

Doug Carpenter, TWU

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**Douglas Dowston Carpenter (1918 – 2008), former Branch Secretary, Transport Workers Union (TWU) and past President of the ACT Trades and Labour Council (TLC). (Interviewed by Ted Forbes, Australian Society for the Study of Labour History 18 August 1997)**

**Mr Forbes** - As a matter of fact you are the first (TLC) President that I remember. Doug, when did you first join a union?

**Mr Carpenter** - The first union I ever joined was the Meat Employees Union but that was way back before the war. I worked for T W Lindbeck. It was a union shop. Then after the war, that was World War Two, round about December 1945, I joined the Transport Workers Union in Canberra. And that was at the Kingston Bus Depot.

**Mr Forbes** - Were you a bus driver?

**Mr Carpenter** - I was a bus driver for 20 years.

**Mr Forbes** - What year was that?

**Mr Carpenter** - That was in 1945.

**Mr Forbes** - That was at the end of the war. I can remember it because I had just started work.

**Mr Carpenter** - I was discharged. I suppose it was because of the 'unsuredness' if that's a word. It would have been expressed as 'bomb happy' or something like that after the war. I didn't know exactly where I was going. Nevertheless, I think I was manpowered into bus driving because I had all the necessary Army qualifications and licences.

**Mr Forbes** - So you came out of the service, did you? You'd been in the Army?

**Mr Carpenter** - I was with the AIF in the Middle East.

**Mr Forbes** – Were you? From what year, Doug?

**Mr Carpenter** - 1940.

**Mr Forbes** – Oh Christ, so you went right through the desert campaigns then!

**Mr Carpenter** – I went through the desert campaign, yes.

**Mr Forbes** - Were you there at El Alamein?

**Mr Carpenter** – I was at El Alamein, yes.

**Mr Forbes** – Really! From my point of view that deserves an interview of its own.

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**Mr Carpenter** - In my opinion that was the turning point of the war. We hadn't won before that.

**Mr Forbes** - You won't get any argument on that. I am very pleased to hear that you were there. I became very angry with God in 1945 because I was nearly 17 and he stopped the war. And I was all ready for it! All through the 1940s I was getting ready to go and bingo! People say 'You were lucky' but I don't know about that. Most of the blokes I know who say that to you also say 'I'm proud I went.'

**Mr Carpenter** – Well, I don't know. I became a pacifist after the war. Possibly that was why I became involved with the union and looking after the underdog. What happened during the war, I thought about it a lot, particularly when you take a battle like El Alamein. You saw all the dead and you wondered whose brother or who is the mother? And we were looking at the enemy dead as much as our own. That gives you a different outlook and you say 'What was it all about?' It was a war of attrition.

**Mr Forbes** - So that comradeship you learned there, you could thread that in with what you were doing as a unionist?

**Mr Carpenter** - That is right.

**Mr Forbes** – Good. Were you ever a workplace delegate before you became an official?

**Mr Carpenter** – The funny thing about it is that in my absence I was elected to a position on the branch committee of management, which is what they called it in the ACT. Les Martin nominated me, and I wasn't even present at the meeting. I was nominated and I found that it was hard to buck and say it doesn't suit me. I was a delegate I suppose because basically that was all the branch committee was in that particular era. There was a very complicated situation in Canberra because we weren't properly affiliated to the federal union. That was one of the complications. So yes, I suppose I was a workplace delegate.

**Mr Forbes** - What made you decide to become a full-time officer?

**Mr Carpenter** - There was a long history before I became a full-time officer. I didn't become a full-time officer until about 1963. So you've got from 1945 right up to 1963. But prior to becoming Secretary of the branch I was branch President. I had been branch President for about two or three years, if I can remember rightly.

I can't put my finger on the times but the record will show when I became President. But it was not until 1963 that I took the job on as a full-time officer of the union.

**Mr Forbes** - That was as a full-time paid officer. So you were an honorary officer before that?

**Mr Carpenter** - Yes. All that period from 1945 to 1963 I was an honorary officer. The only time I was paid was if I lost time off work because of union delegations and things.

**Mr Forbes** - So you were full-time officer from 1963 until about 1990?

**Mr Carpenter** - I retired in 1985.

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**Mr Forbes** - So you were 22 years as a full-time official?

**Mr Carpenter** - Yes.

**Mr Forbes** - Why did you leave the union, Doug? Was it just retirement?

**Mr Carpenter** – It was retirement. I was quite happy with what I had done. I had even been in the elevated position of being federal Vice-President during that period. I enjoyed the union work. I enjoyed the opportunity that it gave.

**Mr Forbes** – Yes, I know you liked it. It's a good life. Did you have any political affiliations during the time you were active as a union official?

**Mr Carpenter** - Yes. As a matter of fact I was one of the foundation members of what we called the North Canberra branch of the ALP. It still exists but I am no longer a member. I am talking about way back now. If you asked me what year it happened, it was when we had the big split with New South Wales because they wanted to dominate. We had one branch here that used to meet down at the old Trades Hall, down near the old hospital in Acton. Then the North Canberra branch was formed. I wasn't instrumental in having it formed but I did become a member and I did become an officer. As a matter of fact, I represented the trade union movement when we went to the federal executive, and the federal executive was in Sydney. Gough Whitlam and all the powers-that-be were there. Now a judge, Terry Higgins, appeared for the branches and I appeared for the unions on the matter about the number of delegates we should have. So that was my affiliation.

**Mr Forbes** - Did those affiliations alter during your time in the union? Did you remain a member of the ALP all through your union life?

**Mr Carpenter** - No. As a matter of fact I decided I would give the game away. We had reached an agreement where the ratio was to be three for the union and five for the branches et-cetera. When Charles McDonald, who was the major nominee for a position on the branch executive, missed out altogether, I said: 'Well that's the end of that.' The agreement we had was non-existent.

**Mr Forbes** - So you had no political affiliations during the latter part of your time in the union?

**Mr Carpenter** - No. We used to raise money but I had no official position.

**Mr Forbes** - Were you a family man with children during the time you were an official?

**Mr Carpenter** - Yes, I was. I had a wife and two daughters.

**Mr Forbes** - Did union work affect your family life?

**Mr Carpenter** - You ask my wife, she will tell you! It certainly did, particularly being the Canberra representative on the federal executive. And of course the federal executive used to meet very regularly, sometimes I thought, too frequently. So I would be away from home quite a bit.

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And then again, there were the late night meetings because with this workforce about the only time to get the membership together was after working hours. So that also affected my family. Then, of course, with the industry that I was involved in, transport - we had the bread carters and all of those kinds of people - we had the early morning sessions. So yes, my home life was disrupted.

**Mr Forbes** – Yes, I have watched transport blokes in two states and it's a hard road to hoe. By the way, have you been both branch organiser and branch secretary?

**Mr Carpenter** - There was no such thing as a branch organiser. I became the branch secretary. I became branch secretary in the late 1950s by a vote. That was before I became a full-time officer. But I was honorary branch secretary - I ran the union from the seat of a bus.

**Mr Forbes** - During your time as secretary of the union, which was over quite a period if you take both the honorary and paid periods, we are looking at something like 25 years, aren't we?

**Mr Carpenter** - It is 22 or 23 years so that is near enough.

**Mr Forbes** - Did you present matters or get involved in matters before the Industrial Relations Commission or the Federal Court in that time?

**Mr Carpenter** – Oh yes. We had many clashes. Of course, everyone will remember the era in Canberra when Tom Findlay was the Commissioner. He virtually looked after all of the matters that affected the ACT. Yes, on many occasions, award matters ...

**Mr Forbes** - There was a fair bit of work, was there?

**Mr Carpenter** - Yes. There were disputes and quite a bit of involvement with the Industrial Relations Commission.

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

**Mr Carpenter** - Union policy and practice was generally determined by the federal committee of management, which I was part of. Very often, with the way the factions were, I had kind of a balance of power situation at one point. So I would say that yes, I was instrumental in some of the policy formulation. But the majority of that, naturally enough, came from the federal secretary.

**Mr Forbes** - You were set up like most unions - you had a federal executive and a federal council. Did you sit on that?

**Mr Carpenter** - Yes.

**Mr Forbes** - And, of course, at the local level, being branch secretary, you would have had a fair input into the local policy.

**Mr Carpenter** - That is right. I think it would have been recognised that the Transport Workers Union was involved in disputation and our presence was felt. That was because our

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membership were quite determined on issues and they would take industrial action. They did not take it purely on a political or that kind of basis. It was when it involved the membership themselves that they decided that they would take action.

**Mr Forbes** – Doug, do you believe that the 13 years of a Labor government, the Hawke 13 years I think most of it was, was a help or a hindrance to the trade union movement?

**Mr Carpenter** – Well, there were times that I saw it as a hindrance. And naturally enough, there were times that I saw it as a benefit. For instance, we had a very sympathetic Member (of Parliament) here who represented the ACT – that was Gordon Bryant. We are talking about the days before we got self-government. I think we got some very good results with that assistance. One thing that we got was the additional week's leave and that was from the federal government. Gordon Bryant was responsible for that. But the one that we fell down on, as much as anything, was the workers compensation one where the troops themselves wouldn't come to the party. We are talking about when we had demonstrations in front of Parliament House and we just didn't turn up with the numbers. It was different on the annual leave question. Gordon Bryant had even said, 'Don't you turn up with half a dozen people.' So numbers do impress, there was no question about that.

**Mr Forbes** - Yes I know, I worked with him on a couple of his campaigns. When we ask that question, lots of people respond with reference to the Accord that we had. Some unionists say that the Accord left us a bit fat and out of shape so that when we didn't have the Accord any more we were not in good fighting shape to protect ourselves.

**Mr Carpenter** - I understand that. I'd possibly left office before that really started to take its effect, but I do know that the union movement was very concerned. I can talk about the time of Ivan Hodgson and the brown coal disputes in Victoria - Yallourn and those sorts of places. The miners had signs up saying: 'Hawke, keep out, you're the graveyard of disputes' and things like that. So Hawke was not really popular. He was not really popular with what he did to the airline pilots and he devastated the trade union movement with the builders labourers. So it was not all plus with the Labor government. We did have some good periods, we did have some good ministers, but Hawke was not one of them.

**Mr Forbes** - What do you believe was the role and result of the ACTU involvement in determining trade union policies during this time?

**Mr Carpenter** - Very often I thought that they took the initiative away from the unions and they kind of stereotyped all approaches to disputes. For instance, the Transport Workers Union would say: 'This is what we want to do' and that conflicted with what the ACTU wanted to do. And very often, as a result of that, nothing happened. So there was no policy fulfilment. I thought it was not the right way to go. It was very good to have their support on issues but when they wanted to take control ....

**Mr Forbes** - They had too much control. What effect did the push for enterprise bargaining - this probably happened after you left - have on your union, for the union officers and the rank and file? What was the impact on your membership numbers and the method of organising? Was that in by the time you went?

**Mr Carpenter** - I only got feedback on it. I was out of the industry. I was no longer active in the trade union movement but I got a lot of feedback from the blokes on the job.

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It would appear that, taking it from the blokes, they would say: 'We got sold down the drain. Look what we've done, we've sold our sick leave for this.' There was a lot of disappointment and I think it has taken the fight out of the blokes on the job and the membership now I think is really on the decline.

**Mr Forbes** - With regard to enterprise bargaining, do you think that the union officials were suitably skilled to handle decentralised bargaining? Did the TWU have to give any specific training to enable officers to cope with the change?

**Mr Carpenter** - No. To my recollection, there was no training. It was just up to the individual secretaries. They were the ones, it appeared to me, that got to talk to the masters - that is the employers - on an individual basis. And they hadn't involved their full committees of management or other people entirely in what they were doing. And I think a lot of it was a policy of appeasement. There were certain issues that were agreed upon early at the time and union membership was one of them. They said, 'You won't get any resistance from us.' I think there was a period when the union membership built up but now we see the complete decline in 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 Carpenter** - In my opinion it distanced the two because as I said, very often the membership did not have any input or were not in a position to have any input, through any elected delegate, to the people who were doing the bargaining. The bargaining was based on formulas that the ACTU had proposed. There were certain specific areas where they said that this was the way to go.

**Mr Forbes** - We were talking about the union officials not being specifically trained but probably having to qualify by having an aptitude. If their secretary had it, then they would probably learn it. Did you have any feedback about whether management was skilled to handle bargaining effectively? Some reports are that management were a bloody sight worse than the unionists.

**Mr Carpenter** - Yes, in certain areas they were. But the overall position was, in my opinion, that the management had the necessary people that they could fall back on and they would not commit themselves without some form of advice. So they were in a far better position than the unions.

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

**Mr Carpenter** - That is for sure and certain. The relevance, to a degree, has disappeared. There are some basic factors that have remained, but in some of the more contentious issues the relevance has disappeared altogether.

**Mr Forbes** - If you had a choice then, what bargaining system would you prefer to work in, an award system or decentralised bargaining?

**Mr Carpenter** - I would rather work in an award system. Each industry must certainly have its own awards because every industry has its different conditions.

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For instance, if you look at the Transport Workers Union, we had to look after the bus drivers. We had to look after the car driver type people. We had to look after the truck driver type people. We had to look after the people who worked in the garbage industry. We had to look after the people who worked in the bread distribution industry. The whole multitude of things changed so awards had to be engineered to cover their particular requirements.

**Mr Forbes** - Just so. What do you think are the reasons behind the declining rates of union membership? What do you think we need to do to fix that up?

**Mr Carpenter** - That is a very hard question because at the moment, the members have been encouraged by the powers that be – and I'm talking about the Liberal government - to reject the union. The propaganda that has gone out has virtually said that the unions are of no further use to you. And of course, I think the union leadership, prior to this, had lost contact with the blokes on the job because of the bargaining and, as a consequence, they were not on the job doing the job. You see, to be a union official you have got to be at the workplace. You have got to be in a position to talk to the blokes on the job before they start work and after they finish work. You have got to keep in contact with them and I think that contact has been lost.

**Mr Forbes** - The ACTU plan for the creation of 20 super unions is now complete or just about complete. What is your view on the change? Has it fulfilled expectations of applying better resources and efficiencies to the movement? How has it been received by the membership?

**Mr Carpenter** - The Transport Workers Union has not been vastly affected by that. There has been some loss of ground to the Transport Workers Union but ...

**Mr Forbes** - You have picked up the taxi drivers now in Victoria. Did you have some closer ties with the public transport unions - the trains and trams there?

**Mr Carpenter** - No, they weren't involved at all with the Transport Workers Union.

**Mr Forbes** - They weren't then but I thought they might be now.

**Mr Carpenter** - I couldn't tell you Ted, I have lost touch with it.

**Mr Forbes** - It would be the obvious way for them to go, wouldn't it?

**Mr Carpenter** - Yes, but I don't know what happened. We are talking about unions that were, let us say, public sector unions - that was all the tramways, omnibus and that sort of thing.

**Mr Forbes** - I think trams and trains are now together. I think they might have formed themselves under public transport which is a good thing because if they are going to call themselves public transport it augers well for the future when they join together. That is the way they've got to go. My next question is a philosophical question. I think it could relate more to your grandchildren. I know, I've got eight of them.

**Mr Carpenter** – Have you! That's better than me.

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**Mr Forbes** - Every time I go to Melbourne, I meet a new one. They are walking by the time I meet them. Would you be pleased if one of your grandchildren became interested in becoming a union official?

**Mr Carpenter** - I would love them to have an interest in the trade union movement but whether they go all the way and become a union official, I don't know. I believe they should play an active part in their union, whichever job or industry they choose. I think they should be involved. But I would not say that a union official's life would be the answer in the end.

**Mr Forbes** - You stayed there Doug! What if one of your grandchildren walked up to you and said, 'Listen grandpa, I've been offered a job as a branch organiser for the union and I am going to take it.' Would you be pleased?

**Mr Carpenter** - Yes, I certainly would be pleased.

**Mr Forbes** - So do you think that the profession of union organising is a respectable following?

**Mr Carpenter** - Well I think so, yes. Although, it has been denigrated by this present government. There's no question about that.

**Mr Forbes** - So you believed in it when you took it on?

**Mr Carpenter** - Yes, I still believe in it. I have been disappointed in a lot of the union leadership. They have not involved themselves with the blokes on the job, they have been more boss orientated.

**Mr Forbes** - Do you think there has been a tendency that the union organiser has been succeeded by the labour manager - the union organiser had to move out when the labour manager came in.

**Mr Carpenter** - That could be the scenario, I suppose.

**Mr Forbes** - The person off the job who has been organising his mates moves over for a bloke who has been trained academically to manage labour affairs.

**Mr Carpenter** - Yes, that's it.

**Mr Forbes** - All right Doug, that was very good. You are one of my longest interviews and yours was the most nostalgic because you can go back a lot further. All of the others have been young blokes. They think they've been making history when they talk about what happened 10 years ago. Thank you Doug.



