

Edited from Interviews with Frank Bollins Organising the Railway Workshops

I joined the union quite readily and it was through the union's assistance that I obtained my first job as a First Class Sheet metal worker in the private enterprise.

I was one of the very fortunate people. I never ever was unemployed. I went directly from school to a job as a junior labourer in a Radio Company down in Woolloomooloo and from there I went into the Railways into apprenticeship metalworker I was terminated at the end of my apprenticeship but I had a weeks holiday due to me and before the end of that weeks holiday I then became employed at a place called United Brass in Botany Road, Waterloo. I worked there from the end of October to early December 1939, and much to my own and to my father's surprise I received a letter from the Railway Dept., indicating there was a temporary vacancy for a first class sheet metalworker at the Eveleigh Carriage Works.

Well now this was quite unique in the sense that up till two or three years after this period, all sheet metalworkers very wrongly were employed as second class sheet metalworkers, despite the fact that one had passed through an apprenticeship and had done a technical college course, it was the state of the industry that you had to be first employed as a second class sheet metalworker.

Well I had to be the first and youngest former railway apprentice to be employed as a first class sheet metalworker; it was only a temporary classification. The reason for that was the person who's place I was filling had been taken down to Melbourne and trained to work in the aircraft factory at Chullora which at that stage it was not open and unfortunately for me it wasn't ready to be opened, and so the person who's place I was filling came back to the Eveleigh Carriage Works. I was then advised that I could either accept dismissal or be transferred to the electric car shops at Chullora as a temporary second-class sheet metalworker.

In that period I was quite substantially influenced by my father's thinking, who always had a very strong anti-war attitude and he encouraged me to take this job, and also because of the fact there was still a degree of unemployment in general industry, to take this job as a second class sheet metalworker at Chullora. Well now it was a blow to my pride and prestige because a second-class sheet metalworker had very limited scope, he was not supposed to use a rule or to exercise any initiative whatsoever. He was only supposed to do repetitious work where patterns had already been created by a first class sheet metalworker.

I turned 21 in 1939 and by that period in the war, compulsory military service had been introduced. I knew I would be called up for the military service So I started at Elcar in late December 1939 and in April of that year I went into the camp at Liverpool for 3 months military service. Having returned to the Railway at the end of that three months I then had to go on parade once a fortnight at Victoria Barracks. I succeeded in getting myself in quite a serious trouble because on one occasion I had been encouraged by one of the foremen of Elcar to work overtime rather than go on parade and he assured me that it would be alright. The next time I went on parade I was wound up before the Colonel and really given a taste of military discipline.

Being dissatisfied with the nature of this employment, (in effect as a non tradesman) I then applied to join the Air force and it was only then that I started to see a way out of the position that I was in. The railway refused me leave of absence to join the air force as a tradesman coppersmith on the grounds that I was a tradesman and under the terms of the national security and regulations as they then applied, all tradesmen had to remain within the railway service. I well recall writing a letter to them and explaining the fact that either they had employed me in a wrong category over a non-tradesman when I had tradesmen qualifications which was in breach of the national security regulations, or they had failed to train me adequately as a tradesman because I was not employed with the full qualification of a tradesman.

I recall putting that letter one afternoon in the then works manager who's name was Basher Bill White, came down to me the next morning and said "Now look son, we have just discovered there is a vacancy at the Eveleigh Carriage Works for a first class sheet metalworker, are you interested in it?"

and I said "My oath I am" and within a day I was bundled out of the Carriage works, he said, "you don't want this letter do you" I said "I'd very much like it back" and I carried that letter for many years but unfortunately I lost it. It was a first major victory I had over the railway. And incidentally after that when I became active, that was the first thing that I became active in railway affairs, and that was to ultimately to bring about the abolition, almost the abolition of second class sheet metalworkers and all of those that I had worked with as an apprentice at the signal branch, in particular were elevated to first class sheet metalworkers and it was quite a feather in mind in quite a few other peoples caps that we were able to negotiate with the railway department to get rid of that terrible state where a fully qualified tradesman was employed because of a lousy pinch penny policy as a second class tradesman.

Before I left the electric car shops, and I think largely because of the policy at the signal branch in my last year of apprenticeship, I became an observer of what was going on in the workshop, I attended a number of mass meetings.

One of the earlier campaigns was a ban on beer because beer went up by a very small amount, a penny a middy (or a hard schooner as they were then called). I remember attending mass meetings and voting for a ban on the afternoon newspapers because of the price increases.

It wasn't too long before I was asked by a couple of the adult or older workers in the sheet metal section to become the elected sheet metal shop steward and I subsequently learned that the main interest was that they wanted somebody other than themselves to push the burrow to have their own leading hand sheet metal worker rather than become under the direct supervision of a foreman fitter. This was the first major issue that I got involved in at the electric car shops, to pressure and negotiate with the then works manager Bill White to have a leading-hand Sheet metalworker. Ultimately we were successful in that.

Activist at Eveleigh I transferred to the Eveleigh Carriage Works in the beginning of 1941 and then that's when my very intense political and trade union activity commenced. I was not there very long when I started to express some opinion. I was introduced to the then President of the shop committee Ted Walsham, and over the road from where I was working in the sheet metal workshop was Alec Bookluck who ultimately became the editor of the shop committee newspaper "The Magnet" and a little vehicle builder or carriage builder as they were then called, Franky Holman who was a member of the Communist Party. And between three of them it was not long before I was proposed for full membership in the Communist Party. I joined quite readily, I don't think I understood a great deal of what was going on but I understood enough to clarify my own mind that changes had to take place in society if workers were to get any reasonable improvement in their working and industrial and general living conditions.

Earlier on I became a self appointed representative of the sheet metal section of the shop committee. It was not long after that that I was elected to the position of assistant secretary of the shop committee. This was much to my surprise because up until then I had always been a very shy sort of a person, and speaking in public or expressing any opinion in public at that time was quite an ordeal for me.

I started to enjoy my involvement as the assistant secretary of the shop committee and soon became extremely active there in workshop affairs and apparently created quite an impression with some of the older workers for the enthusiasm that I was imparting into this job. In that period the Communist Party was still an illegal body. Some of the early party meetings that I went to in the inner city and up in the Darlinghurst area where with the candle light and everybody being very furtive about going up back stairs and going down alley ways to and from the meetings. Mass meetings were held in Wilson Street over the internment of Max Thomas and Horry Ratcliffe who had been caught distributing the Tribune. I always remember Lloyd Ross speaking out there. He was quite an orator in that period. He went very red in the face being done on a motion that the carriage works should stop in protest of the internment of these two well known Communists. There was lack in understanding and backwardness in the minds of the workers as to the effect of the role and nature of the Communist Party as it was then functioning.

During the rest of my period of Eveleigh Carriage Works, I was very much involved in shop committee affairs and I believe particularly under the guidance of Ted Walsham who was a particular forceful person, we made a substantial contribution to the standard and conditions that applied to the carriage works in that period. There were a number of forces mitigating against advancement and conditions. One was the backwardness of the workers; they didn't want to change away from the conditions they had worked under for many years. They were quite happy with the primitive amenities that either existed or amenities that didn't exist at all. The management was extremely conservative, old

fashioned and reactionary and resented the shop committee and did everything possibly they could to forestall its activities and there were some strong differences with some of the service unions, particularly the then leadership of the ARU. Lloyd Ross had changed his position politically and had become extremely anti-communist. We had difficulties with the Vehicle Builders Union which was the largest single union force in the carriage works, it was an extremely conservative right wing sort of do nothing union and as a consequence we were able to win a great deal of support from many of the carriage and wagon builders because of the shocking conditions under which they worked.

It became the policy of the Communist Party in that period towards the ending of the war to develop programs of action, they were called "Programs for Victory, Peace and Security" and each of the Communist Party branches or cells as they were sometimes called was given the responsibility of creating, or initiating these programs for victory, peace and security. Well on reflection I think we were extremely bureaucratic about it, but nevertheless we did a tremendous job in establishing a program of improvement to the working conditions that prevailed in the Eveleigh Carriage Works, so much so that we put forward plans for the complete restructuring of the whole of the workshop anticipating a very (?) Railway transport that would take place at the end of the war.

In addition to that we paid a great deal of attention to the question of amenities and we developed the argument that there should be substantial improvement, or the creation of reasonable workshop amenities. There were no meal rooms, there were no washing facilities and the majority of workers had to use a bucket, it was one of these foreign order jobs for sheet metalworkers to make these wash buckets for all of the other trades and you had this bucket of water which was changed sometimes on a daily basis by one of the labourers who would go to the hot water rooms and fill the buckets up with hot and cold water to the liking of the person involved. We also raised the question of showers because at that stage there were none there and if you were required to do a very dirty job as often you were required to do you had to go home covered in muck. We also raised the issue of meal rooms because of the congested nature of the Eveleigh Carriage Works as was the case of most of the railway workshops that existed in that period, there was little or no space available for amenity blocks and the carriage works, we were successful in having a number of mezzanine floors established in various places to accommodate workers for meal room and locker facilities.

First Aid at Eveleigh

We also raised the whole concept of improved and more adequate first aid facilities within the railway service. In this program for Peace and Security we had that printed as a demand. We had it printed at the newsletter printery and it was quite a substantial four leafed document where we had set out in detail all of these proposals for this new deal that should prevail at the end of the 2nd World War.

We had paid a great deal of attention to the problem of first aid treatment for workers who received work injuries. In all of the major workshops there was a first aid room and the main first aid worker was a worker who had gone through the St. John's Ambulance Course that was regularly conducted within the railways. Whilst they were very genuine and quite capable to a limited degree, the amount of service and the facilities available was very limited by comparison to modern standards.

Through the Communist Party program for Victory, Peace and Security we raised the need to have fully qualified medical assistance available at the first aid centres with a doctor in both the Chullora and Eveleigh areas and also an ambulance always ready and available to take any injured worker to hospital.

This was one of the most successful parts of our campaign. It fell in line with what the railways may have had in mind for the future of the medical service within the railway system. Shortly after the end of the war, there were full time nurses appointed as sisters in the major first aid centres, at the Eveleigh, Chullora and Clyde areas.

We circulated the program for Victory, Peace and Security amongst the workers and then through the shop committee which was originally asked to endorse it, we then presented it to a series of mass meetings to ultimately become the policy for the workshop. As this was done in all of the major workshops in the Chullora and Eveleigh area, we had all of the workshops fully in agreement with some of the basic questions. We had related the program to each particular set of circumstances as applied to the different workshops, but overall the basic issues of first aid, washing facilities and amenities and so on was endorsed as an overall policy.

The appointment of these nursing sisters created a major problem for the Shop Committee. When the sisters came in, there was an immediate reaction to them. There were two reasons for this. Firstly was

the absolute conservatism, particularly the old style railway worker who would have been able to go to the first aid room whenever he felt so disposed have a bit of a yarn with the first aid officer and if he had any personal problems (and some of them did such as piles and a few other male problems), they were very embarrassed about the possibility of having to talk to a female nursing sister about some of these problems and consequently we started to run into very heavy weather.

In addition, the first two sisters that were appointed to the Eveleigh Carriage Works and the Eveleigh Loco were former army sisters and they in turn brought into the railway first aid situation forms of military attitudes that were very obnoxious and objectionable to the average railway worker, and so as a consequence, we were on the shop committee caught between two forces. One the workers who didn't want them because of male chauvinism and secondly the nursing sisters who wanted to maintain or establish and maintain their superior position over the worker by imposing a somewhat military attitude towards the workers.

I recall one incidence that indicated the hostility that existed between the nursing sisters and the general staff. On one occasion this affected me personally, I had to go over to the Eveleigh Loco, I got a foreign body in my eye and it was the doctor's responsibility to remove it and so I was sent over to the loco and the sister that was there unfortunately, and I certainly have some reservations in saying this because it was very cruel at the time, but she was a former army nursing sister and she was certainly not the most attractive looking women and as a consequence she had been given the name of "The Beast of Belsen". Railway workers have never been short of a bit of initiative on giving somebody or some issue a bit of a title.

Anyhow I was sitting in a chair and she had administered the local anesthetic to my eye and she was asking me a series of questions about it, and all I was saying was yes and no. I wasn't being smart or trying to take a rise out of her but she turned on me and said "You use my correct title" she said "My title is sister", "When you answer me you say yes sister, no sister" and with that I said "Yes sister". I hadn't done it deliberately, I was quite sympathetic to her position, and as I have said I played a role in her establishment of the medical service or improved medical service within the system, but this was just an indication of the hostility that existed between the nursing sisters and the substantial proportion of the workforce and unfortunately I was the sought of innocent victim of that.

The sister at the carriage works was an attractive person and I had many interesting and deep reaching discussions with her particularly about political issues. I remember I had to get a lot of ray treatment, I had whacked the back of my hand with a mallet, and so I was able to sit there for about half an hour a day and in between visits we used to sit and talk and discuss our attitude towards a lot of the socialistic issues that prevailed at times.

However on one occasion Sister Nardy went on annual leave and when the acting first aid worker, who was one of the older type of first aid workers, went into the ambulance room to operate it, he found that all of the up to date equipment which had been issued to the nursing sisters had been locked away and in its place she had substituted all the old paraphernalia that was used by the first aid workers. A couple of pairs of tweezers, a couple of bodgers for getting the splinters out and that was that.

We protested to the management about this, (as we regarded it as a slight on the male first aid worker that had been placed in there as a substitute for Sister Nardy while she was on holidays. When she came back she argued that "Well look I am trained to use all of this modern equipment but the first aid worker is not" I could see that there was a very established warrant of demarcation there and as a consequence I acted on the logic of that, I didn't accept the fact that when she went on holidays that workers had to have a secondary or a reduced standard of service, but I could understand why she as a trained medical person had refused to allow the more sophisticated instruments used by her in her classification to be used by somebody with lesser training than herself.

That was just one small facet of the hostilities that developed during the early period of the nurses.

I can remember being of a platform at a mass meeting in for the carriage works, defending the right' the nursing sisters to be there and arguing with some of the male workers as to why they should be retained. The fight against the nursing sisters at the carriage works was led by one of the people that would have been adversely affected because in a big shop like the carriage works in the loco, full time full time first aid officer carried with it a staff position and with the introduction of the nurses it meant that possibility of advancement in that particular area have been cut off short. So this created a subjective approach by a number of the workers who could see a little sinecure that they had an eye on her for a number of years going down a spout, and as a consequence adopted a hostile attitude.

Ultimately we were able to break down a lot of the hostility and I think that in general the railway worker became much more appreciative of the improved and much more substantial service the nursing sisters gave to the worker over the very conscientious but poorly trained first aid workers that we had for many years before the advent of the new nursing system.

In my experience one of the things that kept railway workers in a reasonable state of sanity was the ability to both laugh at themselves and unfortunately sometimes laugh at others. There was always an ability to give somebody a nickname.

I remember in my early remarks about that fellow being called "a blue nosed bastard". In the shop that I served my apprenticeship which was the most difficult and complex Shop in the sense that there were many divisions that existed, petty childishness where one group of workers or one worker would not speak to the other and I mention the reference to the "Blue Nosed Bastard" more than once.

It always made me wonder how I myself as an individual came out of that shop with an appreciation and a need for united action. Maybe that was one of the reasons. But in that shop there was a number of nick names that were handed out to people associated to workers attitudes.

For instance the nickname of the shop steward was uncle, he was everybody's uncle, he adopted that paternal attitude towards workers. The active communists were always referred to as the Reds but that was pretty genetic as far as the Communist Party was concerned.

When I first went down to Eveleigh, every task we had to perform, every job had a specific time to it. One of the first things that happened to any new worker that went into the sections, somebody would come up and say "there is so many hours associated with that job, you haven't under any circumstance got to put it under those hours, you have got to see that you don't too many hours over, otherwise you'll end up getting the bung and you will be in trouble"

One of the first jobs I was given was soil pipes. (This was the pipe that would take the waste from the toilet down onto the railway track.) This was a substantial area of work for the sheet metal section and there were a whole variety of soil pipes, different bends, different sizes and different shapes and so on. I was advised, if you want the time on those, go and see Dainty, so I went over and I said to this bloke "Dainty would you mind telling me the time on these soil pipes" Well he really blew up and abused me no end, he said "My name is not Dainty my name is Les Peters" And I had to explain to him "Look I am very sorry, I didn't know anything about that, somebody referred to you as Dainty "

The reason why he was Dainty he was a bit of a punter and at some stage of his career he bet on a horse called Dainty Bell and Dainty Bell was everybody's favourite and as a consequence he did his dough and so he was referred to as Dainty from then on, but it was a nick name he didn't like, apparently he never got over the losses that he sustained in backing Dainty Bell.

There was another character in the Boilershop, I must say this practical jokes were always part of railway workers lives and I learnt at a very early stage they can be extremely dangerous and personal problem, and I was always lessons during the course of my apprenticeship and in my early days as a tradesman always studiously avoided getting involved in any practical joke that could bread down on any individual who was a person who was either a little backward or had some peculiarity or physical being that brought about a lot of persecution.

There was a guy in the boilershop who was an absolute blowhard, I won't mention his full name, but his name was Alf, and no matter what subject he would always a worldwide winner at it. He could beat anybody at anything. And on this occasion there were some workers there who deliberately set out to provoke Alf to get to the point of making him look a bit of an idiot. And on this occasion Alf had been boasting about the size chook that existed during the period of the war, and one of his mates or the person he worked for, actually the father of Sir John Kerr the notorious governor general, Harry Kerr who was a very competent smith. The other mate of Harry Kerr was Bill Alley who was a first class cricketer who ended up becoming an English cricketer for many years and one of the umpires in test matches.

However the story was that Alf was boasting the size of his chook, so one of the blokes said "Listen Alf how about bringing in a couple of them in and show us" So Alf brings these two chook eggs in and it was during the war and we were working overtime, they used to use the fire in the boilershop to do a little cooking on it around tea time.

So Alf puts these two eggs in the billy can and puts them on the fire, and then somebody very adroitly labeled to divert Alf's attention away from his chook eggs for a period of a time and in the process they substituted two pigeon eggs instead of the two chook eggs. By this time the whole of the boilershop had been made aware of this situation and there was a big circle of interested and enthusiastic workers around the fire. Of course Alf comes back and KH starts to bait him about the size of these chook eggs that he was so boastful about and in the end they said "Alf give us a look at them"

Alf goes over to his billy can and picks these two eggs out with a spoon and instead of being two large chook eggs they were two pigeon eggs. Well that brought the house down. In the instance of those two eggs I have always regarded that as being one of the prime prized practical jokes that I have ever seen or heard of, it was subsequently talked about for years in the boilershop, the time that Alf was brought down to general size by substituting two pigeon eggs for a couple of hen eggs.

Railway workers had always a propensity for being able to make a joke out of some of the serious aspects of railway life; it was always somebody that was able to do a part turn. It was one of the standard practices in my early life that when a railway worker was retiring they would decorate his workplace, his lathe or his bench or where ever he worked with banners and ribbons and somebody would be able to draw a few cartoons that represented some of the incidents in his lifetime at work within the railway and it always brought about a great deal of humour.

I remember when I first went to the Carriage Works, went back to the Carriage Works in the 1940's there were a lot of social clubs that used the function there. These were the days before paid sick pay and as a consequence there were sick and accident funds where you only paid 6d a fortnight and if you were off sick you received a few bob a week to help you over the bad times. With the advent of sick pay, sick and accident funds gradually went out of existence. But these led to each of the sections having their own social committee and so you could put in 6d a fortnight towards a show or a social function at the end of the year around Xmas time. Well these were highly entertaining; some of the workers would spend weeks in preparing little skits that represented some activity either on an individual basis.

Building the Shop Committees

So that and a lot of other issues I think emanated from the intense interest that the Communists in the railway workshop developed in improving the standards and conditions of railway workers. There is no doubt about it that in that period while we didn't develop a tremendous amount of mass of support for the things we were doing, we also developed a high degree of animosity and hostility, particularly from not only the main authority of the railway department but a lot of the trade union leaderships including the N.S.W. Labor Council.

We built the prestige of the various shop committees operating in the major workshops and also the Council of Railway Shop Committees. This met monthly and was representative of the shop committees, as they existed throughout the state.

We built this prestige on the basis of giving service to the members, not apparently to each particular workshop but overall through the council of railway shop committees. I must say the service that we gave the workers in that period was vastly superior to the service that was given by the full time union officials that had responsibility in the railway industry, (or lack of responsibility for the railway industry it truthfully could be said.)

We concentrated on such issues as annual leave, long service leave, improved past conditions, the extension of the sick pay facility, improvements in the then very primitive employed paid superannuation system that existed within the railway service as well as placing a great deal of emphasis on local issues.

During the war workers were not able to clear annual leave and there was very substantial restrictions on train travel. The first two or three years after the war it was like lifting the lid on a boiling pot. Everybody wanted to go away on holidays.

At the Eveleigh Carriage works the main responsibility there was to get everything that had wheels under it out onto the track during the Christmas holiday period and as a consequence prior to the advent of Christmas, the carriage works was a massive hive of a very intense industry, but come a week or two or three days prior to Xmas with everything that I say had wheels under it was out on the road, the carriage works became something like a ghost town. There was a lot of pressure on the railway department for railway transport for railway workers to take them particularly up the North

Coast, and as a consequence of that we established by negotiations through the Council Shop Committees the right for the various shop committees to carry out all of the booking for railway workers when they were clearing their annual leave.

At the carriage works about 90% of the shop had to take their holidays at Xmas time because there was no other work available for them. It was a massive job and the responsibility and processing of this booking of holiday travel arrangements for railway workers fell on my very broad shoulders. And it was a fascinating experience, and I did it I don't know how many times. I was always one of those shop committee activists who refused to make it a full time occupation and everything I did had to fit in with my work pattern activity or my work pattern activity had to fit in with my shop committee activity, but I always had a job to do. As a consequence I did most of this booking of railway seats in my own personal time at home. But as I say it was a fascinating thing and I used to book seats for people who stay away the north of Queensland and Perth in Western Australia, and on one occasion I think it was the first or second year we entered into this arrangement with the traffic section of the then railway service, they just gave us a complete train for the North Coast and said "Here is eight carriages here are all of the diagram forms, you go ahead and do the whole of the booking." It was all done at my expense or the expense of other shop committee officers who assisted and we collected the money, we booked them in all of the stations, particularly up the North Coast, Sawtell Bowambi? All of those places where railway workers in their thousands used to go. On the two main evenings the railway personnel were going on the holidays, I used to go down to Central Railway Station at about six o'clock and stop till nine or ten at night to see each train off and see that there were no problems associated with the workers and their families.

Because of this type of activity the shop committee prestige was raised to an extremely high level. Workers could see in a vivid way that the role of the shop committee was there to help to solve their problems with the guidance and assistance and so on. But at the same time, as I have said earlier, we did get into areas of hostile relationship between the shop committee and the department and the shop committee and some of the more conservative right wing dominated unions, particularly the ARU and the Vehicle Builders Union at the Eveleigh Carriage Works. I think this was largely due to the fact not only had we consolidated ourselves in the minds and the thinking of the average railway worker but we set out to attack what we considered to be the do nothing policies and attitudes of the unions at that time and unfortunately we rarely differentiated, the union was either left or right. The ARU, the Sheet metalworkers, the Boilermakers were the three goodies and all the others were the right wing do nothing unions. It was particularly in the period of the cold war, the period of industrial groups became an intensely political struggle within the railways and in whole number of instances what was termed then the Industrial Group were able to win some of the major positions on the shop committee with some of the assistance of the Labor Council and other right wing union, particularly with the assistance of the then State Labor Government because we poked some substantial holes in our members with them by adopting an all too aggressive attitude on some of the pertinent political attitudes, such as education, health care and so on, in that period and as a consequence there was a mounting pressure on getting rid of the Communists from within the shop committee movement in the railway system.

At the Carriage Works I think we had done a tremendous job in building up the prestige of the shop committee that we were in an unassailable position, it's true that we did lose some positions in some of the sections, but the peculiarity of the shop committee organisation at that time, it was to my more developed ideas now, it was a very primitive form of organisation. One did not have to be a shop steward to be an activist on the shop committee and in fact in most of the railway workshops there were two committees. There was the shop stewards committee which was representative of elected shop stewards, union delegates and the shop committee which was largely based on a sectional basis and so you could have peace of conflict, you could have a section where you could have a union steward who was hostile to the shop committee but at the same time you could have a shop committee representative who was actively engaged in shop committee activity, and so you had this degree of competition and hostility between the two forces and this applied particularly in the ranks of the ARU and the Vehicle Builders Union who I think unfortunately a number of the shop stewards were conservative in the sense that they followed completely and without any questioning the overall policies of the leadership of those union.

Because of pressures that were applied to the functioning of the shop committee at the behest of the then Labor Government and on reflection I think with some justification there were moves to curtail the activity of the shop committee to issues outside of award matters. Well subsequently when I became a union official I saw more clearly the lines of demarcation between a shop committee that was not necessarily a representative of either one or more particular unions but more representative on a sectional basis and a conflict that emerged from that and an established trade union movements, so that I'm certainly not putting all of the blame and all of the responsibility on the Government, on the

Commissioners or the industrial policy that was pursued by the railway service at that time and by those who became active in the industrial groups. I think that we did open the door on many occasions by being over political in a lot of our activity but I repeat because of the tremendous prestige that we have been able to build up for ourselves at the carriage works and looking after the grass route problems of the railway worker, we were in a fairly unassailable position. But I can say this; there were many very hectic moments particularly at mass meetings when attempts were made to get rid of the Communist element within the shop committee movement on occasion when the annual elections were there. From memory I think we must have had over a 1,000 workers at the mass meeting at lunchtime when the voting for the President and the Secretary and the treasurer was undertaken. And I must say we wiped the floor with the industrial group but it wasn't easy and I felt it very much at the time, a number of the people became involved with the industrial groups were quite personally friendly, they were good conscientious workers. And again I say this in a non-sectarian way the Catholic Action at the time had a substantial finger in the industrial group movement and it did create some quite unfortunate sets of relationships between the communist leader of the shop committee and the extremely conservative leadership of the industrial groups.

However with the passage of time particularly after the end of the coal strike when again we had some massive meetings at the Eveleigh Carriage Works and in all of the other work shops, the shop committees were fully supporting the miners during that struggle when the industrial groups were supporting and upholding both the Federal Government and the State Government in their attempts to beat the miners during that strike. And as I say there were some extremely tense and hostile politicised struggle.

The Combined Rail Union Committee

I believe that the rank and file members of the Communist Party in that period did a tremendous job on behalf of the railway workers and laid the basis for the extremely competent trade union organisation that exists at the rank and file level throughout the railway system.

We found ultimately that the railway shop committees had served its purpose because of the restrictions and limitations that were imposed on us. At Government Level we found that a lot of the issues that the Council had previously built its reputation up on such as long service leave, annual leave, superannuation etc., were then taken up by the unions and I say we, when I say we, the leadership of Council Railway Shop Committees, raised a demand for greater attention by the unions to these problems. We raised the need to establish a combined rail union committee under the leadership and authority of the Labor Council of N.S.W., we were successful in that. In the early stages the Council of Railway Shop Committee had representation on combined rail unions committee but no vote because it was argued (and I think on reflection correctly so, that that would have given one at least of the constituent unions two votes on that committee, it was both a policy that one union to one vote.

Over a period of time the influence and authority of the Council of Railway Shop Committee was gradually broken down to the stage that ultimately it went out of existence in the late 1950's early 1960's. I know there was a lot of heart burning in that period, particularly with Stan Jones and Ted Walsham, but I myself could see the inevitability and could see the contradiction between the unions and the shop committee movement. The shop committee was quite primitive in its organisation such that one didn't have to be a bonafide shop steward to be a participant or an activist on the shop committees.

We didn't leave a vacuum, we didn't leave a gap, and we established the authority of the combined rail unions Committee and it ultimately took over many of the issues that the Council of Railway Shop Committees actively looked after over a whole period of years. In the process we did establish a much better understanding and appreciation of the role of the trade union, and as I say the end result was a very fine rank and file organisation functioning within the system today that guaranteed that railway workers conditions are always raised at the appropriate time and many further advances have been made in respect to the basic issues of long service leave and annual leave.

During the early 1960s we were able to develop what was then the first major campaign on wages ever conducted in the railway system, and we brought about in 1960 the first stoppage of railway workers since the period of 1917 when the major strike took place. It was the railway shop committee who was fundamentally responsible for this tremendous development that expressed itself at the beginning of the 1960s when we were able to change the direction away from the questions of superannuation, long service leave, annual leave etc into the next question of wages, and ultimately over a period of years were able to bring the standard of wage conditions particularly amongst the tradesmen up to a reasonable level to the worker working in private enterprise.

Over a whole period of years we were able to change the character of the trade union movement within the railway system to get away from the everyday issue onto some of the more fundamental issues that confronted railway workers, particularly in respect to wages and other conditions.

The strike was an extremely difficult thing to achieve because there was substantial differences, still very deep suspicions as to the role of the shop committee movement or the then developing shop stewards movement. We took very important steps to consolidate a better relationship with the main service union the ARU in particular. The stoppage took place mainly in the workshops. One of the tragic situations was the continued aloofness of the traffic and operation side of the system when it came to industrial action they concentrated on pushing their own barrow. We were never been able to achieve any major break through in co-ordinated united action with the ARU and the AFULE.

There had been some minor sectional stoppages in the late 1950's I was been involved in at least one of them, or more than one in the sheet metal section, particularly over dismissals in early 1952 period. It was not until 1960 that we were able to get the first major stoppage of the railway workshops in particular. I just don't recall off hand how extensive the involvement of the traffic operations side of the industry were involved those actions, but as far as the workshops they were almost completely one hundred percent. This required a tremendous amount of activity and negotiation on part of the leadership of the shop stewards committees.

At that stage we had developed a much better relationship with Lloyd Ross the then Secretary of the Australian Railways Union and we had applied ourselves much more effectively in a united way with the leadership of the N.S.W. Labour Council. As a consequence were able to develop sufficient support amongst the leadership of the various unions, the ARU, the Vehicle Builders, the Timberworkers, the Ironworkers and of course the Boilermakers, AEU, and the sheetmetal workers to guarantee a massive involvement in that form of activity. And from then on after a tremendous amount of campaigning negotiation between the rank and file leadership and the leadership of the unions, in particular the Labour Council of N.S.W. were able to develop other forms of activity, not long duration strikes but mainly stop work demonstration type meetings where the voice of railway workers was very effectively heard by the general public, either by marches or deputations with a mass backing to various Government departments and heads of the Government.

The main leadership of the Council of Railway Shop Committees in the period that I first became involved with it was Allan Wilson from the Eveleigh Carriage Works, He was the father of the Council of Railway Shop Committees It was largely through his initiative and determination that the Central Council of Railways Shop Committees first came into existence and then prospered. When I first became involved with the Council, Allan was still the General Secretary. He was subsequently elected to the position of organiser of the AEU and his position of Secretary of the Council of the Railways Shop Committee was then taken by Stan Jones. Stan was an industrial truck driver, an ARU rank and file from the Eveleigh Loco. He was, the same as Ted Walsham was at the Eveleigh Carriage Works. Both he and Ted were highly intelligent people and it was a great tragedy at the time, that so deep and bitter were the personal political differences that existed within the ARU that both of them were denied the opportunity of becoming a full time official for the ARU. I am quite convinced that given the opportunity, they would have made outstanding full time ARU officials because they were so effective and competent in the work they did. Because of the strong political differences that prevailed in the industry at the time their progress in the movement was always restricted to being activists within the shop committee. (I think in the case of Stan Jones for a period he became a leader of the ARU Sub-Branch at Eveleigh Loco).

I had more to do with Ted Walsham; he was the one that initiated me into full political activity. I had a great personal affinity & respect for him right until the time that I severed my connection with the railway, I think that then we gradually we grew apart because my work took me in different directions and I had had some differences about the contradictory situation that existed between the shop committee that was then constructed and the trade union system as it was then constructed in the railway.

Both Stan and Ted because of their background and their abilities was closely tied to the Council of Railway Shop Committees and I think as I became more and more involved in full time union activity I could see the contradictory gap between the two and I think it was because of that we did have some differences of opinion. I have always had an extremely high regard for both Ted and Stan, more so to Ted because I had a much more closely association with him. He was one of those people I understand in his earlier life he desired to be a school teacher, he is a highly intelligent person, because of the nature society, then coming out of the depression he was denied that opportunity. He always encouraged me as a young blossoming Communist to become involved in the theoretical aspects of the

Communist movement which I thoroughly enjoyed and appreciated and I believe that behind a lot of the development that I was concerned with, Ted Walsham has played a very significant part.

Stan by the same token was highly effective leadership in the Eveleigh Loco. I think there were subjective differences between himself, (normal state of affairs), and other members of the Communist Party branch that operated at the Loco. The same as it was between Ted Walsham and myself and others at the Eveleigh Carriage Works, its all part of our political life and activity. Stan was a tremendous leader, a tremendously conscientious and a capable organiser, in that he never left a stone unturned in detail at the conclusion of each of the Council of Railway Shop Committee meetings which used to meet monthly, the executive met every second week, so that every second week there was a meeting, either an executive meeting with the Council or a full meeting of the Council and the minutes of those meetings were out and produced and circulated to the shop committee movement. Generally at that stage at the height of the council Railways shop committee I think there was about 35 affiliated committees. We had committees functioning at Goulburn, we had committees functioning at Bathurst, we had them in the Newcastle area, Broadmeadow Loco, Port Waratah, Civic Workshops, Cardiff Workshops and a number of the smaller sections there, and also we had connection with the Power Producing Industry because originally they had been part of the railway set-up we had, representatives from the White Bay, Pyrmont and Ultimo Power Stations, we had representatives from the Zara Street Power Station in the Newcastle area and it was quite a comprehensive rank and file organisation.

In addition to the day to day activity the Council had its own newspaper called "The Magnet" and one of the editors of the Magnet was Arthur Serle who ultimately became the district secretary of the Amalgamated Engineering Union until he was defeated in the ballot and then went back into general industry as a machinist. Alex Bookluck, who was a little Russian worker, tremendous guy, took his position as editor of the Bulletin. Alex would have been one of the first interpreters utilized by the railway in the early intake of migrants in the industry. Something for which he never received as far as I am aware, any special payment or any recognition but Alex played a tremendous part in assisting many of the migrants who came into the workshops in a sought of a hostile environment because at that period the first intake of migrants were from the Soviet Union and they brought in a very strong anti-Communist attitude and as a consequence there were some substantial differences between ourselves on various occasions.

Irrespective of that he became the father of all of the migrants that came to be employed at the Eveleigh Carriage Works. Alex was deeply interested in journalism and in writing, he was something of a short story writer himself, was active in the Fellowship of Australian Writers and thoroughly loved and applied all of his abilities to Editorship of the journal Magnet, it was tagged by the industrial groupers as "the Little Tribune" and I guess it was heavily larded left wing politics, but nevertheless it did the job of spreading the activity and the campaigns of the railway workers to a very wide number of railway workers .

I think the "Magnet" used to come out every quarter, either monthly or quarterly and there was always the job to get the big bundles of the Magnets in from the printery at the Carriage Works and Alec and I and a couple of the others would be busy rolling them up into various bundles for transshipment to the various workshops, some we had delivered by truck others by rail but in a very short time we would have the "Magnet" distributed to almost all of the major sections of the railway industry in relation to the workshops throughout the state, so that the "Magnet" along with the Council of Railway Shop Committees played a very important role in the high standard of conditions that exist within the system today.

Another member of the Council of Railway Shop Committees that I well recall was Azor North from the electric car ships at Chullora. Azor was one of the old time militants, I think from my knowledge he was a member of the Communist Party but nowhere as deeply involved as Ted, Stan Jones or myself but nevertheless was a grand old man who was not short of a few thousand words, was thoroughly an enjoyable person till he finished up the Council of Shop Committees on a Saturday afternoon and then do a pub crawl for the rest of the afternoon. I got into serious troubles in my early married life by getting home around 6 o'clock in a fairly pickled state by spending the afternoon at a thoroughly enjoyable company with Stan, Azor, Ted Walsham, (he was a non drinker so he used to disappear) but the three of us and a couple of others, in the period particularly after, during and the end of the war when grog was very difficult to come by. We did a pub-crawl into the city and had a thoroughly enjoyable afternoon of it.

The Council of Railway Shop Committees had it's own meeting room in Wembly Chambers. Azor North was a very capable carriage builder and he spent a lot of time building cupboards for storing our material. We had a Gestetner there. I used to take a lot of time after work running off stuff for the

shop committee and also a few foreign orders for the Communist Party such as the notices of meetings that we were holding outside the gate.

It was a very effective rank and file conducted organisation; it never had any full time officials. One of the highlights was the production of a hand book setting out all of the conditions of railway employment, long service leave, sick pay, passes, you name it we raised it in the hand book. Largely Ted Walsham, Stan Jones and myself did that on a purely voluntary basis. It was sold in the workshops and created a tremendous impression because a lot of workers didn't understand what their rights were. There was a lot of confusion.

The United Front

There was over 20 unions in the railway system some of them had very few members. The ARU was of course the major work shop union which had a big membership and the Vehicle Builders had a substantial membership. There was the ASE which was more conservative than the AEU, there was the Boilermakers which were generally militant and left winged although there were some officials such as Ralph Marshall who ultimately became the secretary of the Labour Council of N.S.W. was elected to the position of Secretary of the Redfern Branch which was largely related to the railway workers. There was the Sheet metalworkers Union which I ultimately became an organiser of in 1959. There was the Hotel Club, there was the BWIU, the Operative Painters, practically the Timber Workers, practically nearly all of the major unions had a foot hold in the railway industry and it was only through the combined railway unions committee and the Trades and Labour Council of N.S.W. that we were able to get a sort of a consolidated union policy but then it was a question of getting that policy applied in the workshops, and some of the unions while they were to agree to a policy at top level, they did precisely nothing about having it applied to their membership at rank and file level and that is where a lot of areas of conflict emerged.

We were very busy people. As soon as we were able to push through a policy decision at top level through the Labour Council Combined Rail Union's Committee, we then got very busy seeing that there was some form of a job action undertaken to give expression to those policy decisions. So that it was a continuous process of finding ways forward, the policy issues that we could get agreement with the Labour Council and then where necessary action. It wasn't easy and in the process of it I think we all learnt a great amount of on the question of the united front. I think one of the substantial contributions for this was - our approach was to Lloyd Ross who had become again for the second time the General State Secretary of the Australian Railways Union, there had been a wide gap between Lloyd and the Communist Party at one period and I undertook the initial approach as to Lloyd Ross, I don't think I am speaking out of school when I say that my original association with him was fairly hostile as it was most with other unions apart from the Boilermakers, the Sheet metalworkers and the AEU, and I approached him on one occasion when the ARU was starting to be adversely affected by technological change, they had just suffered the effects of the rail standardisation between Sydney and Melbourne and Albury with a substantial number of railway porters losing their jobs.

The railway system was developing the concept of automatic carriage cleaning in conjunction with the concept of an automated shunting facility at Enfield Loco Depot, and it was quite obvious that the ARU was going to suffer, possibly more than any of the other service or other unions operating within the railway system.

I made the initial approach to Lloyd on the basis, that well here we had a situation where the left had been standing up for the bucket of rubbish throwing it at the ARU leadership and the ARU leadership had responded, the consequence of it was we were both where we were a few years ago. This mismatch that took place on a sort of unreal basis was not serving the purpose of railway workers. At this time we started to get together to develop some united action. Well I must say to Lloyd Ross's ever lasting credit, he saw the logic of that approach and so we were able to develop a much closer understanding between the workshop and Lloyd Ross. He played a very important role in developing this movement around wages as far as the workshops were concerned. I developed a very high regard for him both as a person and as a leader of a very important trade union.

Academically trained and there was a gap between the Academic and the Rank and File. He expressed his own views very forcefully, one had to be extremely patient to get your own ideas across to him. However, I repeat I think it was a tremendous significance that people like myself and Harry Hatfield and others were then were able to vote for him. in effect speaking for the Communist Party but nevertheless seeing that there was a meaningful united action between all of the causes of railway workers if we were to make any substantial gains and offset the effective technological change which started to emerge in the railway industry during the late 1950's early 1962.

Well as far as myself was concerned in the late 1950's I became more and more involved in the functioning of the Sheet metalworkers Union. I was elected to the executive during the middle 50's and was elected the position of State President and from time to time when need arose I was booked off from my railway job and became fully employed for a period of a week, two, three or four weeks by the union. When any of the officials went overseas I was usually booked up to fill the gap that they left. In the process I became thoroughly immersed in trade union activity. I was still very active in the ranks of the Communist Party, I was on the Central District Committee at the party and devoted a tremendous amount of my time in the activity in that aspect of my political life, and ultimately when a vacancy occurred in the Sheet metalworkers Union in 1959 I was elected as an organiser.

Becoming an Organiser

I well recall this incident that when I had been a job activist in the railway that had been elected to a railway union position as organiser was able to maintain the connection with the railway as an industry. I kept the employment at Redfern each 12 months; I had to apply for 12 months leave of absence to continue the union activity.

Well, I made up my mind that that wasn't going to be the case as far as I was concerned, I saw from a personal point of view as a matter of principle. I felt that if I was capable, being elected to a full time position, I should be in a no better position than any other union official and not to have two jobs, one to fall back on. This was my personal attitude and so at the end of the first period of office when I was re-elected I went down to the Railway Department and indicated to them that I was to resign my position. And I well remember the staff superintendent said to me "Why do you want to do that son?" And I told him, I explained to him that I have got an obligation to my own conscience to have but one job, I didn't want to be under any obligation to the railway I anticipated that I would be closely associated with the railway from then on as my position as a union organiser, I didn't want to be compromised.

When I put my letter of resignation down and gave it to Mert Commis, he said "Son you are a bloody fool" and then he listed all of the union officials that were still on leave from the railway department. A number of them were people I knew well. People of the Communist Party who had sought leave of absence to become full time union officials but I stuck to my guns, I said I see it as a question of principle and that's that. So in 1960 I finally severed my formal connections with the railway department by having them accept my resignation, and I recall writing a letter where I thanked the local management for the assistance and co-operation that they - well that was the then current management - and extended to me as a shop committee and a union activist within the system. I certainly didn't sever my connections with the railway I was still regarded generally speaking as being one of the leaders of the railway, I assumed the responsibility within the Sheetmetal Union for a number of years to specifically look after the railway industry, it was one of my organising responsibilities.

Ultimately when Harry Hatfield was elected as a union official of the Sheet metalworkers Union he took over that role and carried on the work of organising the rank and file within the bounds of the Combined Rail Union's Committee as effectively or in some instance was more effective than I myself had done.

But over the period I have always had the association with the railway industry when we amalgamated in the early 1970's. While I didn't have any specific responsibility because of my job of President of the Union I still maintain this close interest and association with the industry, particularly during the period of major development of technological change. I also had a connection with the railways through the former Sheet metalworkers Union, I had been given the responsibility of the rolling stock industry at Clyde, Commonwealth Engineering and A.E. Goodwin who had a close association with the railway, and so I sort of acted as a go between for the

Workshop forces of the railway and the workshop forces at the private enterprise and I could speak for many hours on some of the very intense battles I had in trying to reconcile some of the differences that existed between the workers in the two separate industries because of conflict of interest, and I believe that ultimately we did get a much better relationship and understanding between the railway worker and the worker who was employed in private enterprise in the manufacturing and construction of railway stock in locomotives.

During the period of technological development within the railways, I became deeply involved in this. I was one of those union officials that spent a tremendous amount of time in trying to lift the railway system up by its bootlaces. For many countless years there was the common cry was that we have got

no money and as a consequence the railways deteriorated almost to the point of complete and utter collapse. It wasn't until the advent of the early era in 1960-70 period I think it was in the late 1960's that (Shirley?) came on deck. Whilst I had some very strong reservations about him as an administrator, I have always been prepared to give him and others within the system a chance to break through the railway bureaucracy and lift the lid off the railways. Largely his intentions were to completely destroy the manufacturing servicing section of the railway and hand it over to private enterprise and as a consequence I found myself in distinct opposition to him, but I think because of my earlier associations with my father, my apprenticeship in the industry I developed a great love and respect for the railways and I have done everything 'possibly could to encourage railway workers to see the need for change in not only the workshop situation, better machinery, better equipment and the expansion of the railway industry, but also changes within the attitude of railway workers towards their own responsibilities. I sometimes feel that never made a great deal of progress in that regard because of the strong feelings that was emanated by some of the shocking policy attitudes that were developed by the administration of the railway industry, particularly during and in the immediate post war period when they deliberately set out to destroy and suppress the developing rank and file movement within the railway industry and at the same time got so deeply immersed in their own internal fighting and bickering that they almost brought the railway system to its knees, and in so doing created a tremendous fall off in the degree of morale that existed within the railway industry, and I and others spent a lot of time trying to re-create the very fine spirit that had always existed within the railway industry and I feel particularly because of the changes that have taken place within the system today that there is a re-creation of that very fine understanding and appreciation of the railway industry as a service to the general public. It is true there is a long way to go, but I feel the developments that have taken place particularly over the past ten years indicate quite clearly that not only is there a new approach and attitude adopted from above that there is also a new developing attitude within the rank and file. And I think in a small degree I can assume some of the responsibility for the creation of that what I consider a new attitude.

So that I have had a thoroughly enjoyable life, the whole of my existence, my married life emanated from the fact that I became an apprentice sheet metal worker at the Chullora Signal Branch in 1934 and from then on I thoroughly appreciated my association with both the shop committee, the union movement and in a limited extent my association with some of the administration. I have met very fine people were who 'as much subject to the whims and fancies and dogmatic assertions of the railway bureaucracy as the rank and file worker in the workshop, and as a consequence I think I always had a very good relationship with the majority of the administrators that I came up against over the period of time. I sometimes felt in the latter period before I retired in 1983 that I was being effectively used as a trouble shooter but many of the issues that the rank and file were getting involved in at rank and file level could be resolved by careful negotiation between themselves and the degree of management that they first came in contact with, and as a consequence I felt that we were able to resolve many of the day to day problems by careful, patient negotiation that ultimately made some improvement in the average railway worker standard of life.

The first major form of industrial activity took place in 1960 and that was an extremely difficult achievement in that there were still substantial divisions and reservations by some of the union leaderships and by a lot of the rank and file themselves. There were still differences between the various railway workshops and as a consequence to get any united action was an extremely difficult and complex task, as I have said the first was in 1960. Well, between then and now there had been any number of instances where forms of industrial activity had been engaged in. One of the tragedies as I see it has been the period of isolation between the workshops which have been for many years have been very effectively organised and the workers in the operation and traffic side, particularly the members of the ARU and the AFULE. Both those sections have tended to isolate themselves from the workshop and it was always one of my strong talking points that until such times as we got complete united action between the operation and traffic side of the industry in the workshops, there would always be some restriction both on the extent of the action taken and on the end result achieved by that action. This was born out very effectively, or this argument was substantiated very effectively during the Hours Campaign where we spent many hours of meetings in consultation with the ARU and the AFULE. I think the ARU both state wise did apply themselves more effectively in relation to the campaign to reduce working hours within the industry. We never had the same success with the AFULE; neither did we have any major success in involving the AFULE in wage claims that related to the industry as a whole. This is not so much a criticism, it merely indicates the role and function that the AFULE have carried on over the years. They have always been independent mainly of the other unions, always applied themselves on an individual union basis and despite the many efforts that we made to get them involved in united action we never succeeded very effectively in getting them closely associated or allied with the workers in the workshop on any of the major claims.

In getting railway workers to engage in industrial action as a united character, either within the workshops themselves, there has always been substantial differences of levels workshops in the of understanding between some of the Chullora area to the Eveleigh Workshops and the Clyde shop, in particular the Centre at Clyde.

It was always a complicated task where you had to apply yourself very carefully to understand and estimate correctly the various levels of development and appreciation of the problem; otherwise you would put yourself in a corner and so destroy the effectiveness of any move.

I found from the point of view being a full time union official that working within the railway industry on an industrial basis was an extremely complicated and extremely time consuming aspect of being a trade union official. But it had to be done to achieve any united activity, one had to go through all of these time consuming processes of talking, talking and talking to the various levels trying to bring them all up to a common level of understanding, in some instances asking the more militant section to hold themselves back a little bit while the rest of the industry caught up many efforts that we made to get them involved in united action we never succeeded very effectively in getting them closely associated or allied with the workers in the workshop on any of the major claims.

So that between the period of 1960 and the current period there were many examples of united activity largely within the workshops, although it must be said that both the ARU and the AFULE have engaged in independent isolated action on their own part which is as far as I am concerned a much more simple and less complex problem in getting all of the workshop unions to engage in united struggle.

Overall in that period the whole of the railway system from the staff right through to the operative unions have engaged in some form of industrial activity. Having worked in the railway from 1934 when the aftermath of the 1917 strike was still a predominant thought in the many minds of the workers and this was so right until the beginning of the 1960's remember the lessons of 1917 were always told "don't let's go out on the end of the limb, don't do this, don't do that" we had to overcome all of the legacy from the past and I believe that overall the trade union movement within the railway, the operative service unions and the craft unions in the workshops in particular have done a very fine job in their own independent way advancing the standards and conditions of railway workers, unheard of in the periods prior to the 1960's.