Full transcript of an interview with

LUKE HEFFERNAN

on 12 July 2005

By Jim Douglas

Recording available on CD

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This interview is with Luke Heffernan held on the 12th of July 2005 at Largs Bay, South Australia.  Luke, I was wondering if you could tell us when and where you were born.

AJR: I was born in Adelaide and lived in Bowden, and Bowden of course was where a lot of workers generated from that area to either the gasworks, the Islington railways or the Metropolitan Abattoirs at Gepps Cross.

So what year were you born?

AJR: Nineteen hundred and thirty-seven.

Nineteen thirty-seven. So it was towards the end of the Depression, leading up to the Second World War.

AJR: Yes. And that was why Bowden was a little backward in developing, in those years, because of the Depression followed by a war and then followed after that, after the War of course, by shortages of food and materials, and in fact you had to have special permits to build, you had to have rationing tickets, and all of those things.

What sort of things did your parents do, Luke?

AJR: My father worked with the Metropolitan Abattoirs. My grandfather, he worked at the Islington railways. And my uncles worked at Islington railways. And I was supposed to in some way follow their footsteps somewhere. But I was a little different. My brothers went to the abattoirs but I didn’t want to follow the steps of this generational ..... that the family had – if your father did it you’d just naturally follow. There was a job already there: all I had to do – in fact, I was sent up, after I’d left school, I was sent up to the Trades Hall and I’ll never forget going in there, putting my name down to work at the Metropolitan Abattoirs.

Okay, so let’s go back a step, and where did you do your schooling?
AJR: I done my schooling at the Christian Brothers, because we were from Irish descent and it was a natural thing to go to a Catholic school as soon as you could. And my grandmother was a devoted Catholic and my grandfather I’m not too sure of. I think he leant more towards the Communist Party than he did to the Catholic Church.

And in fact that came about in 1953, and I didn’t become aware of this for a few years later when I became active, is that my grandmother used to be dropped off at the church by my grandfather in a horse and trap in North Adelaide, St Laurence’s, and there was a bit of a discussion about the church and my grandfather’s role of where he worked, and what had happened is that, as I learnt, it was the Groupers¹ who were taking over the church at North Adelaide, St Laurence’s, and I can remember that all the family used to have to go to the church, if we went to a church it was St Laurence’s. And I was even an altar boy at St Laurence’s. And all of a sudden St Laurence’s was a bit of taboo, we didn’t go there any more, and my aunts and my grandmother went searching for another church and they found the Sacred Heart Church on the Port Road at Hindmarsh to be of their fitting. Because they were not DLP². And it was a fair change for them, because I believe that my grandmother would have owned the pew that she was sitting in at North Adelaide, at St Laurence’s.

So tell us about – how far did you go in your schooling?

AJR: I went to second year at Christian Brothers College, and then, as it was in those days, suffering from low socio-economic situation in Bowden, as soon as you had long pants on you went to work. So I went to find work and I went to a place called Union Engineering. And Union Engineering was a fairly big

¹ The ‘Groupers’ were actively supported not just by the Catholic hierarchy but also by senior Australian Labor Party (ALP) figures and business groups. In the early 1950s they won major battles inside unions against the Communist Party, most notably the ironworkers. Using these as their powerbase, the Groupers began to target any figure in the ALP and the unions who would not rabidly denounce communism.

² By the 1954 federal election, the Groupers were in a position to challenge the mainstream ALP leadership under Herbert ‘Doc’ Evatt, who had become leader on the death of Chifley in 1951. Evatt and significant numbers of union leaders too fright at this mounting challenge to their authority. Many union leaders, including those of the powerful right-wing Australian Workers’ Union, had been happy to see the ‘Coms’ thrown out, but the Groupers were now threatening their positions as well.

² DLP – Democratic Labour Party, a right-wing Catholic political party.
boilermaking enterprise, and I went over there and worked for a while and my father wouldn’t sign the indenture papers for me to be an apprentice, because he believed that he had a cousin, who was Larry Heffernan, who was going deaf by being a boilermaker, and so he wouldn’t sign those papers for love nor money because he actually wanted me to go and work at the abattoirs.

**Right. So you went to Union Engineering, what doing?**

AJR: I was just a bit of a labourer in the foundry and then in the boiler shop, where I’d seen metal being laid out and marked out on the ground, and I was sweeping up and doing all of those chores with the ambition of being a boilermaker at some particular time.

**And so did you join the union at this young age?**

AJR: At that age I was told by my grandfather, ‘The first thing you do is go and see the union man, on the job.’ And I was told how to contact the union man. And I went and seen the union chap there, and they were all union, and I was told that as soon as you sign up you won’t get any rights from the union but they’d take me on board. But as it was, my father wouldn’t sign those documents for me to be an apprentice, and that was the end of my ambition to be a boilermaker.

**So what did you do after that? Did you stay at that place long?**

AJR: No, because after that – they’d given me a six months’ period of time to be indentured by my parents, and I think there was something like a twenty pounds escape clause if you didn’t complete your time, and my father didn’t want to take the risk.

**Right. And so where did you go after that?**

AJR: Well, one place I didn’t go, I didn’t go to the Metropolitan Abattoirs, because even though he wanted me to go there – I even went as far as going up and seeing the Secretary of the Meat Employees’ Union, and I’ll never forget it, in the old Trades Hall, and his name was Pirie, WW Pirie, and to get a job at the abattoirs you had to first of all go there, join the union, and my father was prepared to pay the money for me to join the union, and then be put on the waiting list to be picked up and get a job at the Metropolitan Abattoirs.
Were you the only child in the family, or did you have -- --?

AJR: No, there was five of us.

There was five of you?

AJR: Yes.

And what was their destiny as well?

AJR: Their destiny was the Metropolitan Abattoirs. And all of them worked there at some particular time, other than me, and I wasn’t going there and I was sort of a bit of a rebel in that way. So I went out and found work in other places, doing all types of work. I worked in brickyards and potteries, and just expanded on that until I could get a job. And in fact at the age of sixteen, seventeen, I’d never had a junior rate of pay other than the junior rate of pay I got while I worked for Union Engineering.

So you were paid adult rates?

AJR: I was paid adult rates because I was a fairly strong young bloke that they were looking for, and I was either doing piecework in brickyards or in potteries to get that rate.

Good. And so most of the time, or all of the time, you were a member of a union?

AJR: I was a member of the union –

Do you remember which ones?

AJR: -- yes, I’ve been a member of the AWU³, I’ve been a member of the [Federated] Clerks’ Union, I’ve been a member of the Transport Workers’ Union because I took up truck driving just after I got my licence and I was working for a person who was contracted to the South Australian Gas Company at Brompton, WG Baum, and I’d drive a truck there.

And what age did you have to be to get a licence in those times?

AJR: Sixteen.

So it was still sixteen.

³ AWU – Australian Workers’ Union.
AJR: Yes. It was sixteen. But I could drive a truck – you know, he asked me could I drive a truck and I was about seventeen, I think, and I said, ‘Yes, I can drive a truck.’ And it was an old Lend Lease vehicle from the war years, a tip truck, and a friend of mine said, ‘As soon as you get around the corner sort the gears out and you’ll be okay.’ And so I got the job, and I was driving trucks when I was seventeen.

Okay. So what was the story after that? I mean, you’ve obviously had quite a few jobs. Eventually I guess that you would have settled in some sort of a long-term position somewhere.

AJR: Yes. I went around for quite some time just doing whichever job I could get, because jobs were fairly plentiful: if you didn’t like your job you could leave it and be assured of getting another job; or the boss would say, ‘Well, don’t leave me, I’ll give you another pound a week if you stay with me.’ So that was the way you went around getting work in those times. So there was no shortage of labour and there was a great requirement for strong young boys to do work. So out of all of that I guess the only thing lost by not getting the apprenticeship was that I had no adolescence because I was a man, and most people out at Bowden, being a low socio-economic area, tended to be that way. You became a street fighter and you were tough and expected to be tough. And when you look back at it it was pretty sad to know that you didn’t have the adolescence that other kids would have had, because you were a man. As soon as you put on long pants you were a man and you were expected to work.

Obviously there’s been a long tradition within the family of union activism, so when was it that you started to become involved in more of the union activities that were going on?

AJR: When I was about eighteen or nineteen I became more aware that there were more things happening, and I was becoming aware of things that made up my destiny of where I would fit in the future. And it was certainly not going around picking up jobs because it had an extra five shillings a week attached to it. So I looked at other ways of doing things. So the longstanding view of education, I was fairly well-read, even without the high education that was required, so I was able to do things that other people were not able to do. One thing was that I could stand up – if I could stand up to my father and not work at the Metropolitan Abattoirs Board I
could stand up to anybody – and so that came out as being a little bit of a gift, if you like: that I could speak up to people. And so there was nobody that I was afraid of, and there was no two men that I was afraid of, and that’s how I set things: ‘There’s no two men that I would be afraid of.’ So I went around trying to promote myself as being something of a better person for that. So I had to develop myself in later life rather than through the education system.

So where did you settle eventually in a long-term job? Like you said about eighteen years of age – – –.

AJR: Well, as I got a little bit older than eighteen I started looking for better jobs, and wandering around doing all of these other jobs and I had many of them. Driving for different trucking companies and picking up work. A chap that I went to school with was working at the Australian Customs and Excise and he said to me one day in Port Adelaide, ‘What are you doing?’ And I said, ‘Well, I’m driving a truck.’ He said, ‘How would you like to be a customs officer?’ I said, ‘I’d never get it,’ I said, ‘because of my – I only went to second year in high school and I didn’t complete that because my birthday came up before, before I could complete it.’ He said, ‘Well, there’s a job going over at the Customs,’ he said. ‘Why don’t you put in for it?’ I said, ‘What chance would I have of getting it?’ He said, ‘You’d be a shoe-in for the job.’ I said, ‘And why do you say that?’ He said, ‘Because they’ve just put on a Freemason,’ he said, ‘and now it’s our turn.’ And, being a Catholic, that meant that one Freemason was put on and the next person to go on would have to be a Catholic. He said, ‘When you fill your application form out, don’t forget to put your religion.’ (laughter)

Yes. And you did.

AJR: And I did. And I finished up getting the job in the Customs in Port Adelaide, and I stayed there for a while and then they sent me to look after an area in the Riverland, at Angove’s – St Agnes brandy – and I was trained up there with their person to operate St Agnes brandy and one other place up in the Riverland and look after the books of those two companies. And I had a bit of a feel for it.

Anyway, I finished up getting sick – I was in the Clerks’ Union – and I got sick and I got rheumatic fever, and that was the end of me being able to be in the cold areas where wine was kept and the spirit was held. So I got out of that and then I
went to the Electricity Trust of South Australia as a APA, and that was just a rouseabout, if you like, in the power industry.

**What does the APA mean?**

AJR: Auxiliary Plant Attendant, at the Osborne Power Station. And that’s when I joined the Federated Engine Drivers’ and Firemen’s Association. And I stayed there until they ran the A Station down, and by that time I had a good feel for what was right and what was wrong for works. And the Electricity Trust person at Osborne would not allow me to sit for tickets to operate the largest boilers, as they were, in the state, because we operated under an engineer who had the tickets and who held responsibility for all that was done there. So I challenged them on that and I went to the Department of Labour and Industry to ask, ‘How do I get a ticket to operate these boilers?’ And they said, ‘Well, you’ve got to see your employer.’ So I went back and seen my employer again: ‘I want tickets for what I’m doing, I want something to happen for me.’

**Proper recognition for the work you were doing, obviously.**

AJR: That was right. And they said, ‘No, you can’t do it.’ And then I got a sympathetic engineer who said, ‘Yes, you can do it; but if you do do it, and you want to do it, you’ll have to sit the ETSA exam first and then go to the Department of Labour and Industry. And if you can sit through our exam we’ll tick you off as having the required time and expertise to operate the boilers.’ So they put me through an exhaustive exam that they made as difficult as possible, but the superintendent at that time had changed and another one come in and his name was Leon Sykes, and he assisted me in every way. And on afternoon shifts and nightshift he would drop books in to me about boilers of all types so as I’d pass this exam.

**Why do you think he took a special interest in your wellbeing?**

AJR: Because I was challenging the system. And the union were not too used to people challenging the system at ETSA – you’d see the Union Secretary from time to time but not that much – so I started going to the union meetings to see if they could do something for me, inasmuch as assisting me to get along with my life and having the same opportunities as those engineers who were the boss of me. That didn’t go over *all* that well, but nevertheless this Leon Sykes assisted me to do that
and encouraged me to keep going, and used to slip books into my little locker and he’d say, ‘I want you to read this tonight.’ And he would change those books over as I read them. And that gave me a great education in the whole system – so instead of being a boilermaker I was a ‘boilerbreaker’: so ‘you make ’em and I break ’em’ type attitude was to follow – so I knew more about the boilers than the people that made them.

Right. And so you obviously became highly-qualified in this area of boiler attendant?

AJR: Yes, I passed the exam or I satisfied the Electricity Trust of South Australia as to my worth, and they allowed me to go to the Department of Labour and Industry and sit for the required tickets at the highest level, and I passed it with flying colours and I’ve still got the certificates today, that I could still operate those boilers.

Okay. So now we’re talking probably late ’50s, are we?

AJR: I’m getting into the late ’50s now, yes.

So were you married at that stage?

AJR: Just married, yes, and I was buying a house and I wanted things to be better. So I developed through that little struggle and I was held in reasonable esteem on the job because I’d done something that either they didn’t want to do or they wished they could have done. And so I became a little bit more active within the union to make sure that people got a fair go.

And how did you become active?

AJR: I became active by going to meetings and – I used to go to meetings and then the union seen some worth in me and asked me to nominate for different positions within the union, as delegate to the Australian Labor Party.

Were you a member of the Labor Party at that stage?

AJR: I was a member of the Labor Party at that stage. And I’d go to conventions and state councils of the organisation, the Federated Engine Drivers and Firemen, to the Labour Council of course. And then I got more and more competent in the understanding of what was happening to workers and I became quite active in
the streets and, being a shift worker, I could do things – go up to the union office and roneo stuff off and hand it out and give some assistance to the Secretary and Organiser.

**How many people were working at ETSA at that time, Luke, do you remember?**

AJR: Yes. Osborne Power Station was about at the end of the line and Torrens Island was coming on at the time, being constructed, and there was of course the Northern Power Station. Osborne Power Station was a thing that was held as being the largest generating plant in the state up until Port Augusta, and it still had plaques around the place and different types of things that reminded you of where it came from. That station was a privately-owned station under the name of ‘The Adelaide Electric Supply Company’, and it was nationalised or socialised by a Liberal, Sir Thomas Playford – or ‘Tom’ Playford, as he was. Tom Playford made that – went to the Parliament and took over the power station and all of its identities around the place from the boardrooms of London.

**How did he do that?**

AJR: He did it, he’d started on this project some time back through the war years and just before the War, by securing or trying to secure, coal from South Australia, from Leigh Creek. And Leigh Creek was a very important part of the development of the state of South Australia in the industrial scene. Up until then, South Australia was predominantly farming – grazing – and lived on the income of wool, with a few little places around such as General Motors Holden’s, Chrysler and BHP⁴ at Whyalla. So Thomas Playford first of all secured coal, or the development of the coalfield at Leigh Creek – which was known about for many, many years, in fact from about 1907, that this coal could be used – because up until then all the coal came from Newcastle [New South Wales], South Africa or even London, and it was a hard commodity or a resource to secure with some regularity. Because there could be a strike in Newcastle, and there’d be no coal, no electricity, or in fact indeed no gas in South Australia. So we had gas shortages up until that time – I remember the gas shortages because I lived in Bowden and the Gas Company was only in Brompton, the neighbouring district. So coal was unreliable, and he had to develop
something that would be reliable for South Australia to attract bigger industries and the development of General Motors Holden’s to be a bigger operation. So he went about that and got the support of the Opposition and Ben Chifley to give him a hundred thousand pounds – – –. (break in recording)

So he borrowed a hundred thousand pounds from the federal government to develop Leigh Creek further?

AJR: He got a grant. And he got many grants: he got short grants. Scullin\(^4\) wanted nothing to do with the place earlier. But he [Playford] had this view that they would develop the coalfield first. And then of course Adelaide Electric Supply Company would not use his coal, and the coal was sent down and it was sent out to wood yards and it was burnt in homes, and that was to prove out the fact that it would burn. It was a very low-grade coal, not so much bituminous as the eastern seaboard coals. But it would burn, and in fact I remember when I was at Osborne there was a couple of boilers there – they were Riley Dodd boilers – that were constructed to trial the Leigh Creek coal. But Adelaide Electric Supply Company didn’t want to use it. And that must have stemmed something in his mind that if they’re not going to use it he’d have to develop other ways of using the coal. So in 1946 he went to Parliament and said that he was going to buy out the private company, Adelaide Electric Supply. Even his own party, being very Liberal and mostly farmers representing farmers in the Parliament, were opposed. But he got it through with the assistance of the Opposition and in 1946 nationalised or socialised the power industry in this state, from top to bottom. That meant the distribution, the generation and all the transmission lines, all owned by the state. And they were returning good money, good money, to the state until 1996.

We’ll come forward on that a little bit later in the interview, but now we’ve got the picture of how this nationalisation of the industry came about and why it came about. Still at this time you were actually playing quite a significant role, I’m assuming, within your own union by this time?

AJR: Oh yes, I was getting well into the union, I was seeing that there were some deficiencies there even though it was a good, strong union.

\(^4\) BHP – Broken Hill Proprietary Company Limited.

\(^5\) James Scullin was Labor Prime Minister of Australia from 1929 to 1931.
Who was the Secretary then, do you remember?

AJR: Stan Travis. Stan Travis was the Secretary of the union and had been for many, many years. As people go, Stan was a nice person. But they were entrenched, if you like, in a way; whereas the governments of the day – even Playford – assisted the Federated Engine Drivers and Firemen and its members at Leigh Creek. Clyde Cameron, who was the Secretary of the AWU\(^6\), was assisted by Playford for anything that was needed at Leigh Creek. In fact, one of the major strikes that ever happened at Leigh Creek was over the shortage of tobacco. (break in recording)

And so tell us about the tobacco strike.

AJR: Well, the tobacco strike was when they were developing Leigh Creek. They were living in tents, history tells us they were living in tents, and there was rationing, of course, after the War and well up until the ’50s of being able to get tobacco. You could get a half-an-ounce of this and half-an-ounce of some inferior product. So the workers at Leigh Creek went on strike because they were not getting issued with their tobacco, their tobacco wasn’t coming in – and it was a hard place to get to, I mean supplies were hard enough; but they couldn’t get their tobacco. So they all went on strike. Clyde Cameron, being the Secretary of the AWU, was confronted by the Premier, Playford, who said what were their needs. And he said, ‘They’re on strike because they can’t get their tobacco.’ And Playford gave a government edict that they would not be out of tobacco and get the blokes back on the job, and they were guaranteed that they would never be out of tobacco again and no strike would be caused by shortages of tobacco. And they went on strike for weeks for it. But that held up the Premier’s dream of this thing being viable. And it was a very important part of our history that Playford was so strong on getting coal for South Australia, because the development of South Australia depended on it.

Yes, depended on the power.

AJR: It depended on power. It depended on the greater development of places in the North. And one other thing that he made quite certain of, because he got

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\(^6\) AWU – Australian Workers’ Union.
assistance from farmers who were in the North: that the next power station to be built would be in Port Augusta. Not Osborne, but Port Augusta. So the Port Augusta Power Station became part of the greater good of that area.

It’s interesting that Playford did so much. You were an employee of ETSA, you were active in the union, you were a member of the Labor Party – in actual fact, you were probably trying to work to get him out as the Premier of South Australia.

AJR: Yes! And that was ironic, that there was the person who had – as we know now, but hindsight, I think, Jim, was the greater part of that – hindsight tells us that Thomas Playford was a great developer of this state. And had it not been for a place called Leigh Creek and the development of Leigh Creek, this state wouldn’t hold a chance. We had the cheapest – the cheapest – power in the country.

And where are we now?

AJR: We only fell to be the second – when I worked for the Trust, in fact when I started with the union, we were the second-cheapest in the country. And the only other one was cheaper was the hydro scheme in Tasmania.

So let’s go back to these union days of yours, and you said that you’d held various positions on State Council and whatever: what was it that brought you to the point where you eventually became – did you become an organiser in FED&FA?

AJR: No, I was never an organiser. I was a shop steward – in every job I went to I seemed to pick up the cudgels of shop steward – and after I left the Electricity Trust I went to the Queen Elizabeth Hospital as a boiler attendant, and looked after other boilers all around the state for the hospital, and so I was generating into a pretty good sort of a bloke, inasmuch as I could go onto any boiler in the state, be it large or be it small, and be able to take over if somebody had a heart attack or somebody was ill or somebody was on long service leave or whatever.

What year did you start with the Queen Elizabeth Hospital, do you remember, roughly?

AJR: That was in about late ’70s.

Right. And so you were then becoming more active in the union at that stage, or – – –?

AJR: Oh, very much more active, yes.
So what sort of things were you getting involved in there?

AJR: Well, we were getting involved then with other issues. We were using particular chemicals from ICI\(^7\) that we were told to put in the boilers, as I remember, and with another colleague and good workmate of mine, Doug Meek, we refused to put this chemical into the feed water of the boilers because it was contaminating the system. And the reason we knew that, we read up on what the product was and how it was leaching into the nurses’ quarters. So Doug Meek and myself took it upon ourselves not to dose the boiler, as we were told by the engineer.

So Doug was a boiler attendant too, was he?

AJR: He was a boiler attendant, engine driver–boiler attendant, yes.

And he was working in the public system?

AJR: He was working for the Public Buildings, as we worked for at the time.

Okay. Of course, around that time was the Vietnam War –

AJR: Yes.

– and also the Dunstan years.

AJR: Yes. Well, the Vietnam War was one of the highlights, if you like, of seeing people in the streets, and that was made for activists.

So you got into the Peace Movement?

AJR: I was into the Peace Movement, at the rallies and marches, and I’d never seen so many people in one place in my life as you’d see in Victoria Square, and that through those Moratorium days.

So the union was actively involved in the Peace Movement?

AJR: No, the union wasn’t so much actively involved. The union didn’t – as I said, being a shift worker I could get around to some of these rallies and that. But I always carried the name FEDFA with me, because you needed some vehicle to travel on, so I travelled on that name. And then I’d go and tell the union that I’d been there or done that, and they weren’t that much interested, to that degree. There

\(^7\) ICI – Imperial Chemical Industries.
was a bit of a hangover from the older days of when – oh, it wasn’t so much the older days – of the modernisation of how to collect money, and payroll deductions were keeping the secretaries and that away from the workers.

**So the old days of going out and collecting the money from the shop steward all of a sudden ceased.**

AJR: That ceased a bit, yes, that was starting to cease; because it was sent in, and the governments – *and* employers – were quite happy to send the money to the office in Trades Hall and they just put it in the ledgers and — —.

**And didn’t see the Secretary or the union organiser.**

AJR: And that was bringing back the direct contact with people on the job. I remember when *I* first went on the job I’d pay my weekly or monthly subscriptions to the shop steward and then, at the end of the month, around would come an organiser or the Secretary of the union to collect the money and to speak to the workers.

**So tell us a bit about – what do you remember about the Dunstan years?**

AJR: Well, the Dunstan years brought up a lot of new things that were happening, and more predominantly social justice issues.

**And of course he was big into the arts.**

AJR: Big in the arts, and a very good communicator. And I remember as a shop steward that Dunstan told the FEDFA, or asked the FEDFA, to send a representative and not an official of the union to his suite in the city to be briefed by the department heads and also by himself over drinks and coffee and biscuits. And Stan Travis asked me would I go and find out what Dunstan wanted and what it was about, because he didn’t want union officials there.

**Was that your first meeting face-to-face with Dunstan?**

AJR: Face-to-face with Don Dunstan, it was.

**And how did that meeting go, what did he want to talk to you about?**

AJR: Well, I was quite surprised because what he wanted to know was what were people saying out there. He wanted to know what the general people were saying about certain things that he was either implementing or was about to
implement. And I thought that that was fairly enlightening because here he is, the top man in the top position, wanting to speak to people off the job. And I met other people there who were – sort of just went there to have the beer or have the cheese and bickies and didn’t want to say too much; but I found that Dunstan was trying to edge out of them – personally, by himself – ‘What’s wrong with the job? How do people feel on the job? What do they need? And what did they think about the six o’clock closing? What did they think about the opening of hotels for longer hours? What did they think about the arts?’ He was asking all those things, but he was doing that directly. And in a matter-of-fact way.

Right at the grass roots level.

AJR: Not standing over or sitting down at a big mahogany desk. Mingling with people and having discussions.

So ’72 we saw the election of Whitlam in the federal parliament.

AJR: Yes.

– then you had those three years of Whitlam.

AJR: Yes, well, I remember that very distinctly. A boiler attendant’s rate of pay at that time was sixty-eight dollars a week, before Whitlam came in. By 1975, when Whitlam was out, it was a hundred and forty-eight dollars a week.

How did that happen?

AJR: Well, we had ambitions in, to the Industrial Commissions, that we couldn’t keep up with, and you had to get onto the union to make sure that your demands were being met because other people were jumping over, leapfrogging your award. And we had a committee within the union to hasten the process on. And even though the union were not too used to having their ambitions not only met but exceeded – that meant they were out of ambit so they were out of claim – we seen new ambitions coming in and greater claims being met, and they were being fulfilled very quickly. And unionism was a very proud part of being a South Australian worker, because the unions were delivering. But they were delivering through a system that was created by – in this state – Don Dunstan, with a close relationship with Gough Whitlam. People were being educated to a higher degree. They were leaving this state, going
to the Australian National University, because they could get in there on a lower standard of education.

Then Whitlam turned that around.

AJR: And he turned it around. And that was free education, of course, free education.

And we’re talking then about the Medicare\textsuperscript{8} system as well – national health scheme.

AJR: Medicare. Well, I was unfortunate to be very active in the time that Whitlam was put out of power, and I was running around all over Adelaide in fact, waiting for the call of Bob Hawke to make sure we were all in the streets on that fateful Tuesday.

Was this ‘Maintain the Rage’?\textsuperscript{9}

AJR: To maintain the rage. But what happened is nothing had happened, we were let down. And I was running around and I was going into the union office, and I was working on the job as a shift worker, going into the union office, roneoing stuff off, taking it into the streets, standing in the streets, passing it out to people, to be aware of this Tuesday. The eleventh. Of November. Nineteen hundred and seventy-five. Because we knew at two o’clock on that Tuesday that Whitlam was going to be dumped. Everybody knew it. Even Bob Hawke knew it. And we were waiting for this new person within the ACTU\textsuperscript{9}, who had taken over from Monk, who had no respect of the Trade Union Movement at all, to do something on that day. And nothing had happened.

There was lots of noise about it.

AJR: But there was no action. On the thirteenth of that month I was leaving this house and, as I would on afternoon shifts, I would go and have a run on the beach before I went to work. And I had a little dog so I had to go down a little bit further. So on the way to work I got out of the car to go and have a run on the beach, and I have a severe heart attack. That heart attack was all paid for by the things that

\textsuperscript{8} The original national health scheme introduced by Gough Whitlam was called Medibank.

\textsuperscript{9} ACTU – Australian Council of Trade Unions.
Gough Whitlam had done. There was no medical bills, no expenses at all. There was no money changed hands for me to have a heart attack and be looked after at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital. I was in there and I had three months off of work, I had plenty of sick leave, I was respected by the people on the job and I was looked after very well; but there was – the Medicare system just looked after me.

**The universal health care.**

AJR: And I didn’t have to worry about a thing. So I could get better very quickly and recover. Just after that, of course, the Secretary of the union, Stan Travis, had retired, and we made sure that he had a good retirement, and a power worker from Port Augusta came down to take the job, didn’t handle it very well, and I was confronted by people from Leigh Creek and other places to stand, not as an organiser but as the Secretary of the Federated Engine Drivers and Firemen.

**What year was that?**

AJR: In nineteen hundred and eighty-two.

**Nineteen eighty-two. And the office, where was it located at that stage?**

AJR: The office at that stage was located with the Metalworkers in Sturt Street, because we were going to be an amalgamated partner of the Metalworkers. And we had the good relationship with the Metalworkers in this state. But the powers to be elsewhere decided the amalgamation wouldn’t go ahead.

**So tell us about some of those times as Secretary of the Federated Engine Drivers’ union, tell us about some of those times from 1982 onwards.**

AJR: Well, from 1982 (mobile telephone interference) onwards, the first thing I was confronted with – because we changed over the secretaryship on the 1st January of 1982, and we had an auditor come in and do the books and everything was handed over on the first. So the wages of the previous secretary, the loser of the election, was paid up on that day and I was in the chair. As of that day.

**So did you service the whole of the state, the Secretary of the union?**

AJR: The Secretary, with an organiser, serviced all of the state.

**So where did that take you?**
AJR: It took me as far as Ceduna, Woomera, Leigh Creek, down the South-East – the furthest place down there was Caroline where there was a CO₂ plant and we had engine drivers there – so we covered the state in a very, very broad way.

What sized membership did you have at that time, Luke?

AJR: The membership at that time was reasonable but not large.

So what were we talking about, thousands?

AJR: We’re looking at over two thousand, eight hundred members; but it wasn’t big enough to avoid being called an ‘insignificant’ union. Even though they were very powerful people: they were in power stations; in fact, we had the award and coverage for the Birkenhead Bridge operators. But what I found, when I first got to the books and sat down with the accountant, of what had happened to the union is that it had run out of steam in a way that I didn’t imagine, and that was that we had five thousand dollars in the general account and we owed eight. So I had to start work immediately on building up the membership of the union to make it worthwhile. (break in recording)

Where were your main members? I mean, you’ve talked about the hospital system, you’ve talked about the power generation system, the bridge operators: where else did you have members?

AJR: Well, I had members at Leigh Creek, of course, and that was the people at Leigh Creek who came down to this house and asked me would I stand, because they’d been to meetings with me and with the union.

What were they doing in Leigh Creek, what was their work?

AJR: Operators, plant operators.

Right, okay.

AJR: And they operated the biggest plant. Without them the place wouldn’t go ahead.

And did you have members on building sites?

AJR: We had a few on building sites, not many. It had been neglected. And we had coverage for engine drivers on private railways such as BHP, we had the people who drove trains there, but then we had stationary engine drivers, and engine
drivers also played their part in plant operating. So a person on a crane was constitutionally deemed as being entitled to be a member of the Federated Engine Drivers and Firemen. These people were neglected by the union and we didn’t have enough of them, so I set about getting more about them. We had Roche Brothers, who were big earth movers and road builders, and so that gave me a bit of an idea of what was about, and then I went into other things further.

**What about Roxby Downs when that started?**

AJR: Yes, we had Roxby Downs, we had Roxby Downs, I used to go there. We had the Welland Shaft and we had the operator there, we had the operators on that.

**And what was your relationship with the community there? The Roxby Downs was out in the sticks somewhere, as was Leigh Creek.**

AJR: The relationship at Roxby Downs was tremendous by the membership, but by the management – they didn’t want to see me, ever. But the winder drivers were very strong and played of course a pivotal role in taking any ore out of the ground. So I had no problems in seeing them. In fact, when Western Mining told me that I didn’t give them twenty-eight days’ notice before coming up and seeing the membership, the membership decided they’d walk off the job and meet me at the boom gate. So they met me down at the boom gate and from that day on I had no problems in ever getting into Roxby Downs or their operation.

Luke, at that stage the United Trades and Labour Council of South Australia had various branches, like they had one at Whyalla if I remember rightly, they had one at Leigh Creek and certainly one down the South-East and one in the Riverland, so what sort of connections did you have with those, having members in those areas?

AJR: We attended every one of them, and it was through the FEDFA – and if it wasn’t for the FEDFA there wouldn’t have been one at Leigh Creek.

END OF DISK 1: DISK 2

[We were] talking about the formation of the Trades and Labour Councils in the various regions, and you were saying that the FEDFA played a major role, particularly in the Leigh Creek Council. Can you tell us a bit more about that story?
AJR: Yes. We supported them, and the one at Leigh Creek was running short and of course the Electricity Trust of South Australia didn’t want a Council there, and they didn’t want too much activity. But it was through the membership of the FEDFA at Leigh Creek that they reconstituted the Leigh Creek Trades and Labour Council.

**So it would have been lonely driving up there fairly often, would it? Did you have any companion with you, or what did you do?**

AJR: There was times when I’d take my wife, for the reasons being is that at Leigh Creek, as one place, at Leigh Creek there was a lot of women who were only tied to the house and to the children. In fact, there were about 3.2 children per family, which is pretty large. And they were even – in those days, with a new town being developed – were short on certain items, such as baby formula, and I’d fill up the boot of the union car with baby formula.

**Okay. What, because it was so expensive up there or just couldn’t get it, or what?**

AJR: It was so expensive.

**And how did you distribute it?**

AJR: I used to take it up there and give it to our delegate, who would then sell it, of course, to people at the price that I’d paid for it. We were not out of pocket; it was a personal thing that I would do out of my pocket, not the union’s money, is to take up this formula – or any other thing that they might want.

**And did they appreciate Barbara being up there with you, with them?**

AJR: Of course they did. And even to today we still get people and we still have a relationship with delegates and their wives from Leigh Creek. Because Barbara became a little bit of a guiding light – because they were young mothers, they were young mothers with two or three and in some cases four children, and Barbara could give them some assistance in ‘what you do for this’ and ‘what you do for that’. And she was a new face. But they appreciated that, and they would always, if they came to Adelaide, they’d call in and we’d have people stay here. In fact, we had one person stay here where it was fairly unique, because after I developed the union into what I believe was a better place after I left it than it was when I picked it up, we had a Vice-President who was Indigenous and he’d never
been on a plane. In fact, he came down and stayed with us while he went on to a course in Sydney for the union, and so he stayed here and he wouldn’t sleep in the bed. He sat up, because he had a complaint. But I think the complaint was that he was fearful of this other thing that he was going to be confronted with the next day, and that was a plane trip from Adelaide to Sydney where our federal body had brought in Indigenous people from all over Australia, from every branch in Australia, to go to a TUTA\textsuperscript{10}-based course in Sydney for Indigenous people.

Okay. That’s pretty progressive. So where did the union stand on the issues of the Accord, for example?

AJR: Well, personally I didn’t like the Accord, but the greater – and I went to the ACTU Congress where it was voted in; and even though it got up, to me that was one of the most important congresses that the ACTU had had.

Do you think the Accord would have worked for low-paid workers in preference to those in public services and stuff like that?

AJR: I think it proved that it didn’t. I think it proved – in my mind – that it didn’t achieve it.

Do you think the unions could have played a bigger role in there, or do you think – why do you think it wasn’t accepted or achieved in the way that it was meant to be achieved?

AJR: Well, it was accepted to a point, because it got up, it got up that they were allowed to do it. The relationship between the industrial and the political wing of the Australian Labor Party had actually taken over a significant role, that took away the needs of the worker long-term. Short-term it sounded great, short-term it sounded great. The only good thing that would have come out of it was the superannuation for workers.

Luke, earlier on in our interview we talked about the Democratic Labor Party, the DLP, and the Groupers – and I’m backtracking a little bit now so that I can get a little bit more history on there – was the Federated Engine Drivers’ and Firemen’s Association ever targeted by the Groupers?

AJR: Not that I understand. I don’t understand that it was targeted in this state; but it would have been in Tasmania, certainly would have been in Tasmania.

\textsuperscript{10} TUTA – Trade Union Training Authority.
But the Federated Engine Drivers and Firemen were certainly targeted by all types of people because it was communist-based.

The leadership was communist?

AJR: The leadership was communist-based.

And you being a member of the Labor Party, did you ever give consideration yourself to joining the Communist Party?

AJR: No, because I always seen the Communist Party as being an ally, an ally of the working class. If I was to start all over again, I’d certainly have to look at what side of politics I’d be at. I’m a member of the Australian Labor Party because I’ve been a member of the Australian Labor Party since I was eighteen and played a part in the Australian Labor Party from that time. I’d been on polling booths since I was eighteen, and I’ve just recently been on one so I’m still doing it. But I’m more of a social democratic-type person than of what I see now as the Labor Party.

So are you disappointed with the direction the Labor Party’s taken?

AJR: Ah, very disappointed, very disappointed. It’s certainly not the party I joined.

Why do you say that?

AJR: Well, it’s gone away from the roots, it’s gone away from the needs of workers. If we look at politics today we don’t see a true representation of the working class people. They’re either lawyers or they’ve been within the Party serving the needs of ministers as hacks and officers – very well-educated, very well-educated, but not educated in life.

One of the things that people are saying is that the Labor Party are further to the right now than they’ve ever been before, and of course Howard is further to the right – Howard’s Liberal Coalition – is further to the right than we’ve ever experienced, I would imagine.

AJR: Yes, because the Australian Labor Party has allowed it to go that way. The Australian Labor Party have shown no new initiatives since Whitlam. No new initiatives since Whitlam.

And that was in ’75 when he was sacked.

AJR: That’s a long way back.
Thirty years.

AJR: And we’ve seen no new initiatives that will get workers in behind it. The only way Labor is going to win an election is that the Liberals are going to lose it. Not because they deserve to win it, because they’ll be an alternative to what?

It’s a good question. Luke, when did you actually officially resign or come to the end of your role as the Secretary of FEDFA – or I’m assuming in that time there was the amalgamation discussions?

AJR: Yes, I was involved with the amalgamation of the Federated Engine Drivers and Firemen with the BWIU\textsuperscript{11}, the building industry union.

And that’s where you finally went?

AJR: No, I stayed on to be the first President of the CMEU –

That was the Construction –

AJR: – Mining and Energy Union, which was then to become the CFMEU\textsuperscript{12} when the forestry came into it.

Right. And how did you think that amalgamation went? What was your feelings about it and what was your experiences of it?

AJR: Well, to be more than honest with you, my feelings of it in the first instance [were] that the FEDFA were in need of a partner. And we’ve had a couple of different shots at different organisations, such as the Transport Workers’ Union, the Metalworkers and of course the building unions. So when the Building [Workers] Industrial Union came up and we listened to all that was being said, of how a two-thirds majority would have to be the prescribed number to be amalgamated, that sounded fair and that was accepted by both parties, the BWIU and the FEDFA. And that worked okay that way. It then, as things happen, is that I don’t believe that there is a successful amalgamated organisation around, and the FEDFA now hold no awards, they’ve been handed over to a building union; whereas the Amalgamated Metalworkers are somewhat different, they had divisions set in

\textsuperscript{11} BWIU – Building Workers’ Industrial Union.

\textsuperscript{12} CFMEU – Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union.
place and almost in concrete that there will still be a boilermaker and there’ll still be a fitter.

Yes, and of course they amalgamated a long time before the so-called ‘twenty great unions’, weren’t they?

AJR: Yes, and it was the twenty great unions of Bill Kelty that brought about the hastening of amalgamations, and I don’t think it’s been too successful. In fact, I know that it hasn’t been successful, because it’s divorced the person who had the constitutional coverage or the umbrella to stand under was taken away and a broader umbrella didn’t fit all.

So when did you finish up as the Secretary of the FED&FA? (break in recording)


So we’re talking say nine years ago. And I was interested to know what your feelings were about the present situation that we’re in, where the Howard Liberal Coalition is now talking about making some major and significant changes to the industrial relations system. How are you feeling about that, as an ex-union official and obviously an activist?

AJR: Well, quite obviously I’m not too happy about it, because all those things that had been fought for by people before me and even things that I’d fought for are now going to be taken away from workers, and they’re going to be taken away very quickly. In fact, some of those things have already been taken away by enterprise bargaining, some of the things that we achieved, and workers are not working the same way now as they did prior to the enterprise bargaining system.

I heard on the radio only a few days ago Mark Vaile, the new Deputy Prime Minister, and he was talking about the Australian industrial relations system had to change so it would become competitive with the overseas wages and conditions that were being applied in Third World or in developing countries. How do you feel about that?

AJR: Well, we’ll certainly be there because what they want to do, they want to reduce the wages or stop the wages from getting any higher, and how they will do it, as soon as the enterprise bargain agreement runs out, they will then – the employer, that is – will have the power to be able to run the edict of the Howard Government of changing the conditions that people work under. And it will be done in a very subtle way because they will be very cunning not to knock it all out all at once. They will bring it in and introduce it in small bites, and the younger people will be the first
targeted so as they’ll never get used to having high wages or high opportunities within their structure of work. So they’ll get the younger person first and the hardheads will come later. But they will all cave in once those agreements that are now in place run out. So at the end of the enterprise bargain agreement a new agreement will be struck by the employer, and you can mark my words: if the employer doesn’t do it, they will be targeted by the Howard Government and fined if they do not comply. So if they believe that a worker is worth more money they will not be allowed to give more money.

So we’re in for a tough time.

AJR: We’re in for a tough time; but the employers are going to be in for a tough time as well.

Do you reckon this could be, say, the rebirth or the reinvigoration of the Labour Movement?

AJR: I’ve always been waiting for the renaissance of the Trade Union Movement for some time, and on what I see in the new campaign I’m seeing better things than I’ve seen for a long, long time. I’m seeing people get back into the streets. And without people being into the streets, without people taking a direct action against what’s happening to them, nothing will change. But things are looking good, inasmuch as there are big crowds out, people are getting out, people are being made aware by either television or radio advertisements of what’s going to happen to them. In fact, it’s held up Howard and made Howard come back off of leave to counter something that his ministers can’t counter. And the face of their industrial relations person is not the face of a worker, certainly the face of an employer.

Luke, you might have retired from the union in 1996 but you really haven’t retired, have you?

AJR: You don’t retire. Everything I have today, everything I hold close to me today, is union.

And community?
AJR: Community is union. And that was one thing that I was able to develop by being a secretary of the union: I could go down and stand on certain aspects of community needs because I was the secretary of a union.

Give us an example.

AJR: Sandhills at Semaphore and around those environs: we had ‘Save Our Sandhills’ down at Tennyson, the FEDFA were involved there. The FEDFA’s been involved in going to meetings of all types of areas of community need. The FEDFA and its members were always told not to interfere or cross a community picket line, and we demonstrated that by buildings in the electorate of Mayo – Downer’s area – up at Mount Barker, where we saved two banks.

What, from being pushed down?

AJR: Being pushed down, yes. And the builders or the people who were going to demolish them were made to do the buildings up.

Like a Green Ban?

AJR: It was a Green Ban, yes. So we were able to stop that. No FEDFA plant would come in, and with a building union, no-one would come in and demolish them. Those banks are still standing today as testament to the fact that they could be made a beautiful, historic building. And the person who wanted to knock them down has probably been made a millionaire by the efforts of the unions by going around the Hills area doing up buildings, because it was an example that you don’t have to knock down everything.

So once an activist always an activist?

AJR: That’s what active’s about.

In your blood?

AJR: I think it grows in your blood. It’s caused by your experience of life, that you’re either going to be able to talk your way out of it or fight your way out of it; and to be an activist you’ve got to be prepared to be active. (break in recording)

So, Luke, it seems like you’ve been an activist all your life. You’ve obviously had a very strong background and family history in activism, both in community and in unions, and as you pointed out earlier community and unions are one thing, basically. Do you have any regrets at all?
AJR: No, I don’t think you can regret things. You can certainly look back and say, ‘I may have done it better’ if you had the right tools, the right people around you. But no, you don’t go back onto regrets. That will all be weighed up at the end of the day, and not so much as saying, ‘Well, I regret this or I regret that,’ because at the time you were doing the best you could possibly do with what you had.

So when’s your next meeting?

AJR: Well, there’s always a meeting, and there’s never a bad meeting, Jim.

Does it take two to have a meeting? (laughs)

AJR: Just two. Just two.

I heard that on Friday there was a group of – we call them ‘the older activist group’ – coming together.

AJR: Yes, they’ll all be there.

And what are we going to do, what’s going to happen?

AJR: Ah well, I guess on that occasion we’ll all be friends. But there have been times in the past when we’ve been foes. Within the Trade Union Movement, of course, we all had to protect our own spot and there was nothing much wrong with that.

So are the older activists coming together for a specific reason?

AJR: Yes, to pursue the goals of what should be done and the proper way that people should be working, and if we can encourage – and that’s about all we can do – if we can encourage younger people to be activists such as we were and do just their little bit, even, for their own future, then I’d be happy and the Trade Union Movement should be stronger for it.

Good on you, Luke. Thanks for a wonderful interview, I’ve really appreciated it.

AJR: Hope it went all right.

END OF INTERVIEW.