are able to find and maintain a unity. You do not have that experience in Canberra like we do in the other big cities where you have very considerable enemies who are able to attack you with great vigour and do great damage to you. You are able to engage them and come through with great victories. We have never been able to have that here so that my very dear Canberra colleagues probably don't even know what I am talking about when I refer to these things.

Mr Mines - You are also involved in the Trades and Labour Council's May Day committee and the Labour History Society. Do you want to add anything on the relevance of these activities?

Mr Forbes - Don't forget the Cuba Friendship Society.

Mr Mines - And the Noel Butlin Archives Friends.

Mr Forbes - Yes, that is a new one. The Butlin archives are terribly important. We are recording the memoirs and current attitudes on trade unionists, all for posterity, for people to know and ponder in the future, particularly students. So it is very important.

Ted Forbes, LHMU

And here we have this disgraceful administration of the ANU, under the encouragement or threats of the reactionary Howard government, threatening to do away with these archives. It is a dreadful business. I am only sorry that trade unionists are not able to see how serious it is for them too.

With regard to the other organisations, the Australia-Cuba Friendship Society is something I have been in since a union lawyer, the plumbers' lawyer in Melbourne, John Zigouras, a great labour lawyer - still going - started up the Australia-Cuba Friendship Society in Victoria about 1970. I joined it then and have been in it ever since.

The May Day committee and the others are all things that I think all active trade unionists and labour people should be in. There is an interconnection between them all. If unionists' kids were educated in fine music, we would have a trade union symphony orchestra and I would be active in that. I believe that workers are not cultivated; the system makes sure that they remain uncultivated. But there are the workers of the future - the physicists and the medics - ...²

Mr Mines - You were about to say something about culture and cultural activities.

Mr Forbes - Yes, I started to carry on a bit about that but I suppose it is very seldom that anyone asks you what your dreams were for the development of the trade union movement - the worker's movement. I just slipped into dreamland for a while. I have always loved poetry. Someone once said, 'You are a great declaimer, Ted. You apprehend the world through your ears.' I said, 'Not only that.' But that was not untrue. I go to concerts but I have never seen a member of my union, or any other union - with the exception of the CPSU of course in this town - or any workers there. Yet I know well - and it is not an article of faith, not a matter of faith - that workers can develop these attachments. They are not gifts. It is just a matter of cultivation when you are young, through your parents - that is very important - and through your education. Lenin put it well. I have forgotten where I read it but he did say to someone very early in the Revolution that 'We must teach the people to consume. In the first place they will consume food and clothing and shelter, because they know now that they need those things. Then they will consume education for their children and themselves and then science and then culture. All of these things will become needs to them.' Lenin was absolutely right. Those things have got to come to the working class---and I can hardly wait!

² Audio tape ends here. The final question and answer in the transcript appear to have been erased from the original tape.