

NICKI SAROCA.

OPEN FOUNDATION - AUSTRALIAN HISTORY.

25TH AUGUST, 1989.

THE EMERGING ROLE OF NEWCASTLE TRADES HALL COUNCIL AS AN ACTIVE PARTICIPATOR IN THE SOCIAL ISSUES OF THE COMMUNITY.

INTERVIEWER:

NICKI SAROCA.

INTERVIEWEE:

KEITH WILSON - FORMER SECRETARY NEWCASTLE TRADES HALL COUNCIL.

DATE:

11TH AUGUST, 1989.

The senseless devastation witnessed by Keith Wilson, during World War 2, precipitated his entry into the Australian Trade Union Movement. He willingly embraced trade unionism as he perceived the concern the movement had for the ordinary people. After many years experience as a delegate in the mining industry and various other unions, Keith became a state organiser and Secretary of the Miscellaneous Workers' Union. During this period he discerned the extra exploitation of female workers and the hardships they endured. Upon the retirement of Alex Dowling, Keith Wilson was elected to the position of Secretary/Treasurer of Newcastle Trades Hall Council (N.T.H.C.) which he held from January 1969 until September 1979.<sup>I</sup>

Although N.T.H.C. was primarily concerned with industrial relations and the demands of workers the labour organisation maintained an open-door policy. Any section of the populace could approach the Council, assured that their grievances would be dealt with sympathetically. In this way, N.T.H.C. undertook a social commitment and emerged as an active participator in the struggle to preserve the quality of life of the community as a whole.

The Trades Hall Council united the diverse members of society in a mutual endeavour to thwart the bureaucratic control of government. Consequently, many attempts by both state and local governments to encroach into the recreational areas of the people were repelled by the concerted action of community groups supported by the labour movement. Conservation of the environment was a major concern of N.T.H.C., and the threat of "green bans" was often employed to deter companies intent on despoiling our beautiful surroundings. Similarly, the Council actively assisted various Residents' Action Groups in their fight to resist the local authorities' policy of allowing developers to demolish buildings and erect high-rises in their place.

I. N.T.H.C. Minutes, Thursday 6th. September 1979. Keith Wilson had suffered from continuing illness over the past few months and officially terminated his employment on this day as he was unable to perform the duties of Secretary.

In 1975 the entire Trade Union Movement was immersed in a bitter dispute over the mining of uranium. Agitation by N.T.H.C.'s newly established Ecology Committee exerted a significant influence on the Australian Council of Trade Unions (A.C.T.U.). As a result, the resolution to ban the mining and export of uranium, raised by our Council, was successful. Thus, N.T.H.C. was instrumental in eliminating a major threat to the life and health of Australian workers, and also in steadying the international proliferation of atomic weapons.

The involvement of N.T.H.C. in improving the living standards of workers, and society in general, extended to the health, education and cultural spheres. The labour organisation readily responded to appeals for financial assistance from the various health institutions. Furthermore, political action initiated by the Council ensued the establishment of a medical school at Newcastle University and was paramount in compelling the government to allocate additional funds towards education. A genuine concern for students induced Keith Wilson to enter the high schools where he familiarised the youth of Newcastle with the fundamental principles of trade unionism. In a like manner, the medium of culture was employed to spread the message of the Trade Union Movement and to encourage cultural activity amongst the workers.

In the political arena N.T.H.C. resisted the iniquitous decisions of federal authorities. An "Act of Defiance" was signed to publicly denounce the abhorrent war in Vietnam and to render encouragement to the conscientious objectors. Similarly, the Council castigated the Australian Governor-General for dismissing a democratically elected government and strove to overturn this unjust act.

During the period Keith Wilson held office as Secretary/Treasurer of N.T.H.C., a social ingredient emerged in the function of the Council in addition to its traditional role of improving industrial relations. The encouragement of Council fostered solidarity amongst community action groups, enabling them to confront bureaucratic government and to resist the destruction of the developers. Furthermore, the Council actively supported women in their struggle for liberation and equality. Finally, N.T.H.C.'s implacable opposition to the Vietnam War and the mining and export of uranium had political ramifications that reverberated throughout Australia and the international arena.

---

## CONTENTS

Introduction	I
The factors precipitating the entry of Keith Wilson into the Australian Trade Union Movement.	I
The participation of Keith Wilson in trade unionism.	2
The role of Newcastle Trades Hall Council (N.T.H.C.).	3
The duties of Keith Wilson as Secretary of N.T.H.C.	4
A labour of love.	5
N.T.H.C. takes a stand on social issues and actively supports the needs of the community.	5
Actively supporting the growth of Resident Action Groups.	8
The N.T.H.C. Ecology Committee bans the mining and export of uranium.	9
The involvement of N.T.H.C. in the health of Newcastle workers.	10
Action against the Fraser Government's attack on Medibank.	11
The interest of N.T.H.C. in education.	11
Teaching the youth of Newcastle about trade unionism.	12
The Cultural activities of N.T.H.C.	12
An Act of Defiance- the Draft and the war in Vietnam.	13
The reaction of N.T.H.C. to the downfall of the Whitlam Government.	14
The most important achievements of N.T.H.C. during Keith Wilson's period as Secretary.	14

- 1 -

SIDE (1)

NICKI SAROCA.

Friday, 11th August, 1989.

The emerging role of Newcastle Trades Hall Council as an active participator in the social issues of the community.

My name is Nicki Saroca and I'm talking to Keith Wilson at my home in Raymond Terrace.

Keith is a former secretary of Newcastle Trades Hall Council. He held office from January, 1969 until July, 1979. Where once the Newcastle Trades Hall Council concentrated mainly on the traditional areas of wages and working conditions, this period found the Council developing an active role in the social issues of the community. Keith maintains close ties with the Trades Hall Council and often speaks at their functions. He is presently Vice-President of the United Caravaners' Association of New South Wales which operates out of a room provided by the Trades Hall Council.

KEITH WILSON.

Nicki, Keith Wilson is my name. I was born in the country and there was a lot of water run under the bridge before I entered into serious trade union activity, and this mainly eventuated from my four years of war from a nineteen year old in the Middle East and New Guinea and of course, the poverty, the destruction, the inhumanity to man was expressed blatantly before our young eyes. I become, what later to be known as, a real International - ist and on my return there was no difficulty for me to join the Trade Union Movement. Instinctively, I seen that the trade unions were taking up the problems of the ordinary people, the suppressed people, the exploited people. And I had a rich experience in the mining industry. I soon become a delegate and it wasn't long before we were in a big strike that was provoked by the, what is known - or what was known historically, as the "Cold War immediately after the Second World War where the employing class attacked the Trade Union Movement with the idea of smashing the Trade Union Movement or containing it by provoking a strike in the steel industry which extended to the mining industry. I participated

- 2 -

in that. And, of course, later on despite the fact that the Government had promised the miners, who done such a wonderful job during the war years, that there would be better conditions, that there would be reward in the peace time, nevertheless, when they put their log of claims before the authorities they were turned down stating that the basket was empty. There was a long drawn-out strike as a subsequent to those negotiations which took place in 1949. And so, over that period, the union saw their members, particularly some of their leaders, jailed. The funds of the unions were frozen and so that this was a tremendous experience and, of course, it split the community right down the centre. And so after many years of experience in various other unions I become an organizer with the trade unions, with the Trades Hall Council around May Day, that's an international day, full-time work meeting international delegates that come and spoke to the Australian Trade Union Movement. I also organized a conference around the unemployment for the Trades Hall Council and later in the early sixties I spent up to '69 working full-time as a secretary of the Miscellaneous Workers' Union and a state organizer of that union also which took me out into the countryside as far as Cobar, Bourke, Brewarrina up out in the deep west and up in the Tablelands to the border of Queensland and up to the coast as far as Tweed Heads. The main responsibility was to build the union movement and look after the needs of the workers. I had a tremendous satisfactory experience, particularly working with the underprivileged women as mainly our members come from women workers in the schools and universities stretching over the wide area and we dealt with women that been deserted, deserted wives, women that now were widows and they had to work hard starting early in the morning, double shifts. We saw in our experiences the poverty, the hardship and so that this experience taught me a lot about the needs of women, the extra exploitation of women workers as against the usual run

...../Page 3

- 3 -

of workers in industry across the board in Australia. And, from this experience and the retirement of a long-standing trade union official, the well respected, a very fine man in Alex Dowling, still living today at 89 years of age, I was elected to take the position of Newcastle Secretary/Treasurer of the Trades Hall Council. And it was certainly an exciting period, the most exciting period for me, the most testing times because the Trades Hall Council involves some 48 unions, over 50,000 members belonging to those unions. And the role of the trade union centre was to co-ordinate the work of some single unions and collective unions to carry out campaigns from the top union movement, namely the Australian Council of Trade Unions, from locally the organized workers around their immediate demands. And this work was very, very, important, led to a great experience and experiences. And it was in this first year that the now Prime Minister was elected to the position of President of the A.C.T.U. We deliberately, as a body, wanted to see the best national leader elected at that time and so we used the opportunity of our May Day celebration to have Bob Hawke come along and address the wide range of delegates from the various unions at a May Day dinner, plus stay over and meet various officials in consultation so that they would be ready if elected as delegates from their particular union to vote in the September Federal union elections of September that year. And we were successful in our efforts to assist, along with the other states, in having the new, bright, up and coming leader that we believed so much in and thought that would do so much for the Trade Union Movement. So that the periods that led and went on from the 1949, and particularly in that very year, was a culmination of action of the workers resisting the shackles that had been placed on the workers by what is known as the Arbitration and Conciliation Act that previously by the Menzies Government had been introduced penal provisions

...../Page 4



- 4 -

within the Act that restrained workers from going on strike, that hit them with tremendous fines if they went out on strike. This was an intimidatory effect and so the campaign at that stage was reaching a crescendo where in May of 1969 the workers, one million in all throughout Australia, stopped work in protest at the refusal of a union official to carry out and pay the fines on behalf of his union, it was the Bus Workers' Union, and it was a union official by the name of Clarrie O'Shea who was jailed for refusing to carry out his union's decision not to pay up. And so as a response of the upheaval that took place led to the freeing up of workers and a greater democracy then started to take place amongst the trade unions to put them back on the road of taking affirmative action from time to time when the workers were in trouble.

N.S.

Keith, what were your duties as Secretary?

K.W.

The duties was to organize and co-ordinate the various actions determined by Council. Council were representative body, an advisory body to all its affiliates and my job was to work with the Executive to draw up agendas and to have full meetings every fortnight of representatives of all unions affiliated and, of course, to initiate activity that was thrown up in between meetings. I was free and we had an open door policy with any section of the people that were in trouble could call on the trade union officers and discuss their problems and subsequently, the matters would then go to the Executive and the full Trades Hall Council, and we always invited speakers from the various groups that were putting up their problems so that we could then discern just how best we could exploit activities to solve their given problems.

...../Page 5

N.S. What was it like to be Secretary?

K.W. Well, I would say I was privileged. There was never anything, any job that I could say that would be more rewarding than working in such an organization. For example, money was never a question, wages was never a question. The previous Secretary, and this I think shows you just how the Trades Hall Council was dedicated to the workers, for twenty-two years he worked well below the norm wage for his classification. He was a Liner-type operator in the Printing Union and he was working for eight pounds less than the wage for that job. And I was that enthused about the work I never questioned the wages, although that I dropped as Secretary of the Miscellaneous \$3,000 a year, but that never entered our thinking because the work was so rewarding. We felt that we were able to assist so many people and enjoy doing it.

N.S. It was a labour of love!

K.W. It was certainly a labour of love. It was expenditure of energy and experience that we knew from day to day that helped so many people and it had so much influence on the community, whether it be in the education field, see there was a very early action to have an autonomous university built in Newcastle and this commenced in the early 50's, 1950 actually, there was a demonstration and public meeting called, so as far back as that there was a social commitment that was undertaken.

N.S. Keith, I'd like to discuss the development of Newcastle Trades Hall Council from concentrating mainly on industrial relations to actively supporting the needs of the community. During the 1970's the Newcastle Trades Hall Council involved itself in many community activities.

K.W. Yes, this was really a question that had the Trades Hall

- 6 -

Council not taken the stand on social issues, would have been irrelevant in the long term. Although, this wasn't the reason why it was undertaken, that is the social questions that come before them. You see, such issues as the American big coal company attempting to introduce and build a coal loader at Port Stephens up in a recreation area of the working people and their families. And it was interesting for the first time I experienced, not just industrial workers taking action, not just miners, wharfies, brickies and the like, but we had a new ingredient come in to the struggle, the social struggle, of people around the quality of life. And there was solicitors, there was small business people, there was women that took action for the first time in meetings and demonstrations. Fife was the Minister for Mines under the Liberal Government at that time and our actions culminated with a big rally in Sydney and negotiations took place with Clutha and the Minister for Mines, Mr. Fife, and this was backed up by a ban placed on the possibility of a coal loader being built by the appropriate trade unions who said that they would not build such an obstruction there to the health and welfare of the people in Port Stephens. And so that was a glorious victory and, as I say, it was a new ingredient into the social arena where there was more than just the ordinary industrial workers taking part. And of course this was setting the pattern and there was actions springing up all over the place. In the East-end of Newcastle at one time there was at least four architects participating in resident action, what was called Resident Action Groups, and they were resisting the Council's open policy of looking after the developers knocking down buildings and building high rise and from that activity the Council was involved, from the residents appealing to the trade unions for support which was readily available. We worked together as a team and won great concessions and this went on for years. We had the position where there was a big road to be built round

- 7 -

about the 1973, and it was the road that they attempted to put through Blackbutt which would destroy the most beautiful park. It was called Highway 23 and there was urgings from the Labor politicians at that time that were in full control of the City Council to get on with it, to get on and build this road which was going to split right down the centre this beautiful Blackbutt Reserve. And over many months of agitation, of meetings, of going to the Council, trade unions, along with women activists, architects and general people from the community, again bought a retreat on behalf of local government and there was a victorious settlement. And of course we could go on to areas such as out in the Swansea area where they tried to build a marina, and then out as far as Caves Beach they tried to do buildings that was unsuitable for the community in the area. There was a foreign company, a Japanese company, this led to conferences, meetings and conferences, with the authorities and the Lake Macquarie Shire Council, and of course eventually they backed off under the threat of bans which become known as "green bans". Down in the Central Coast there was a struggle against the Red Gum Forest to protect the rainforest from sand mining by the big sand mining companies. Again, after long months of struggle, the sand miners picked up their tools and moved further afield. And it don't matter what area we come to in those periods that the Trades Hall Council was called upon one way or another to intervene. In the Cooks Hill area, not far from the Trades Hall, there was the Housing Commission, under Minister McGinty, endeavoured to knock down 26 houses and re-build other houses, with no consultation with the community. This led to community action, the most articulate summary of what was happening and countering such action, and finally at a conference with McGinty, he guaranteed that in 24 hours he would make his decision one way or the other. We just had our input in the form

- 8 -

of stating that we would bring up artillery in the form of our trade union support for the people there. And within a shorter time than 24 hours McGinty announced in the media that he'd withdraw, and have the Commission withdraw, their proposition and allow the people to settle there without any disturbances. And so these were the things that happened over a long period of years that made the work so satisfactory, that gave a great kick to the Trade Union Movement because each issue as it come up, well then there was solutions had to be found. The organized bureaucrats of the City Councils, of the Shire Councils, had to retreat under the pressure of the community's actions backed by the trade unions in the form of delegations, debates, public meetings. And so that was a rich, a very rich, experience, very rewarding indeed to be able to be part of those actions and to win great satisfaction. And I think today that we're able to see a continuation of that in the form of regular "green bans" and the names "Greenies" coming about, it seems to be the going thing today not to be derogatory about assisting, the trade unions assisting, people in trouble, community action groups, but the governments to take notice, both State and Federal, that they've got to do something substantial to preserve the environment, to protect the quality of life of the people generally. So I think we've got to look to the future that will enrich the life of the people, that will hold back the attacks that are being made, have been made and still being made.

N.S. During the 70's the Trades Hall Council actively supported the growth of Residents' Action Groups!

K.W. That's right! The Residents' Action Groups were encouraged. For example, when we heard attacks being

...../Page 9

- 9 -

made and conservat<sup>ist</sup>ists' outburst, that is within the Trade Union Movement, it wasn't all smooth sailing, because you'd hear from time to time speakers from what is known as the Right Wing, or the most conservative based trade unions, still say, in this day and age, that we shouldn't be worrying about these sort of things, we've got enough to do to look after the wages and conditions. And, of course, when they've been exposed and told quite bluntly that the trade unions become irrelevant if they don't pick up the tab and face up to their responsibilities, whilst not only encouraging but laying the basis for a greater involvement of the community and defeat the frustrating bureaucratic control, the undemocratic activities of the structures that we see from day to day in whatever the local government bodies are, or the State political machines, or right up to the Federal basis. But then the struggle must continue, is continuing, despite the attempts of obstruction by some of the hard-head conservatives that cannot see the wood for the trees.

N.S.

The Ecology Centre was also established in the Trades Hall in 1977 during your period as Secretary!

K.W.

That was an important period and there was developments that took place during that term, very important issues, along with, in addition to, the Resident Action Groups. There was the wider political issue that confronted the whole Trade Union Movement in 1975, when there was a great debate with more than 800 delegates congregating in Victoria over a week. The issue arose out of the formation of the Committee, the Ecology Committee, that formulated a policy to go before the A.C.T.U. Congress which developed in a bitter struggle, and finally the struggle to refuse to mine, to put a ban on the mining of uranium and the export of uranium, was carried by about two to one majority and it had a big bearing on,

...../Page 10

- 10 -

not only national, but international affairs because it was raised, our resolution put up by the Newcastle Trades Hall Council was successful and that it set the pattern for activity right around the world. It was a great contribution by the Newcastle Trades Hall Council to have the banning of uranium, first for health reasons, the great dangers to the life and health of the workers in Australia of mining uranium, and of course, the dangers also internationally of having the proliferation, greater proliferation, of atomic weapons.

END OF SIDE (1)

SIDE (2)

N.S. During the 1970's the Newcastle Trades Hall Council involved itself in the important area of the health of Newcastle workers!

K.W. Yes, Nicki, it was a common thing for the Trades Hall Council to work with medical people in the interest of, not only the workers, but people as a whole. We were never backward in coming forward in assisting with raising funds for Wallsend Hospital Outpatients, for Newcastle Outpatients, any appeal for anti-cancer activity. This was the norm that went on over the years and during my time of office came an opportunity for a whole medical school to be established. Now this called for an enormous amount of money to be handed out by the Federal Government. Now there was a three way battle for it, meaning that the state of Queensland was trying to win the vote of the Government for this expenditure to go on, Wollongong was also, and of course Newcastle was the third runner. Our political action from the Trades Hall Council, hearing speakers from the medical section of Newcastle and joining in the various forms of political action put pressure onto the Federal Government, and of course, they realized the setting in Newcastle where all the work had been done, and so we achieved this very fine

- 11 -

establishment, a wonderful asset to the Hunter Valley, the medical school.

N.S.

Could you tell me about the action against the Fraser Government's attack on Medibank?

K.W.

Well again, Fraser was the Prime Minister elected after the defeat of the Whitlam Government who established a very fine medical machinery called Medibank to assist generally the poorer people, the pensioners and so on. Well, Fraser moved in to cut costs at the expense of humankind in our country and our Trades Hall Council rallied with demonstrations, in fact, the A.C.T.U. was drawn in for the first time calling for a national stoppage. And our Trades Hall Council, as had been the custom in all these issues affecting the people, we've been right to the fore-front in demonstrations and political actions to save what we could and from our actions, no doubt, all around the country it steadied the hand of the people such as Fraser who wanted to whittle away the already fine medical establishment that had been established by the previous Whitlam Government.

N.S.

Could you tell me about Newcastle Trades Hall Council's interest in education during your period as Secretary?

K.W.

Well yes, Newcastle Trades Hall Council was always interested, interested firstly because the affiliates included the Technical Further Education members. Teachers' Federation were always to the fore, one of the most democratic, one of the most active unions right throughout Australia, and particularly in our district. And so in the actions for greater funds, then the actions of the students, actions of the unions in the educational field were backed, not only by resolution, but by active demonstrations. I can vividly remember marching with the students and using the Council's influence to strengthen the demonstrations, to force the Government to make more allocations towards the education field in our district.



- 12 -

N.S. You also went into the schools to teach the youth of Newcastle about Trade Unionism!

K.W. Yes Nicki, it was important in this period that, for the first time, we got requests. There was economic societies set up by 13 year olds in high schools on a couple of occasions and this led to extensive in-roads into the high schools, both ordinary public schools and private schools to Catholic high schools. Now, the reason of course we accepted without hesitation the invitation to go there, was to further their understanding of what the trade unions were all about, what they would be confronted with when they come out of school as young men and women. And these discussions were very rewarding, very exhilarating because they were so young, they were so eager to learn and I enjoyed them immensely because they were much more active, and of course, they expressed views across the board from the various families of what they thought on politics and economics and trade unions. And we got on very well and I think that it was to a great advantage to the young people coming into the workforce that we were able to do that sort of work.

N.S. Yes, it's very important! Could you tell me about the cultural activities of the Newcastle Trades Hall Council during your time as Secretary?

K.W. Yes again, we were able to form a Cultural Action Group. Now, this come about by activists that were keen on cultural activity, of getting the message of the Trade Union Movement and the campaigns that were being waged within the workforce and within the working class centres. And so that action group then set about with theatre, both in the workplace and in the streets. They were linked with international May Day celebrations, they were linked with the Peace Movement. And so that Cultural Action Committee expanded and has served greatly the cultural activity amongst the industrial workers in particular, who were always lagging back in this field.

- 13 -

N.S. And you had a wonderful tribute to Dame Mary Gilmore!

K.W. Yes, in our time with the consistent May Day celebrations, with the international influence, speakers, visitors to our country, and of course, the activities, the activities with the young people that were carried on, not only just the demonstrations, the celebrations of the early achievements of the past, but a new ingredient from our district was initiated by the then Secretary of the May Day Committee, Merv Copely, long since ceased, but a great one in this field of culture. And it was his idea that there be a national award established so that young people could compete in various form of culture, whether it be song, poetry, or the like and this has been extremely successful and rewarded right throughout Australia.

N.S. You actively opposed the Draft and war in Vietnam! Could you tell me about the consequences of acting according to your conscience?

K.W. Yes, in the course of the international activity we were involved with all the organizations that were set up to defeat the terrible war going on in Vietnam. So much so that massess of leading personnel, clergy, business people, ourselves from the trade union, we signed an Act of Defiance calling on the young people not to become involved and that we'd give them every encouragement, to hide them, to keep them away from this terrible action of the government to send them away with no voice, no vote, to be killed in a useless war. And all this activity that we and others throughout Australia were involved in finally brought down the Federal Government and turned around the policy whereby the war had to stop, our commitment had to stop, immediately conscription was stopped. It was a wonderful day for Austalia and it done a lot to expediate the end of the war in 1975.

- 14 -

N.S. How did the Newcastle Trades Hall Council, and yourself, react to the downfall of another Australian Government?

K.W. When the Australian Governor General, on the 11th of November in 1975, had the audacity to come forward and sack a democratically people's elected government, well then there was an uproar, of course, right throughout the length and breadth of Australia. Whitlam, the elected Prime Minister, called on the people to keep up their wrath. Unfortunately, there was a dim note as far as the Australian Council of Trade Unions' leader was concerned, Bob Hawke at that time. He was very quiet on the issue, but nevertheless there was tremendous demonstrations right throughout the country at the undemocratic nature of dismissing a government that was already elected by the people. So our role, like we've been consistent right throughout the period, we certainly resented it and worked to organize this route as far as it could be taken in endeavour to overturn this drastic decision that was imposed on the people by one individual connected with Great Britain, the Governor General, for example.

N.S. Looking back, what do you think have been the most important achievements of the Newcastle Trades Hall Council during your period as Secretary?

K.W. Well Nicki, one could say that there's many, many achievements, however some key issues would be, including the very important issue of improving industrial relations which have continued to improve, the building of strong connections, strong relations between community action groups in our districts and right throughout our region to help the struggle against the big developers and the multinationals; for an encouragement of more people to become involved in confronting all forms of bureaucratic government, all our local councils or state governments, or the federal "boys".

- 15 -

And of course, important was the development in this period of the advancement of women in their struggle for liberation and full equality. There was quite a contribution towards this still awaited success, and that is, the complete liberation and equality of women. And finally, we could say that our Council in this period had a big influence on the A.C.T.U. in regards to the mining and export of uranium because it was from our Council that the resolution was carried after a great debate and had international significance as a result. And of course, the aid and the important role in assisting the conscription, the anti-conscription fighters, in the terrible war in Vietnam and our efforts towards completing and ending that dreadful war, I think, was an outstanding achievement, for not only our Trades Hall Council and the Trade Union Movement, but from the people right throughout Australia.

N.S.

I'd like to thank you very much, Keith, for sharing your experiences with me. I have learnt a lot and you have reinforced my views of the importance of the Newcastle Trades Hall Council.  
Thank you very much.

END OF TAPE.

THE EMERGING ROLE OF NEWCASTLE TRADES HALL COUNCIL  
AS AN ACTIVE PARTICIPATOR IN THE SOCIAL ISSUES OF  
THE COMMUNITY.

NICKI SAROCA  
OPEN FOUNDATION AUSTRALIAN HISTORY  
7PM-9PM WEDNESDAY  
6TH SEPTEMBER, 1989.

The inception of Newcastle Trades Hall Council (N.T.H.C.) in 1885 established a tradition of agitation for the recognition of the rights of workers. In its formative years the labour organisation concentrated mainly on industrial relations.<sup>1</sup> However, by the 1970's leaders possessing progressive ideals had acknowledged the necessity of developing a firm commitment to safeguard the interests of the community as a whole. One such leader was Keith Wilson. During his period as Secretary/Treasurer of N.T.H.C. the organisation emerged as an active participator in the social issues affecting the people.<sup>2</sup> The Council vigorously intervened when it perceived community interest was being disregarded, and this action ensured adequate public consultation and debate.<sup>3</sup> Resident Action Groups were encouraged to organise and resist the iniquitous decisions of bureaucratic governments.<sup>4</sup> The Trades Hall Council consistently thwarted plans to destroy the local ecology and maintained a policy of conservation of the environment.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, an uncompromising opposition to the Vietnam War and the mining and export of uranium was instrumental in achieving a reversal of the federal government's political platform. The labour organisation involved itself in the important spheres of health, education and culture, providing necessary services in these areas to the people of Newcastle.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, securing justice for Aborigines and women was an intrinsic function of N.T.H.C. and intervention often succeeded in ameliorating the status of these groups.<sup>7</sup>

1. J.C. Docherty, Newcastle The making of an Australian city, Sydney, 1983, p.102.
2. Personal research and a source within N.T.H.C. corroborate my thesis.
3. Chris Dodds, "Left Approach to Environmental issues", n.d.
4. "Trades Hall Council...Working with you to make a better Newcastle", Newcastle, 1978.
5. Minutes of the Newcastle Trades Hall Council, 21st October, 1971.
6. "Trades Hall Council...Working...,"
7. The N.T.H.C. Aboriginal Advancement Committee operated for many decades. An annual International Womens' Day is organised by N.T.H.C.

N.T.H.C. supported the development of Resident Action Groups and encouraged people to assert their prerogative to participate in decisions affecting their local environment. Industrial action was often implemented in an endeavour to compel state and local authorities to recognise the legitimate rights of residents. Thus, when the inhabitants of Coon Island and Little Coonie were faced with eviction by the Liberal Government N.T.H.C. picketed the site, and this maneuver prevented demolition of the peoples' homes.<sup>8</sup> The citizens of Port Stephens vehemently opposed the government approved Clutha proposal to establish a coal loader and deep water port which would destroy the intricate ecological balance of their area. N.T.H.C. consolidated the struggle of the community groups by placing a ban on the construction, effectively precluding its commencement.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, the campaign of Newcastle East Residents' Group to force City Council to allow public consultation and participation in the development of the East End was assisted by B.L.F. green bans imposed with the approbation of N.T.H.C.<sup>10</sup>

Environmental conservation and the resistance of profiteering developers remain major priorities of N.T.H.C. Although the labour organisation supports the demands of workers for continued employment it opposes the irreparable destruction of our natural resources.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, intervention by the Council ensured the preservation of the Red Gum and Rain Forest area of the Central Coast that was being threatened by mining operations.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, the despoliation of Blackbutt Reserve was thwarted when N.T.H.C. banned the construction of Highway 23, thus protecting the pristine nature of the parkland.<sup>13</sup> Under the auspices of the T.H.C. Ecology Centre, established in 1977, conservationists are united in the struggle to repudiate development, at the expense of the environment.

8. "Trades Hall Council...Working...,"

9. Minutes..., 6th April, 1972.

10. Minutes..., 12th July, 1973.

11. Minutes..., 21st October, 1971.

12. Minutes..., 18th November, 1971.

13. Minutes..., 17th May, 1973.

The involvement of Australia and the U.S.A. allied troops in the Vietnam War was passionately denounced by N.T.H.C. Furthermore, the Council agitated for the repeal of the iniquitous National Services Act which drafted young men to fight an immoral war on foreign soil.<sup>14</sup> Many delegates, including N.T.H.C. Secretary, Keith Wilson, signed an Act of Defiance, a statement publicly supporting conscientious objectors, and were charged under the Crimes Act for their alleged seditious stand.<sup>15</sup> N.T.H.C. was an active participator in the intensive lobbying for the cessation of the war and abolition of conscription that culminated in the Moratoriums: nation wide days of protest and a call for peace in Vietnam.<sup>16</sup>

N.T.H.C. continually affirmed its opposition to the mining and export of uranium and international proliferation of nuclear weapons.<sup>17</sup> In 1979 N.T.H.C. Ecology Committee formulated a successful resolution petitioning the Australian Council of Trade Unions Congress (A.C.T.U.) to endorse a suspension on uranium mining, processing and exportation.<sup>18</sup> The morally responsible action of our Council ensured a reprieve for many Australian workers from the insidious threat of this radio active substance. Moreover, the labour organisation requested a nuclear free zone be proclaimed in the South West Pacific region and remains committed to international peace, disarmament and the removal of U.S.A. bases from Australian soil.<sup>19</sup>

A firm conviction in the entitlement of Newcastle residents to adequate health services and educational opportunities induced N.T.H.C. to intervene in these important areas.<sup>20</sup> In 1972 N.T.H.C. endorsed the entreaty of the Royal Newcastle Hospital Board for the establishment of a medical school at Newcastle University.<sup>21</sup>

14. Minutes..., 6th March, 1969.

15. Minutes..., 16th October, 1969.

16. Minutes..., 19th March, 1970.

17. "Trades Hall Council...Working...",

18. Minutes..., 22nd March, 1979.

19. Minutes..., 8th March, 1973.

20. "Trades Hall Council...Working...",

21. Minutes..., 2nd November, 1972.



Political action implemented by Council contributed to the installation of the complex in our city. N.T.H.C.'s concern for the occupational health of workers resulted in the inception of Newcastle Workers' Health Centre in 1983.<sup>22</sup> The staff of the centre continue to perform an essential function by assisting employers and employees create a hazardous free work environment. In the educational sphere N.T.H.C. participated in the campaign to have a university established in Newcastle, thus providing an accessible academic institution for the residents.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, concerted action by the trade union organisation and interested citizens coerced the government to allocate additional funds to the inadequately financed T.A.F.E. system.<sup>24</sup>

The cultural advancement of workers has been a consistent policy of N.T.H.C. for many decades.<sup>25</sup> With the formation of a Cultural Action Committee two objectives of the Council came to fruition. The group succeeded in creating a greater awareness of the Trade Union Movement by a didactic employment of the arts, and simultaneously, developed a cognizance of culture amongst the workers.<sup>26</sup> Another important contribution of N.T.H.C. is the proliferation of cultural activities organised in association with the annual May Day celebrations. A May Day Committee co-ordinates art exhibitions, poster displays, poetry and musical events, which invariably manifest the commitment of N.T.H.C. to world peace.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, the Mary Gilmore Art Award, initiated by Merv Copely, a former Secretary of the May Day Committee, continues to enable young people to realise their artistic potentiality.<sup>28</sup>

22. Letter to: National Workshop of O.H.S. action groups and W.H.C., from N.W.H.C., 1st February, 1984.

23. "Trades Hall Council...Working...,"

24. ibid.

25. ibid.

26. Taped interview with Keith Wilson, former Secretary N.T.H.C., 11th August, 1989, p.12.

27. "Trades Hall Council...Working...,"

28. Taped interview..., p.13.

N.T.H.C. maintains the inalienable right of disadvantaged groups, such as Aborigines and women, to have complete participation in issues pertaining to them. For many decades the Aboriginal Advancement Committee of N.T.H.C. promoted the cause of our indigenous people and intervened when unjust action threatened the quality of life of the black race.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, the advancement of women in the struggle for liberation and equality was strenuously supported by the labour organisation. An annual International Womens' Day celebration is organised by N.T.H.C. in recognition of the importance of women and aims to elevate the status of the female sex.

Many years have lapsed since industrial relations was the exclusive preoccupation of N.T.H.C. The leaders of the labour organisation perceived the relevance of a firm social commitment and endeavoured to attain this ideal. Thus, a new era began. The dedication of the delegates of N.T.H.C. ensured a solid relationship with the community. The Council upheld the principle of accessibility. An open door policy exists and any member of the public is able to seek advice and engage the assistance of the labour organisation. As of August 1989, 5 Sub-Committees function to facilitate the social activities of N.T.H.C.<sup>30</sup> Under the aegis of the Council, the community developed numerous strategies for repulsing the injustices that affect their standard of living. Therefore, the emergence of N.T.H.C. as an active participator in social issues provided the people of Newcastle with a powerful ally in the struggle to preserve the quality of life of the community as a whole.

29. Minutes..., 3rd June, 1971. Evictions of Aborigines from Purfleet Reserve was impeded by N.T.H.C.

30. Sub-Committees operating as at August 1989: Cultural Action; Environment; International; Health; and May Day.

---

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Docherty, J.C. Newcastle The making of an Australian city, Sydney, 1983.
- Newcastle Trades Hall Council, Trade Union Directory & Reference Manual, 1977/1978.
- McLagan, Alexander History of Newcastle District Trade Unions Vol-1919, Carrington, 1955.
- McLagan, Alexander History of Newcastle District Trade Unions Vol2 1919-1943, Carrington, 1961.
- "Trades Hall Council...Working with you to make a better Newcastle", Newcastle, 1978.

### Newspapers:

Newcastle Morning Herald, Monday, August 14, 1989.

### Unpublished documents:

- Dodds, Chris "Left Approach to Environmental Issues," n.d.
- Newcastle Workers Health Centre, Letter to: National Workshop of O.H.S. action groups, and W.H.C., 1st February, 1984.
- Minutes of Newcastle Trades Hall Council, 1969-1979.
- Taped interview with Keith Wilson, former Secretary N.T.H.C., 11th August, 1989.
-

UNIVERSITY OF NEWCASTLE

OPEN FOUNDATION COURSE

1989

I, Keith Wilson give my  
permission to Nicki Saroca

to use this interview, or part of this interview, for  
research, publication and/or broadcasting (delete one of  
these if required) and for copies to be lodged in  
the AUCHMUTY LIBRARY ARCHIVES

NEWCASTLE UNIVERSITY

for the use of other bona fide researchers.

Signed Keith Wilson

Date 11-8-89

Interviewer N Saroca