

**13. Robin Hampstead, Industrial Officer, Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance (MEAA). (Interviewed by Ted Forbes, Australian Society for the Study of Labour History - 20 November 1997)**

**Mr Forbes** – Rob, what is the full name of your union?

**Mr Hampstead** - It is the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance. I am the industrial officer and I have been with the organisation for over 10 years.

**Mr Forbes** - When did you first join a union? How old were you?

**Mr Hampstead** - I joined the union movement when I was just 15 years of age when I commenced work on the slaughter floor at the Casino abattoirs, working on the scales.

**Mr Forbes** - How long did you spend in the meat industry?

**Mr Hampstead** - I spent quite a number of years in the meat industry as such. I certainly spent 13 years at Casino abattoir. I left Casino abattoir to become a union official with the Australasian Meat Industry Employee's Union (AMIEU). The Newcastle & Northern branch was the branch where I became an organiser. I was there for some nine years. During the period I was there, I held the position of assistant secretary.

**Mr Forbes** - Was that an honorary position?

**Mr Hampstead** - No, full-time. They were all full-time positions.

**Mr Forbes** - You became a union officer. How old were you then?

**Mr Hampstead** - I would have been about 23 when I became a union officer. I stayed there for a number of years. I can remember years better than my age - I don't like to remember my age! It was about 1961 when I started as an organiser with the meat industry employee's union.

**Mr Forbes** - How long did you stay an organiser?

**Mr Hampstead** - About nine years.

**Mr Forbes** - What did you do then?

**Mr Hampstead** - At that time, the meat industry was in chaos. There were closures of abattoirs occurring everywhere. I was a specialist person on abattoirs which meant that I was away from home a lot. I actually spent 17 weeks away from home in one year, which was just too much with young kiddies. My kiddies were just finishing primary school.

**Mr Forbes** - How many children?

**Mr Hampstead** - Two, a boy and a girl. So it was very difficult and there was a lot of pressure on the family. It just didn't suit me to be in that sort of circumstance. I was offered a job at Gunnedah municipal abattoir where I went and became the personnel and industrial officer.

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I'd actually spent a lot of time there as a union official trying to solve problems as well.

**Mr Forbes** - As a matter of fact, in that long answer you have cleaned up about four questions so that's good. Are you still an officer of your present union?

**Mr Hampstead** - Yes.

**Mr Forbes** - Which we still call the Journos but we probably shouldn't. How long have you been with your present union?

**Mr Hampstead** - I have been here 10 years now. I think I would definitely be the longest serving employee in the organisation at this time. There would be a couple of elected officials who would certainly have longer periods of employment, but I think I am the longest serving employee at the moment. If there is anyone else, they would not have been there 12 months longer than me.

**Mr Forbes** - Did you have any political affiliations during the time you have been an official with any union?

**Mr Hampstead** - Not a political position, as such.

**Mr Forbes** - We mean membership.

**Mr Hampstead** - Yes, with the meat union I went to the ACTU Congresses and the like and participated in Trades and Labour Council activities.

**Mr Forbes** - What about membership of a political party?

**Mr Hampstead** - No, never been a member of the Labor Party or any party.

**Mr Forbes** - It says were you a family man with children and you answered that in the affirmative and you have more or less said - I don't want to put words in your mouth - that you took action early to make sure that you remained a family man close to your family while you were doing the union job.

**Mr Hampstead** - That's right. I've been married now for just over 35 years. Both my wife and I have strong backgrounds of a solid family life. I was brought up that way. Not everybody is, but I was. We discussed the pressures on our family with our parents and the advice we got was that we might need to get a job that didn't take me away from home so much. I think that was the wisest decision. I don't regret anything I've done actually. I think it's worked well.

**Mr Forbes** - I think you said that you were a workplace delegate before you became an official. You've always been active from a very early age.

**Mr Hampstead** - Yes, I became active when there was a work value examination of the abattoir I was working in, to do with the state award. Albert Allsop was the secretary of the branch at the time and in the smoko time, I overheard Albert telling a couple of much older members that the employer had made certain statements about the work which were absolute lies.

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I was aware of it because I had worked on the scales and knew the weight of all the animals off the top of my head, and I had done a training scheme which taught me every job in the place. So I was able to make good assessments of general summaries and I told Albert that the employer had lied to him, that the people he was talking to, the older fellows, really wouldn't know enough about the subject matter because they hadn't worked in close proximity to the scales and hadn't worked on the scales. They were guessing the average weight of carcasses but I actually knew.

So with that information he went back to the employer and challenged them to bring out their records, and they were proved to be liars. It helped him to get a really marvellous outcome of those negotiations, particularly with the barristers and the judges who were there doing their inspection. He chopped them apart. What happened was he came back and walked up to me on the job and personally thanked me for my contribution. A couple of years down the track he approached me and asked me to become an organiser. So I guess I became involved just through being exposed to employer skullduggery, which is inevitable I think. Most employers cheat and have people on.

**Mr Forbes** - As a union official, did you present matters or get involved in matters before the Industrial Relations Commission or the Federal Court?

**Mr Hampstead** - Yes, I've been in both tribunals throughout the period I have worked for unions. I never actually gave evidence when I was a worker. I gave information, as in the instance I just referred to, but not evidence as such. But I have appeared in federal courts and state tribunals and given evidence for the union as a union official and conducted arbitration cases as well.

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

**Mr Hampstead** - I had a fairly significant role because the Newcastle & Northern branch was a very strong, viable and financially strong branch of the meat industry union. It was probably the most financially successful branch and probably still is today. The committee of management that ran the union had the sort of make-up, an older and younger mix, that really valued input from union officials. I was fortunate in that way, so I did have an opportunity. I don't believe everybody would always have that opportunity but certainly, in that particular branch of the union, I definitely had input.

**Mr Forbes** - Could I suggest that in your present union, which is completely different, your influence would not be so great as it was with the meat industry union.

**Mr Hampstead** - Absolutely, a lot less in this organisation as it is today. But when it was the Australian Journalists Association before we amalgamated, and the branch was autonomous and paid a contribution levy to the federal office for its maintenance, for the part it played in the organisation, again I was more involved. I actually enjoyed the capacity to interact with the committee and to guide them and help them with their investments, strategy, policies and all the rest of it. I think personally that decentralisation, the federalisation if you like, of the union movement is a backward step. It is better to have the activity and the decisions being made and being seen to be made back at the rockface, in the branches.

**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 you do, in what way was it?

**Mr Hampstead** - I would have to say I thought it was a bit of both because there is no doubt that the labour movement has done much in the absolute interests of workers. Certainly, the provisions that they ultimately put in the Workplace Relations Act as it is today, and the Industrial Relations Act as it was then, covering termination and those things were big steps forward. And I think they did a lot for getting the union movement to become more aware of the bigger picture. I think it has done a lot of good in that respect. I don't believe the government did so much absolutely wrong. But it appeared to me that they were influenced a little too much by the ACTU's views which weren't necessarily the views of the majority of the unions.

**Mr Forbes** - That is the next question Rob, if you don't mind. With that question about the 13 years, we really wanted to know your view of the Accord. What do you think the effect of that was?

**Mr Hampstead** - I think the Accord was the greatest thing that ever was and it should have been kept in place and maintained. It guaranteed the worker a capacity, to the best that they could expect and hope for, to maintain their standard of living. Without it, I believe the smaller workplaces and the individuals on their own get lost and aren't necessarily served well by the union movement. In my view, the Accord was a good thing. A lot of people might not agree with that, but that is my view.

**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 Hampstead** - I think it has been a disaster. I think the purposes for which the ACTU was developed and its mandate have been exceeded. It has taken steps to introduce and enhance the occupational health and safety protections for workers and things like that and the minimum wage, and that's good. That's what they are there for. But when they got involved in the organisation structures and what size unions should be or shouldn't be, I believe they stepped right into an area that is best determined by the organisations themselves. If they wanted to amalgamate, let them amalgamate. But I believe they adopted a strategy in a policy sense of having smaller unions amalgamate and insisting that the larger unions take them over if you like.

In some instances that was necessary, because some small unions were definitely not able to service their members and probably were inappropriate, but not when it comes to forcing amalgamation on the larger unions, particularly with 10,000-odd members. I think that small unions of anything from about 7,000 on, in fact even slightly smaller, can be extremely efficient financially and able to service their members with great thoroughness and with considerable expertise and assistance.

**Mr Forbes** - Actually you have jumped forward to question 19. I intended to ask you that.

**Mr Hampstead** - Sorry.

**Mr Forbes** - That's okay. You answered the questions and addressed the problems as they present themselves to you in your mind. That's okay.

**Mr Hampstead** - I certainly don't like the 20 super unions idea. That's just how I feel about it.

**Mr Forbes** - What effect did the push for enterprise bargaining have on your present union, both for the union officers and the rank and file? What was its impact on your membership numbers and methods of organising, if there was any?

**Mr Hampstead** - I think enterprise bargaining hasn't hurt our organisation greatly in the sense that it was operating under the Labor government's Act. It may have got to a slightly worse situation but I believe the Act was structured sufficiently for us to be able to work through those issues and get through. I don't believe the enterprise agreements were being focused and were not likely, in my view, to become individually focused on specific workplaces. For example, with News Limited and Fairfax that we cover, I think we were more likely to keep a macro enterprise agreement in place with possible schedules attached to it. I think the structure of the Act provided the means and actually steered people in that direction, whereas the Act today makes that proposal quite difficult and really pushes you towards having individual agreements with minute workplaces, specifically focused workplaces, and even parts of workplaces. And that really does fragment the agreements. That in turn has an immediate effect on the capacity for a union to resource that service.

I'd have to say that initially it was an impasse that made us pour more effort into it and certainly took a great deal more effort. Enterprise bargaining certainly chewed up some money and made the system of servicing members more expensive.

To that end, the outcome probably was pretty good but I think in the longer term the Accord and the centralised award system, without enterprise bargaining, probably would have serviced people as well. It was just up to the people to develop their awards and provide for the flexibility within the awards. It didn't have to be done through legislation in my view.

**Mr Forbes** - With regard to enterprise bargaining, do you think that your union officials were suitably skilled and resourced to handle decentralised bargaining? Did you have to give them any special training at all?

**Mr Hampstead** - There was special training provided, but I have to say that it was all done so quickly, on the run as it were, after the event. The Act was put in and the amendments were made and they were being implemented at the same time as people were trying to be trained. To that end, I think there were some disasters in the first instance and certainly some outcomes that left a lot to be desired. I think as time went on people, frankly, learnt more by their experience than they did by the training specifically, because it was so varied and convoluted.

**Mr Forbes** - So they learnt in the field?

**Mr Hampstead** - I think they did, more than anything.

**Mr Forbes** - Do you think that management was skilled enough to bargain effectively at the site level?

**Mr Hampstead** - No, they definitely weren't, and I don't think they even attempted to train themselves either. They had perceptions that were so out of court and wild and didn't have any sense to it at all that it made the exercise for unions much more expensive and much more time consuming. That is what I mean by expense. The time of officials is expense and you can't get away from that. Time is money.

To the extent to which people have to sit day after day arguing with employers about stupid things that should never even be on the table because the employer has some wild dream that he can do something or wants to do something or force some issue on people, it doesn't help at all.

**Mr Forbes** - Would you agree that, as some of our interviewees have said, the employer didn't know what it meant and all they thought it meant was clawback, trade-offs, as far as the awards went?

**Mr Hampstead** - Exactly that. They did not know what the fundamentals were. They thought it was an opportunity – and I think what you said was a good way of putting it - they saw it as an opportunity to simply take back conditions that were hard won and that they had had to concede. They just wanted to take them back without any need to compensate people or to even address the issue. It just gave them power. It was a power thing.

**Mr Forbes** - In the early stages then, before employers were educated by their own representatives presumably, and the union would have been on top of it before the employers, do you think that helped to enhance the relationship between the union officers and their members?

**Mr Hampstead** - I think it did. I know that this union didn't lose membership at all in that time. But certainly members became very much aware of the skills and ability of the union and because delegates were accompanying those officials, they observed the ignorance and arrogance of the employer. I would actually agree that it did enhance the relationship. If it didn't increase the membership, it certainly made those who were members much more solid.

**Mr Forbes** - Increased their understanding of what unions have done.

**Mr Hampstead** - Yes, and certainly their appreciation of the union rose quite considerably.

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

**Mr Hampstead** - I think the award system now, unfortunately, is being made less important and will increasingly become less important. Awards are meant to be minimums but I fear that the minimum is not as meaningful. Although the legislation would appear today to uphold it and sustain it, in fact it does not. You can see now in the government where current enterprise agreements can in fact have wordings in them that totally displace and remove the award in its entirety from any application in the workplace. That is terrible when they can do that. And the employer can do that by a majority vote. I would have to say that people - normal employees – have absolutely no capacity to understand and appreciate all the implications in circumstances where the award is to be totally displaced.

I might refer back to a judgment of the full bench where they charged the unions and employers of not being up to speed with enterprise bargaining at one time, that we weren't mature enough and hadn't reached a time of maturity that would enable enterprise bargaining to go ahead as it should, in their view. If it was so difficult for the employers and unions who were in fact skilled and working in the system to come to grips with it, what possibility is there for an employee to come to grips with such a major change as to displace an entire award and everything else by an agreement in one month? But that is what the employers are demanding of employees today.

**Mr Forbes** - If you are saying that ordinary rank and file workers generally throughout Australia didn't really understand the origin of their awards, which I would agree with, do you think that, in retrospect, the unions had fallen down on the job in keeping the rank and file educated and aware of the origins of their awards? For instance, do you agree with me that perhaps in the early part of the 1920s and the 1930s that workers generally knew what awards were, and knew how they were originally fought for and that they had to remain strong to defend them?

**Mr Hampstead** - I would agree with that. When I was a young boy in an abattoir, and a young man later, I did know that the award was there. I knew the award was important and people were very conscious of it. It was where all your conditions were. That was the most valuable document to you in relation to your employment and you were made aware of it. I think the unions made you aware of it as well. I think you are right that as time went on, the unions probably didn't put as much focus on the need to keep employees informed and defend it.

**Mr Forbes** - To defend it daily, yes. That is important. That's my view and I am glad that you agree with that.

**Mr Hampstead** - I wouldn't say it just to agree with you, Ted!

**Mr Forbes** - What do you believe are the reasons behind the declining rates of union membership? If you believe that, what in your view needs to be done to rectify the decline?

**Mr Hampstead** - I think the decline is small in our union but I fear it may get a little greater in time. I think it is great for some other unions and, to get to the point you are making, yes, I think union membership is dropping generally across unions.

That has got to be a concern to every union because inevitably it flows on. The main cause of that in my view would go back to an issue I raised earlier about these macro union exercises because I don't think they have helped. It has tended to take away from the individuals the feeling that they are actually participating and able to participate - and that is probably more important - the ability to participate directly in the operation of their union. For example, the financial arrangements with most unions are such that it is all done on a macro level, the federal office type level. But equally members have become disillusioned, I think, through the processes of change and, again, it hasn't been handled well by the unions.

Unions have taken too much for granted. Payroll deductions made income easy, whereas in the early days when I was a union official with the meat union, we drove round from Woy Woy to the Queensland border. We visited every butcher shop twice a year, every one. We knocked on the door, shook hands with the members and collected their fees and/or handed them a magazine that we had produced for that half year, reporting on activities of the union and all the rest of it. But they met you face to face twice a year. They saw you and they knew they would see a union official. Every one of them.

Now, it has a lot to do with resources and it has a lot to do with enterprise bargaining taking up so much of our time. Union officials now are probably the same in number per capita of membership but their time is just not available to go out and shake hands with the member and say, 'How are you going?' The only time they get a chance to visit now, or only purpose for their visit now, is in response to an urgency call from a member. That can work positively in certain circumstances. But in workplaces where things are harmoniously ticking along, I think that is where, if a study was done, we would see that union membership is falling.

**Robin Hampstead, MEAA**

Because it is those places that don't see the union official now as often, if at all. There are places that have members of this union that I haven't been able to visit for two years, and that is simply because you don't have the time to go out and visit them.

**Mr Forbes** - Yes, you do actually have to see them, don't you?

**Mr Hampstead** - The members then must, by perception, lose that empathy with the union. That is, they no longer appreciate that the benefits they have obtained - the award benefits and one thing and another - have been obtained by the activity of the union. They then become suspicious and think they would have got it anyway and that the outcomes are being delivered by some other means.

**Mr Forbes** - Yes, I agree with you. With regard to recruitment, I don't care how slick modern advertising by an organisation may be, you still have to get in front of the person with a card in your hand and get it filled in. Because they don't line up at the union office and say, 'As a result of your advertisement, I've decided to join the union.' It just doesn't happen, does it?

**Mr Hampstead** - Exactly.

**Mr Forbes** - If they come into the office, you know they've been sacked or there's something wrong.

**Mr Hampstead** - That's right. But when we went round the workplaces ...

**Mr Forbes** - You had to get out to get your wages. In 1960, my secretary said, 'Teddy, you go out there. You've got to collect 26 pounds, half of that is mine and the other half is Kath's, the office girl. There are two organisers so you'll have to make sure, on average, you collect 70 pounds a week.' I can tell you that it was bloody hard to get.

**Mr Hampstead** - I remember too, and I think it is being managed differently by the union officials today - that is, the organisations and the officials themselves. But I remember when I was working with the meat employee's union, an organiser did not call on one town, quite a significant town with about five butcher shops in it, came back to the office and said that he did. There was a contact with the membership that he hadn't called. That secretary kicked his butt pretty hard, stuck him in a car, and made him drive all night, visit those people, and drive all night the next night to be back for work the next day. He gave him one day to get up there, do the job and get back.

**Mr Forbes** - In Queensland you're talking about, are you?

**Mr Hampstead** - It's talking about getting up to the Queensland border, yes. The bloke had to go to Lismore. Lismore has got about 27 butcher shops in it. The bloke decided he'd just give it a miss because he was running a bit late.

**Mr Forbes** - There were enormous distances to travel. We had organisers in my time travelling around in a Kombi van with the name of the union on it, with a little bed in it.

**Mr Hampstead** - That would be right. I can imagine that.

**Mr Forbes** - You can't get away with that anymore.

**Mr Hampstead** - I was luckier, we used to stay in motels. But by the same token, you are right. It used to be a profitable and quite a beneficial trip, always. It never was not. We used to take about a fortnight to do an entire section of New South Wales. We had five trips that three of us did, which was set out in books. We had a booklet with every name of every butcher shop in it.

You were told you had to seek out any new butcher shop. And we rotated. A different organiser did that trip the next year. So if there was a new butcher shop and you didn't pick it up, the bloke would pick it up next time. If the butcher said, 'I've been here two bloody years and you're the first bloke I've seen,' the rest of us would know because we policed each other. We did not appreciate our colleagues not doing their job properly. So there was a real conscious effort.

**Mr Forbes** - Additionally, it gives your members the opportunity to get to know more than one person.

**Mr Hampstead** - That's true. But if somebody doesn't call on a new butcher shop and the employee says, 'this is the first time I've been a bloke in two years,' it makes that next organiser's job to join those people up almost impossible. Whereas if he'd called the first time, he probably would have joined those blokes up straightaway, no problem. So it was the slackness of the way in which some of the officials worked that was addressed immediately.

**Mr Forbes** - I've seen that in unions too. Any false solidarity, backing up a colleague who's not been doing his job, had to be overcome.

**Mr Hampstead** - Absolutely.

**Mr Forbes** - They saw the union secretary as the boss and didn't want to dob their mates in. You had to overcome that.

**Mr Hampstead** - We didn't have that. We used to police ourselves. If the bloke didn't do it, we would tell him, 'Mate you'd better get in your car and go back there. You're not dumping it on me.'

**Mr Forbes** - This is the last question. Would you be pleased if one of your children was interested in becoming a union official? As your kids are probably set now, we are probably talking about grandchildren. What would you do if one walked up and said, 'Hey grandpa, I'm interested in becoming a union official.' What would you say?

**Mr Hampstead** - It wouldn't bother me greatly, quite frankly. Certainly I don't regret one bit. On reflection probably the greatest thing that I ever did was to listen to Albert Allsop when he said, 'Look, I think you would make a good organiser.' It frightened hell out of me because I was only just a meat worker with little education.

But he did say to me that he would pay for courses and give me training and that I would have nothing to fear in that area. Thankfully, he did that. I enjoyed it. It has been a good life. I think I enjoy helping people more than anything and getting good outcomes for them and being there to help them even when you can't win them. At least you're there to hold up and do something for them, pacify the situation, talk them through it and counsel them through it.

**Robin Hampstead, MEAA**

My daughter, I would suspect, would probably be easily encouraged to go down that path. She often comes even today at 32 years of age and speaks to me about situations at work. She is very conscious of the benefits of unions. She's also conscious because she knows how union officials do work from her knowledge of me. She also is very quick to criticise the particular union that services her. They just never see them.

**Mr Forbes** - So you think the union organising is a respectable profession?

**Mr Hampstead** - I do, I do think it is respectable. It is something that people who do it can be very proud of.

**Mr Forbes** - It is useful and respectable.

**Mr Hampstead** - Absolutely. That is my view, yes.

