

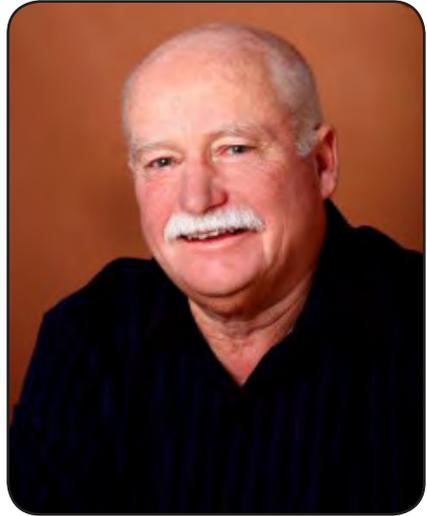
Interview with Dick Williams, President of the Queensland Branch of the ALP and former Secretary of the ETU (Queensland Branch)

Conducted January 2013 by

**Howard Guille and
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Can you summarise what you've done in the ETU

I did my electrical apprenticeship in Queensland Rail in Ipswich and Redbank. Then I worked for a series of contractors and, in 1974, started at the Box Flat Mine. In 1975, I was elected Shop Steward and from '75 to '84 became a Branch Conference Delegate and, ultimately a State Councillor of the Union. In October 1984, I was seconded into the Union on a six-month period to assist with organising down the Gold Coast in the Construction Contracting area. The SEQEB dispute began six weeks later. I stayed on as Organiser after SEQEB and in 1990, became Assistant Secretary and then in 2001, Secretary, retiring in 2009.



Dick Williams

What led you to be active in the union?

I come from a Labour Party and union oriented family. My father was an electrician and my paternal grandfather worked in the boiler shop for the railways. I'm not sure if he was a member of one of the forerunners to the Metalworkers — such as the Boilermakers Society or whether he was an Ironworker. My maternal grandfather was a member of the Ironworkers until the day he died. My mother was a 30 to 40 year member of what used to be the Hospital Employees Federation and was very active as a Conference Delegate, Shop Steward and so on. She was a psych nurse mainly at Wolston Park.

I remember my grandparents and my mother telling me not to speak to

certain people in our street following the split of 1957; to the day she died, my grandmother never spoke to one particular family because they “ratted” and went with Vince Gair to the DLP. I went with my grandfather, working on Bill Hayden’s first election campaign in 1961, doorknocking with him and handing out “how to vote” cards and putting stuff in mail boxes. I think it was just a natural progression for me, given that background, to become a Shop Steward.

I joined the Union as a fourth year apprentice in 1971, a reasonable date, the 1st of April. I just got active and campaigned around various things. Probably my first exposure to leading

an industrial dispute of any significance was the underground “sit in” at the Southern Cross Mine in 1983.

I always remember my first dispute as Shop Steward at Box Flat Mine. It was over the very great decision by our members to go on strike because the company would not employ apprentices. We went on strike, not about increasing our wages and conditions, but providing employment for some of the youth around Ipswich. We won the blue and ended-up with four apprentices.

I also remember in ’75, when they sacked Whitlam on the 11th of the 11th. I was Secretary of the Combined



Dick Williams erecting Eureka flags at the entrance to the Southern Cross No 14 mine symbolised the spirit of the October 1983 staydown action. As Box Flat ETU delegate, Dick had borrowed the flags from his young son’s bedroom for the occasion.

Mining Unions at Box Flat Mine, so I called all the guys underground to the surface and we had a shift meeting and went home and took the afternoon and nightshift home as well. The next day I got a telegram from the union office telling us to get back to work. Which I thought was quite unreasonable of them. I couldn't understand why the revolution didn't start that morning

How were you involved in ALP politics?

I was a member of Young Labour but my ticket shows that I didn't join the senior party until December '74. In 1977, I was a Delegate to the ALP State Conference in Brisbane from the Oxley electorate. In '79, I went to Rockhampton as a Delegate for Oxley again. That was the famous conference when they voted, and I underline the words "they" voted, to allow the AWU back into the party.

Then in 1980, there was federal intervention into the party. Prior to that, the Trades Hall unions essentially ran the party. And you were either with 'em or you were against 'em. And there weren't too many that were against them. People like Harry Hauenschild, Neal Kane, Tommy Burton from the Printers Union, Harry Mellor from the Miso's. Along with Fred Whitby and Jack Edgerton; they were the big leaders of the party and the trade union movement. The ETU had enormous power politically within the party in those days.

What about federal intervention in 1980-81?

Federal intervention was a major shit fight. We had two ALP parties in Queensland for a while. It took two to three years before it finally settled down and a deal was signed between the warring parties and factions became a genuine part of political life. I was locked into what later became the "Old Guard", the ETU, the BLF, Storeman and Packers, the Ironworkers, Vehicle Builders and a number of other unions,.

People came together after the three-year blue and by then the old Trades Hall power had been smashed. Equally, from '83 to '89, we all got on with life and worked very hard because of the SEQEB dispute.

Can you briefly sum up the SEQEB dispute?

The SEQEB dispute was about the use of contractors. A SEQEB document fell off the back of a truck and clearly stated that they were going to contract out all new line work. The dispute started just before Christmas 1984. We declared a truce over Christmas, and then the moment the action started again in January, it was on for young and old and we were in and out of the Industrial Commission. Anybody who lived through it knows how chaotic the State was — the place was shut down. The other unions were supporting us magnificently, particularly initially

after the 1,002 were sacked. The Transport Unions had blockades on the state, the Telecommunications Unions, the Postal Unions had blockades on all Government telephones and mail and we had the power wound down in the power stations to critical levels. There was power rationing for weeks on end, all of that was happening, but equally, at the same time, there was a raft of legislation rolled out that was probably the first taste of real anti-union legislation in Australia's history.

The Continuity of Supply Act made it illegal for us to be on strike or any worker in the electricity industry to be on strike. It made it illegal to picket — it had fines and jail terms for all of that. Union officials could be fined and potentially jailed for inciting people to take industrial action. It was the first wave of legislation that allowed scab unions to be set up. The Queensland Power Workers Association, which was a scab union set up to do over the ETU and the other electricity unions, was sponsored solely and wholly by SEQEB, at the taxpayers' expense. Supported by one of the registered unions by the way, but that's another story.

All of the things that Howard did in 2007, and then some, were done in 1985 in Queensland. People don't understand that today, especially the younger people.

What lessons do you draw from the SEQEB dispute?

This is where the political side of things is so important, you can fight as much as you like industrially for wages and conditions, but unless you've got real political power, you can never deliver what we deserve and what workers really deserve. That's certainly my philosophy. I saw it first hand with the SEQEB dispute. We got belted. The union and the members of the ETU who were in the middle of that dispute, were absolutely belted by a government who was hell bent on destroying the union and they almost succeeded.

What was the political response?

Neal Kane and the ETU had placed people into parliament who were good trade unionists and never forgot where they came from. Kenny Vaughan and Nev Warburton in particular, were both ex-Assistant Secretaries of the ETU and became Ministers in the first Goss Labor Government in 1989. Now as luck would have it, Kenny Vaughan turned up as Minister for Mines and Energy and Nev Warburton turned up as Minister for Industrial Relations.

So, within a matter of weeks, days in some respects, some of SEQEB outcomes were redressed. With the redrafting of the industrial legislation, we were brought back into the mainstream. The sacked SEQEB workers had their superannuation

entitlements reinstated — though some people were never found; those that wanted to go back to SEQEB, could go back to SEQEB though not many of them took them up on that. The writs hanging over the heads of power station operators were cancelled.

None of this was perfect. In the minds of the ETU officials of the time and in the minds of the sacked people, it has never been resolved. We are still at war as far as we're concerned. We never got it all back, and, to my mind and to the mind, I think of every other organiser or official in the ETU who went through that dispute, it is still not over. That's how raw that nerve is within some of us.

Even so, because we were able to change a government, we could redress some of the excessive force and coercion used to crush a bunch of workers in an industrial dispute. It taught me a great political and industrial lesson. It taught me, on the industrial side, that if you're gonna take on a government, you've got to be prepared to fight to the death. It's as simple as that. And the chances of beating governments if a government is really, really, really determined to do you over, are pretty negligible. On the other hand, it also taught me that to deliver what workers are entitled to in our society; we need to have governments that support the working class, not governments that are just supportive of the employers and the like.

How did the ETU change after SEQEB?

Prior to the SEQEB dispute, the ETU had a bit over 8,000 financial members in Queensland. We had roughly a \$1 million in the bank or thereabouts, sorry tell a lie, we didn't have a \$1 million in the bank, we had bought a floor of the Trades Hall that was worth about a \$1 million, and we had several hundred thousand dollars in cash. When we finished the SEQEB dispute, or when some people called it over in late '85 - early '86, the union was about \$2 million in debt and our membership had slipped to about 6,250.

Bob Hendricks was Secretary from '87 to 2001. He built us back up to where we had significant funds in the bank. I think around \$2 or \$3 million when I became the Secretary. Our membership peaked at 8,500 to 9,000 just prior to Howard's election win in '96. We were on a downhill slide like all other unions from '96 to 2001. From 2001 to 2009, our membership went from, I'll never forget this number, 7,771 on the day I took over and it was 11,868 when I went out the door in 2009.

I wouldn't say the ETU was gun shy from '87 to 2001 but we used to pick our disputes judiciously and we were not a campaigning union, I'll say it that way. We changed from 96-97 when Howard was elected. This really kicked in from 2000 onwards. We became a proper campaigning union and set out to do a number of things. One was to lift

the wages and conditions of electrical workers in Queensland especially pay which had fallen against electricians across the country and against other trades within Queensland particularly in the Building and Construction area.

Over the four bargaining campaigns from 2001 to 2007, we increased wages by about 40%. Now timing's everything in life; we were helped because there was a lot of work on; Lang Park was being done and that was where we got the 36-hour week.

What about politically?

We set out to do a couple of other things — increase our influence within the trade union movement and increase our political influence generally. We could only do that if we were a campaigning organisation and that didn't mean just campaigning about wages and conditions. We would campaign on social issues and issues that affected society generally. I'm always very proud of our anti-nuclear and anti uranium stance.

I was always happy with the old Trades Hall group, but not so happy with Labor Unity because they were in effect too socially conservative for me on abortion, women's rights, and those sorts of issues. I didn't think that the Labor Unity was the best faction for the ETU if we were going to be a genuine campaigning, left union

We had the debate at our Branch Conference in 2004. It was about 'should we be affiliated to a political party' and, if the answer to that was yes, 'which party?' If the answer was the ALP, 'which faction?' And we had that debate and it came up with the left. We moved to the left in 2004 and we're still in the left.

How big a debate was it?

Huge, both affiliation and joining the left- it went for about two and a half hours. It is debated every two years — though people are now very comfortable with the idea of being in the left. There has been one longer debate on affiliation and that was after Peter Simpson, the current Secretary, was expelled from the party for a short period of time.

Can we look at the ALP governments since 1989 — starting with Goss

I think the biggest criticism that can be made of the Goss government and why they were defeated was that they didn't do enough. They came in with a mandate to really reform this state and yes they did all of those good things that I talked about in terms of righting the wrongs about the SEQEB dispute and the industrial relation system etc. But, when it came to the big ticket items of reform that would have really delivered a great outcome for the people of Queensland, they pulled up well short.

How much of this was because the ALP, in government, has been intoxicated with neo-liberalism?

Neo-Liberal policies, economic rationalism, whatever the buzzword is, it all means basically the same thing when it comes to selling public assets. It had been Treasury's desire in Queensland to follow down that neo-liberal path for a long, long time. It follows the IMF agenda for countries that run into any sort of financial problem. They have to privatise their assets, they have to put in austerity measures, they have to cut back on services, they have to reduce the size of government. Now we weren't in that position in Queensland and yet we had Labor governments, successive Labor governments under Beattie and Bligh who were going down that path anyway. The Beattie government privatised the electricity retailers though backed-off selling generation. I know this because of meetings we were invited to with Beattie and then with Mackenroth and Bligh.

Bligh and Beattie at least improved the level of services but they paid for it by not increasing taxation.

Absolutely; and eventually that has to come to a stop. You cannot continue to rack up enormous bills. Before I left the ETU, I was told from within government that they were facing some pretty tough decisions in terms of their financial viability and they were

going to have to look at some drastic measures. I thought that they were talking taxation, that's how naive I was. Because we had been hammering at 'em for years and years that you cannot be a low tax state and still deliver the level of service that you want to deliver.

You are now State President of the ALP; how does the ALP get back?

How does Labor fight back? Labor fights back from our disastrous result from last year on a number of fronts. And this is my mantra and I've had it going since I decided that I would stand for the position of President of the party. We have to go right back to first principles.

The first thing is membership. ALP membership peaked around 8,000 or so, some four years ago. The longer we stayed in government the fewer members we had and so less workers and supporters. So, first step, we have to rebuild the membership of the party and turn those members into individual campaigners and collective campaigners for Labor ideals and values.

Membership has stopped going backwards. Last year, we recruited 1,540 and we recruited 1,222 of those from September to December. For renewals, compared to this time last year, which was leading into an election year for the State Government, we're