

Edited Interview with Stan Jones in 1985 Working On The Railways

I'm Stan Jones. I was born at Redfern in 1908, and at the age of fifteen, went to work in the Eveleigh workshops. I became a railway worker because I had a family background associated with the railways. I knew that my grandfather had worked in the railways, that my father had worked there, and uncles and cousins and so on had worked on the railways. So after I'd tried half a dozen different jobs and didn't like any of them, I decided the railways must be a better place to work in. And I found that they were a place that needed a lot of improvement and I'm happy to say that there has been a considerable improvement today which is a reflection of the good work put in by the rank and file over the years in shop committees, unions and so on.

I was brought into contact with the various conditions, which existed at the time. They were disgraceful. There were no sanitary washing facilities in workshops. There were crude lavatory arrangements and the question of safety was at all times subordinate to the question of output. There was a bonus system in operation after the 1917 strike in various sections of the workshops and particularly in the foundry, where men made themselves ill endeavoring to accumulate bonus money. This was partly stopped by the Lang Government in the early '30s, but nevertheless some of it persisted up till much later periods.

The workshops at that time were still divided following the strike in 1917. Men were bitter towards each other because some had worked on, during the strike and others had remained out and paid the consequences. Some lost positions of authority where they'd been supervising sections; because they were strikers they were reduced back to the bench. For a long time there was agitation to have them restored to their positions. Finally this was achieved. The 1917 strike was lost because of lack of proper organisation amongst the union leadership despite the enthusiasm shown by the rank and file. The rank and file was very concerned about the introduction of the card system, which they considered was going to result in loss of jobs and speed up in the workshops. I had forty-nine years nearly, service in the railways, in workshops mainly at Eveleigh and for short periods at other depots.

The workshops in the period from 1917 up till the beginning of the 2nd World War had these different groups of people. They were divided on the basis of their attitude to the strike, their religious groupings and various organisational tie-ups that people had from that period. So bitter was the position with regard to strikers and non-strikers that it was quite common over the years to find people being warned not to talk to other persons because they'd worked during the strike and on many occasions when a striker died, there would be a white lily placed on the coffin by some mate of his who'd remembered that they'd been through the strike together. This was where the term "lily-white" was applied to people who had gone through the strike.

My family had a workshop back then. My father and uncles worked in the Eveleigh workshops and my father was very active during the period of the strike and I went with him at times to the picket line - I was only nine years of age but from this point of view I considered that winning the strike was going to provide a great benefit to us.

As a result of his activities, my father, along with many others was victimised and they were not employed back in the railway service for a long period after the strike. My father went to work at the steelworks in Newcastle as a boiler-maker and he continued to travel from Redfern to Newcastle each week, bring home his wages at the weekends in order to keep the family going.

One of the problems of course from the strike was that of the bad attitude taken by people, understandably towards those who had worked during the strike. I was a believer in the maxim, which was popular among the more militant section of the Labor movement of that time, "Knock his head off while the strike's on, and convince him afterwards that he should join in union action in the future. In that way you could overcome the personal bitterness that existed and result in strengthening the unions.

After the strike organizing unionism became difficult. Representatives on the job found that they were being harassed by the new supervisors. The NUR, which is in existence today, was of little assistance.

It was regarded at the time as a Commissioner's or employer's union, this made it difficult for ordinary union activity on the job to be carried on. There developed on the part of union leaders, a reluctance to involve themselves in any activity, which would lead to industry stoppages.

The first stoppage of which I was aware was in 1926 at the Enfield Loco Sheds where fitters walked off the job in complaint about their conditions of work. Apart from that most of the activity around the workshops was carried on around safety questions and that wasn't a great deal of activity.

The Railways Department had set up a safety first organisation which had no real power. It could not stop a dangerous practice from being carried on and could not call workers out of the shop where it was being carried on and so was simply an organisation that was an employer's organisation. Representatives were elected from the various sections, and this gave the appearance of democracy. It also had an annual meeting at which representatives from all over the area would meet under the Department's control in the Railways Institute. There they would discuss matters of safety without getting very far with them. The organisation was finally regarded by the worker on the job as a joke. So many of the matters, which should have been dealt with by the committee, were left unremedied.

By 1925 there was, however, a developing or a renewal of a militant attitude towards many matters associated with the work. Because of the inability of the trade unions to carry out real campaigns during this period, there developed a desire for job organisation. At that time a political identity, named Jock Garden, had returned from a trip to Scotland where he had made contact with the workers in the ship building industries on the Clyde. Here the shop stewards movement had formed committees on the job that was comprised of representatives of the workers elected by the various sections. He addressed the NSW Labor Council and gave a very enthusiastic address on the question of these shop committees, as he termed them, and as a result of that the Council decided that it would endeavour to foster such a system of job organisation in New South Wales.

The first organisations that we established, (and there's considerable rivalry as to which was the very first), were at Enfield Loco and Eveleigh Loco workshops. The trade unions gave support to the new shop committee movement and the Commissioner at the time viewed the shop committees, in some way as an alternative to the unions and an improvement on the NUR. He gave recognition to the shop committees that had been formed. The way was then open for these shop committees to have regular monthly conferences with management to discuss grievances in the workshop areas. Where the same issues affected different workshops they could arrange for a deputation to the Commissioner himself. The work of organising committees in different places went ahead however an attempt to establish a central body, a Council of Shop Committees, broke down in the early period, before 1930. A change took place in the Commissioner's attitude and it became more difficult to get recognition for shop committees. Some of these work areas found different ways of making representations such as bringing in unions to take up matters for them or sending representatives along as ordinary trade union committees.

The committees were formed in different ways. At Eveleigh Loco Workshops for instance, each separate shop elected its own representative and in some cases elected a committee. This created a miniature organisation similar to what was desired for the shop committee movement as a whole. At Eveleigh, a central committee was established at which representatives from all the various sections of the workshop sat and dealt with matters concerning that workshop.

At the water supply workshop for example, every person that worked there was regarded as a member of the shop committee. This meeting would elect a managing committee, which was responsible to the full body of the workers. In Chullora, at the Electric Car shops, there was again a different form of organisation; trade union delegates together with people elected from the various sections of the Chullora car shops constituted the shop committee there. The boiler shop, Perway and Signal shops had committees similar to the one at Eveleigh.

Eveleigh carriage shop started with a committee at a slightly later period. They had a combined trade union and shop committee meeting which was held separately to the shop committee itself but which brought the two forces together. It was in this combined forum that one of the leading individuals in the building of shop committees, Alan Wilson, showed what a good organiser he was. A revival took place in the early '30s. Delegates from the existing shop committees were all invited to send their delegates to a meeting, which elected the executive of that Council. At that workshop he was able to build up towards the establishment of the Central Shop Committee on a sounder basis than on which it was brought into existence previously.

This gave the shop committee movement a leap forward. Every month the minutes of that meeting

were taken back to the workshops and were then read discussed, debated and either adopted or rejected by the particular workshop. These meetings were held with the Commissioners approval but there arose a problem. Being an overall organisation, with contact with the Labor Council and trade unions generally, the matters discussed by it at times were regarded by the Commissioner as being political. And to illustrate the absurdity of some of the attitudes that were taken, these were struck from minutes and in one case, the committee discussed the increase in the price of bread and the instruction came out from the Commissioner that this was a political matter and was not to be discussed at the monthly meetings. Needless to say, there were means by which the committees finally got away from these kinds of bans, some of them meeting outside the workplace to discuss the minutes in full.

At Boundary St. for instance where the Everleigh Loco workshops were situated, and at Coddington St. for the carriage side, the meetings used to be taken outside the gates, and the discussions would take place unhindered by any kinds of bans whatsoever. But this was not satisfactory to the people involved and it became an objective to remove these bans and claim the right of free speech in the workshops themselves. This was finally attained, in practice if not in open acknowledgement, by the authorities.

There were of course, a number of political issues, which were developed in the period concerned. There was the development of the fight inside the Labor party between the Lang leadership and the other forces opposed to Lang. This was brought into the workshops at meetings and discussions that took place throughout.

Some of these meetings became quite hectic, decisions were made at a period when the Commissioner was frowning on political discussions, decisions would be made outside the workshops, attempts on a ban, not only by the Railway Commissioner, but also by political forces outside and there were quite a number of battles which took place in regard to this.

It's interesting to note that in respect to the Boundary St. area this was the area chosen by Lang, at the height of his connection with the Labor movement, to deliver what was regarded as his industrial policy speech. This became unsatisfactory too, and we campaigned to have election meetings held inside the workshops instead of outside. One of the factors leading to this was that the person supplying electricity for Lang to speak to present this policy cut him off the air at a certain stage so it was decided that this couldn't be repeated and from then onwards these meetings were held inside.

We're going through the period now when the workshops were feeling the impact of the development of the electrical train system throughout the service. The steam engines were taken off the road, a lot were sold or stored and they were replaced by electric trains. This to a large extent shifted the centre of influence in the railways over the years from the Eveleigh Loco workshops to the electric car shops at Chullora, which became stronger in its protest about different matters and developed an organisation there which was of a very good character. There was one point of course which had to be considered - the tendency for areas to concentrate mainly on the things that were related to their particular area rather than the general matter, which required general support. This was usually a problem, which had to be overcome, and many good people took part in the various areas in seeing that the program of the shop committee received that support.

People like Acer North at Chullora car shops, Joe Pool at the Perway workshops and Cec Matthews at the signal workshops were very active shop committee people and active trade union people. They helped to build the general approach towards the program of the council shop committees. At this time, the shop committee movement commenced putting forward a general program in respect to matters which had not been taken up by the trade unions over the years. These were matters such as a program of 3 months long-service leave for 20 years service in place of one month, and 3 weeks annual leave in place of the one week at that time and a number of other related conditions. Meetings were held with the members of the Labor Party who were in office, Claude Matthews, Joe Carlton who had worked in the Eveleigh workshops were appointed as liaison officers between the ALP or the Parliamentary section, and the shop committee movement. They met with the shop committee council on Saturday mornings in the old Trades Hall and planned what they were going to do in connection with this matter.

Claude Matthews undertook the carrying through in the Parliament of the Bill for the Annual and Long service leave. It meant however that a good deal of rank and file support had to be obtained and this was done. People were quite enthusiastic about it and at the period before the war at a session of parliament, a Private Members Bill was moved by Matthews and an amendment was moved by Mark Davidson who came from the Broken Hill area. Whereas Matthews as he had an agreement with the

shop committees for a fortnight's annual leave, Davidson proposed 3 weeks and he also proposed an improvement upon the long service leave provisions. This was put before the House and Bruxner who was then the Minister for Transport. There was a delegation of shop committee people who waited at Parliament House lobbying the members beforehand and endeavoring to secure what support we could. It was significant that one member of the government, a chap called Reed, known because of all his initials, as alphabetical Reed, met with the delegates outside and told us he wouldn't have a bar of it. When he went into the House during the course of the debate he told the House that he'd interviewed the men's delegates and as far as he was concerned, he saw no objection to what was asked for and he also added, we in this House get six months leave a year.

Despite the opposition of Bruxner, Minister for Transport, who told the House that no matter what you carry today, railway men will not get extra leave, the motion was carried on a vote of 47 to 27. And Bruxner was taken to task in the Truth newspaper, which editorially enquired who gave Mr. Bruxner authority to reject a motion of the House. However, he continued to reject it and in the following election, the shop committee movement issued 185,000 leaflets calling Bruxner a dictator for the attitude he had taken. We considered that this had contributed largely to the defeat of the Bruxner government at the elections and the election of the Labor government in place of it. The Labor government promised it would carry through the decisions that were made previously and finally it did so. Just at the period at the outbreak of war.

It then became important that leave should be granted as annual leave, the long service leave as such, to be regarded as recreation leave and not as a leave to be taken as a retirement leave. This became an issue and at Eveleigh, there was a motion carried which accepted that the outbreak of war had created a new situation that manpower was difficult and that we would have to make certain adjustments. This was done by a motion that provided that for the period of the war, the long-service leave should be provided only when it was allowable due to exigencies in the service and that the annual leave would be taken as annual leave wherever possible. Now this was something accepted by the Labor Party. I might mention that the motion that was moved and carried by the Eveleigh meeting was incorporated word for word in the Railway Act of that time. It had been taken by the Secretary of the Australian Railways Union (I might mention his name was Dr. Lloyd Ross), down to the Executive of the ALP of which he was a member, and was successful in gaining their support for it. So that the matter of leave, long service, annual leave rested there until the termination of hostilities.

However, the shop committee movement had taken up the amount of leave that was called for by Mark Davidson and it had devised this programme to include the extra amounts of leave that would be provided by the amendments that he had moved. And finally this was accomplished and even improved upon. The Bus and Tram Organisations had joined in with the campaign for leave and they had found it was a going campaign and they were responsible with the stoppage of buses for obtaining finally, four weeks annual leave and all this is part of a process of improvement of leave.

And it's interesting to observe that whilst talking about the question of annual leave that prior to the 1917 strike, there was no annual leave as such. There was good conduct leave and the good conduct leave could be used as a penalty against a man for infringement of rules and regulations or any offence committed on the job. If a man came late, for instance, on too many occasions, well, perhaps he might lose a day of his good conduct leave which meant to say that his amount of long-service leave was reduced for that year by whatever penalty was imposed. After the strike the authorities made provision to change this good conduct leave provision to a proper annual leave and they made provision of one week. The good conduct leave was then abolished for workshop sections but was kept in existence for other sections of the service which meant that the traffic people and the engine drivers would still be in a position where they could lose their good conduct leave for offences which the Department regarded as serious enough, but would still retain the one week's leave complete.

At the period before the war, we had what was called 'The Bloody Mile', extending through Sydney yard up beyond Redfern. It was called that because from time to time, fettlers, extra gang men were killed when carrying out their duties. And when one looks today at the kind of vests that are being provided by the department for people working in that area so's that they'll be immediately observable by train drivers and the systematic placing of detonators in areas where fettlers are working, or gangs are carrying out any sort of re-railing, the comparison is obvious. This has been responsible, under union pressure, for cutting down on the casualty rate in that area.

Then too, the Railway Department generally, adopted a much better attitude with regard to safety matters and it did become possible to have discussions between the shop committees, trade unions over the question of safety in workshops. Previously, safety questions had been shelved with the reply - this is a matter for the safety first movement. And as I indicated earlier, this was such an

unsatisfactory organisation that it wasn't possible to exert any kind of pressure and the danger still remained. But the shop committees becoming more active on matters of safety, with the trade unions also coming in on matters of safety, it became a different proposition.

The Departmental heads themselves were undergoing a different approach to the question, until we find today that safety under the present administration of the Railways is a fairly important question, as it should be. However, there'll be many problems ahead and it might be necessary to get back to some of the methods employed by the shop committees in the past. Today you find the need to exert political pressure to a far greater extent, even than previously because of the financial needs of the State in the present period.

The prewar depression affected the railways as it affected most industries and rationing of work took place. It ranged from one week off in every twelve through one week off in every six, to down as low as one week on and one week off, so that those who were down on the lowest amount of work were really only working for a dole existence. These were the people in the Construction branch of the Railways. Workshops were able to bring pressure to bear through the shop committee movement and through the unions, finally to relax the amount of time off to places so that one in five went to one in twelve. That was one week off in twelve instead of one week on in twelve. There were various changes which took place in regard to rationing of work. And they were mainly due to the organisation that existed on the job. This too was a period in which the impact of electric trains as opposed to steam, was having its effect on the Everleigh workshops. But nevertheless, even in Everleigh, the rationing was never more severe than one in six.

During the period of the thirties, the shop committee movement produced its own paper, which used to come out once a month; it was financed by the donations of workers on the job. The name of it was Magnet. It was taken over from a militant group that used to operate throughout the Chullora area and they allowed the shop committee movement to take the paper over. But it, changed over from a roneoed paper to a printed paper and Arthur Searle, who later became the State Secretary of the Amalgamated Engineering Union was editor of the Magnet for a number of years. He did a very good job and was followed as editor by a chap at the Carriage works named Alex Woklack who was also a member of the Australian Writers League.

Also on the job were publications produced by shop committees, in Eveleigh Workshops - Eveleigh News was produced, and at one stage, the sub-branch of the Australian Railways Union also produced a roneoed publication the Eveleigh Call. These were but a few of the publications that developed throughout the railways through the period of years, showing that the workers were concerned with the expression of their views with regard to one matter after another. In addition to the Magnet, use was also made of the journal of the Australian Railways Union, Railroad, and The political and industrial campaigns waged in its columns as well.

During the war period, these papers and publications helped to explain situations to people in the workshops and were used to secure a good deal of co-operation for the war effort. This was particularly important in those areas of the railways, which had been given over to wartime production, such as Chullora, and the shell production at Eveleigh workshops. For the first time we had the employment of women in the production of shells and they had men as well working side by side. This introduced a new element into the workshops generally. The women got on quite famously and took part in several stoppages, which were quite a novelty as far as the workshops were concerned at that time. The women brought some new life into the workshops.

In the post war period, the workshops became an avenue of employment for migrant labour and for the first time we were confronted with different languages being spoken in the workshops and with people who had different views brought from overseas. There was no real trouble about this. Generally speaking there was a great degree of unity established with the migrant worker. There were people brought forward who were interpreters, belonging to the particular ethnic group and they were able to give good explanations of what was done and the necessity for it and so on.

One aspect of railway employment was, of course, the annual picnic and this was one thing that the children of railway workers looked forward to. Different sections had different picnics on different days. The Eveleigh picnic was one, which I remember from my earliest period, when I went with my parents, to Clontarf. Of course, everyone in the workshops was paid for the day off. It was a holiday, and they really enjoyed it in a good way. There were thousands who would attend the different picnics and families would start their preparations at five and six o'clock and in the mornings to pack the lunch baskets. By the time that they got on the ferry many of the parents were pretty well worn, but not the kids. The kids used to be eager to receive their packets of lollipops, ice-cream, chocolates whatever

was available handed to them by the willing workers as they left the ferries. In later years, these picnics became much more ambitious in their scope. They were held at Luna Park, at Manly, Cronulla, Gunnematta Bay and generally still retained their attraction and were still popular with the children. The migrant workers seem to have big families of children, whether they were theirs or the neighbours you wouldn't know, they would go along to the picnics and they helped to give a good feel, a good atmosphere.