

**DEPARTMENT OF INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS,  
UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA**

**PILBARA IRON ORE INDUSTRY PROJECT**  
(funded by University of WA)

**JOHN MOSSENTON**  
b.1953

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VERBATIM TRANSCRIPT

TAPE ONE SIDE A.

This is interview number nineteen of the Pilbara iron ore industry oral history project, for the Department of Industrial Relations at the University of Western Australia. This is Stuart Reid interviewing John Mossenton on 29th of January 1991, in Karratha.

SR Yes, John, can we begin by getting some biographical details from you? Where and when were you born?

Mossenton Right, I was born in Chelsea in Victoria on the 14th of February, 1953. A Valentine [laughs].

SR What was your full name?

Mossenton John Edward Mossenton.

SR And your mother and father's name and their occupations?

Mossenton My mother was a housewife. Her name was Patricia Ann, and my father was Harry Richard, and he worked in the clothing trade.

SR What sort of work did he do in the clothing trade?

Mossenton Well, he owned his own business in Malvern in Victoria, and just

made clothes for some period of time. He actually.... he separated with my mother later on in life about when I was probably twelve years of age, and I've yet to see him since.

SR           How much schooling did you.... where did you go to school and what sort of schooling did you do?

Mossenton     Right. I went to Carrum Primary School in Victoria, and then went to Bombeach High School, went to Form Four; left there, ended up getting a job in a garage, serving some petrol until an apprenticeship came along, and then I did an apprenticeship in the boilermaking area with a firm called Major Furnaces and Combustion Engineers in Moorabbin.

SR           What sort of a training was it in boilermaking? Was it a good grounding for you?

Mossenton     Well, actually at the time, the apprentice training committees in Victoria had started a new scheme, where an apprentice could actually transfer from one job to another, unlike apprenticeships at that stage, that you'd go in to one firm and stay there for the whole of the period of the five years. This one was put on a scheme where I could actually move from one place to another and during the apprenticeship, which I ended up doing in four years, that I did

go to a number of different firms over that four years, as that was part of the scheme. And I believe that it was probably a better grounding than most people have, sitting in one workshop for the whole period.

SR                   And what did you do when you'd completed your apprenticeship?

Mossenton       Oh well, I completed my apprenticeship at a place called Peninsula Engineering in Moorabbin. I then decided (I was only 21 at the time) that Victoria - I'd seen enough of Victoria, and wanted to have a look at the rest of Australia. So I jumped in a car and I came to Western Australia, where I started at a small metal shop, in Osborne Park I think it was, in Perth. I must have been there for about all of four hours until I realised that I didn't like that too much [laughs] so I went out looking around for a job elsewhere, and we applied (with a few other friends of mine) for jobs in the iron ore industry, which we were successful with Hamersley Iron in 1974.

SR                   So you came up to Hamersley Iron. What was your impression when you got here?

Mossenton       Oh in 1974 I was pretty green. I hadn't seen too much about anything. We flew up here and I got off the plane at Karratha and I suppose like anyone else that had come up here for the first time, wondered what the hell you were doing there! I can remember the person, Doug Matthews, who was the industrial - or the personnel officer at the time. He met us at the airport and he took us in to the Dampier, where we went to the Hamersley Iron administration building, and we were looking down at the ore wharf, and I could see this great monstrosity of a building down there, puffing out billows of red



dust, and I said, "What the hell's that place?" And he said, "Well, that's the pellet plant and that's where you're working," and I nearly had a fit. You know, I didn't realise that places like that existed because being in a metropolitan area in Victoria all my life, I mean I'd never seen any industrialised areas before. So it was certainly an eye-opener that I was going to have to work in this place. But as it turned out it was probably one of the most friendly and best places I've worked in all of my time.

SR           What was it about it that was so friendly? Why did you think it was a friendly place?

Mossenton   Well, I mean I was petrified first of all going down there because, as I said, I was pretty green coming into this sort of area. I hadn't had any experience in the workplace apart from being an apprentice, and I didn't really know how to take anyone in open industry, and especially in the mining type industry. But when we got down there and people automatically introduced themselves, and started having a talk.... It was really for the first time that I'd been introduced to unions too, but I'd certainly been around union workshops all my life, but as an apprentice, I suppose, we don't really take too much notice of it. We're very worried about ourselves and our own activities of the days. And going down there after being introduced, introduced as the way the operation is, who's your union rep and so forth, and people just going out of their way to assist you, to show you around.

I mean that was virtually the second day. The first day of my getting in to Dampier, I can remember sitting in my room petrified that I'd been told I had to go down to the mess in the morning, have my breakfast, and then there will

be a bus waiting for you to take you to the pellet plant. And I purposely slept in that day. I just didn't really want to go down to that mess and I didn't want to get on that bus in the morning. I REALLY was petrified about what I was doing in a place like this, / and what I was going to be put up to. Anyway I stayed in my room and [laughs] I can remember the accommodation officer coming around and knocking on your door, and I was saying, "Oh yes, yes. I'm sorry, I must have slept in." Well, I don't think I'd slept in at all, I was just so bloody scared about going out into this new bloody work situation.

But anyway, I was taken down there in the car with this bloke, and it was from <sup>stet</sup> then ~~that~~ they introduced me to all these people, and I realised it wasn't such a fearful place that I thought it was going to be. / It was actually quite a freindly place and I got on quite well there. It was very close, and I think the dirt around the place, the conditions, were pretty bad. I think all those sort of things brought everyone together. I mean unlike today, even the foreman seemed to get on well with the workers too. It was very much of a family situation in there.

SR                      What was the actual work like itself?

Mossenton        Well, I suppose from a boilermaker's view point, it was pretty shoddy type work. It was.... you were working on a pellet plant. / <sup>The pellet plant</sup> It must have been at that stage over ten years old, and it was burning a lot of oil. There was a lot of sulphur around. There was a lot of corrosion from the salt, / so everything that we actually touched - I mean we really had to chip stuff off, and it was just a patch-up type of work all of the time. There were times when we used to have to go over to the ore drier, and I mean after a period of time

there.... and you didn't have to be there a long period of time before you realised how the system, or how the place, worked.

But it was all worked on a vacuum basis to keep the dust down in this ore drying area, and the boilermakers, you know, would have to go over there and fix up these holes. But <sup>Uc</sup> you soon learnt that ~~you do~~ as a boilermaker, the last thing you take to the ore drying section to fix up a patch on a piece of their plant, was a welder. You took along a piece of steel and a tube of plastic mastik, and you go and stick it on. I mean because if you tried to put an arc welder to it, you'd just burn another hole in it. So really we got to the stage where all you were doing, you were sticking bits of metal on to the place to keep it going. So it was that sort of condition. I mean it was totally different to anything that I did an apprenticeship in, as building things or repairing things in the field. The iron industry which is.... or the pellet plant I should say more so than the iron ore industry, the pellet plant was just a unique place to be.

SR Was there a lot of work?

Mossenton Well, <sup>Uc</sup> it was always breaking down. I mean as day workers we were continually working overtime, and we'd be called in at all hours of the night. We had a good system where it came to overtime, that everyone had their fair share of overtime. There was no one person getting too much. There was a system in place that ensured that, and we worked a lot of overtime, and I think that again, that was one of the things, I suppose, that built a relationship up on the job, as that it was a sharing of the money and the time that we were there. And also every time someone was called in, there was always an experience which



you could always relate to the next day. And at times around Christmas <sup>uc</sup> and so forth, I mean there was always a position that Christmas time... I remember the Christmas time in '74, that everyone wants to have a shot at everyone else, and there were always water fights; water fights galore. And this one particular day, <sup>- Christmas '74 -</sup> a few people had come in early and set up water hoses in the workshop, and all the boilermakers had their own personalised fire extinguishers which they pressurised themselves with air, and there was just this gigantic water fight. It went on for the whole of the morning and just no work was done on this particular day, <sup>uc</sup> and one bloke there by the name of Mick Gardner, who was an operator there - and I'm not quite sure if Mick's still around. I think he might be - that he was the driver of the 992 front-end loader, and he spent the whole morning filling up the bucket of the 992 <sup>front end loader</sup> to get some revenge about a soaking he had received earlier on in the morning. After some period of time, Mick <sup>and</sup> drove up to the front door with this 992 tractor and just let the bucket go open and there was this... there's tons of water just come through the workshop. Well, in the end the superintendent of the place, Jim Runceman, he'd just had enough of it, you know, and he just turned round and he said, "Well, that's enough," he says, "everyone home." So we all went home and amazingly we all got paid for it ~~[Laughs]~~ but I imagine if those sort of things happened today, we probably would all have been given our marching orders. But that was the sort of relationship we had around that time. It was quite good.

SR           What about living in the community, in the mining community itself? What were the living conditions like?

Mossenton   Well, '74, I suppose it's still pretty late in the iron ore

SINGLE MEN'S QUARTERS

industry. For me, I came up here as a single person. I was in the single men's quarters at Dampier. It was segregated. You had the single women's quarters at one part of town - the single men's quarters and the single women's quarters in different areas, and then you had some staff who were single, and those staff seemed to be in the better blocks than the workers. That didn't help. And the messes also for the single blokes. That we had one mess for the single men and we had another mess for the single women and the staff positions. So the staff could mingle with the women, but unfortunately the rank and file, the wages people, we had to sit in our own particular area.

So that was one of the things that I noticed straight away, and that was one of the things, I suppose a group of people actually set out to resolve, and it was over a period of time that we pulled down those barriers that people had... have been segregated eating quarters, and that was one of the moves, I suppose, to normalisation, if you could ever normalise a place like the Pilbara.

The rest of the town, very young. I noticed that everyone in the town was young. There were no elderly people. There was.... well, there just weren't any elderly people around the place. No one you could turn around and ask for guidance, I suppose, if that's what you were looking for from someone of that age group. But everyone was young. Everyone was the same age. So we all had a fair bit in common and I suppose that didn't help, because I suppose, if there's fifteen blokes to one sheila in the town, and we've all got one thing in common, it was I suppose, that one girl! So there was always a lot of turmoil as to who was going to be taking her out. So that caused a lot of conflict in the towns in those times. I think it was like better in the places like the wet mess to go and have a drink, because at least the women didn't



come down to the wet mess, and there was never any a problem, but as soon as we found a woman come in to the place, it seemed to change the atmosphere of the whole conversations that took place.

So that was one of the things I noticed. I think I also noticed for the first time, ~~and I hadn't really come in to it,~~ that marriages were very strained. That a lot of the friends that I did work with in the pellet plant, you know, used to go to their homes and then for the first time that I'd noticed, in my working life (and it hadn't been very long in my working life) but going in to an area where the strain was straight on to the family, because there wasn't anything for the women to do. I mean there were no jobs for the women. They used to sit around at home all day, and as it became quite apparent to myself and others [laughs] there was a lot of extra-marital situations going on around the place. So that was quite, you know, quite eye-opening.

SR           How did you go about normalising these situations like the messing and the accommodation?

Mossenton   Well, I suppose it was just bringing them up at meetings. We used to have mess committees, that were set up by the unions and the company, mainly by the unions, and the company had to fall in line otherwise they'd get a ticket. So there were a few things that we pushed as far as the single men's quarters were concerned. One was about the messing facilities, about the segregation. <sup>ve</sup> the other parts that we were jumping up and down about all the time, was that they wouldn't allow us to have anything in the rooms apart from what they would supply us. So if you wanted to put a television or a fridge or something in your room in those days, it was not on. ~~Some people wanted double~~

beds. I mean I wanted a double bed, but they certainly wouldn't allow double beds. And I can remember the cleaner saying, "Well, if you have anything in your room other than what you've got, then we're not about to clean those rooms."

~~So those things caused problems, and so we ended up having meetings on the oval and ultimations~~ <sup>U</sup> were put, say "Well the single men are just not going back to work [laughs] until such times as these things have been rectified." And they were rectified. ~~That was sorted out. And they were in the very early parts of my time here. That was in '74.~~

SR                   What sort of role did you take?

Mossenton       Well, I didn't take a great role in those days. I mean I was certainly a voice in the crowd, voicing the concerns but certainly as an official, no, I wasn't in any capacity at all. I was just one of those people who were being subjected to some of those things that we didn't agree with, and we would vote on them, voice our opinions, and take the appropriate action [laughs]. We never, ever asked the support of the married blokes, because in those days, it was really 60 to 70 per cent single blokes, compared to 30 to 40 per cent married blokes. And we did not want to put those people to any hardship because of their family situation, and we damn well knew that Hamersley Iron wouldn't be able to run the place without the single people.

But that's totally different today. I mean I think we'd be lucky to find in the Hamersley operation 10 per cent of single people. So certainly we've rectified that problem [laughs] because they just don't have any single people.

ON THE JOB

SR                   What about workplace issues?

Mossenton       Workplace issues, well.... I mean if you work in the pellet plant the biggest work issue was the dust, and it was a dry pellet plant, a dry system which means that you grind the ore up and it's a dust, it's like talcum powder. There's no way of controlling it, so if I remember, <sup>we</sup> we used to have a meeting every second Monday. ~~We used to have a meeting just about the dust, and it got to the stage where every second Monday, that the people would be coming in their thongs, their shoes, their boots would be on the back of the car, because there was nothing Hamersley Iron could ever do about satisfying our needs in relation to the dust. So I suppose, it was the start of the 38 hour week because every second Monday we would be going home, no matter what. And that continued on for a long period of time; I can't remember how long, but it was just an automatic thing in the pellet plant. No-one else in the Hamersley Iron used to do it, but in the pellet plant we certainly did.~~

So that was that major issue. The other issues around the place really came as a matter of working overtime, the conditions of the food, and all those sort of things. There was always problems about catering, because they would come out in hot packs, and we'd look at the hot packs, and we didn't like the hot packs, and we'd say, "Well, we're not going back to work until you've fixed them up." So that was really an issue again about single quarters. It was about bringing the standard of the food up in the single quarters - to bringing up to what happened on the job as well.

So yes, we fixed all those sorts of things up. It was just a matter of not



going back to work, going on strike, and there was always plenty to do. I mean there might not have been too many women around in those days, but there was a lot of drinking being done and there was a lot of socialising. So people sort of just dealt with it on a day-to-day basis and really didn't give a shit.

SR                    You mentioned sulphur as well as the dust.

Mossenton        Yes. Well, the sulphur.... there was nothing you could do about the sulphur, and in Dampier (if you know Dampier) there's always a wind coming in. If it's not a westerly, it's an easterly, and if it's not one of those it's something else. So there were always days in the pellet plant where you wouldn't work on either side of the plant. But you were up on the injurating floor where most of the sulphur fumes were coming out of, there was an easterly wind, well you didn't work on the the side, and if it there was a westerly wind, you didn't work on the other side. And there was nothing anyone could do. No-one was ever forced to do it. They tried to give us respirators and all that sort of stuff to work in those areas, but it just was a futile.... on the part of Hamersley Iron. It jsut wasn't going to be successful.

SR                    What was your worst moment the first time you were up here?

Mossenton        Well, I suppose the worst moment was the first day I was here. I mean that would have been the worst moment I've ever had, coming to grips with being there and wondering what it was going to be like to work in a place like that. I don't think I had another worst experience other than that. The rest of it was fun. I mean there was a lot of characters.... I mean unlike today where they seem to go out and employ people on the basis of their high education, and

~~what they've got here and there, in those days, I mean, you know, to get people up here, they really had to take anyone they could get. And~~ <sup>Uc</sup> ~~the characters that came up in those days were unique. I mean they weren't clones of anyone. They were themselves and you look around today, and anyone that's been promoted in the system seems to have the same attitude to the person that employed them or gave them that promotion, where in those days everyone had their own personality.~~ ~~It was a good time to work.~~

I remember a bloke by the name of Errol Watson, and he was a South African, ~~and I'd never met a South African before, and he used to get at~~ <sup>Union</sup> ~~meetings and.... I mean if the meetings were evr boring - you know I'm talking about union meetings down at the Community Centre - I mean he used to do something outrageous.~~ <sup>lc</sup> He used to just jump up on the tables and he'd just rip his pants down and say, "Oh this is a load of shit, and this is what I think of you!" and start running down the place without any pants on ~~and so forth. I mean and that's the thing of it you know,~~ <sup>Uc</sup> ~~it would just break the monotony of the meeting and then it would be back on track again you know, if you could call things 'getting on track' after something like that.~~

~~But he.... it was an experience working wuth him and I can remember, as only a tradesman just out of my time, that~~ <sup>Uc</sup> ~~we had an apprentice there, and the apprentice's name was Mick Cummings. Now Mick Cummings as it is today,~~ <sup>lc</sup> ~~he's actually the convenor of the metalworkers in Dampier today - took my position ever. And I can remember Mick being in the grinding mill - I suppose it was appropriate that grinding mill - that Mick was standing there with his hands behind his back, just wondering and having a look at this particular job, and Errol come up behind him and pulled his pants down, and wopped out his dick and~~



just flapped it in the back of Mick's hands, and you could see Mick grasping what the hell was this? and [laughs] it was a couple of seconds later before he realises that he had hold of Errol's cock in his hand [laughs]. And he certainly never forgot that and you could mention it to him today or any other day and he gets quite embarrassed about it, poor old Mick [laughs]. But I mean, Errol was just one of many people that you could mention out of the pellet plant, ~~or I suppose out of all things that you remember, I suppose Errol--~~ you could never forget Errol, couldn't forget him.

SR                   What about other humorous moments?

Mossenton       Oh.... other humorous moments. [pause] Well, I can remember.... well, this happened to me. We used to have an article, or a little magazine in the pellet plant called The Awful Truth, and it was a magazine, and it was set up by a committee, and we used to write stupid things in it. I can always remember reading in it one day, and I really had to have read it because I really couldn't remember too much about it. I can remember a group of us being out at the Walkabout Hotel, and we all got a little bit drunk, and there was a couple of sheilas around the place, and there was one sheila from Fortescue, from the roadhouse, and she was working at the roadhouse, and we were all bragging about - you know, what a great place it is to work at Hamersley Iron (I can't understand why we do that) but anyway she said, "Oh I've never been to a pellet plant, you know, where you people work. How about taking us in there to have a look." Anyway I was a day worker and certainly not a shift worker.... Anyway I ended up taking this woman on site around about two in the morning, and pissed as a newt, and I can say it now because I'm not employed there any

longer, but I was as drunk as a bloody skunk, and I had this woman there in my hand, and here we are, walking around with hard hats on.... and reading in The Awful Truth that there apparently had been a change in policy within Hamersley Iron in the pellet plant, where they do now have boilermakers on shift work, and they were starting employing women as TAs. Here was myself, walking around. I'd been spotted there by the supervisor and a few others that evening, you know, taking this woman around the injurating section, and I really can't believe I did that, but I did.

But I mean to talk about humourous things, I mean, just working at the Hamersley Iron was just humourous in those days. I mean everything was a good time. The things actually changed just before I left, there was a slight change in the policies. I remember an electrician that we had there, a bloke by the name of Milton Carroll, and Milton was a good bloke. He was an electrician. His wife, Jill, actually worked as a barmaid down the wet mess, and he ended up getting a job as a foreman. It was the first time I noticed that there was a difference of opinion between staff and wages and what their wives could do; because one of the conditions that Milton got the job - well he got the job, but a condition of him maintaining that position, was that his wife would have to resign her position as a barmaid down the wet mess at Dampier. And she ended up doing that, but it was also the end of their marriage. But.... well it wasn't long after that that she just could not come to grips with her and now, having to abide by some of the rules of the staff in that area, and that someone else had the ability to say what she did and what she didn't do in that town, and her husband wanting that particular job, and it was a very short time after that they broke up, and she went her way and he went his.

So that was disturbing to say the least, that there were people in a company to turn around and say, that well, I'm going now, telling you what your wife can and what you can't do in that particular town.

So I suppose with those sort of things come up that sort of puts you in a position of saying, "Well, it's wrong and someone has to do something about it." And it was after that that I left soon after that. I mean I went back to Perth. I ended up coming back up as a boilermaker at McPhees at the Two Mile in Dampier, after a short period of time and that's when I started getting more and more involved in ~~teh~~ Trade Union movement, because I think those sort of things where people could actually TELL people what they can do which were wrong, actually probably changed my opinion about how I dealt with people in that sort of position.

SR                    So how did you get involved?

Mossenton ~~well, really~~ I took a six month contract up with McPhees at the Two Mile working as a boilermaker, which wasn't too bad, but there were certainly a few things - and I was still in the iron ore industry. We were just working for a contractor in the iron ore industry. I was still associated with the same people, and I mixed with the same people that I was the previous year. It was certainly a different life style. The conditions were a lot worse. I mean I'd come from the single quarters where you had sort of your own amenities and so forth, and then back into the contracting area where you were again sharing two to a room. I mean I found that pretty hard to come to grips with, you know the communal shower. Jeez, I'd never been in a communal shower. You just walk into the block in the middle of the night, and here's all the



showers up, no curtains, no nothing, you just plonk your stuff on that bench-seat down the centre, and in you go to the shower. You know I suppose I'd been ~~sheltered a little bit of my life, and~~ I found that quite embarrassing for the first few bloody weeks, but you soon get used to it.

So certainly it was a change of understanding between the difference of the contractors versus the employees of the major companies. So there was certainly a difference there. I didn't really get involved too much at that time. It was then I'd had enough of the Pilbara and my sister was going overseas and I'd been away from home now for over two years, and she was going overseas, and I didn't expect her to be home for another three years, so I thought well, I'll go home to Melbourne, and just have a surprise visit. And I ended up doing that and staying in Melbourne for a period of time, and working in the construction industry. <sup>Later,</sup> ~~As a matter of fact~~ I got a job with McPhees in Melbourne, which was quite good, ~~because I met a lot of the people that I'd work in the Pilbara in McPhees, different foremen who were going from different location to different location, I met up with some of those again in Victoria.~~

I ended up becoming the shop steward at McPhees, because we had a few little problems there, ~~and we started working in the construction industry at Leisarts in Victoria, doing the hot strip mill. We were doing a few small jobs there~~ and that again was an education to me in the Trade Union of it, ~~because I was a shop steward as part of a group of shop stewards from different companies, and I can't remember the name of the bloke now, but it was from Hornybrooks, and he~~ <sup>was</sup> ~~the~~ <sup>vc</sup> convenor, and I can always remember him and the way he conducted these meetings, and believe me, by Jeez, <sup>[I'd think]</sup> I'd like to be like that some day, being able to have that sort of power, you know. And I suppose it was like a drug

listening to him, to say well if you could only do that on occasions, it must be ruddy good. Anyway there ended up being an eighteen week strike there and they closed the place down. ~~Everyone went and they said you could have your job back when they opened the gate, and I understand that happened. But I certainly didn't go back. I was well and truly out of it by then, and I ended up applying to have a job in Western Australia - because by that time I was a bit of a nomadic sort of person - I'd had enough of Victoria by that stage again, and I said well, I'll try back with Hamersley Iron. I saw them advertising in the paper, so I applied for a job, and they were stupid enough to take me back. And that brings in another era [laughs] when I got back there in '78.~~

END OF TAPE ONE SIDE A.



TAPE ONE SIDE B.

This is tape one side two: Stuart Reid interviewing John Mossenton on 29th of January 1991 at Karratha.

SR                    So by that stage you had become pretty much committed to union activities, I guess.

Mossenton        Well, I was committed to the extent that I knew what the union movement was about, unlike in my earlier years as an apprentice, and in my first few years in the Pilbara, I was learning, and certainly I'd been shown, and it had been shown to me by management, I suppose, that's how irresponsible it can be sometimes, and how they can affect people's lives. I didn't like that and certainly I was more astute.

But when I came back in 1978, I suppose it was the first day I was back there, that I understood how they could take advantage of someone new. I was employed as a boilermaker at Dampier at East Intercourse Island (that's the Hamersley Iron's major port) and the first day I got there I was asked to go and do a job on a Saturday. I mean not many people start on a Saturday, but I actually started work on a Saturday, and a bloke by the name of Dennis Turner, who was my foreman, he didn't know I'd been with Hamersley Iron before. He thought I was, you know, as green as they come, and he turned around and he said to me, he says, "Right, I want you to go around to the reclaimer pad, and I want you to weld up - hard-face these particular pieces of.... on the reclaimer." Anyway I said, "Yes, that's not a problem." So he took me around there, took my welder, dumped my welder off, set it up, and he says, "I'll be back at smoko to

pick you up." "Well," I said, "hang on." I says, "Where's the ute? I might want to go back for something." He said, "No, you won't need to go back for anything. There's enough here for you." I said, "Well, where's my TA?" And he said, "Well, you won't need a TA, because you're only going to be welding these things on." Anyway, so he jumped in the ute and pissed off.

Well, I waited around there (and this is my first day back) from seven o'clock to nine thirty. Anyway a TA came around to pick me up for smoko, so I jumped in the ute and I went back for smoko. Anyway he says, "How's things going?" I says, "Oh, they're going all right." Anyway so I had my smoko, and the TA said, "Well, I'm here to take you back." Anyway so the TA took me back around to the reclaimer pad and you know, we stopped and had a bit of a talk, and he said, "Well, what are you doing?" I said, "I'm doing absolutely nothing until I get a TA and a ute." And he said, "Jesus Christ!" he says. "You're fair dinkum," he says. I said, "I'm fair dinkum. I'm not going to work out here in the sticks by myself." I said, "There's a safety aspect here and," I said, "I want to have a TA and," I said, "I want to have a ute and I want somehow to be able to communicate in case something happens."

Anyway so he left and went back to the workshop. Anyway lunch time came around and he came back around and picked me up again. Took me back to the lunch time room, and anyway we were sitting round having lunch, and after lunch again, he takes me back out to the job. Anyway I hadn't seen the foreman, you know, he hadn't come around. Anyway, probably about half an hour after I got back from lunch, he came around. He said, "How's things going?" I said, "Things are going great." I said, "I'm still waiting for my TA and I'm still waiting for the transport." And he went off his head, and I said, "No point you going off

your head at me." I said, "I know my rights. I'm a bloody boilermaker. I'm a tradesman. I require a TA. I'm not working out here in the sticks." And there was bugger all he could do.

But he was willing to take advantage of me being a new bloke, doing as he wanted, and I imagine that goes on every day of the week, and again that was another nail in the coffin (if you could call it that) for me to take on a position in the union and become more and more active, because it's people like him that I say.... you don't need to educate workers. The union doesn't need to educate workers, or they've got to do is listen to the boss, and if they listen to the boss, sooner or later they'll educate themselves as to how devious they are. And that bloke was certainly one of the people who educated me about the rights and wrongs of management and I suppose I can thank him for where I am today.

SR           What was the presence of the union like? How active was the union at that stage?

SOMETHING IN THE AIR

Mossenton   Well, it was the most active. It was becoming more and more. 1974/75 I didn't really see too much about it. It was certainly a lot of domestic issues which were being sorted out on the job. I hadn't seen any sort of negotiations and so forth. As a matter of fact I think I just missed the negotiations before I got there in '74. 1978 there was something in the air. We knew something was happening in 1978. And it was the next year that we were all called to a meeting down at the oval and we'd set a position up to say that we wanted certain things, and those things were not negotiable. We wanted it. We wanted a pay rise, we wanted this and we wanted that and gee, I can't remember



~~what they all were now.~~ We ended up going on strike for between ten and eleven weeks, and it became - it got right out of hand. I say 'got right out of hand'; ~~it was probably....~~ it got out of hand as to what the issues were, because I remember Laurie Carmichael and Jack Marks being up here at a particular time, and we took the time at that stage to have them address our rally. And when we were having that particular meeting outside the TAB in Karratha, the police came up there and asked whether we had permission to have the meeting. ~~And we said, "We didn't know what you were talking about."~~ And then they turned round and ~~said that....~~ <sup>Uc</sup> they took the names of Mr Marks and Laurie Carmichael, ~~and we said, "Well bugger that."~~ We ended up going for a march down the main street of Karratha (if you can call it a main street) and up to the.... up to where Hamersley Iron were having a meeting in the Roebourne Shire offices, with some few placards and bits and pieces. And the coppers came up again and started ~~taking names of more people, and~~ <sup>Uc</sup> that was the start of 54B where the government had to issue a permit for these meetings to take place.

~~And~~ <sup>Uc</sup> anyway Laurie and Jack were arrested when they got off the plane in Perth and from then, that changed the whole idea of what our dispute was about. Our dispute was about wages, conditions and so forth, and then all of a sudden, we realised that we were in the middle of this bloody great political row about, you know, 54B and the ability to meet and so forth.

So it changed direction, but at the same time it was beneficial to us because we ended up picking up well over quarter of a million dollars in finance from unionists around the Pilbara to assist us in our plight. And certainly if it wasn't for that particular assistance - because there were a lot of people on the bones of their backsides at that stage - we had committees set up; we had

people organised with food and so forth; people distributing, everything. And that money which came in ensured that we were victorious in the end. I mean a lot of people will say that we lost. I don't think we lost. ~~I certainly think~~ that we achieved what our goals were. A lot of people will say that we shouldn't have gone back then. We could have got more. We may well have been ~~able to get a bit more but, I mean, hindsight's a wonderful thing.~~ We'd had enough at that stage. Well, the majority of people had enough, I'm quite sure and I'll be honest, I'd had enough. I mean I was broke by that stage. ~~I'd~~ borrowed money heavily to be able to keep my wife and my one child at that stage, you know in the custom that we were used to. I mean we were certainly not in the custom we were used to. I mean we'd taken a reduction in our living standards and so forth, but you certainly still had to maintain certain things in a place like this otherwise you'd go round the twist.

So that was a big thing, 1979, and I suppose out of 1979, if there was a thing that changed the industrial relations in the Pilbara, that was it. Hamersley Iron soon learnt that people who received large incomes each week, ~~that they~~ could go on strike and support themselves for a long period of time, and it was a letter which came off the back of a truck to us, that showed that Hamersley Iron's position over the next few years would be to try and reduce the level of income paid to their employees to ensure that that doesn't happen again. So 1979 was really the end of an era ~~and from that period of time, the companies~~ were certainly going to change, or Hamersley Iron was certainly going to change the way in which they did business with us, and we certainly needed to change also. But <sup>we</sup> unfortunately for us we didn't think anything was going to change. We were riding on the top of a wave. <sup>we</sup> ~~We'll keep on going~~ and in two years' time after that, we felt the boot right up our backside from Hamersley



Iron and we were devastated - in 1981. /

SR            ~~What was it that changed about their policy? How did they deal with you differently?~~

Mossenton    Well, in 1979, going back to work, we had a position of strength ~~because we had been out on the grass for a long period of time. There wasn't a lot of ore. They needed to gain.... or show the Japanese that they were a reliable supplier of iron ore,~~ and they did a deal with us in relation to industrial relations. We had an industrial relations policy put into place, known as 'The Blue Book' which said that no-one would lose time. I mean we could have a dispute as long as we didn't go home, we got paid for it. ~~We could sit on the job and not do anything. We'd have paid meetings, we could do this, we could do that, and we'd always be being paid.~~ There were heaps and heaps of disputes but no-one lost time, and that was the way Hamersley Iron wanted it, because they wanted to show that there was an improvement in lost time. ~~I mean there was certainly lost time when it really came down to the practice of it, it was just that we were all being paid for it.~~ And I think that weakened the Trade Union movement. /

I mean I've always been a believer that if it's worthwhile stopping for, it's worthwhile not getting paid for. And in that two years between 1979 and 1981 when they did away with this procedure, people became lazy; ~~People became.... well, they wouldn't have a meeting unless they were going to get paid for it, They wouldn't do anything until they got paid for it,~~ and it certainly weakened the Trade Union movement significantly on the job in 1979 to 1981. ~~And in 1981 when they turned round and said that we'd abused it, they'd abused it. I mean~~

they had allowed it to go on. But the workers were convinced that the union convenors abused it, but they were set up. They were allowed to. Some of them did, some of them didn't. I mean there were a few convenors around that would accept the position, but I remember in Tom Price and Paraburdoo, they used to sit in their MUA hats all day, waiting for the telephone call to.... if there was a problem on the job, and they were being paid continually all the time.

I'm not saying that's wrong. I think to a degree that you need to have that sort of situation in an iron ore company, but to the extent that they weren't doing anything with the time, I mean if they'd have gone out there and started doing a few things and being more active, instead of being reactionary knowing that there was not going to be a need for a reaction. The only time there was need to be a reaction, by then it was too late. I mean they'd lost the confidence of the troops on the job. And the troops on the job, after an eleven week dispute in 1979, and feeling how all these meetings and so forth were paid for, for the next two years, they'd lost the will to fight. They didn't want to know it. I mean people might contradict me about what I say, but personally I was there during it, and I've been there till now, and I believe that that's the truth, and it's been until 1990, until we've had the ability to be able to pull a major dispute within Hamersley Iron. It's taken that long to get over it.

Hamersley Iron now - the workers in Hamersley Iron would not be pussy cats now. I believe that they would have a mind again, because again over the last few years, I suppose it's getting out of the era we're talking about, but they've been suppressed, or been pretty harshly treated over the last five years. And it's taken that to get them back to go together again.

SR            Prior to the ten week strike in '79, what role did you play in the union, the Metalworkers' Union?

Mossenton    Prior to 1979, probably the dispute, a very.... oh, an active voice, if you could call it that. Someone that people would know that I was going to say something at a meeting, because I was pretty.... I was only a deputy steward in one of the shifts at the island where I worked but again, I believe, I was probably on my way up. I wouldn't admit that to too many people, but I certainly had ideas that eventually, after seeing that bloke in Victoria, that I would like to do something like that. I was willing to be heard and willing to be seen to be heard, but again, like the convenor at the time, a bloke by the name of Don Bartlam, was a good friend of mine, and Don was doing an excellent job, and you would never turn around and try and take his position. One, you wouldn't want to do it and, two, you wouldn't be successful because he was a very good convenor, and he showed that over a period of time. So it was just a matter of waiting and biding your time.

SR            What about during the dispute itself?

Mossenton    During the dispute? Well, it was mainly in the area of organising the food parcels and so forth. I didn't really get much to do in those particular disputes, because there were so many high profile people in the Hamersley Iron at the time, and the women - a lot of women. If it wasn't for the women, we wouldn't have won. But the women were excellent. The high profile stewards and convenors, they were continually going around and doing things. I mean if everyone who wanted to do something did something, I mean the [unclear]



'Too many cooks spoil the broth'. I mean there was just too many people around willing to do something, and I was quite satisfied in those days to sit back and allow other people to do it. I mean it was all being done. I don't think anyone could have done it any better.

But we learnt a lot. I learnt a lot from those particular days, and there it was necessary a few years after, in '82 to '83, where we were nearly going to go through the same situation again, and by being there in the 1979 and learning about how to set up those particular committees and everything else, ~~that~~ in 1983 when it was nearly having it again, that we'd set up all the committees but it was resolved before it went any further. Again it was just a matter of sitting back, listening and learning, and again it was part and parcel of my education, I suppose, as to where I am today.

SR           What were the main priorities for management at that stage, through '78/'79?

Mossenton    / '78 to '79. [pause] '78 to '79, I suppose <sup>management's</sup> ~~their~~ main objectives would have been to - well, naturally, to sell as much iron ore as they can. I mean they were always striving to do that. But I think they were trying at the same time, to break down certain demarkation issues around the place. ~~There was.... there seemed to be more and more disputes, and I take it from the metal trades' view point, internally in the metal trades, there was always argument about fitters and boilermakers, whether a fitter should be using an oxy torch, whether a boilermaker should use a huck bolt machine to the exclusion of the fitter. I mean the huck bolt machine if you don't know what a huck bolt is, it's a cold rivetting process, and we had these fans in the pellet plant, that~~

all the wear plates had to be rivetted to, and in the end of it they decided that they were going to huck bolt, and in the manufacturers' paperwork, they described it as cold rivetting process. But the fitters said, "No, no, no. It's there to replace bolts, which it is there written in the manufacturers' paperwork." So there was an argument as to who was going to utilise the huck bolt machine and so forth.

So we saw it more and more in those times, arguments as to demarkations between the trades. I didn't really notice too much in the areas of the unskilled people - I mean the production type people. But certainly in the trade areas it seemed to be a push-on.

SR                    With the same union covering both areas of workers, why should there be such a dispute?

~~Mossenton~~ [laughs] Well, I mean, <sup>Ue</sup> it was a matter of working overtime. I mean, the demarkation, if that's your work and that work needs to be done in conjunction with another piece of work, that means they could bring two people in to do the work instead of having one person, so if you turn around and break those demarkation issues up, you're going to reduce the income coming to the people. ~~It's going to be cheaper for the boss but I mean, we weren't certainly about reducing our living standards.~~ I mean our whole basis on our life up there was based on overtime earnings. I mean no-one comes to the Pilbara and wants to work a 38 hour week. ~~I mean if you want to work a 38 week, you might as well go back to Melbourne, Sydney or back to Perth. You don't come to the Pilbara for 38 hours a week, and that's probably the reason why the 38 hour week, the Pilbara was the last place for it to come, because just no-one wanted~~

to commit themselves to that work that little in a place like this [laughs].

SR           Was there also a change following on from '78/'79 in the amount of overtime that was available?

Mossenton   Well, there were always arguments about overtime and the availability of it. I mean of all of the domestic issues, I suppose ~~overtime....~~ I mean <sup>Uc</sup> the less and less overtime there became, the more and more arguments that came between the workers themselves, and I have no doubt that after that 1979 dispute, ~~and Hamersley Iron's position, and from Terry Lynch to say that they would have to reduce the income of the workers to ensure that '79 doesn't repeat itself,~~ that there was a decisive program from them to say: 'Reduce the amount of overtime'. How do you do that? Do away with demarkation issues. ~~You do away with demarkation issues, you don't subject yourself or expose yourself to that sort of overtime. And so by doing that, which again then created a conflict within the union itself, between the workers about who was going to get it and who wasn't,~~ <sup>Uc</sup> and it was the beginning of the end, I think. It was the start of restructuring. I mean they say restructuring only happened last year, but believe me, it happened ten years ago, or it certainly started that way in this industry. ~~I mean I'm talking about 'this industry' as being the forefront for the union. I mean it is one of THE last strongholds of the Trade Union movements in this country, and it started to happen ten years ago - restructuring.~~

SR           What sort of problems did management have, and how did they try to resolve those problems? How did they try to overcome them?



Mossenton Well.... oh, I'm not quite sure what the question is.

SR I'm just trying to get you to put yourself on the other side for a moment, and see this ~~from the~~ management prospective. From their point of view, what sorts of things would they see as problems and how did you see them from your point of view?

Mossenton Well, they would certainly start trying to deal with the workers on individual bases, instead of coming through the official union position because, I suppose, that if there's been a reduction in overtime, and a reduction in the demarkation, the way to get around that is to be pally with certain people in the workplace. And I have no doubt that the company had the people that they could rely on and go and talk to and say, "Well, listen, will you do this job?" You see, unlike the position in '74, where overtime was being shared around, we had control of the overtime; we controlled the demarkation. Now we're getting into a situation where we have lost control of the demarkation issue - or losing control of the demarkation issues. We certainly haven't got control - we certainly believed we had control of the overtime rosters and so forth, but people were being.... the hungrier they were getting, a little bit more desperate, and they were willing to be more pally with the boss, and again, that's not a good situation for the Trade Union movement to have against them, that you've got the boss going out there, or being told by his management to go out and be more friendly with the workers.

So they were trying to break down this 'them and us' attitude, but it certainly wasn't for our advantage or the individual's advantage; ~~it was to ensure that they could have a.... well, you know, they just wanted to break down the system~~

between the union and the employees, ~~And that's what I think they strove to do,~~  
~~and I think they did that by being pro-active, by going out there and dealing~~  
more with the individual than they were with the official unions.

SR Were their recruitment policies changing too?

*The company's recruitment policies were changing too.* ← *Italics*

~~Mosenton~~ I don't really think I noticed it at that stage but certainly  
<sup>Uc</sup> they were more picky. ~~They....~~ <sup>Uc</sup> we seemed to have a lot more people from the  
agricultural industry, [laughs] farmers and so forth, jack of all trades, ~~and so~~  
~~forth.~~ We found people being given employment opportunities - and I'm not  
against this - but we found people being given more opportunities who were on  
the bones of their arse, so to speak. ~~But people who were well off were just~~  
coming up there because they wanted a change, they didn't seem to be getting  
the jobs. They were giving jobs to people who really needed it, and I think  
they were buying loyalty. Instead of getting the right people for the job - I'm  
~~not saying these other people were not good enough to have the job~~ <sup>Uc</sup> but they  
went out and started buying loyalty, I believe, by giving these people jobs up  
there, and certainly people that didn't have Trade Union backgrounds.

I mean very hard to do in the tradesmen area because a tradesman has a  
different background. I mean if you've done a trade, you've done it in a  
workshop, and more than likely in this country, there's been a unionised  
workshop in it. But certainly in relation to tradesmen's assistants, production  
workers, other bits and pieces round the place, we found a lot of those people  
were on the bones of their arse, and if you weaken the production unions  
because the production union.... if you haven't got a militant production  
union, well, I mean, that's the first step. They're the ones that shift the ore

over the end of the wharf, and if you can weaken that one, then that's the first link. That's the best link to bloody have a shot at. And then they utilise that against the craft unions. So I certainly believe they did change their employment strategy and based it on that, particularly within the unskilled areas.

SR           How did you see issues of discipline and gains of status and dismissal and so on, were there changes in policy on that over the time that you were....?

Mossenton Yes, well in the '70s, you could always be virtually.... no-one got the sack. I mean I don't know what you'd have to do to get the sack in the '70s. I mean you just didn't get the sack. You'd have to do something bloody really bad to get the sack. But in the '80s certainly there was a change also there, that warnings seemed to be coming in more and more often. We got to the situation where they were documenting everything against individuals. ~~I mean it was just.... and it got to the stage....~~ I don't think it's to this stage yet, but it's like a baseball game, I suppose, where you go.... the rules are three strikes and you're out. ~~That seemed to be going the way, that they would be giving you a chance and letting you know you had a chance, and then a second chance, and a third chance, and say, "Right. Well, I'm sorry," and if you didn't take it and if the unions objected,~~ sometimes if you got a good convenor, you could get out if it. But if it ever got to the courts, I mean they just went in there and said, "Well look, he's had one chance, two chances, three chances; he's got to go." And it was really the first time from then that we started seeing terminations being done through the Commission, and the Commission has done a lot since. ~~And the policies of Hamersley Iron's certainly~~



changed where from a day you couldn't get the sack [laughs] to now where they're getting rid of people. I suppose they believe they can get people to replace them in these times where there's a lot of unemployment out there and people willing to come up here, because of mortgages and so forth. But again that's certainly a change.

SR           What did they do to try and control or limit the activities of unions?

Mossenton   [pause] well it went from the extreme, as I've said, from between '78 to 1981, they didn't do anything. I mean you could do what you bloody liked. In 1981 when they had that big change in the industry, they said then that the shop steward is an employee first, and he will be expected to do these things, and then we accepted that. We accept that. We accept that he is an employee, ~~but we also accept that when you become a shop steward or a convenor,~~ especially in a place like the iron ore industry, where you're dealing with thousands of workers.... I mean in your own areas, you're probably dealing with a few hundred. I mean it takes you a fair bit of time to look after those people, ~~and we accept that you're an employee and should be doing some work,~~ but you're also there to assist them in the running of their operation, and they decided that well, that wasn't on, and that they then said that you could do that work, but first you'd have to get permission. ~~Well, you'd had to get permission off....~~ and you weren't to take the initiative. I mean you had to sit down there and do your job, and then you'd have to get a phone call from a supervisor of another area, <sup>be</sup> because there would be a worker in another area would have a problem. He would go to his supervisor, the supervisor then would ring at the request of that worker, to say I need my convenor. He would then

ring the convenor's supervisor. The convenor's supervisor would then say, "Oh, he's a bit busy at the moment. He may be able to ring you back in a little bit of time." ~~So he'd come out and see you and say, "Listen, Joe Blow from over the workshop, he wants to have a chat to you. I can't release you right now, but I can release you when you've finished that particular job," and that's the sort of situation. I mean,~~ <sup>Uc</sup> it was a position that we would not accept.

I mean if a worker wanted a representative right then and there, then the representative would go, and again that caused problems also because the convenor would just walk off the job. He would say, "You can get stuffed." I mean <sup>Uc</sup> in the end we used to organise it ourselves. ~~We used to have turn around and have our shop stewards' meetings which we still had, and we would have probably thirteen different shop stewards in one particular location, and we would end up organising times that the bloke from the light <sup>vehicle</sup> legal workshop would ring up at seven o'clock. The bloke from the number one workshop, he'd ring up at seven forty-five, and so forth for the rest of the day. And again, I mean, we showed that if Hamersley Iron wanted to bastardise the position about giving convenors release to do particular work, then we showed them that we had a bigger imagination than them. That we could turn around and <sup>Uc</sup> we could organise problems to be at any area at any particular time to keep the convenor out of the work area and to keep going around the place. And we orchestrated that and we maintained that bloody position for a long period of time to show them we could do it. And in the end things were relaxed, ~~things were relaxed,~~ and it went back to a sort of harmonious relationship again. I mean that's just like just having your ups and downs, when the pendulum swings, I suppose, when they believe they can do it, they'll do it and it's just something that you've got to be continually wary of.~~

SR           What is the pendulum related to? Is it related to stockpiles and orders and....?

Mossenton    Yes, well, definitely. That's.... Yes, I mean if there's a lot of ore there on the port, in stockpiles, I suppose the people in the port areas probably have a good hand, but the people in the mine sites don't. If there's a dispute on at one of the other iron ore companies, everything seems to go hunkydory, because they want to get their shipping out, but if everything's running right smooth, right through the Pilbara and they seem to have a shot at us. But we've got to be smart too. I mean we have a shot at them at the same time, and we know the good times and the bad times, and we're not about to go and bloody sacrifice ourselves when we darn well know we're not going to have an impact, and I suppose, I don't take anything against them for doing that, because we do exactly the same to them. So we accept it and they accept it.

END OF TAPE ONE SIDE B.

edited to 5000



TAPE TWO SIDE A.

This is interview nineteen in the Pilbara iron ore industry oral history project for the Department of Industrial Relations at the University of Western Australia. Tape two side one: Stuart Reid interviewing John Mossenton on 29th January 1991 at Karratha.

SR           Something I wanted to ask you about: were there ever any issues of introduction of new technology or change in the equipment?

Mossenton     Prior to 1980, no. There was really only familiarisation of the hydraulics and pneumatics courses and so forth. There was very little change in the whole operation between that period of time. I mean there might have been changes in types of conveyors. Like in the pellet plant there used to be a thing called the TKV, which was a bucket type at the end of the pelletising process, and it broke down all the time, and certainly those things had to be replaced, and they were replaced with conveyor systems and so forth. But, I mean, they weren't new technology as such. I don't think it was until the mid '80s that actually there were introductions of change, and most of that happened in the areas of the electronics where.... and I think the only reason they introduced that was because it was reducing the number of men that were required to run the operation. So, I mean, anything that we've seen in new technology has always been based on less manpower - or it's got bigger. But really no, no real introduction of major technology.

I mean the Hamersley Iron operation - and I have visited other iron ore companies round the world. I was lucky to go on a mission in 1987, and what I've seen around the place is, every iron ore producer in the world looks at Hamersley Iron as the top, and they strive to obtain their results. So Hamersley Iron is certainly a very formidable opponent when it comes to technology.

SR I'm actually surprised to find that. I guess.... I've never seen other iron ore places so, you know, I didn't realise that.

Mossenton Well, it's.... I mean when you look at the areas of Canada and so forth, their iron ore industry was.... well, it's very low grade ore, and everything has to be processed through a concentrate or betterfication plant, and that's the way they sell their ore, or otherwise they pelletise it. It's quite costly to do both so, I mean, the Hamersley Iron - or the Australian ore generally - is around about 60 per cent, 66 per cent iron. I mean they've got a few problems with alumina and so forth, but generally it's a very high superior ore, and their major competitor, Brazil at the moment, I mean they sell an alluvial ore anywhere, and it's usually pelletised itself. So again, it's an over-rated cost for the Brazilians to compete, and I suppose, Hamersley Iron of all the iron ore companies in the world, and in Australia, they have the fortunate position of having one of the most best lump.... I mean they are one of the only lump sellers of iron ore in the world, and they have a monopoly on that particular market just about. So they're right up the front.

SR                   Just briefly could you mention that new introduction of that new technology in the mid '80s and what kinds of issues it raised for the union movement given that it meant fewer people?

Mossenton       Well, it created.... I suppose it caused one of the biggest disputes that we had in the '80s. In 1983, in Paraburdoo, there was a demarkation line between the CEMU and AWU about how you take ore off the face. It's always been done by a shovel. But Hamersley Iron introduced new technology into the mine in Paraburdoo around by that time by introducing these great big loaders, front-end loaders, which had coverage of the AWU. I mean the AWU covered those particular loaders. So they ended up putting those things in to the face, which sparked a demarkation issue and a dispute between the CEMU and the - well, it was the FED in those days - and the AWU. And that was a pretty nasty dispute, and to this day I still don't think it's been sorted out as to what happened. I think generally it's accepted that shovels are the best thing for operating on the face and they're utilised by the FED, or CEMU today, but on occasions they still utilise that particular loading sequence utilising the AWU.

So I imagine if it's still going on today that we probably lost that dispute, and I don't think it was ever a problem until such time as one or the other, go on strike. And then they utilise one union against the other. So, I mean, that's probably the biggest thing as far as technology which was introduced in



the '80s which caused a major problem in the demarkation. And naturally when you are bringing in something big, you're going to use less people, because it's going to move more ore, and generally the CEMU or the AWU haven't had a problem with that, of introducing that new technology. They just want more money for it. So they see anything that they bring in to the industry that's going to reduce the number of men, fair enough, but it's going to cost them for it.

In the areas of the electronics, I suppose, where the biggest change has been where.... which has the ability to affect the impact on the manning, the PLCs have gone into just about all equipment. Where once upon a time, for instance, at East Intercourse Island, their port loading facility (and I can talk about that intimately) that we used to have an operator on the dumper - or two operators on the dumper. One used to look after the dumper, one used to look after the positioner. We had another one on the stacker. We then had one on the reclaimer. We had one in the control room, and we had one on the ship loader. Today I understand that it will only be necessary to have one in the control room, one in the ship loader, and one at the dumper. They don't need anyone.... they don't need to man those other places. And after talking to one of the staff people who was at the port, he doesn't believe it's necessary either to have someone in the control room. So going from those numbers, they seem to be able to run the whole operation with two people. One at either end of the operation - one in the ship loader and one in the dumper.

So that's going to have a significant effect on the AWU production people, where in the past they've said, "The introduction of new technology, give us more money." Now, it's on the basis that they're just doing away with those positions altogether. They're really going back to being.... looking after the wash down areas and so forth, and personally I think, those people are going to find themselves in the position of ship loader operator and dumper operator and control room operator, you'll see a push for them to go to staff, or you'll see a push from Hamersley Iron that they become tradesman operator, because you're going to need a high level of electronic knowhow to be able to operate and maintain those particular positions. So I think that the AWU are going to find themselves in all sorts of trouble shortly.

SR            Just going back to industrial conflict and take this back also to '74/'75 through the '70s; who was it that had the power?

POWER PLAY

Mossenton    Ah well [pause] I think that in.... I think leading up to 1979, from say '76 to '79, it was the company that maintained the power. I think that's why the unions maintained such a large campaign of industrial unrest in 1979 to take that power away from the company. ~~They'd seem to be.... The unions~~ weren't being able to achieve anything. The unions certainly wanted to achieve certain things. The company were showing the power. They had the power to do those things and the unions in 1979, decided to wrestle that away from them. ~~And~~ I believe they did do that but unfortunately, they didn't maintain that position after a couple of years.

1974 I think it was the other way around. I think it was between '74 to '76, it was the unions who had the power, or there'd been a dispute in '74 over the award negotiations, and they'd maintained that position, and in 1976, it was a ~~position where the unions were segregated.~~ Up until 1974 there was an award with all of the unions. In 1976 the company realised that they had an opponent, you know, one group of people, and they needed to break that up, and in 1976 they went and had negotiations with the separate unions, and we had a group of separate awards that came out in 1976.

They wined and dined a lot of the ~~union officials or convenors - I wouldn't say the officials - but the convenors were certainly being wined and dined in~~ Perth. There were long negotiations in Perth in 1976, where people were doing their own things and I don't think anyone wanted to come home. I think they were all having such a great old time in Perth, that they wanted to stay there for ever and a day. And out of that became the formula for Hamersley Iron to get the initiative back. They've split the unions up and now they've got four or five different awards that came out of those negotiations, and that was the only time it's ever happened.

Again after that, in 1977, the unions again went in collective and they came out with a document, but the damage had been done. The classificational structures had been altered ~~so forth~~ to really set the problem of demarkations. ~~I've got to explain that in 1974 there was an agreed position that there was~~



work to be done by individual unions. But in 1976 when they did their individual thing, each union wanted to have as much coverage as they could, and then you noticed that.... because no one had input to the other, you noticed that the documents were being registered in 1976 that all of a sudden you found classifications in their documents that shouldn't normally be in there, or wouldn't have been accepted if the award had been done collectively. So when they went back together, the damage was done. People would stand back and say, "Oh yes, we do have constitutional coverage of these people. Just go back to the 1976 award with Hamersley Iron, which was an award which was done individually and not in conjunction with each other. So I mean they've utilised that 1976 Hamersley Iron and individual unions to further their own ends to gain greater coverage. So that was a problem and I don't think we ever got over that. And that was the start - that was again another problem which has set in, and which has assisted in great change in this industry.

SR           Where would you place the blame for those demarcation disputes arising? How would you apportion it between the unions on the one hand, grappling for more coverage, and the company, on the other hand, trying to <sup>drive</sup> draw ~~up a wedge~~ <sup>a wedge</sup> between the different unions?

Mossenton   Well, I think it's quite easy at any time for the company to create a dispute within a union, or quite easy for the company to create a dispute between two different unions. I mean they have the whip hand. I mean they hold the money. They can do what they like. I mean they can do a deal. I

mean if an individual convenor goes in there, and the company says to him, "Listen, we're going to do you a deal. Your members are going to have a great advantage over this," and if the unions aren't talking to each other, I mean he's going to do that deal. And he doesn't look at the consequences over a long period of time, and a lot of these people, especially in the unskilled areas, I mean every skill that they obtain, is something extra that they didn't have before, and they grab hold of that. So it was a lot easier for the company to do deals with the unskilled - well, the non-trades areas, than the trades areas, because the trades people didn't want to do any other work. I mean they were quite happy to do their own trade, and leave all the shit work to those unskilled people. And the Trade Unions, I think, made the biggest blue by allowing a lot of that work to go. They did deals to create more employment in the earlier parts of... or the later parts of the '60s and '70s, early '70s, to say, "Well, the tradesmen aren't going to be doing any belt work. They're not going to be doing any service work," which were part and parcel of their trade anyway, and they made classifications up. So all of a sudden, you find we have now beltmen, we have servicemen grade one, servicemen grade two; we have riggers which was part and parcel of our trade to a degree; tool and material storemen and we created all those particular jobs for the metalworkers, for our members, but at the same time, in 1976, the other unions claimed some of that work too, because it wasn't necessarily just trade work. And then we started having problems about demarkation between the unions. But the company, they knew what they were doing, and I think it was just shortsightedness of the unions to turn around and create those classifications. I mean, no-one would

screen that change, I'd say. You know, if you just employ a person that goes out to just to change a scree mat, it was part and parcel of a tradesman's job, but it was a dirty job. He didn't want to do it so let's give it away. And by giving away those jobs it created big problems for us.

SR                Within the union, in the areas where unions did have power, who was it within the union that actually held the power?

Mossenton       Well, the convenor no doubtedly had the power. If he had the support of his lieutenants, his shop stewards, he had the power to do anything, and it was always a position that.... well, I mean there were three major.... oh I suppose four major unions on the sites: that's the CEMU (or the FED), the AWU, the AMWU and to a lesser degree the ETU. It was a battle. Well, the FED were unique. They had their own way of doing things. I mean they had the railway line. They had to get the ore there. They used to do many deals, and I give them credit. I mean they did what the AWU should have been doing for years. The AWU seemed to fall over for some reason and do deals which really didn't assist their members in such a way. But the FED, they did their deals and I mean, you've only got to look at the wage packets today of those people, compared to the people in the operational area, to see that here you've got two production unions, and one's probably on \$20000 a year more than the other one, to say well, you know, "What the hell's gone wrong there?"



<sup>Uc</sup>  
~~So~~ the FED were unique. They knew how to... they had good organisers. They had good convenors, stewards. They knew how to put the pressure on the company. I don't say the workers themselves, it was a matter of knowledge from those organisers. But they did a good job.

The AWU, I don't think they did a good job at all. I think that they were very non-unionised people who were quite willing to accept, "Oh, let's just get on with the job," right, all of the time. And I say that they employed a lot of people on the basis of them buying loyalty, and I think that's what they did. And that they didn't achieve as much because their workforce weren't militant and certainly their organisers and convenors weren't either; or if they were, they certainly found other ways [laughs] of being grateful.

The two metal trades' unions, they were principled unions. Probably sometimes too principled. And unfortunately it seemed to take a long time for them to achieve anything because most of them were dayworkers. ~~They weren't on a great income. They seemed to be on less money than both the production unions because being dayworkers,~~ <sup>Uc</sup> if they played up at all, they would stop their overtime ~~they were on a 38 hour week - they couldn't achieve too much.~~ But I suppose because they were continually being oppressed by that sort of treatment, they were the more militant out of them all, and it made them smarter. The metalworkers, and I speak from personal knowledge, and the ETU, ~~that~~ when they went out on a campaign, they damned well knew that they would have to pick the right time. The others would just do it. ~~They were non-thinking most of the~~

time - just go out and do it, because they damned well knew they didn't have to think about it because sooner or later, they were going to come and get what they got, because they needed to have that ore.

But the metal trades' area, I mean there's been times we've been on strike and done things, I mean, sometimes it would be two, three weeks before we'd pick up anything. And <sup>we</sup> the metalworkers became smarter because they had to be, because their workers were receiving less of an income ~~well not all of them~~ but certainly was a large group of people in light-legal workshops, who weren't essential to the operation. They weren't in the service industry. They weren't picking up overtime but they had to look after those people. So they had to be ~~smarter~~. They created funds (you know slush funds) to make up the difference for those people, and finance was a big thing. I mean the metal trades, I suppose, were the leaders in those areas, and when they had a dispute after that, ~~they were smarter, they were organised for something to break down - or not organised for it to break down.~~ I shouldn't say that, but they would wait for something to break down, and then there would be just an automatic walk out, knowing that because demarkation issues were there (they were set in stone in those days) no-one else would go in and do their work. ~~Contracters wouldn't be brought in.~~ If you bring a contractor in to to do someone else's work, then you create another dispute on top of that dispute.

~~So people~~ were a lot smarter in the craft unions. That's the way they had to do ~~their business.~~ And to gain the power - well, everyone strove to be able to achieve that end. I don't think that there were a lot of people that wanted to abuse the power, but certainly power is what you strive for, because without the power you don't have the ability to represent your workers. ~~You can't rely on the boss as he's always said, "I'm fair."~~ I mean he might be fair in his own eyes. He might believe he's a good person and doing the right thing, but at the end of the day, I mean, you've got to represent the workers that you're looking after, and to do that, you have to be able to put the pressure on the boss and ~~that's to gain the power;~~ and <sup>bc</sup> as a bloke said to me, he said, "What you've got to do, is you've got to strive to be able to walk up to the general manager and tell him to look out the window, and look at the ship load<sup>er</sup>, and say, 'If you don't agree with me, ~~because I'm being fair and reasonable,~~ (don't worry what ~~his views are)~~ if you don't agree with me, I have the ability to get on the telephone and turn that ship loader off, and if you don't believe me then watch me," and that's what you strove for because that was the ultimate pressure. You didn't worry about the cigar or the chair that he was sitting in, or the suit that he had on to show that he was the boss. But once you could prove to him that you could do that, then you earned his respect, because until <sup>such</sup> some times <sup>as</sup> you could effect that, he really didn't have any time for you. ~~It was the only time he really wanted to talk to you, when you could do something like that.~~



I mean I can remember going from.... I had a three bedroom house, and I had a.... I had two children at the time and I was having another one, and there was a large demarkation dispute between the AWU and the Metalworkers, and the general manager was Vic Strong. [pause] Both the Metalworkers and the AWU were on strike. They came up and there was a new ship coming from Korea. It was a first - it was on its maiden voyage and they had television crews and everything. They wanted this ship in there. They wanted that ship, you know, to be loaded on time because it was very important as far as the publicity was concerned. And Vic Strong turned around and he says, "I want both Mossenton and Kelly in here now." Right. And [laughs] here I've never seen a bloke fume more than old Vic at that particular stage, and Vic said, "I want you bastards back at work." He says, "I don't care what it costs." He says, "I want the problem sorted out." And the problem was sorted out, and I said to him, I said, "Well, there's one other bloody thing, that I want fixed," and I said, "from a personal viewpoint." I said, "I've been looking for a four bedroom house, and that bastard over the other side," (Mike Woosnan his name was; he was the industrial officer at the time) "he wouldn't give me this house, and the reason he wasn't giving me the house is because you're stopping it." And he says, "Fuck," he says, "if that's all it's going to take you to get back to work, you can fucking have it," you know [laughs]. It was the next day I had a four bedroom house in Karratha. I haven't told too many people that. They might think I'm corrupt.

But I certainly believed I was entitled to that four bedroom house because of the ages of my children, and I think a lot of people did too, but it was simply because, I think, that I was a convenor, that they were showing me that I couldn't get it because I was a convenor. But at the end of the day, I mean, I achieved the house. It was just another little bit on the end of that dispute to have that rectified, you know. But we fixed that part but there was just one outstanding bit, fix that and you'll get them back for sure.

SR                   How did you fix up the demark dispute?

Mossenton       Ah [pause] I'm just trying to think. It was.... I don't think.... wait a minute, I don't think it was a demarkation dispute, it was a dispute about an AWU storeman, so that caused the demarkation itself, because he shouldn't have been an AWU storeman. He was a tool material storeman which was covered by the metalworkers, but this bloke wanted to belong to the AWU. And this bloke had been given a bit of a cheek behind the store and he pretended to throw a seven pound hammer at him. Unfortunatly he let the hammer go and it hit the bloke on the head. The dispute was that the metalworkers wouldn't work with this particular storeman, and the company were going to sack the storeman, and they ended up sacking the storeman. But the AWU went on strike, saying well it was unjustified and they wanted him re-instated because he was a good bloke, and the metalworkers are saying, "Well, hold on he tried to kill this bloke. We're not having him back on the job." And in the end there was a Commission hearing about it where he was terminated and the company re-employed him again.

- straightaway. I mean no sooner had the Commission turned around and said, "You're sacked, that's it," Hamersley Iron then turned round and said, "Righto, we're going to re-instate you, but as a new employee, loss of all entitlements." And the metalworkers said, "Well, we're not working."

And that was the issue, about how to resolve that issue, and at the end of the day, it was resolved about who was going to work with him. I think he was taken out of the store and he was guaranteed that no metalworker was going to have to be put with him, and so forth. So that resolved the issue between the parties. So it wasn't a demarkation, but it was caused by a demarkation issue initially, about whose actually job it is. I mean the metalworker storeman would certainly not throw a hammer at a metalworker [laughs].

SR                   What is the source of the power for the convenor? How does the convenor get to a stage where they can, with confidence say, turn that shiploader around?

Mossenton       He gets to have the full backing of the workforce. He has to have respect from the workforce. I mean he just can't get into a position and say, "I'm the convenor and I'm going to do these sort of things," because if that was the case, workers aren't stupid, they would turn around and see that a person's going to abuse that power, and they would soon rectify that problem, by a vote of no confidence in the actual convenor. And I don't think we've been in that situation where that's happened. ALL the people that I've dealt with



within Hamersley Iron over the sixteen odd years, have been responsible people to that degree. They certainly have not abused their power.

I remember Bruce Collier from the Commission saying that there were.... what was it? "The cowboys of the Pilbara - power without responsibility," and I don't agree with them. I mean he maintained those positions that people up here had this power but they didn't understand what the power was. I mean I would look at it and say that it should have been voiced the other way, that the companies had power and they were irresponsible for what they were doing, and they were being irresponsible in many forms. I don't think the 'cowboy convenors' if that's the phrase 'cowboy convenors of the North West', actually exercised this position of power without responsibility. I think they were quite responsible.

[noise on tape]

SR                   Okay, I think it's fixed now.

Mossenton       Okay. Right, what was the question again?

SR                   What did the management think the union strategies, the unions' objectives were?

Mossenton I'm sure they knew that we were out to improve the wages and conditions of the workforce, but I think what they saw us as, was as being a thorn in their side about how to change the way in which work was done in the industry. And they were right. I mean we didn't want any change. We didn't see the necessity for any change. Our position was to maintain what we had. I mean we were striving for better wages and some conditions, but generally we wanted to keep things the same. The company's position was that they wanted to make change and they knew that we would be in opposition to that. So they knew what our objectives were and they saw us as just a thorn in their side to be able to do that. So I imagine that's why they tried to recruit in different ways and deal with individuals instead of unions, to try and weaken the union construction from within. And I believe that they were probably successful in doing that.

SR Are you referring to a particular stage of time that they were doing that?

Mossenton Oh, I think from the early '80s, that that was their idea about making change. So up until then, it was.... we were still in a sort of.... we're growing. I think up until the '80s, they had a change of view to say, "Well, this is not the Oakleigh Plate, a sprint. We are now the Melbourne Cup, and we're here for the long haul," and they certainly then needed to change their way of doing things, because now they're an established iron ore producer, and they're going to be here for a long time to come, and they

certainly don't want things to remain as they've been in this honeymoon period of the industry growing to what they had.

END OF TAPE TWO SIDE A.



TAPE TWO SIDE B.

Tape two side two: Stuart Reid interviewing John Mossenton at Karratha on the 29th of January, 1991.

SR           Once again on the subject of conflict, what was the fundamental basis for conflict between unions and management from workers and management? Was it an ideological thing? Were there people within the union movement who had some sort of ideological commitment to the working-class struggle against capital?

Mossenton    I don't think it ever got down to those particular issues. It was really about these people wanted to improve their conditions. I don't think it got down to the basis of it. I don't think many of the workers understood the business about the capitalists versus the rest of us [laughs]. I mean they really didn't see it that way. There were certainly people in the Trade Union movement who pushed that position across, but I don't think they were very successful. I mean they were certainly successful to the extent to say, "These people make a lot of money. They should be sharing a bit of it, but at the end of the year when we had our agreements, we want more money." That certainly gets across to the people, but I don't think they really understood a lot about the ideological positions of the two different areas. It was mainly that we were making a lot of money for these people and it needs to be shared at the end of the day - and that was the main reason for conflict.

The only other area of conflict that we really had was how different people were treated, our union representation and those sort of things. I mean if you have a look through the iron ore industry, I mean, those two things are the major things that have caused disputes - the major things. And whenever they wanted dispute with us, they always fall back on it. I mean, because it's always the same. It's just the position that they want to have the right to manage and they don't want anyone to interfere.

So they certainly have a position where they see it, and they see it from a very high position in their organisations, but I don't think that's necessarily on the shop floor at the supervisory area. I mean the supervisors generally come up through the ranks. I mean some would say a lot of them were are suckholes, that's how they've got there, but generally I don't think they wish to push the position about, you know, "We want the total right to management," especially in the craft areas. I mean the craft areas, they were brought up with a union background anyway. They might not agree with it but they certainly understand the position.

SR           What was your perception of the Commission - Industrial Commission?

Mossenton Well, I mean I.... I'd never seen a Commission before I got up here. I mean I was petrified like anyone else going to court for the first time. [pause] They seemed in the early days, and I take it only on the basis of report back meetings, that it was quite good, because we were generally successful, and again in the '70s, it was.... the difference being that everything could be done for reconciliation. It didn't need to be arbitration. Our convenors at that time, and I mean I was a member at that stage, I was only in the ranks, I wasn't in an official position, but we had many, many report backs where people had gone to the Commission. They'd had their discussions and were able to come to an agreed position between the company and the union at a conciliatory level. It wasn't until after that major dispute, and in 1981, where we then started to get the bad side of the Commission, that every time we went there we started losing, because they changed their attitude about how they were conducting themselves in the Commission. They were becoming more legalistic. They weren't dealing with it on the merits of the case, good conscience and equity, like the Commission guidelines state under Section 26. I mean it was now becoming.... the real.... they started to show themselves as to what they were. They were not there to compromise themselves at all from that period of time.

So the Commission from the '70s, when we had the upper hand, they seemed to.... you know we had great success. After the '80s again their idea of how to deal with us changed, thus their way of dealing in the Commission changed too. And the Commission didn't make too many recommendations in our favour after that,



but I mean, the few times they make recommendations and then been challenged on appeal, they certainly started to realise that they've got to be a lot more careful in dealing with the iron ore companies. And that's the same today unfortunately.

SR Did it change depending on which government was in?

Mossenton Ah [pause] I think it got worse with the Labor Government [laughs]. I really can't even remember when there was a change of government, but no, I don't think the government made any difference at all. I think it was just a matter of them changing direction, that is to say, "Well, this is now the long term we're looking at, not the short term. We've gone through that period."

SR What about different Commissioners?

Mossenton There's always stories that, you know, you had Commissioners like people who'd give away more than others, and so forth. I find that the good Commissioners were only seen to be good Commissioners because the company and the unions in those days, had the ability to be able to come to a resolution and conciliation. I think that once the arbitration was brought into it, then I didn't think that there was a difference between any of the Commissioners. They were all there to do a job and they knew that if they didn't do it properly, they'd be challenged by the opposite party. So certainly there seemed to be

better Commissioners than others, but that was only in conciliation. When it came down to arbitration, I think they were all the same.

SR           How did the Commission influence that relationship of power between the parties?

Mosenton     Well, I find the Commission always wants the easy way out. They were always saying, "Well, we should try and sort this out through conciliation." I darn well know on occasions where the Commission was quite frustrated, because there was one issue which I was intimately involved in, was a termination of a person who was on worker's compensation. He'd been on worker's compensation for four years. A lot of people say, "Well, the company's done, you know, a good thing by keeping that person employed for four years." Well, it wasn't as if it was any of his fault. I mean he was working on a job and in the course he was hit by a vehicle, and I mean, there was no doubt whose fault it was, or whose fault it wasn't. And it wasn't his fault of doing his job and someone speeding around the corner and losing control and running in to him. No-one wanted to see this person terminated, but they'd had enough. They just wanted to terminate him and they said, "Well, that's it! Gone."

Anyway they terminated him and we had a meeting of all the people, and said, "Well, we're not accepting his termination. You can do it under the award, you can do anything you like, BUT we're not accepting it." So they ended up taking us to the Commission, and the Commissioner turned around and divided the

conference, and I knew one of the supervisors who told me later on what the Commissioner had said. The Commissioner said, "Well, it's one of those issues. You can either take him back tomorrow, or today, tomorrow, next week, or next month. It is just one of those issues, a social issue, where these people are determined to not allow him to go. So you can swallow your pride and re-instate him today, or you can do it over a period of time how long it takes. Because they're not going back." And that's the position that we found.

There are issues where we turned around and said, "We are going to stay out for ever and a day. You can order us all you like. You're going to have to stand there and throw us over physically to get us back in the gate, because we're just not going to go," and the Commissioner soon realised - and I think the company soon realised that there were different issues that they could take up and different issues they couldn't in the Commission. When it came to those social issues where there were principles involved about looking after the individual, there was no holding us back. But when it came to issues such as demarkation and so forth, they knew they had the ability to work around the system, and win in those areas, and the Commission won't have any assistance to us in those areas. They tried to be of assistance at certain times, they'll say, "Now listen Hamersley," or Mount Newman, you know, "just look at it in a realistic way." And they said, "Well listen, forget about the realistic way, and this is the way we want it," and then they would argue those cases and we didn't have much show in those areas.



But there were certainly the areas where we had the ability to have the support of the Commission, but the other times the Commission were useless to us, and sometimes they were outright bloody outrageous to us. I mean they just didn't like us at all. And those issues, I suppose, when we were arguing for bloody stupid things, like you know, three flavours of ice-cream. I shouldn't say that [laughs] or it was the texture of the toilet paper. I don't know.

But I mean, there's certain issues where we would certainly not get any support. There were certain issues where there was no assistance but there were other issues (social issues) where the Commission would try and be as supportive as was possible, and he would try to ensure that we didn't on those issues, end up going into arbitration, because else I don't know whether we'd win those on arbitration or not. It would just complicate the whole issue if people didn't go back to work and didn't accept orders. So he certainly was very hard in relation to the employers in those certain cases.

SR            Were there situations where the shop stewards or convenors could find themselves in conflict with their own union?

Mossenton    I suppose the people in Perth turned around and mentioned, said, "There were those crazies in the North West." I mean the convenors and shop stewards of the iron ore companies really were their own bosses. <sup>Ue</sup> ~~I mean~~ the State officials, the State unions, didn't have the facilities, didn't have the finances, to be able to cater for all of the needs of the iron ore industry. So

the convenors had a fairly and a free hand. It was only on very rare occasions that they would be taken into hand, and I can remember being a convenor only for a very short period of time, where we were having major disputes in Tom Price and Paraburdoo; little disputes over a whole range of areas, ~~and I was in~~ Dampier and we didn't seem to be having the problems there. But management for some reason had taken up these stupid issues, and the unions were continually following them up too, and it ended up getting into this, "You do this, I'll do that," and then it was we were having disputes in the mine sites every week.

And Frank Bastow, who was the State Secretary of the Metalworkers, and also Harold Pedan<sup>o</sup> who was the President of the Metalworkers at that time, ~~he~~ ~~summons~~<sup>lc</sup> They summons the three convenors from Hamersley Iron down. There was myself, Steve Brown and Ben Farrell, from Tom Price. And we thought, you know, we thought we were going down there to listen to something that was happening in the Commission, and we got taken in to the board room, and here's these two old blokes sitting at the table, and here we are, these three pretty rough looking bloody convenors from the North West, saying, "We know, we'll do what we bloody have to do." And they went off at us! They turned round and told us what the bloody hell were we playing at up in the North West? We're there to be representing our workers, not hacking about over all these stupid bloody issues which gain them no popularity, ~~we no popularity. It's not doing the~~ company any good and it's certainly not doing the workforce any good. And we were told to take our bloody - take it in hand and pull ourselves together, because we were there to represent the workers, not represent our own bloody interests in those areas.

<sup>Uc</sup>  
~~And~~ that was the first time that I've ever come across a position where the State unions had actually taken the representatives in there and given them a bollocking, and we were sent back to bloody site with our tails between our legs, and it was certainly something that I always remembered, ~~and~~ I always have a lot of respect for bloody Frank and also for Harold, for <sup>taking</sup> ~~what he'd taken~~ us in and doing that. ~~Because I didn't think unions did that, but they certainly did. I learnt that quite clearly.~~

<sup>The company</sup>  
And on another occasion, it had been the opposite way around, ~~where I remember~~ ~~that they~~ believed that I had a vendetta against them - and I didn't really. ~~It might have seemed that way.~~ <sup>Uc</sup> And they contacted Jack Marks who was then the State Secretary, which is only a few years ago, and Jack actually pulled me aside, and started to have a shot at me again. I said, "Hold on, Jack, you're getting the bloody story wrong," and when Jack was explained what the story was, Jack turned <sup>a</sup>fund and rang back to Hamersley Iron and said, "Don't you ever bloody come and see me again!" Because they were abusing their position trying to influence me through my State Secretary by telling a whole lot of bullshit.

So, I mean, on the first occasion, we were wrong, ~~right~~, and we deserved what we got, and on the second occasion they tried to utilise the same system, but as it came out, it backfired on them, ~~and I mean here's this bloody.... being sorted out a different way.~~



But certainly the unions do come in conflict occasionally with their stewards, and sometimes we're right and sometimes we're wrong, but I'm glad to the position that it does happen. It certainly goes to show that our unions are responsible.

SR Can you give us rough dates on the Frank Bastow, Harold Pedan<sup>D</sup> meeting, and the other....?

Mossenton Oh, it would have been around.... it would have been about 1982, I suppose. There was a lot of conflict around at the two mine sites at that particular time. But I....

SR Were you able to turn things around when you did get back?

Mossenton Oh yes [laughs] Automatically there was a position where the disputes didn't take place and that there was a lot more consultation and talks, because I've got no doubt that probably the companies realised what happened too. They've never ever mentioned anything to us at all, but certainly our attitudes changed. We went and had meetings with our shop steward committees on each of the sites, and we relayed the position what was there to us, and I think there were a few hostile people saying, "Well, what the bloody hell have they got.... what right have they got to butt their nose into the way in which we run our business?" But generally across the whole three sites, it

was accepted by the shop stewards that well, occasionally someone has to pull us into line if we're doing the wrong thing. I mean if we're doing the wrong thing, someone tell us. I mean we might.... I don't think we knew we were doing the wrong thing. I think we were just doing it for everyone because that's what we knew best, and for a person from the outside, probably looks at with a different light, and we were grateful, I suppose, that they took the time to take us down and do those sorts of things to us.

SR           What were the kinds of disputes that you were going out on at that stage?

Mossenton   Overtime issue, over someone not receiving the right bloody meal. I mean there were just a lot of little problems. They weren't of any great significance. [pause] They were things that probably could have been sorted out if people were willing to sit around a table and just have a discussion with each other. But because, I suppose, ourselves, and also the company, you get to the situation where you know what he's going to say before he says it, so you think to yourself what's the bloody point of sitting around the table. Let's just go and do it. And usually it would be a 24 hour, or a 48 hour strike, and then we'd say, "Well okay, that's it. That's the end of the subject." But again something else would happen and there would be another 24 hour, or another 48 hour strike.

And so it just went on like that and I think that we just realised that.... well, after being taken aside, that things just couldn't go on like that. One or two things would have happened but we would have been kicked out [laughs] as bloody convenors of the organisation because the workers would have got bloody shitted off with it, or the company would have taken us to task on a bloody stupid little issue and then showed us - you know - what a hiding we could get when a third party came in on some of these particular issues. So they were resolved.

SR                   What about relations between workers and workers? Was there.... within each union was there a good solidarity or were the workers sectionalised?

Mossenton       I.... the pellet plant is probably a good example of what they did to weaken the structure in the pellet plant, because the pellet plant was the hive of activity. That's where all the militants came from, because of the decent relationship we had there. They, in the end, broke it up into different sections. They saw what the workforce was as a family unit, to speak, a very strong, very supportive of each other, very supportive of issues and so forth. They ended up dividing it up into areas where you had, I think it was, the grinding section, the injurating section, and the balling section - I think there was one other section. But they divided it up into three or four groups. Then we saw a dealing with the individual groups actually weaken the structure on the site. It wasn't that area where everyone had smoko together then. They



had smokos in their little sections around the place. They didn't get to talk to each other at smoko time. They didn't get to talk to each on the way to work, or from work, or in their lunch break. They became individual little groups, and that was a way in which Hamersley Iron, I think, started breaking down the union structure in the strongest part of their operation, by doing that.

And that's continued on today in all of their sections. You'll find at the Seven Mile, a number of different sections where workers are segregated from each other in the workshops, in the mine sites the same thing, that they segregate workers. They don't like to keep workers together. The better they can break them up, well the better it is for them to deal with workers. And it creates problems amongst the workers themselves, because if one group of workers say, "Well, if they can get that, why can't we get that?"

It has a danger for the company also, but if they seem to be doing things for one group and not another group, that creates a problem. But it's on lesser and lesser occasions that the groups are getting together. I mean, mass meetings today are very few and far between. In those days if there was a problem, there would be straight away. But I imagine if there were a lot more mass meetings today well, then things would be a lot stronger on the Trade Union side. But seeing as we don't seem to be going in that direction [laughs] we're going in the opposite direction.

SR                   What about relations between the workers and the shop stewards, the local representative and their union?

Mossenton        What, you mean....?

SR                   Is there good loyalty there?

Mossenton        What you mean as an official or as a convenor?

SR                   No, I meant.... sorry you're talking about which perspective do I want you to answer?

Mossenton        No, no, no. Is the question from the rank and file in the company?

SR                   Yes, the rank and file.

Mossenton        To the convenor - or to the rank and file to the union official?

SR                   I meant rank and file....

Mossenton        To the union organiser.

SR                   .... to the local shop steward.

Mossenton Oh, in his work area?

SR About the ground [unclear]

Mossenton Oh well I mean, it was great. I mean back in the '60s to the '70s, I mean you didn't have to turn around and [pause] worry about who was going to be shop steward. There were elections. People wanted to be shop steward. Right? They all wanted to be there, you know, so there were elections for shop stewards, which was a great position that had.... I mean there was a challenging for the position. I mean after that, after all the battles we went through and some of the defeats that we had - I mean you can go in there and say, "I want to be the shop steward," and they say, "Go for it, mate!" [laughs] You know, "You can have it." And it's still not a problem.

I mean, one is that in the early days, there was a challenging for those positions, which was good for the Trade Union movement, later on, I mean, the position is that no-one really wants it because it's been shown to be a bloody hard job to do, because of what you've got to deal with against the companies, and people don't like that challenge on top of the work and their family life in those areas.



I mean the relationship's good either way. I mean today they're grateful that someone's going to do it. In the days, in the '60s and '70s, it was good because it was a challenging position; that you had to challenge someone to get into those positions, and you had to maintain a position with support from the rank and file.

SR Can we talk a bit about how the union was organised in the workplace?

Mossenton Right. Well then.... I talk from the metal trades' viewpoint. There were elections, you know, in every workshop, and sometimes even with.... even on shifts in different workplaces, as to each one to have a representative. Those representatives would then meet each month and they would then elect their executive of the site: it would be a convenor, a deputy convenor, and a third delegate. The third delegate is mainly the person that looks after the finances and books of the local on-site union. The convenor, he runs the show, and the deputy convenor was virtually the heir apparent to the convenor, always in a position so that if he left that, he would take over.

From then, each union virtually was set up the same way. From then we would then have a CUC in the early days as it was call, which was the Combined Union Council, on each of the sites, and then the convenors would then get together and they would elect a President of the CUC to deal with common issues which affected all of the unions on the site. That would meet on occasions with the

employer, if the employer recognised it. Sometimes the employer didn't recognise it, sometimes he did, depending upon where the pendulum was fitting at any particular point in time.

It was later on that the CUCs were disbanded because they didn't have any recognition within the Commissions and so forth, that there was the Mining Union Association (that's a later thing) that's come about, which is a registered organisation, or association within the Commission, which has some sort of standing. Now those same bases of the union structures on each of the sections, in each of the sites, set up. Now they have two people on an MUA, which deals in the same way as the old CUC did.

But I suppose that if you're a convenor, whether it be in the '60s or '70s, or whether it be the '80s, and if you had some sort of aspiration to go further in the Trade Union movement, your goal was to become the President of that combined group. And THAT if you were looking for the power, was where you had to aim for. That was.... if you were looking to gain total power of the workplace, against the boss, that is what you strove for, the President of the CUC or the MUA, because once you achieved that, then you achieved not only the respect of your own organisation, you've also received the respect, and also the support, of the other unions on site, which gave you the total power to be able to deal with the company you were associated with. That was the part you strove for.

SR                   How have you seen that power being handled?

Mossenton        I believe it's been handled with great responsibility. I don't think I've ever seen that power being abused within the Hamersley Iron operation. The people that have been put in to those positions have generally been people of some credence, some, you know, they were supported, that they weren't radicals of any description. You usually found that the ratbag, if there was one around, that he might strive for that position, but at the end of the day, he wouldn't achieve it. He may well achieve the vice or the deputy's position, but very rarely you saw him achieve that top level, and if by some chance that he did, he didn't have the automatic authority to be able to do what he liked. He still had to come back and deal with issues within the Combined Union Council or the MUA, again which was a safety valve to ensure that you didn't have one person who was going to go on a rampage and bloody pull the whole lot out. So there were checks and balances within the system to ensure that that couldn't happen anyway. But I don't think the unions abused it at all. I think it's been handled with great delicacy.

SR                   What about local committees? Did shop stewards get together to meet and discuss common issues amongst themselves?

Mossenton        No, not.... the shop stewards within a union would. They would get around and say, "There's a problem in...." (say the trade areas in the Seven Mile workshop) "We need to have that sort of fixed up," and then there



would be a collection of thoughts and arguments between the shop stewards themselves. "Well, if it's going to be fixed up, how are we going to do it?" They would then give the ideas to that particular shop steward and also the convenor, about how to go about doing it. So certainly they discussed things as far as in the unions were concerned (individual unions) about different problems and how about they were going to deal with them. When it came to inter-union things, it was done at a CUC or an MUA level. The shop stewards virtually never saw each other in a formal sense. They certainly spoke to each other on the job, but it would be very unlikely that someone from the AWU at the Seven Mile would ever get together with an ETU member from the Dampier port operation; it would be very unusual indeed. It would have to be a major dispute where the convenors of all of the unions had said, "We want a meeting of all the shop stewards," and that happened, well you can count it on one hand over a period of sixteen years that I've been there.

SR                    Was there much training of the shop stewards?

Mossenton        Where we had put into the provisions of the awards, TUTA training, Trade Union training right, with TUTA, they did not agree to have individual unions coming up, and training their own people. Metal trades certainly did it anyway. I mean we wouldn't get releases. I mean we'd have to go on unpaid leave. The Metalworkers would pay, or we'd pay out of our funds, to have someone come up and in our own ranks, and train us as to what metalworkers should be being taught, but the company did agree early on, that

there should be some sort of Trade Union training because they also saw the need that you just can't have people going in there and doing willy nilly, not knowing what they're doing. There has to be some sort of sense to what they were doing. So they agreed that the Trade Union Training Authority would come up and conduct courses on site once a year, and that's been happening for many, many years now.

END OF TAPE TWO SIDE B.

Tape 2  
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## TAPE THREE SIDE A.

This is interview nineteen of the Pilbara iron ore industry oral history project for the Department of Industrial Relations at the University of Western Australia. This is tape three side one: Stuart Reid interviewing John Mossenton at Karratha on the 29th of January 1991.

SR                   What about union finances? How were the finances managed?

Mossenton       Well, in the iron ore industry there is just no way known that the State people (the State organisations) can be able to finance the activities in the iron ore industry. It was needed to be deals done with the different iron ore companies, I mean if they wanted industrial peace, that they had to come across and pay some of the wages. So it was agreed with generally all of the iron ore companies, that if there was a need for Commission hearings and so forth, that they would pay those people to attend those particular hearings, that they would pay for travel costs incurred for meeting that commitment. So there were deals done with the State unions through negotiations with the companies as to financing the very expensive problems of air travel and also wages.

As far as the union again was concerned to try and survive the industry to that



degree, they couldn't do that. I mean we just didn't.... there were a lot of other things going on around the Pilbara at the time, construction and so forth, and the geographic position is that simply is that one person, or two people, just don't have the ability to service that type of industry. So the committees on the sites, the stewards, the convenors, the CUCs, the MUAs, they organise their own finances to be able to cater for running the on-site unions.

I mean some of the unions on site today are very sophisticated with computerisation. They have their FAX machines, they have photo-copiers, they have better communications than some of the State unions have [laughs]. They've got better offices than some of the State unions have. So they did that for themselves, and usually it's done through a slush fund or a levy that they levy themselves on a weekly basis. They have constitutions which govern the use of those particular funds to cater for the on-site running expenses to ensure than no-one's out of pocket, and that it's all done on the base of expenses incurred by those individuals.

So they've certainly set up a very good financial structure for themselves to be able to run, not in isolation, but in conjunction with the State unions and also the assistance of the companies are giving them also through agreements that they have with the State unions in their awards. So it's all been put into place quite good, and it works quite well.

SR                   Who's responsible for the finances?

Mossenton       The on-site finances are responsible to the on-site people.

They're responsible for themselves. They have their secretaries and treasurers set up. They have people that audit the books. They generally.... the constitution, I think on all of the ones that I've seen, there's a constitution that turns round and says, 'There must be financial reports given to the members on a periodic basis', and they're quite scrutinised. Workers of all people, I've noticed, if it's their money and they believe that someone might be abusing it, they are very astute when it comes to checking those finances, and generally there has not been a problem. There have been a few little problems over the years, but generally those things have been sorted out, and if there has been a problem and it's sorted out, it never happens again.

SR                   What about the meetings of members? Who organises those and who actually runs the meeting?

Mossenton       Well again, it depends on what the meeting's going to be about. If it's a domestic issue, it's generally done on the basis of what.... well, let's go back to the start. If it's a meeting in a workplace, the shop steward will conduct the meeting. he will have the ability to call a meeting of his members like he would in any other particular workshop. If the issue is something complicated where the steward is not confident of resolving and believes he needs a bit more of an assistance, he won't necessarily go to the State union, he will contact his convenor. The convenor then will look at the problem, try and sort it out in that area, and if there's needed to be a meeting convened, he will convene that meeting, and if he believes that the issue is of such importance where it might well have an effect outside that particular area, he will take the decision about whether he will call a meeting of the whole membership of that particular site. And then it won't be up to an

individual group of people making a decision which will affect the rest of the workers in the workplace. It then is put to the position that they will make the decision at the end of the day.

Workers won't allow the shop steward to make decisions. They won't allow the convenors to make the decision. It's like in any democratic organisation, I suppose the union is probably at that stage, it's probably the most democratic organisation that everything had to be sanctioned by the rank and file. I mean certainly they have their positions, their guidelines of what you can and what you can't accept as a person, but at the end of the day, it's the rank and file to make those decisions. But it's up to the convenor or the shop steward to decide when those meetings are going to be conducted, and where and how.

SR           And in practice, the convenor has a great deal more power than that actually at the meeting, doesn't he?

Mossenton   Oh yes, he.... I mean he will put his position at those meetings and he will put recommendations. I mean once upon a time it used to be that you have to ask for recommendations from the floor and so forth, but I suppose that people expect now the convenor to, if he's going to call a meeting of so many people, that he knows darn well what it's about, and he should have an idea about what he's trying to achieve at the end of the day. And he will put his recommendations up and they'll be seconded, and they'll be voted upon. But generally there always a lot of debate, always a lot of, you know.... from both sides of the idea. I mean everyone - they're not sheep in the industry. They certainly have their own viewpoints, and if the resolution or recommendation's got merit, it's got up, but there are occasions where they have not been got



up. I mean people have knocked them back. And that's good also for everyone. That's put the convenor back in his place occasionally, if he thinks he's known everything, then sometimes he realises he mightn't know everything, or he certainly doesn't understand what the workers are thinking in any particular point in time.

So again there's the checks and balances in the system to ensure that things are done right. But the convenor would be under no illusion there. He has a lot of power. There is not an occasion where an official can come in to a site and conduct a meeting, and he'd be confident of getting something up, if he didn't have the backing of that convenor. You have a lot more power as a convenor in the iron ore industry than you do as an official of the union, of that particular organisation. The convenor is a person you do not underestimate at all. It is good to be friendly.

SR           What about amendments to recommendations, or amendments to a position that's been put up? Does that happen very often or just...?

Mossenton   It does. Usually the recommendation would be put up, but if a person doesn't believe that it's totally right and he wants to put an amendment to it, I mean it is done by the rules of the union. I mean it doesn't happen often, but it does happen. [pause] All I can say really to that is that yes, you're right, it does happen. There's not much more you can say.

SR           Just moving on to inter-union issues, and sometimes this whole area of how one union relates to another can be as interesting as the relations between the unions and the management themselves. We've talked a bit about

combined union councils and the MUA later, what other characteristics of the relations between unions up here can you relate for us. I mean between which unions have relations been better, between which have they been worse?

Mossenton Well [laughs] from time to time it's all over the place. I mean generally one accepts the position that the AMU and the ETU have a very good relationship, and has done for a period of years. Again because there has been a strict understanding as to demarkation, and I think again, you're back to the area of demarkation. That will indicate as to whether you have a good relationship with another union, or you don't.

For instance the AMWU and the ASE have the same coverage of the same people, except for the boilermakers. I mean the boilermakers haven't an option. But fitters have the ability to go to the AMWU or the ASE. The ASE is seen as a very right wing union, which no-one likes. They believe they're scabs. They believe they're bloody suckholes. They're say the next sort of position from going from an ASE member is to the staff position. That's generally where you have, and when the AMWSU which is a relatively left wing union decide to go out on campaigns on whichever issue it is, you generally find that the ASE won't support that position and go in and do their work, which is scabbing in my view.

So that is a relationship which is a bad relationship. We do not have a relationship with the ASE and the AMWU. It's always been very hard. The AMWSU have been striving for years to do away with them out of their operation. They have generally been active in doing that and done a lot to achieve it; like for instance now in Paraburdoo, there is no ASE, and there will not be any more ASE

in Paraburdoo. In Dampier there is ASE in the Seven Mile workshop. In the rest of the operation in Dampier, there is no ASE. They have been driven out. In Tom Price there is still a small amount of ASE in that mine, but again it is being reduced over a period of time.

So the AMWU and the ASE haven't got a relationship. The only time they've got a relationship is if they're seeking the support, and they always try to, but you've got to do it in such a manner as to have a shot at their personality or.... you've got to try and bring them around. I mean they just don't seem to have a principal position, and generally that's what the metalworkers would think. The ETU....

SR                   Just before we move on to that.

Mossenton       Yes.

SR                   How do you drive out the ASE?

Mossenton       Well, we've done it by the basis of attrition and going in and having discussions with the individuals, through one form or another, to say, "It's in your best interests to join the Metalworkers, because if you're going into a workshop and there's only one left, and we're all going to go on strike, and you just turn around, are you going to come into work while we're on strike and do our work? Well, we'll telling you that's it in your best interests not to." And you can draw from that whatever you like, but I mean, generally they've seen the position to say, "Well, yes, well, it's probably in my best interests not to be a member of the ASE, and be in conflict with all of



my workmates."

So generally that's been the position. I mean there has been occasions where we've bought them out. We are.... you know where there's been one or two in an area and they say, "Well, hold on, I've paid my bloody union dues. I didn't really know this," because they might be new people. If it had been Hamersley Iron, that's another way which they caused a conflict too, because they damned well know that that will be a problem, so if there are no members of the ASE in a particular area, then they employ someone who's not a member of the union. In Perth they say, "Well, you've got to be a member of a union. Here, here's the ASE office." So they turn around and go and join the ASE, so people have come to site with no knowledge, and of being in a situation where they've come on site and they're automatically in conflict with the workforce because they're in the wrong union, because they know what's about to happen.

So we will have explained those sort of things to those people. They say, "Well, listen, I don't really want to have a problem." You know they've joined the other union, but on occasions, a couple of them have said, "Well listen, I've just paid out a hundred and odd bloody dollars. You know I can't really afford it." The position's been quite easy. I mean they resign from the ASE and they get fixed up in relation to their ticket, through whatever means.

So there's been those occasions where we've got rid of the men in those areas. [pause] But gradually and gradually they go.

SR                   What about in cases where someone has some sort of commitment to the ASE, and wants to stay in it? What do you do with them?

Mossenton Well, there's not much you can do. They stay there but we've found that only to be in two places, where they are still there, and that is at the Seven Mile, and one also at the Tom Price in one of their work sections.

SR So do they have any representation at meetings?

Mossenton Well [laughs] one of the main reasons it's very hard to get one member to lead the ASE, because he's a convenor in his own right. There's only HIM and one other, but he's the convenor and the other one's the deputy convenor, which gives them the right to sit on all negotiations and represent themselves. They don't represent anyone else. So it's a farce. I mean I don't know how Hamersley Iron accepts the position that it goes on. But because under the award it states that each union will have the ability to have representatives at these particular places, and that's why he won't become a member of the Metalworkers. I mean he wants to stay there for ever and a day, and get out of doing all the work, like he believes the other bloke is. But he doesn't represent anyone other than himself. So I mean it's so.... he's really abusing it for himself, and I mean.... but that happens [laughs].

SR Which site is that on?

Mossenton That's a Dampier site. Yes, well there is only about two or three members of the ASE in the whole of the site - and yes.

SR Yes. You were going to say about the ETU.

Mossenton Well, the ETU and the Metalworkers, they've had a pretty good relationship right over the years, but it's only now - and again it's because of demarkation issues between the parties that restructuring is breaking down those issues between mechanical and electronics. That there's tension between those unions now, which hasn't been there over the years. So it's been a very good relationship right through the years, but now it's being strained somewhat.

The AWU and the CEMU, as I said that early in there there's been some very hard problems to come to grips with technology, such as in the mine sites, you know, with the introduction of those big loaders to the mine face. Again they.... it's a very similar situation between those two unions as it was between the ASE and the AMWU, but it's not to that degree because the only demarkation they have is doing the same work but in different classifications, which has been resolved to some issue. But it's still an issue which is there and that, I imagine, will stay there for some time.

Between the craft unions and the unskilled....

SR Just before we move on to that....

Mossenton Yes.

SR .... just follow on to the FED. You mentioned earlier on that the FED had had some particularly good organisers. Who were the organisers you were referring to?



Mossenton Oh.... Well, I probably think that their best organiser that they've had up here (in my time) has been Colin Saunders, very hard-nosed, knows when to hit them and he's been supported by some very good convenors on the three sites. Colin actually worked for Hamersley Iron so he knew it intimately anyway, and I suppose, then going as an organiser in to the same area, knew the weaknesses and the strengths of Hamersley Iron, so he certainly understood it and was able to capitalise for himself - well, not for himself, but for his members, in that area. And he earned a lot of respect for his members and the convenors that were representing them in the industry. So to my knowledge, Colin was the best.

SR What about.... you were going to say somewhere about the craft and non-craft unions.

Mossenton Yes, well you asked the question about the relationships between the unions. [pause] I suppose from the non-craft unions, we always see the weak link in the organisation is going to be the unskilled people because they don't have the unionised backgrounds as the craft people do. So we were always weary about what they're trying to do. Even more so in these days than there has been in the past. We probably believe [laughs] that they're trying to take our jobs. You know restructuring breaking down, more demarkation lines, so demarkation is probably the main issue in the Pilbara, or in any industry, about causing disputation, and that we understand that they've got a position that they want to do more and more maintenance work at our expense. We certainly are not in a position that we want to do their production work, but as in anything, when you're being threatened with something, then again you're going to be active.... you're going to respond and it's our position now that if they're

going to take on our work, we'll take on their work, as being operators. And so who's going to win at the end of the day? I mean it's pretty obvious that the company's are the one that's going to be the winners.

I mean they want more money for doing more work at our expense. We're going to sit back and do nothing. I mean we're not going to do that, we're going to say, "Well, we've got a better offer for you," you know. We'll end up doing their work and you've got a tradesman. We can fix these things properly. Forget about all this bullshit work that you want to give them to do. So, by then, wanting to achieve that, they're going to put pressure on the craft unions and that relationship is going to deteriorate even more.

But generally in the early years, I think we saw them as a bit of a drawback, again because they just didn't seem to understand what we were all trying to achieve. They were willing to do deals which they probably could achieve more and they've really been limiting us to what we could have achieved. So I saw them all just as a drawback, only some of their organisers these days are quite good. I mean the organiser that the AWU had in the earlier years probably weren't really up to the standard that they should have been. But then again, I suppose, it's very hard to get people to take on jobs, going from one iron ore company to another iron ore company, when it's bloody 45 degrees every day, and you're driving around in vehicles that are not air-conditioned and sleeping in the backs of them.

So I mean, even though they were dedicated in what they were trying to do, they probably didn't have the ability to be able to represent the workers as they should have been, and it's taking nothing away from those people. They were

genuine people. They probably were just tired from the time they went from one place to another, and the rest of it. So I suppose that was always a bit of a problem. But I mean, that might have been the same for the craft unions too. I mean I don't think we probably had the level of people that we probably needed to represent ourselves to that degree either. And that's taking nothing away from those people either. I mean probably a lot of them were green just like myself [laughs] and you only learn over a period of time. But it's a lot more comfortable to learn today, than it would have been in those early days.

SR           What about relativitiies, have they been an important concern for craft unions like Metalworkers?

Mossenton   Well, I mean we always believe that we're being underpaid compared to what a non-skilled person gets. I mean we do a five year apprenticeship generally, to learn our trade, and what happens when we come to these industries? That we get here and we find ourselves being paid less per week than an operator, and the operator.... I mean, he goes out there and he learns how to drive a car. He gets a certain wage rate for that. He then learns how to drive a truck, and then a semi-trailer. Then he learns a front-end loader and then a bulldozer and a bloody haulpak, and his wage rates are similar to that. I mean it's only.... it's still only a vehicle that he's driving. But they're getting their wage rates by the introduction of new technologies and the size and responsibility of those particular pieces of equipment, and that's how the deals have been done, the way Hamersley or the iron ore companies have set up with the AWU.

The trade area unfortunately, we have maintained the position that a



tradesman's a tradesman's a tradesman, and all trades should be paid the same. I've always believed that it's the right way to go. I've probably.... it causes problems, and now all those things are changing where people are going to be paid on a different basis, where they're going to be paid for skills obtained aAnd skills that are utilised on the job because certainly I mean, tradesmen aren't all equal. But that's the way we've dealt with it over a period of years, and even though our wages have gone up, relativity by the introduction of new technology into the production area, that relativity has closed somewhat - closed significantly, and it is a big problem to us. And award restructuring in 1990 is about altering that and getting rid of the base tradesman's rate and giving it to the production people and for us to achieve the proper relativities that we deserve up into the area of 115 per cent of what a base rate should be getting, and that's what we're striving for. So we've dropped that position about us all being equal from now on.

SR How do you feel about that?

MOSSENTON [pause] About the what?

SR The change to restructuring?

MOSSENTON Oh, I think it's a con. I don't like it. I mean I hear the arguments for restructuring, to say well, we need to restruct to become internationally competitive. I can remember talking to Nixon Apple, from the Metalworkers, some period of time ago, and he said to me, "Well they have the same argument in Sweden. They said that we must change, become internationally competitive," and that seems reasonable enough. But there was conflict within

Sweden, to say, "Well, okay, if we're going to make all these changes to become internationally competitive, and we do that, why should this group of people that deal in a domestic market, have to change and become internationally competitive, when they haven't got any competitors?" And that caused a conflict within Sweden. And I see the same position here. I don't see why we're making all these changes to make say, someone in the Water Authority more efficient when he's not going to be dealing with anyone in the international market. He's going to be dealing with simply the same work, the same conditions, he's always dealt with. His market is within Australia. He's certainly not going to start exporting water to bloody Japan or anywhere.

So certainly restructuring has probably got its needs in the international marketing area, but domestically I don't believe that it.... I think we're just being conned to bloody ensure that it's going to more profits for those people that are making them, and there's going to be less work at the same time.

I'm up and down about it. I hear so many arguments for it. I see that, you know, that there's going to be an influx of income into the industry because of all the profits that is going to be secondary and downstream processing of all of our primary products. But I still haven't seen any of that and I don't think I will be seeing any of it for a bloody long time. I think the workers in this country are making all the bloody sacrifices and no-one else is doing anything. I'm disillusioned with the ACTU. I think they're breathing life in to a dummy, trying to breath life in to a dummy, that being the Labor Government in this country, and I think the sooner they divorce it, the better. But unfortunately, I suppose, they've still got aspirations. Some of them be coming up into that area, and they're still trying to bloody make a few more

sacrifices to give it one bloody last chance of life. I don't think they'll be successful.

SR           Anyway that's all recent stuff. There's one other.... a couple of other things I'd like to ask you about the earlier days, and one is about strategy, long-term strategy. Was there at any stage any planning going into union activities, planning for the medium to long term, or was it all reaction to the needs of the moment?

MOSENTON    No, well in the iron ore industry it was always the needs of the moment. I don't think they'd ever sat around and tried to look at the long term because shop stewards and convenors aren't there for a long period of time. They always like to achieve something in the short term. So they look at the domestic issues around the place and say, "Well, I've achieved this and I've achieved that," but I don't think anyone put any plans in place to say well this is what we're going to do over a long period of time. I mean the only time that there has been any strategy within the Hamersley Iron, and I suppose, well I was there. I mean it was a strategy that I certainly took up and it took a long period of time. Because I took over as a convenor in the early '80s, and we'd been devastated by Hamersley Iron about.... our organisation was virtually bugged, and there had to be a whole rebuilding process. There was a process put in place by myself and a few others, but there needed to be a longer term plan than we had done. It wasn't going out there and being gung ho, it was a matter of bloody trying to build a workforce up that had been devastated. And it was a matter of bloody sucking eggs for a while and bloody just sitting back and doing things slowly, slowly, slowly, until we could gain the confidence of the workforce again after a bloody bit of hiding.



So that's probably been the only strategy to rebuild, and I mean that's probably the only long-term plan that's ever been put in place. It's the same within the Robe sort of area - it's a rebuilding program. Generally in the iron ore industry, it has simply been that we have a reactionary from a very proactive employer.

END OF TAPE THREE SIDE A.

TAPE THREE SIDE B.

Side two of tape three: Stuart Reid interviewing John Mossenton on the 29th of January 1991 at Karratha.

SR I'd like to get you to comment on the role that alcohol has played, first of all in the union movement, and secondly in the Pilbara generally.

MOSENTON Alcohol in the union movement. Well, there seems to be a lot of talk around conference tables and so forth about how we do things and what plans we're going to make or how we're going to react to certain issues. Generally the people that you're dealing with in the Trade Union movement, whether they be the shop stewards or the officials (more so the shop stewards) that they are not used to talking in a forum around a table. They seem to be very withdrawn. They're not able to express themselves and so forth. And it seems to be that when you have finished the meeting and it's generally accepted that everyone goes to the bar and has a few drinks, or round the barbecue and has a few drinks, that after a couple of hours of that, people are a lot more relaxed and able to express themselves. And that's been the general position, I think, of the Trade Union movement generally [laughs]. I mean, even if you go to a TLC meeting, there's a lot being said there, but it's not until after the TLC meeting, that a lot more comes out. So I suppose if it happens at the TLC, it happens all the way down the line. In the Pilbara it happens even more so.

But people bloody don't get together very often. They come across the sites, they get together, they have their meetings, they have their discussions, but

it's not until after hours that really you get down to business about what people are really saying, and what they really meant, so drink's played a big part in loosening the tongues of those particular people. So yes, alcohol has a bigger impact. I don't <sup>vb</sup> whether it's the alcohol that has the impact, or whether it's just the uncertainty of being able to deal with people around in a conference scenario. I mean maybe if you turned around and got rid of the conference tables for these laymen, I mean all we're talking about.... we're talking about operators, we're talking about tradesmen, bloody bulldozer operators - it doesn't matter. But these people are not used to dealing with that sort of position.

So I don't know whether it's the alcohol as such. It certainly seems to indicate that it is, but I think it's generally because that's the way in which life's done in the Pilbara anyway. Everyone likes to have a bloody beer, so usually your social activities are always around a hotel, or around a keg, or something like that. But I think it's not that really. I think it's just the business that people don't know how to deal with a place where it's formal. Here you are, you've got a Chairman, a deputy Chairman and a Secretary. You've got to go through the Chair. Generally the lay person that we deal with up here, have got no idea about those sort of formal procedures. They just like to generally get out there and have a bit of a say. And I think if we tried to conduct our meetings in a manner other than the way we do it, we probably wouldn't get into the position that needs to be a drink around the bar to really get down to the business. But I don't think it will change. I mean even today, I mean, it's accepted that union officials, their position about going to talk to people in the different iron ore towns as it was in the '60s and '70s, that it was back to the pub or back to the barbecue, to do the business



around a drink. And I think it came to be accepted of the officials, that they were all blokes with big noses, and red bellies - [laughs] big noses and bloody big bellies, and beer swigging and being able to look after themselves in the front bar of the bloody roughest pub in the Pilbara. That's generally the attitude that most people expect them to be, and I suppose in the early days, that was the case, and to some degree, I suppose, it's still the case today. But you certainly still have to be able to do some of those things - hopefully not all of them [laughs]. Well, be expected to do all of them.

SR           On the subject of the drinks, I mean in many cases, it would be more than just 'a drink' at the barbecue. There would be a lot of drinks.

MOSENTON   Too many drinks. It gets to the situation where you just drink and drink and drink and you're continually talking about these issues, and you've got to remember that these people are not talking to you because they like you, they're talking to you because you're representing them, and they're talking to you generally because you're a union official, and you've probably done something wrong, or you haven't done something which they expected you to do, and if you had done something that well, that was your job any case. So they're talking to you because you're their representative and they want to have a shot at you for whatever reason. And generally after a period of drinking for several hours, then there's going to be an argument. Whether the argument turns to a physical argument, is generally the basis of what the argument was about to start off with, or whether.... or for whatever other reasons. But generally now that the.... there is always an argument. I find that we don't usually go out and drink in front bars of hotels any longer. We try and conduct our business in a different manner today than we used to.

THE ORGANISER TODAY

~~But~~ <sup>Vc</sup> the life of an organiser in the North West is a lot different to an organiser in the city area. You can turn off in a city. You can turn round and go home to your little house with your wife and your kids. You've got your friends around your neighbourhood and so forth, but if you're an organiser in the Pilbara, ~~that you live in the town~~ you live in a work town. These towns are only here for one reason. They're here because of the industries that are here. The people who live in these towns work in those industries and you represent them all. You cannot go to a hotel, you cannot walk down the street, you cannot go to the swimming pool, you cannot go to the beach, you can't go to a restaurant, you can't go to a football match or a cricket match. You can't go anywhere without meeting someone who you deal with in a work situation, and I don't think a lot of the people in our Perth offices understand the problems.

We've got a major problem about our people in Perth. They think it's great living in the Pilbara. They think well, you've all got boats, you all go fishing and the reason they get that sort of understanding is because we haven't got any friends ourselves. The friends the union organiser has in the North West are usually other organisers, because they're the only people that can bloody understand the sort of life that you have. Usually if you've got your wife up here, and she works, her friends don't like to associate with you, ~~because usually they might have....~~ <sup>Vc</sup> one of their friends might be a staffie ~~that works at one of the iron ore companies,~~ or he might be a person who doesn't necessarily agree with your ideas, so you're very restricted in relation to your social life. So your best friends are the other organisers, and I suppose it's one of the reasons why organisers in the North West get on a lot with each other, more than they do in the metropolitan area because they

need to rely on themselves for their social activities, where in Perth you can turn around and you can be at war with the opposite numbers in the other organisations, because you can turn off at the end of the day, at the end of the week, and go somewhere else where no-one knows you. It doesn't happen up here.

I'm very critical of the organisers in Perth when they say, "We want you to go out and sign up this bloke's members," because what they're really saying to you, "We want you to take another friend off the register <sup>of</sup> who you can deal with on a social activity." They don't understand those sort of scenarios, and people always say about the Pilbara, and especially about Karratha, that's it's so unique because you have all these unions in the building together. You have them all here together, you know they work harmoniously because we need each other to bloody live up here. If we're at war with each other like they are in Perth, none of us would be here. We'd all be around the twist. We wouldn't have any friends we would be leaving. We wouldn't be able to cope with life up there.

I don't know if I've answered your question.

SR                   What does it do for family life?

MOSSENTON       Family life. I don't find too many organisers that go through a period of time without a marriage break-up. I think for myself, for instance, I'm now separated. I will be divorced shortly. My wife hasn't been able to adapt to the pressures of life up here in the Pilbara, and also the pressures of life that an organised life brings on. I unfortunately, probably am



partly.... There's no doubt about it, I'm partly to blame too. I should have got out of the movement, but I find it very hard to turn around and go back to a boss and accept the shit. I've always been in a position where I like to stand up and speak for myself. I mean there's very few organisers up here that have a steady relationship. They've had problems with their marriages, more so than other people.

And the other area is, if you have a problem with your wife in Perth, there's always the family to rely on, you know, to try and sort it out. In the Pilbara, you don't have any family to be able to rely on to assist you. Your wife hasn't got the ability to walk out of the house and go to her mother's. She has to stay in the house with you, and that doesn't go to improve any relationship. If you've got that tension between you, and you need to have a break from each other, even if it's only for a day or two days, and it might be able to resolve it, you don't have that ability in the Pilbara, because you don't have the friends to go and stay anyway. You don't have relations to go and do it, and where two days might have sorted out a problem, in the Pilbara where you've got to stay in the same house, then it just creates even more and more tension and gets worse and worse.

There's great difficulties that the organisers in the North West have to put up with, and I'm certain that they don't understand. I was trying to say before, ~~the people in Perth think you have a great time up there.~~ The problem is that we ~~turn around and~~ take our State Secretaries or our State Presidents or national officials when they come up here (because they come up here very rarely) we take them out bloody fishing, and show them a great time. We take a carton of piss and we take a bloody boat and we go out and catch some bloody

red emperor or some trevally or mackerel or something like that, come back, have a great barbecue, invite the other organisers around and they have a great old time. They jump on the plane the next day with a bit of a hangover, a bit of a sunburn, and an esky full of bloody fish fillets, and they think those lucky bastards. I wish I lived in the North West.

I think maybe what we should do in the future is turn around and show them what we really do on weekends, and sit around and do bloody nothing, and just show them what life is really like, ~~instead of showing a bloody false bloody outlook on life. Enough [laughs].~~

SR Well, John Mossenton, thank you very much

MOSENTON Oh, that's been great [laughs]. I've got some of my frustrations out on you [laughs].

SR Thank you.

END OF RECORDING ON TAPE THREE SIDE B.

END OF INTERVIEW.