

14. Robert Peden O'HARA (1959-2014), Branch Secretary, Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU). (Interviewed by Ted Forbes, Australian Society for the Study of Labour History - 14 August 1997).

Mr Forbes – Bob, when and where did you first join a union? How old were you?

Mr O'Hara - I joined the union when I was 16 at the start of my apprenticeship, and that was in Scotland in the coal mines. It was the National Union of Mineworkers - Group 2, which is the tradesmen's branch.

Mr Forbes - Were you apprenticed to be a fitter?

Mr O'Hara - Apprenticed to be a boilermaker.

Mr Forbes - In Australia, apprentices were not pressed to join a union, although some of them did. Was that the same in Scotland at the time? Were apprentices supposed to join and was any pressure put on them?

Mr O'Hara – No, there was certainly no pressure put on them but apprentices were certainly encouraged to join the union because it was part and parcel of the whole culture within the mining movement and, I suppose, within unionism in general. So apprentices were encouraged to join and in fact formed part of the specific mining lodge in the area. They had their own spokespersons in relation to issues and items that may have come up regarding the apprentices of the day.

Mr Forbes - What other unions did you belong to?

Mr O'Hara - I didn't belong to any other union in Scotland. I served my time in Scotland and maintained my membership of the National Union of Mineworkers. Then when I came to Australia, I joined the Metals.

Mr Forbes - Were you a workplace delegate before you became an officer?

Mr O'Hara - Yes, I was indeed. I was the secretary at Meadowlea Foods, which was the old Vegetable Oils, and then Goodman Fielder took it over. I was the AMWU delegate there for some 10 years before becoming an official.

Mr Forbes – So you were always in the AMWU; you were never in it when it was the AEU¹?

Mr O'Hara - No.

Mr Forbes - I still think of it as the AEU.

Mr O'Hara - There are still a few around who think of it as the AEU.

Mr Forbes - How did you become a full-time officer of the union?

¹ Amalgamated Engineering Union

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Mr O'Hara - I was given the opportunity when one of the officials became sick. This was in 1989. I was invited to become a temporary organiser, on delegation. It was supposed to be for six weeks and after 16 months I got elected into a position of full-time organiser.

Mr Forbes - Are all branch organisers of the Metals elected?

Mr O'Hara - Currently, they are not. Previously they were. Our last national conference determined that we could appoint officials for a term of between 6 months and 12 months.

Mr Forbes - Something like the Missos.

Mr O'Hara - Yes.

Mr Forbes - The next question is why did you leave the union? But that is obviously a question for old blokes like me and half of the people that we are approaching so I won't bother you with that one. Did you have political affiliations during the time that you have been active as a union official?

Mr O'Hara - Yes, I have been a member of the Labor Party for a considerable number of years. Currently, I am the ACT President of the party. Prior to that, when I was living in NSW, I suppose because of my affiliations in certain factions, I would have had very little chance of becoming a party representative in the NSW Branch.

Mr Forbes - So those affiliations have not altered during the period of your union activity; they have been constant?

Mr O'Hara - Yes, indeed.

Mr Forbes - You are a family man, you have a wife but you don't have any children so I don't know that I can ask you whether that has affected you. I suppose it is a bit too early in your married history to say whether your union activities are creating strains.

Mr O'Hara - I am not long married but, like all jobs, it has its moments. Family wise, with regard to kids, it does not affect me. But in so far as family commitments go, if your job happens to interfere with some social function or gathering, well that's just par for the course. And that doesn't go down well at times.

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

Mr O'Hara - Yes, indeed we do. All officials in the AMWU present their own cases in the Industrial Commission. When it becomes a Federal Court matter we can then determine whether we utilise our legal branch. But in so far as issues on behalf of members are concerned, all officials are advocacy trained.

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

Mr O'Hara - Like every other official and rank and filer within the AMWU, the policy and union practice is determined through various councils - the state council, the national council and our state and national conferences.

Those policies are debated and each member of those respective councils and conferences has the ability to sway the debate one way or the other. But it is the decision of the majority of those people at the conference or the council that is taken at the end of the day.

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 in what way? I suppose that question is really asking about the Accord, as it was.

Mr O'Hara - I suppose you can put it two ways. Yes, you could say it was a help to the union movement on the basis that there was not a concerted attack on the union movement as there is now. In so far as a hindrance, I suppose a lot of people became complacent with regard to the industrial outlook and the Accord certainly had some impact on that.

A lot of people assumed that, at the end of the day, the government was putting forward the increase when in actual fact it was never fully understood that any increase on the basis of an Accord outcome was negotiated between a number of parties - that is, the government, the unions and the employers. It always seemed to people that the government and the employer were putting forward the increase.

Mr Forbes - It has been suggested by a number of people that, by agreeing to the Accord, the unions perhaps assisted in getting themselves sidelined.

Mr O'Hara - I would say yes to that if you consider that people under the age of 35 - I suppose at this point in time it might be a little less - have never had to struggle during their working life for a wage outcome. They believe that it was always handed to them on a plate. The problem now is that the union movement is not only attempting to politicise but industrialise some of those individuals in the workforce and say to them, 'This is what we did previously when we were seeking an increase and this is what we have got to do now.' And encouraging and convincing some of those people is extremely difficult.

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

Mr O'Hara - I think the ACTU played a significant role. They played a good role. They looked at the generic requirements of industry in general in the country. Unfortunately, with the amalgamation of unions that occurred during that period, I suppose essentially it happened on factional rather than industrial outcomes.

Mr Forbes - Yes, I have a question here on that. But perhaps you could take the questions as they come and when we get down to that question about the super unions you might express yourself differently, according to the interposing questions. What effect did the push for enterprise bargaining have on your union, both for the officers and the rank and file? What was its impact on your membership numbers and method of organising?

Mr O'Hara - I believe the effect of the push for enterprise bargaining on the union was that it was a whole new picture and people really didn't know what the parameters were and how to progress it. There was a lack of knowledge in a lot of respects among officials and delegates. It took the union a period of time to upgrade those skills and that knowledge to allow that to occur. The impact on membership was that in a lot of companies, enterprise bargaining was not new to them.

Where those members were accustomed to struggle, it was not new, just a new name as far as they were concerned. Where the members were not accustomed to struggle, and where they had to sit down and collectively bargain, I would suggest that the employers had, in real terms, the upper hand.

Mr Forbes - Were union officials suitably skilled and resourced to handle decentralised bargaining? Was any specific training given to officials to enable them to cope with this change?

Mr O'Hara - Initially, I would say no. The union officials were not correctly equipped to handle enterprise bargaining in the sense that a number of officials were of the 'old school.' They were used to picking up the boss by the collar, giving them a thud on the ear, and knowing full well that the rank and file were behind them, supporting them all the way. The new era, so to speak, in regard to enterprise bargaining, where we sat across the table being nice and facilitative to each other, was difficult for a lot of officials, especially the older or more senior officials. The younger officials probably picked it up at a better rate than some of their more senior comrades. That aside, the training and how we actually conducted ourselves in those negotiations was something that came later. So to say that we were fully equipped, no we were not. To say that we are now equipped, I believe that currently our officials are, and they have got every opportunity to be further briefed or advised as to where we go.

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

Mr O'Hara - I think that decentralised bargaining probably distanced the members from the union. That sounds a bit of a catch-22. I think it distanced them in the sense that the officials had to spend more time at individual workplaces. Therefore, they didn't have the opportunity to do, as a number of my senior colleagues used to say 'the milk run' - to go around, say hello, have a cup of tea, sit down and have a smoke in the boilershop or whatever - the good old days. We don't do that anymore, not very often. When officials get the opportunity to do it you can rest assured that they love it. But unfortunately, that's the way it is. That's what has happened on this decentralisation.

Mr Forbes - Yes obviously, if the union officials have so much more to do, they can't be there for social calls. Is that understood generally by the membership now?

Mr O'Hara - No, I don't believe so. I think that every member in every workplace has got the view that when they require the services of a union official, they should be able to have that service on tap.

Mr Forbes - That's sad, isn't it?

Mr O'Hara - It is sad in the context that it gets back to the training issue where you have got site delegates and on-the-job delegates and the issues that some of the members require officials to deal with. In my day, which is not that long ago, if an official came in and dealt with some of the points that members and delegates require them to deal with, it just wouldn't happen.

Mr Forbes - You have referred to the skills required and the training provided for officials in this new wages system. In your view, was management skilled enough to bargain effectively at the site level in the first place and are they now?

Mr O'Hara – No, I don't think they were skilled at all, and I don't think they are even prepared now. I think you will find that with a lot of the local management, all they want to do is just grab and take whatever they think is a hindrance to their business without looking at the big picture. For instance, they want to reduce morning tea, reduce lunch - the claw-back episode.

Mr Forbes – That's not the idea, is it?

Mr O'Hara – Well, it doesn't do anything for productivity and efficiency.

Mr Forbes - Decentralised bargaining reduced the relevance of the award system: what is your view of that statement?

Mr O'Hara - I think it took the focus away from the award system and put the focus upon each individual workplace. To say that people were aware of what the award said, prior to decentralised bargaining, I think is a bit of a furphy. I don't believe that the members in general would be aware of what their award entitlements were prior to decentralisation. It probably took the focus off the award system in the sense that we weren't as active in updating awards as we were previously. When we were negotiating increases and negotiating change at a national level, the awards were updated at that time. Subsequent to that, and we are going through it now with these 20 allowable matters, some awards have not been varied for a number of years. I suppose you could put that back to the decentralisation.

Mr Forbes - What do you believe are the reasons behind the declining rates of union membership? What in your view needs to be done to rectify the decline? The next question deals with the super unions so you might like to deal with those together. The ACTU plan for the creation of the 20 super unions is now complete. What is your view of this change? Has it fulfilled expectations of applying greater resources and efficiencies into the movement? What effect did it have on you as an official? How do you think it was received by the membership?

You could probably deal with this as a whole question. The ACTU brought on those young people but that is over now and millions of dollars and hours later, it apparently has not turned up anything like the results. We are in a period of numerical decline.

Mr O'Hara - Yes, certainly we are in a period of numerical decline but equally we are in a period of change on the industrial front. Workforces in general are less than what was previously required due to technology, best practice and various other factors. Sure, there will be a decline in union membership. Whether the ACTU super union policy played a part in that, I don't think so. I don't disagree with the super union concept. I think there are a lot of points that could be done better, if we had our chance again, about the super unions and how they should apply in industry - things which would actually give the employees and the union members the upper hand instead of what has occurred with the employer having the upper hand.

The problem with the decline gets back to whether the school leavers, or the people entering the work force, have got any idea about what the union movement is about. How do you overcome that? I suppose we need the opportunity to go and speak to various school groups, to the TAFE colleges, et cetera, and explain the benefits of being a member of a union, regardless of which industry they may enter. The unfortunate thing about all of this, as I have said, is that people under the age of about 35 currently have never had to struggle to attain a wage outcome.

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They do not understand how their annual leave, sick leave, annual leave loading, long service leave and workers compensation were attained. These are all aspects that are in the award which they believe are theirs as a right or they believe the boss gave them that. No-one has ever explained to them what the union movement has done. It was not a case of the union movement seeking everyone to go on strike every time. The terms and conditions, other than wage outcomes, do not appear to be commonly known by young people. They do not know that it was the union movement that fought for them and that it was the union movement that implemented them.

Let us take superannuation, which is not even that old. Compulsory superannuation was not even in place in the early 1980s. It was not until a campaign in the mid-1980s here in Australia that we got compulsory superannuation from employers. Those people who were employer friendly used to be invited into the employer's superannuation scheme but they were few and far between. You would probably know about this, Ted - you were probably never invited into it. It was only through the union movement that superannuation became compulsory.

Mr Forbes - It would seem that a reasonable education system should include the considerable history of wage fixation in a country like Australia.

Mr O'Hara - Absolutely.

Mr Forbes – It's a bit alarming that it's not happening.

Mr O'Hara – It's alarming in the sense of trying to introduce it into the curriculum because, while some of the more progressive academics are attempting to do that, there are more non-progressive academics who are seeking to make sure that it doesn't get in.

Mr Forbes - It seems there might be a class struggle going on! If you had your choice, what bargaining or I should say what wages system would you prefer to work in?

Mr O'Hara - Probably twofold. I would say that there should be a centralised system so that everyone at least receives what you would deem to be the cost of living, which we previously had. Where we looked at the cost of living increases over the previous year ...

Mr Forbes – Is it not what you deem it to be but who deems it? That becomes a very political question because we have got to have a process by which a reasonable movement is arrived at.

Mr O'Hara - Obviously you would not accept what, say, someone like Morgan and Banks determines the CPI increase to be. We are told that the average weekly wage in Australia, and this is what is published in all the papers, is currently in excess of \$600. But I don't know where the average worker is, because I have a number of people who are earning significantly less than \$600. So if you are going to look at the average wage, let us look at it in its context. Let us look at how you determine the average wage, rather than superimposing those executive wages where they are picking up, in some circumstances, \$40,000 or \$50,000 a week, never mind a year.

Equally, if we are going to look at the cost of living increase, then that is pretty straightforward. That would be something, when we are talking about a centralised figure, where we would have a collective - that is, a group from all facets and all walks of life - who would look at it and say what it means to the pensioner, to the child, to the middle, low and high income earner.

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They could look at how much more it is costing people to live this week compared with last week or this year compared with last year. That would be one part of it. The second part to that would be - getting back to the system, and I will probably be criticised for this in a number of areas, is that if you have a workplace where you are strong, and you have got the ability to get more than the central figure, then that workplace should be able to go out there and struggle for it. They should be allowed to do it.

Mr Forbes - Would you say then that if those stronger ones are successful it sets a good example for those who perhaps have not seen fit, or have not been able, to organise themselves similarly?

Mr O'Hara - Yes, I think you are right Ted. If we've got an opportunity to highlight an area where a hundred yards up the road, they've just picked up \$40 or \$50 or whatever per cent you want to put on that, and you've got a similar type of workplace down the road that has not, it can be used as a tool for organising. You can turn around and say to them, 'Why are you any different from them? Your employer and their employer are putting profits in their pocket the same as everybody else, only their employer is not going to put as much profit in their pocket as your employer is.'

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

Mr O'Hara - I don't have any children but I suppose I would. I think it would be in the sense of that social outlook in regards to looking after your fellow man, fellow person being politically correct – looking after your fellow worker. If I had someone that I could encourage into the movement then I would, simply on the basis that they have got some degree of social equity.

Mr Forbes - So you would agree that working for a union is an honourable profession?

Mr O'Hara - Absolutely.