

**12. George Wason, ACT Branch Secretary, *Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU)*. (Interviewed by Ted Forbes, Australian Society for the Study of Labour History - 18 August 1997)**

**Mr Forbes** – George, when and where did you first join a union?

**Mr Wason** - I was probably 18 at the time. It takes me back to 1975-76 - the final year of my apprenticeship as a bricklayer. I was working in Edinburgh and I joined UCATT – the Union of Construction, Allied Trades and Technicians.

**Mr Forbes** - Were you ever a workplace delegate before you became an official?

**Mr Wason** – Yes, I was a workplace delegate up in Sydney on several construction projects.

**Mr Forbes** - Did you come to Canberra as an official? Were you already an organiser?

**Mr Wason** - Yes, I was an organiser for the BWIU (Building Workers Industrial Union) at the time. I came here in 1986-87.

**Mr Forbes** - What made you decide to leave the rank and file and become an officer of the union?

**Mr Wason** - I was working on a major project in Sydney. I was approached by the union to see whether I would consider working for them for a period of three months as a temporary official. I decided to give it a go because, if I didn't like it, I could always go back on the tools.

**Mr Forbes** – You must have liked it then. Did you or do you have any political affiliations?

**Mr Wason** - With our organisation, the BWIU, most of our senior officials up in Sydney were tied up with the Communist Party in some shape or other. The union had fairly left-leaning tendencies. Even though I never became a member, I did do quite a lot of organising and political work. We used to go along to some meetings where we had to secure control from the 'Young Pioneers' and a few other groups like that, a few of the radicals and the Trots, but I was not a member of any party. I was approached to join the Labor Party but I refused to do that. So although I wasn't affiliated to any particular party by membership I did have involvement.

**Mr Forbes** - Although you were not a member of any political party, was there a tendency for groups to have a united front if there were particular aspects of radical groups that had similar views? I can remember myself early in my working life, I was in the Communist Party at first and then the Labor Party, and there was a fair bit of co-operation – there had to be at job level - between like-minded people.

**Mr Wason** - I was never involved in doing political work or co-operating with the Labor Party at the time, although we had one or two officials who were active within the Labor Party itself. So I suppose, in the sequence of events, I would say that it was not so much explicitly but more implicitly that we did work together.

**George Wason, CFMEU**

**Mr Forbes** - Did that continue right through your activity up to now? Are you still unaffiliated?

**Mr Wason** – No, we have slightly shifted. When I moved to Canberra, quite a lot of the left people within the union movement were tied up with the ALP and we were moving into the period of self-government in Canberra. I was persuaded at the time to join the ALP to bolster the vote to ensure that the left got its fair share of preselection candidates running up to the inaugural ACT Assembly elections.

**Mr Forbes** - So you have a continuing membership?

**Mr Wason** - Since then, yes. I have kept it going and I get active on certain issues, especially when they relate to projects in the construction industry and industrial relations.

**Mr Forbes** – George, were you a family man with children during the time of your union activity?

**Mr Wason** - Yes.

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

**Mr Wason** - It does affect it. It makes it a bit more hectic than it should be because a lot of these things don't happen between 9 to 5. As you well know, there are meetings at night and meetings at the weekend, so it does cut into your family life.

**Mr Forbes** - I suppose we ask that question because it does put particular stress on the lives of some people and it is probably one of the reasons why unions are very careful to try and involve the spouses of their key officials. In some cases, it has broken up marriages. I suppose, in a sense, it did with mine.

Did you or do you get involved in matters before the Industrial Relations Commission or the Federal Court?

**Mr Wason** - Not so much now, but I used to do a lot of stuff in the Industrial Relations Commission. If there were disputes with employers on construction projects, you were normally involved from the start so it was probably sensible that you would do the presentation to the commission because you knew the history and the intricacies of the dispute. Some disputes were a bit more technical and we used to get some back-up from someone like an industrial officer.

**Mr Forbes** - Would you get them from Sydney?

**Mr Wason** - We used to get them from Sydney but these days here in Canberra we have our own industrial officer.

**Mr Forbes** - As an organiser, and perhaps as secretary, in dispute situations that come before the commission, would the organiser involved have a forward role in that?

**Mr Wason** – Generally yes, because they are the person on the ground.

**Mr Forbes** - Does that mean that all of your officers have functions before the commission?

**Mr Wason** - Not all of them. Some of them more than others, but depending on who they were, we would normally send the industrial officer down to help them.

**Mr Forbes** - Would all of your officers have experience of being in the commission? And know how to conduct themselves there?

**Mr Wason** - They could conduct a basic case in the commission.

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

**Mr Wason** - I have a dual role in many a way. I am secretary of the union so therefore one of my primary responsibilities is to ensure that the union policy is carried out once it is formulated. I would also say that through the various committees, such as the committee of management and state council, I would have a fairly important role and a reasonably large input in debating the pros and cons or the pluses and minuses of what policies should be adopted.

**Mr Forbes** - Do you believe that the 13 years of a Labor government was a help or a hindrance to the trade union movement? And if so, in what way was it?

**Mr Wason** – Well, it had its good and its bad. The concept of a social accord is not a bad concept. The problem was that, unfortunately, the labour movement did not pin the government down to their end of the bargain. For example, when we signed the Accord in mid to late 1983, it was some 6 to 12 months later that the then Treasurer Paul Keating deregulated the financial market. There was nothing in the Accord to redress that situation. Basically, they had moved the goalposts on their part but never allowed us to move the goalposts to suit our part. Things like that were detrimental to the interests of the union movement, and more to the point, the union membership. There were positives obviously. There was centralised wage fixing which allowed people who were in a poor bargaining position to have wage rises. There were other social benefits such as the reintroduction of Medicare, child-care rebates and so on. But it still doesn't avoid the fact that, unfortunately, the union movement allowed Labor to renege on what I would call its fundamental commitments that it should have had to the labour movement.

**Mr Forbes** - In relation to what you said there, it did allow some of what might be called the weaker unions or not so well organised unions to share in having reasonable adjustments made to their pay. It has been suggested by some officials that it never encouraged those people to strengthen their position organisationally and that overall the whole union movement became a bit fat and flabby, so that when harder times came, as they have at the moment, they lost their capacity to fight and organise.

**Mr Wason** - That is probably true, but there is a question there you've got to ask yourself. Just because there is an incompetent or inept union leadership in place, does that mean to say that you penalise tens of thousands of workers? Do you say to them you are not eligible for a wage increase because your union is incompetent? That is the social question you've got to ask. You're also right in saying that tougher times are upon us and that it is certainly exposing the weaknesses of such unions. For example, the AWU is falling apart at the seams. They would have to be one of the major offenders during the 13 years of Labor. They basically went out for lunch and left it up to the commission and the Accord to deliver wage increases to the workforce.

They've got a lot to answer for, but unfortunately they're not alone. History will judge them. We have just got to get on with the struggle.

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

**Mr Wason** - Once again, the concept of having the combined union movement coordinating social and industrial policies is fine in principle. Unfortunately, what happened was that it was ruled from the top. We had a very small inner circle with Kelty and a few other senior executive members of the ACTU. I would also argue that it was very similar to the political side where you had at that time Hawke and Keating and one or two key ministers. I don't think it was really debated out with caucus what the policy should be. In my view, small groups getting together and deciding how the cake is going to be carved up is definitely unhealthy. It is not in the best interests of either party, as history is now showing. Things are coming out about the Hawke-Keating years in government where it was a small select group who got together to decide on things. But when the pressure was put on, there was no way that that small group was going to be able to combat all of the problems and fights that they had to encounter. They never encouraged or involved the broader caucus and we saw what happened in 1996 where, basically, the ship sunk.

**Mr Forbes** - In some sense, I suppose you have to be brave to be a bureaucrat because if you are wrong, you carry the can alone. You don't have a rank and file that can respond if they don't know what you were doing.

**Mr Wason** - Definitely.

**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 its impact on your membership numbers and your method of organising?

**Mr Wason** - The net effect to us was that we had to employ more officials. If the government was looking for a job creation scheme, they certainly found one by default, because basically we had to increase our staff by about 25 per cent to deal with enterprise bargaining - a system, I must say, that we never supported. Although it would be fair to say that our industry, for numerous years, for as long as I can remember anyway, has always done some form of enterprise or industry type bargaining. It has not been uncommon for us to sit down with the employer associations and strike up an agreement. We struck up agreements on national superannuation, on redundancy and so on. We have had a hybrid of enterprise bargaining for many years.

The reason that has been there is that it has allowed the market to move. It has been a safety valve because our industry is volatile: it has busts and booms. When the boom was on, the centralised wage fixing principles showed that they were totally inflexible. What happened was that employers were in no other position but to pay market rates and market rates in Canberra in the mid-1980s were well above anything that the IRC was prepared to handle. Therefore, we made informal agreements so that these workers were able to get the market rate. So we've had a form of enterprise or industry bargaining for some time. The effects on the workforce in the construction industry, in the main, have not been much different from what it has been for the last 20 years or so.

**Mr Forbes** - That's an interesting comment.

**Mr Wason** - As I said, we are out there negotiating with the employers. Most of our members would have gained significantly. In fact, if you compare the gains that they are receiving now to the gains they were getting during the Accord years, we are certainly outstripping the agreements there. Our last agreement, which expires this year in October, was 12 per cent over 2 years, so that is a 6 per cent per annum increase. That is our second enterprise agreement so in essence our members have received, since we started enterprise bargaining, in excess of a 20 per cent increase. We are now shaping up for another round of enterprise bargaining where we will be looking for a similar outcome of between 12 and 15 per cent for the next 2 years.

**Mr Forbes** - I have heard that with some unions like yours - I don't know which other ones - that they were accustomed to enterprise bargaining, that it was their modus operandi. I'm not too sure whether this question is relevant but do you think that your union officials were suitably skilled and resourced to handle decentralised bargaining? What if any specific training was given by your union to enable officials to cope with the change?

**Mr Wason** - Times change from when we used to do agreements years ago. For example, what would happen is that you would get a letter from the employer saying that they agree to the wage claim. That was about as formal as it got. It would be signed by the principal of the company. These days the agreements have got to be processed through the commission. Therefore, although our officials had the basic tools to go in and put a claim on an employer and sit down and negotiate, we then had to train them up so that they could get all of the necessary paperwork in order so that it could be lodged in the commission and registered. So yes, we have done several training courses. We also went through the situation of how to deal with an employer who wants to go down the track of an EFA (*enterprise flexibility agreement*) - now an AWA (*Australian workplace agreement*) - and how to combat that sort of thing. Our view is that we continually train our officials. We don't take the attitude that because a person has done a couple of training courses they must know everything. Everything is in state of flux, it is always changing. Reith has already flagged that he is going to try and get more changes into the IR Act in the next session of parliament, so one could assume that they will not be changes which will assist the union movement or union officials. So we just have to keep on educating our officers so that they can maintain the relevancy of what is going on.

**Mr Forbes** - For some unions, of course, it was very difficult. But equally, was management skilled enough to bargain effectively at the site level? In my case, I found that they were bloody hopeless. All they could think of was claw-back. But in your case perhaps it was not that dramatic.

**Mr Wason** - No, management seems to have a common trait throughout all of the industries: they don't really care. As you say, their best effort was a crude version of, 'Does this mean you guys are going to work in the rain?' or 'We won't pay you penalty rates.' Very few companies in our industry have any real innovation. To be fair to them, most of the employers in our industry, some 85 per cent of them, employ 10 people or less. Therefore, they don't have the time or the resources to get into the intricacies of industry reform and those types of things. Industry reform, in the main, has been driven in our industry by the CFMEU. Employers have come a very poor second. As I say, with the exception of one or two, the attitude of most of them is, 'How can we claw-back or buy back?' That is what we have been faced with but at the end of the day, what employers want is for the job to be finished on time and within budget. If they get that, they're happy.

**Mr Forbes** - Do you think decentralised bargaining enhanced the relationship between the union and its members or did it result in distancing them?

**Mr Wason** - Once again, that question is a two-edged sword. In certain areas, it has enhanced the union's relationship. We had situations before where we had pockets of members who knew that they could get a lot more money and we used to be seen, wrongfully, as the ones who were holding them back. If we had signed a no extra claims clause in the commission, which meant that they could not get any more money, they would say, 'This is bullshit, we know that we can get in and negotiate with the boss and he will pay us 20 per cent.' We would have to say, 'We can't do that.' In that way, that strained some of the relations because we were seen as the ones who were holding them back - not the commission, not the government, but us. That was one problem. Since that restriction has been lifted, we have been able to get out and negotiate and certainly in the construction industry it has probably enhanced the relationship between the union and the rank and file. Although that's not in all of the cases because you would have to say that there are pockets where the union is not in a position to negotiate either because the sector is weak, poorly organised, or the workers themselves aren't prepared to stand up and have a go. They expect the union to do it for them but the union can't. If you look at some of the other unions, especially in the white-collar area, who are not in a strong bargaining position, you would have to argue that the workers are probably a bit disenchanted and are asking the question: 'What is the union doing for us?' So there are swings and roundabouts on that one.

**Mr Forbes** - Decentralised bargaining reduces the relevance of the award system: what is your comment on that statement?

**Mr Wason** - It certainly does. When you look at it, the Howard-Reith policy now is to strip the award back to 20 basic matters. We have got something like 90-odd clauses in our award and they want to strip that back and get rid of some 70 clauses. To turn around and say that the working environment should only deal with these 20 allowable matters is nonsense. It is not dealing with reality. People have all sorts of problems, not just industrial problems, they have a lot of social and personal problems which do flow into work. If Reith and Howard are trying to argue that none of these problems flow into the workforce, then they have got rocks in their head. They are either totally incompetent or totally dishonest or both. Anyway, we've had all sorts of situations that we've had to deal with, which have been social problems - the application a few years ago for parental leave is an example of that. People have got to realise that if the worker has got personal problems, it is going to flow into the workforce. There is no way that they are going to keep it out. I don't care whether you are a university academic professor or a builder's labourer, if you've got some social or personal problem, it will affect the way you perform and behave at work.

**Mr Forbes** - What do you believe are the reasons behind the declining rate of union membership? What needs to be done to rectify the decline?

**Mr Wason** - There are several reasons for that. The most obvious one is the federal government and all of the state and territory governments bar one, who are actively encouraging workers to leave unions. I don't care what anybody says - that has got to have an influence where you have the major employer, both federally and in every state - the governments are still the major employers - encouraging people to leave unions. That has got to have an impact on union membership.

The other one obviously is the change in society, that is the technological changes which we are experiencing. If you look at the places where there is job growth, it is not in your traditional manufacturing, mining, engineering base where there has traditionally been a strong blue-collar union presence. We are moving into a high-tech, hospitality and service area which really deals with other employment practices - part-time, casual, contract workers and individuals, many of whom are award free.

On the other side of the coin, there are the unions who have got most of that coverage, and I would say that the majority of unions in that sector are very poorly organised. Therefore, what is happening is that the areas where job growth is taking place have probably got the lowest density of union organisation and union membership. So therefore, when you compare it with the total figures, it gives people, in my view, a distorted perception that workers are deserting unions. That's not true, but the problem is that the new workers are not joining unions. When Mr Reith and Mr Howard get hold of the figures they certainly distort them and use them for their own arguments. They bend them and shape them to fit their political bent. For example, in our union, we are growing in the states where there is job growth in the construction industry. Our branches are growing, they are not shrinking. There are several factors and one needs to analyse them.

**Mr Forbes** – That's quite interesting. I must think about that myself. 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?

**Mr Wason** - On face value, I would say that it has in some areas.

**Mr Forbes** – Has it? I didn't read any results of this so I don't know. I'll be interested in your answer.

**Mr Wason** - I will go back. In my view, it is still not complete. I'm surprised to hear it has been completed.

**Mr Forbes** - It might have been an assumption by the person who drew up these questions. I didn't know that either.

**Mr Wason** - Take our own case for example. Some of our divisions don't really come into play until the year 2000 so I would argue that it is not complete. For example, when we drew up the scheme for amalgamations with the four state branches of the BLF - the remnants of the deregistration back in 1986 - with a couple of the agreements, say in Queensland and Western Australia, it will be the year 2000 by the time they become a fully integrated part of the CFMEU. At this point in time, we have in Queensland the BLF division of the CFMEU. It is quite similar in WA, although WA is now moving at a much faster rate and will probably integrate before the expiry date of the agreement. In South Australia and Tasmania, the two branches of the BLF amalgamated at a much faster rate than what was specified in the agreement or the scheme of amalgamations. We still have one of the FEDFA branches down in Victoria. They will also come in about the year 2000. So it is not complete in a technical sense but in a day-to-day sense it is probably complete. They work as one unit so on the ground they are fairly unified in their approach.

**George Wason, CFMEU**

But whether it has achieved its objective, if I had to balance it up, I don't think it has achieved its objective. For example, if you look at the AWU-FIMEE amalgamation, in my view that's a bit of a disaster. They are actually at war with each other. I only wish they could be as aggressive against the employers as they are towards each other. They would certainly shake a few employers out of their chairs. The same can be said for the metal workers and the vehicle builders. It is almost war, especially with the Victorian and South Australian branches of the vehicle builders. People are threatening to take out court challenges against each other.

So I don't think it has achieved its objective basically because I don't think the ACTU was sincere enough with what they actually wanted to get out of it. For example, there is no way that FIMEE should have been amalgamated with the AWU, nor should the ASC&J amalgamate with the AWU. In my view, FIMEE should have been amalgamated with the metal workers and that would have formed a true industry union. Don't forget that was the concept of the ACTU originally with the super unions. They wanted one in construction, one in manufacturing and so on. That was the concept so that you would have this peak body that could deal with things - with one union you'd get rid of all of the demarcation about union tickets ....

**Mr Forbes** - It was industrially inspired and not politically.

**Mr Wason** – That's correct. But unfortunately, the politicians got hold of it and basically perverted what was, in the main, a decent position. For example, the plumbers and the Electrical Trades Union are out on their own. They should have been part of the CFMEU along with the ASC&J. But because the politicians and the politics took control, we ended up with a hybrid of the original thing and that has exposed its weaknesses.

When we try to represent the industry, we are fairly fortunate that people see the CFMEU as the main player in the industry. That's not just because of our name or because we amalgamated, it is because we have officials out there being active, chasing the employers and maintaining relevance with the membership. It is working in our case, but if you took a balanced view and looked at the 20 unions and you tried to identify 20 of them that are actually working, I think you would find that the minority are working and the majority are not.

**Mr Forbes** - Your comments suggest to me that if the amalgamation or the mix had a natural industrial harmony, it is working. I am trying to cover the areas where I've heard there is difficulty and it would seem to me that where it has not been successful, it was trying to effect an amalgam between two bits of a mixture that won't mix.

**Mr Wason** – That's right - people who have no common interest. For example, we had a strange mix with the builders' labourers. We had a part forced mix through deregistration and then a half mix through amalgamation. But I would say that if you went onto a building site today and spoke to workers and said, 'Do you think it would be a better idea having a separate labourers' union and go back to a separate tradesmen's union?' the majority of our members would laugh at you and say, 'You've got rocks in your head, we all work together, we all should be in the one union.' It's the same with the FEDFA - the riggers and the crane drivers - they all see that it is far better being in the one CFMEU than in a small in-house type union. The thing is that they all have something in common. They all work together. They've all got the same interests and they all want the same net outcome. It is very hard to go around and set yourself up and try to represent people who basically have a conflict of interest.



**Mr Forbes** – George, if you had the choice, what bargaining system would you prefer to work in?

**Mr Wason** - I would like to see some form of centralised wage fixing system, something which can ensure that workers keep pace with the cost of living, and a strong award system which would protect workers from being exploited by employers, although you would never stop that exploitation from taking place. But certainly, it gives you a tool to recover moneys where you do uncover exploitation. But also, I think there has got to be some form of safety valve which allows for what I would call industry negotiations to take place.

For example, if a peak employer body and the peak union in that industry, whether it be construction or metal or maritime, agree to something which is above the centralised wage fixing agreements and provides a balance for the industry, I don't see any problem. In fact, I think that should be part of the government's industry policy. Unfortunately, you'll not get anything like that from this current government. You can't even get an industry policy out of them.

**Mr Forbes** – Final question, would you be pleased if one of your children became interested in becoming a union official?

**Mr Wason** - I don't know if pleased would be the right word there. My attitude with the kids is that at the end of the day, they have to make up their own mind as to what they want to do in society.

**Mr Forbes** - Given that they did, and they came and said, 'Dad, I've made a decision. I have the chance to be a union official and I want to do it.' How would you feel about that?

**Mr Wason** - I suppose I would be pleased, if that's what they wanted to do.

**Mr Forbes** - Why would you be pleased?

**Mr Wason** - I suppose I would be pleased in the sense that they have been able to make up their mind as to what they want to do in their life. I would say that as a union official there is plenty of work there for them.

**Mr Forbes** - Is it good work to do?

**Mr Wason** - It is never boring.

**Mr Forbes** - No two days the same.

**Mr Wason** – That's true. And if you want to play a role in having an input into social change and that type of thing, and if that's what you enjoy, then well and good. The pleasing thing would be that they have decided what they want to do. I think the hardest thing these days with people leaving school and going into the labour market is that a lot of them are very unsure about what they want to do and where they are going to end up.

I must admit that when I entered the labour market and decided I was going to be an apprentice bricklayer I never for one minute had any aspirations about being a union official. I never thought I would be sitting here today giving an interview, but things change.

**George Wason, CFMEU**

**Mr Forbes** - I always did want to be a union official. I'd done a lot of reading about it, the shearers and all. Australia has a long and romantic history of unions and I suppose I was caught up in that. But do you agree that being a union organiser is a very respectable profession?

**Mr Wason** - It is certainly respectable but it also carries with it a lot of responsibility and people should not sit back and take it lightly. This is probably becoming an outdated comment but it is not like when people used to join the public service and decide that they were going to be a career bureaucrat.

**Mr Forbes** - It will never be like that, will it?

**Mr Wason** - It won't be like that anymore in the public service, not with this current government. But that used to be the trend when people left school, they would decide that they were going to be a career bureaucrat, that they were going to try to get to the SES level and that type of stuff. They'd leave school, go off to university and come out with some degree, then jump into the public service, work there for 30 or 40 years and then retire. I think this current government, and even the previous government, are certainly changing that. The point I'm making is that people should not think they can jump into the union movement and make it a career or think they will have job security. There is no job security because every four years you are up for election. And anyway, people should not go in there because they want a good cushy job. If they are going to do the job, they've got to go in there, in my view, with a social conscience. I think, in many a way, that has probably let the union movement down too over the last 10 or 15 years where people jumped into the union movement because they saw it as a springboard into politics or greater and better things. Certainly over the last five to 10 years, we've seen a lot of people using the union movement on an opportunist basis where they have used it as a springboard into politics or where the next time you bump into them, they are some high-flying human resource officer for some major corporation. So if people are going to work for the union movement - great, let them do it and good luck to them.

**Mr Forbes** - Thank you. We're nearly out of time but I just want to put this on the tape. Behind George there is a poster on the wall that says, 'The problem with the rat race is that even if you win you're still a rat!'

