

Transcript of interview of Bill Dunn by Mick Carpenter (MSS.229/6/C/CO/9)

Side A

1. **MC:** I'll just test it just to check that the whole thing's working first of all. Right, that should be enough.
2. **MC:** Interview with Bill Dunn, 11 11 82. Well, just to go straight into it, presumably you didn't start off in the Health Service, Bill.
3. **BD:** No, I worked as a . . . I was a Royal Marine for a number of years, regular Royal Marine, and then went into working on the oil business, where I become an activist, and . . .
4. **MC:** Was this in the North Sea?
5. **BD:** No, before the North Sea ever was thought of. I was down to go on one rig called the 'Sea Gen' and that as you know collapsed, but before then they'd offered me a job in pipelines so I never got to actually go on the rig, you know, and it collapsed with a few of my friends on it, but, you know, like I say just the luck of the draw. Maybe somebody up there does like me after all! Then I met my wife at 38 years of age and decided the time for trotting around the world was all over and that I should settle down, and if you're going to have kids I believe you should be with them, and try and give them the right values in life and let them see that family life is a matter of two people living together in some sort of harmony and having the right principles and to teach your children that. So I looked around for a job to keep me at home and to give me a certain amount of standing in the community I suppose, you know, I could've took any big-paying job or . . . I was fairly qualified as a plant hire and one or two other things, but I felt I wanted to do something that was worthwhile, you know. So I become an ambulance man and that is where I am to this day and wouldn't want to change it really.
6. **MC:** That's great. Did you have any. . . was there any trade unionism or politics in your family at all, or?
7. **BD:** Well no, I was an orphan really. I was brought up in Dr Barnardo's, and my first introduction into politics was by a lady by the name of Bessie Braddock, I don't know if you remember her, and her husband Jack, and they used to be governors of the school, of the Dr Barnardo's.
8. **MC:** You come from Liverpool?
9. **BD:** That's right, yes. And they used to come and visit quite frequently and they kind of take [took] a fancy to me and my brothers and sisters and they used to take us out fairly regular. And quite often those days out would be to miners' galas or dock workers' re-unions or something like that you know, and we pretty soon realised that, you know, the value of the trade union movement and the value of the labour movement and it become my life, you know. It was something, I respected both of them I knew their principles were beyond reproach, and I just admired them and respected them and I thought well, that's not a bad way to live your life, trying to do something else for somebody else, or the strong looking after the weak, you know. And that's how I saw it as a kid, you know, and I suppose I've been committed ever since.
10. **MC:** That's interesting . . .

Transcript of interview of Bill Dunn by Mick Carpenter (MSS.229/6/C/CO/9)

11. **BD:** No, I don't remember my father or my mother, and my brothers, three of them were regular soldiers or sailors and they were killed during the war and so they had no politics you know. But during my service with the Royal Marines I was one day on a kit inspection, they also had a locker inspection and they found a Labour Party card in there, you know, when I was a fully paid up member. I was quickly run up in front of the commanding officer and told "get your arse out of this", you know, that "we don't want you subversive commies in here". Well, I didn't drop out of the Labour party, I had to give him an assurance that I would, and. . .
12. **MC:** How long were you in the army?
13. **BD:** In the Royal Marines. . .
14. **MC:** In the, sorry, in the Royal Marines, oh dear, you'll kick me out the house!
15. **BD:** Eighteen years altogether, from boy service, you know, but . . .
16. **MC:** That's quite a common thing isn't it? To go from the orphanage into the armed forces.
17. **BD:** Oh yes, well, you're well institutionalised, you know, and you can stand it better than most, you're maybe the best kind of person to be in that kind of situation, you know, 'cause you're not always looking over your shoulder for your mammy, you're your own man, you know.
18. **MC:** So you didn't really choose it as much as it was kind of, or am I wrong?
19. **BD:** I did choose it, no, I did choose it. I chose to be in the Irish Guards because my eldest brother was an Irish Guardsman. And, just as I was walking to join them that morning, I had to cross the Haymarket in Liverpool to get to St John's Street, where all the recruiting offices are, and I see this guy striding across the Haymarket in a lovely navy blue suit, you know, and big red sash across his chest, and I said to him, "excuse me, where's the recruiting office for the Irish Guards?" "up there laddy" he said, you know, and I said "what are you?" and he said, "I'm a Royal Marine." And the way he said it, that changed me, you know, I wanted to be a Royal Marine, and again that was something else in my life I never regretted, you know, though at the same time that was what made me a pacifist, that's what made me an ardent supporter of nuclear disarmament, that's what made me a total supporter of peace at any price, you know, and I believed that, I believed that, now I believe that fighting for war is like screwing for virginity, you know, you can't do it.
20. **MC:** Did you see any active service at all?
21. **BD:** Well, quite a lot, yes. I was in Burma, I was in Korea, Borneo, Suez, Cyprus, Kenya.
22. **MC:** Quite a bit. . .
23. **BD:** Quite a few. I was also mentioned in dispatches twice for acts outside of the normal run of the mill things, you know. Someone's got to get it, I suppose, and they dish it out of a hat, but I was quite proud to get them at the time, you know, but napalm really made me a confirmed pacifist.
24. **MC:** That was in, what, Malaya?

Transcript of interview of Bill Dunn by Mick Carpenter (MSS.229/6/C/CO/9)

25. **BD:** That was in Korea.
26. **MC:** Korea rather, I see. I didn't realise they used it as early as that.
27. **BD:** That's right, yeah, the back end of Korea it was first used. When you see villages, you know, where they bounced to try and wipe out the position of the other side, you know, and the bombs would just carry on bouncing straight over on to a village or to where there was a load of civilians who had no part to play at all other than to keep out the way, you know. And there was kids burnt and women and all of that business, well then if that doesn't make you a pacifist, if that doesn't make you totally opposed to war, then nothing will in my book, you know. And shortly after Korea, I come out, [19]53, I was, I just, I had the option and I came out, and ever since then I've been [a] pacifist.
28. **MC:** Is that one reason why you went into the Health Service in particular or?
29. **BD:** No I don't think so. I don't think that really, at that stage, or at the stage where I was making up my mind to become an ambulanceman. I think I just basically just wanted a job that had some contact with other people, and if, you know, on the way along you could've done them a bit of good, well then that was the kind of job I wanted, you know, I could just as easy considered being a bus driver or a bus conductor to be with other people, but I felt the ambulanceman, you know, there was going to be some reward in the job. There wasn't much financial reward, you know, I think I joined and it was twelve pound fifteen shillings a week and I used to spend that on a night out, you know, and twice as much as that, but we struggled by and we got by, we've, I don't think we've ever regretted it.
30. **MC:** What part of the country was this?
31. **BD:** This was in London, I joined, we lived in Golder's Green at that time and I joined from there, you know. That was about sixteen year[s] ago. So, I'm getting to be an old hand at it now, or I'm getting quite used to it.
32. **MC:** When did you join the union, which union did you, I mean how did you get involved in trade unionism in the ambulance service, did you carry it from you from the oil rig or. . .
33. **BD:** Well, I knew I had to belong to a trade union, not that there was a closed shop at that stage, or anything like that. But I knew that basically because I was me, I would want to belong to the current trade union or one of the current trade unions - there's four in the Health Service. So I decided, while I was doing my training, to wait until I got to my main station and see what union the majority of them were in, and then make up my mind what union to join, you know. And as luck would have it I got to Park Royal station where it was 95% COHSE¹ so I joined COHSE right away, you know. And, I decided that I wouldn't be an activist, you know, I couldn't see the need for me to be an activist at that station, they were fairly well breached with shop stewards and there was a couple of very hardened people there, like Bob Simpkin and Jim O'Brien, who was an executive member of this union at the end. And so there was no real need for me to become a total activist, while I did get involved, you know, I never actively become a shop steward or anything like that. And I enjoyed the work I was doing and, you know, and things didn't seem too bad. And then I moved to Greenford station, and I was quite appalled at Greenford station because there were some of them there were in the Federation of Ambulance Personnel, there was

¹ Confederation of Health Service Employees

Transcript of interview of Bill Dunn by Mick Carpenter (MSS.229/6/C/CO/9)

one of them in NUPE², there were another couple in Transport and General³, and out of the fourteen, I think there was about seven unions involved, you know, and it was obvious they were ripe for a rip off. And I was the only COHSE member there, you know, and I spoke to them, I said, “this is crackers, you know, what we got to do is all get in one union and be solid so’s we can kind of, if anything does happen to us we’ve got the chance to battle against it, you know, as one body”. So nobody wanted to change, obviously, you know, and nobody, I certainly wouldn’t have left COHSE having joined, so I could understand their point of view. Although FAP⁴ was on the failing side then, you know, it had already started to fall to pieces. So eventually the guy I was working with, I suppose he got pissed off with me, opps, I shouldn’t have said that should I?

34. **MC:** It’s alright, don’t worry!

35. **BD:** I suppose he got browned off with me forever talking about COHSE, and why it was a good thing and how it was Health Service union and, you know, we should eventually consider it, he joined. And then another guy joined so there was three of us, you know, and then the management mounted a little attack on the station, because they wanted to add another line on the rota, and I said “well look this is what I been frightened. . .

36. **MC:** What’s another line?

37. **BD:** It means that, you know, your rota will change, your hours of working will change and what they wanted to do was at the end of our nine week rota add another week of days, which would’ve altered all our leave entitlements and everything else, you know. So I said to the guys and the girls up there I said, “this is what I’ve been scared of, and now here we are, you know, we’re all factions and we’re not going to get anywhere, you know, we’re going to have no head to fight for us like, you know”, and I said “we’re going to be beat”. Anyway we all had a, we had a meeting, a station meeting, you couldn’t call it a union meeting, you know, and we just thrashed it out. And they all decided they’d all join one union and then the argument become what union, you know, I said “well, you know, this is my sticking point, I can’t join anything but COHSE”, I said “I’m the oldest hand here, you know, I’ve been in the service the longest”, I said “and, you know I’d be throwing away a lot of benefits”, I said, “but you who are in NUPE and that, you’ve only been in two or three years, you know, you’re not going to lose the same things.” So eventually, at the end of the day, they all joined COHSE.

38. **MC:** And that was the major reason for the shift?

39. **BD:** That was the major reason, yes.

40. **MC:** Not particular loyalty to one union representing one point of view. . .

41. **BD:** No, no, there’s very little loyalty, I find, in the Health Service, to a union. I find the health workers are more loyal to the branch secretaries. They look at the branch secretary, and if he’s strong and if he’s got a bit of charisma about him and if he’s the man who’s doing the job, and if he’s keeping the management off the backs of his members, well that’s the union they join, you know. And they openly called it at my hospital Bill Dunn’s union, you know. Now, I don’t agree with that and I think it’s wrong, you know, but if that’s how

² National Union of Public Employees

³ Transport and General Workers Union

⁴ Federation of Ambulance Personnel

Transcript of interview of Bill Dunn by Mick Carpenter (MSS.229/6/C/CO/9)

they can identify with the union, and if the branch secretary is sound and he's a good trade unionist himself, well then maybe it's not a bad thing. It certainly keeps him on his toes because he knows if he starts letting them down they're going to go somewhere else. And I find this is one of the problems in the Health Service, that they quickly go to other unions, you know, if they're not getting their own way.

42. **MC:** It's a question of why the branch secretaries join particular unions, then, isn't it?
43. **BD:** That's right. It think it's why a branch secretary keeps banging his head against a wall, you know, there's got to be something more than just a union, because it's easier for him to change, you know. It has been done, branch secretaries, you know, in this area, have left COHSE gone into NUPE, caused us no end of trouble, but, you know . . .
44. **MC:** 'cause ambulance personnel - not just men 'cause it [laugh] . . .
45. **BD:** . . .that's right . . .
46. **MD:** . . I mean they're . . . can I use the word "notorious" for swapping, aren't they? Is that wrong?
47. **BD:** Well it used to be more than it is now. At one stage of the game they would swap for the most ridiculous of reasons, you know: the wrong word from a regional officer or an area officer'd take a whole station out of one union and put it in the other, you know, and the guy wouldn't even know what he'd said, or he didn't even have to say it, they'd only have to think he was implying it and they'd be out, you know. But while I was a convener for the ambulance service, we formed, or we got the management to agree to a membership qualification, that you had to be a member of a union to become a member of [?a unit] and I must admit that has slowed it down an awful lot, that stopped the chopping and changing and it makes it more easier to deal. But again I think, in that situation, in the ambulance situation, again it goes with the branch secretary, you know, if the branch secretary gets browned off with the union and he changed, like, you know, I'm convinced that - and I don't say this big headedly - but I think if I walked into my station tomorrow and I said "look what COHSE's done to us, bang, bang, bang, I'm going to join NUPE", that station would follow me, you know, because they know I won't let them down, they know I wouldn't, you know, take them along the bad road. There's no way of me doing that like, let me first qualify that, you know, no way can I do that, 'cause I'm committed to COHSE, I believe in COHSE, I believe, I'd like to see it a little more left-wing, I think it's a bit too on the right, but - a lot too much on the right - but, basically their ideas are sound, you know.
48. **MC:** But that's more than just benefits, now, presumably. I mean it started. . . you mean loyalty has grown, that belief, like, in industrial unions. . .
49. **BD:** Oh yeah. I think, I think, are you talking about me or?. . .
50. **MC:** Yes, you, yes. . .
51. **BD:** Me, I've always been loyal to COHSE, I've never, from the day one I joined, that was me, I was going to stay in COHSE then, no matter what, till I left the service, because I for one don't believe in changing unions, changing my union, I believe in changing the union I belong to. I believe that is very important, otherwise why the hell belong. You know, I've built up a strong branch because I want to be a powerful figure at conference, I want to

Transcript of interview of Bill Dunn by Mick Carpenter (MSS.229/6/C/CO/9)

have my words listened to, I don't want any national officer being so strong that he can say to me "shut your mouth, sit down, you've got fifty members, what are you talking about?" They can't say that to me, I've got over eight hundred, you know, I'm a big branch. So, you know, within reason people have a listen to what I say, and I think we've done as much good in the union as anyone else, you know, I think we've argued against, we've turned the executive over with some of our attacks at conference, you know.

52. **MC:** For example . . .

53. **BD:** Well, one I really remember was, I think we had about sixty, seventy-odd members at the time, you know, and it meant that I was putting into this union about two or three quid a week on travelling, you know. I don't mind that, but Bob Farthing come up with this grand plan that each branch would pay its own affiliation fees. Well, I wanted to affiliate to the Labour Party, I also wanted to affiliate to the trades council, but if I'd have had to do it, it would have been Bill Dunn paying it, you know because I had a small branch and had very little returns coming back from the union. So, you know, and I think to be honest, you work harder with a small branch because you're out every day trying to get new members, you know, trying to get your 150 so's you can have two delegates to the regional conference. You're always chasing members, you know, because you get fed up of being the little fish, and I got up and I talked against his resolution and we beat them then you know, it was decided that that wouldn't happen. Last year over the - not last year the year before - over the big rise they decided to have, you know, I thought that rise was too much, even though the union were in trouble, you know, I thought there was lots of internal economies they could have made and I still think that, you know. Your very thing, the history of the union, I believed at that stage, that that was one of the internal economies, you know. It didn't seem to me to be straight, that there was us looking at being short of money and then commissioning a guy to write the history of the union.

54. **MC:** It wasn't put over very well, was it, by the platform that they used? . . .

55. **BD:** Well, no, I don't think however they put it over, if you're in financial difficulties you don't go out and buy yourself a new three-piece suite, you know, you do with what you've got. So at that stage, and, you know, I've said it before we started the tape, and I think it's a great idea now, you know, I think it's a fantastic job, but you know, that was a, you know, I spoke against that rise. And then in the afternoon, you know, we told the executive firmly that, come back in the afternoon, give us another, you know, we're in a negotiating position come back and give us a chance to give you some money. We didn't want to skim the union, we know we got to pay and, you know, you only get what you pay for. But, you know, they hadn't done anything for us that year, you know, the pay rise we got hadn't been really, I don't think, executed well. We accepted a fairly low offer, then we going to ancillary workers who were student nurses and asking them to pay an awful lot of money and it didn't seem fair. So on the afternoon I reversed my plan because the offer was, you know, the asking then was a little bit lower and was something I felt my members could afford, without, you know, me losing them all, and I spoke in favour of that, you know, so, yes we do, we do have our run-ins with the national executive and I don't believe they're the final voice in the union. I believe they're very necessary and I believe that they should make the intermediate policies, but I believe conference is the supreme council of this union.

Transcript of interview of Bill Dunn by Mick Carpenter (MSS.229/6/C/CO/9)

56. **MC:** [That's the difference with] something like the RCN⁵, where the conference is just an advisory body, isn't it?
57. **BD:** That's right, yes. And that's got to be wrong, you know. I mean their conference should decide this week whether they're going to accept that money or not.
58. **MC:** Well, they can't.
59. **BD:** But they can't because they've got no power. But if this was our conference falling this week, I believe our conference would be really qualified to make that decision because I respect, you know, if you take our conference, it's a magic time really, you know, it's, you've got a very very good cross-section of the people you represent in this union in that conference hall. The conference hall reflects the amount of what your members are. You know, we got, the guy sits in our region, he's a Tory, he belongs to the Tory trade unionists, if you've ever heard of anything so stupid! But he's a very active man, this trade unionist, he's a branch secretary, he does a very good job, he's also the benevolent officer for our region, he does far more than most socialists are doing, you know. So, you know, you got him and you got someone not so far right as him and you got some people who are very far left, the Socialist Workers' Party in there, some of the Militant Tendency in there, you know. Then you've got people like me, you know, who just try to make sure that the union is on the right lines and doing the right thing to encourage a bigger membership. Because that's the only way we really live, is by our membership, you know. Take all the membership away, it doesn't matter what Albert⁶ says, no one's going to listen to him. It's only listening to him now because we're over two hundred thousand, or two hundred and fifty thousand five hundred, whatever it might be, you know. And I think that's important, that the conference is the magic body and it is entitled to make decisions and those decisions should be more binding on the union than they actually are.
60. **MC:** Because they don't always influence. . .
61. **BD:** No, no. . .
62. **MC:** I mean there was this thing, I mean regardless of the issues, there was the National Abortion . . .
63. **BD:** That's right. Now I believe that was handled completely wrong. I believe that - and whether you believe in abortion on demand or not, or whether you believe in NAC, you know, National Abortion Campaign, whether you believe in their actual prospectus, for use of a better word, I don't think that's important. I think what is important that we should have been allowed, without all the 'fol-de-rols' and all the red herrings being drawn across and everything else, I think that should have been whittled down to one composite resolution, where it says "shall we or shall we not affiliate to the National Abortion Campaign?" Never mind, you know, the ones shouldn't've been accepted where they said "we want to review last year's commitment, we want to do this, we want to do that". You see, there was one resolution that having said one thing said exactly the opposite, you know. So it caused a lot of confusion, and I think at the end of the day the NEC were as confused as we were, 'cos I spoke to a couple of NEC blokes and they just didn't know what'd happened either, you know.

⁵ Royal College of Nursing

⁶ Albert Spanswick, COHSE general secretary

Transcript of interview of Bill Dunn by Mick Carpenter (MSS.229/6/C/CO/9)

64. **MC:** Because of the confusion that's what led to the non-affiliation. But do you think conference is always quite aware of its power or that that power is a lot of the time lying dormant?
65. **BD:** That's right, I think a lot of the power is lying dormant, and I think the general secretary is in an absolutely wonderful position because a lot of people at that conference – sad to say this – not a lot, I would think 'some', I think that's a better word, go there for the booze and the birds and the good time, and that's sad, that is very sad because they've come there at the union's expense, and I believe they have a right to do the job they're sent to do. Now I enjoy my booze, no one more than me, but I never miss an opening time at that conference, and I'm there 'til the end every day, even on the Friday. Now, I don't believe . . . I believe that that is the least you can do. But you see then you've got people who have come there and they sit there and they sit there dutifully but whatever the general secretary says is right, and they don't listen to the argument, they listen to what the general secretary says. Now, unfortunately, you know, Albert is not JC, or he's not the Pope, you know, and he is fallible, he's like me, he can make mistakes. And I think he made a mistake last year when he disbarred some of our members from coming in to listen to the debate on pay. And, I think it was on pay where we had the big discussion over whether they would be allowed in. And the attitude was, "oh we'll get a lot of strangers getting in". Well, that couldn't've happened because all you had to have was anyone who didn't actually have a visitor's ticket just sending in for a delegate or a branch secretary and he could've come out and verified whether they were there or not, you know, whether they were bona fide stewards or members or whatever. I thought that was appalling. I thought it was also appalling that two of our members were manhandled by the police and thrown out, out the foyer, and no one got upset about that.
66. **MC:** I wasn't aware of that.
67. **BD:** No, but I saw this, you know, and I tried to get to the rostrum and I was told off, you know, and there was another silly pillock on the rostrum and he wasn't making much [indistinct]. But I think we lost a lot of credibility as a trade union that day. OK, so the position was reversed the next day when I was coming back at lunchtime, or just after the lunchtime, and I'd been held up, someone had spoken to me on the road and it was just a few minutes late and we were coming back and I see these crowd of lads shooting up the back steps, you know. And they were the guys I'd supported the day before, you know, and I'd said "these guys are bona fide members". And, course, forgetting my ill health, I was off up the stairs after them and when they see me with the door open I clocked one of them, you know. Not much of a pacifist really, but they so incensed me, you know, that I said to them "look, you're trade unionists, you're not bloody burglars, you don't have to go in anywhere by the back door," I said "let's do I do it democratically," I said, you know, "you've made a fool of me, you've made burglars of your bloody selves," I said "what future's in that? We've lost democratically, well, let's lose it and, you know, let's do something else about it." But all the things I'd intended to do about that I kind of went off doing because you don't want to associate with someone who's smashing bloody windows and acting like a child because they don't get their own way, you know. I've lost my own way lots of times in the Labour Party and in conference where I particularly wanted a resolution to get through, you know. And you lose and OK that's what democracy's about, you're not going to win everything. And I was a bit ashamed of them at the end of the day, you know, but maybe they'll grow into it.

Transcript of interview of Bill Dunn by Mick Carpenter (MSS.229/6/C/CO/9)

68. **MC:** Did you get involved in the Labour Party at the same time as you got involved in the union, or . . . ?
69. **BD:** Oh no, I was in the Labour Party long before.
70. **MC:** Of course, you were in the army, yes, I forgot, you mentioned the army.
71. **BD:** I was in the Royal Marines.
72. **MC:** Done it again! [laughs] The question I was going to ask, quickly going on from that boob, the branch started off amongst ambulance workers but then spread out elsewhere, did it?
73. **BD:** Yeah, well . . .
74. **MC:** How did that happen?
75. **BD:** It was started off as ambulance, as you say, and then we, what happened was a failing branch at King Edward's Hospital, which is Ealing, quite close to the ambulance station where I'm stationed, and Pat McGinley asked me would I go down and give the branch secretary down there a hand with his books because he was in a terrible mess, he hadn't made any branch returns for a number of quarters, one or other thing had gone wrong there. Anyway, the guy was a night telephonist, and I got there and he was a very old man who was also very sick, he had heart trouble and asthma. And when I walked in I explained who I was, you know, and he said "oh thank God!" he said, "someone's going to take it over," and he just give me the books and that was it. And at that stage I think there was about twenty-seven members there and I was quite happy with that. I knew nothing about nurses or ancillaries or, you know, other than just bumping into them in the normal course of my job. So I thought I won't bother with it I'll just leave it and then I decided well I might as well build it up and see if I can get someone to take it over, you know. So we, at that stage there was only the Royal College of Nursing there, and they were the only ones allowed to go in and speak to the school of nursing. So I asked for permission to go in and speak to the new students and it was refused. So I told them I felt that this was totally unjust and they said "oh well, we'll stop the College as well if that's how you feel", so at least we stopped the College going in, you know, but no way were they about to let us go in. So, what I done then, I used to make it my business to be in the hospital every Wednesday morning, 'cause I knew that was the day the girls come down to get the new uniforms – they'd start on a Monday, you see. And they'd come down, they'd be measured for the uniforms, and at ten o'clock they were turned loose to the canteen. So we used to hit them in the canteen, you know.
76. **MC:** Metaphorically speaking.
77. **BD:** That's right, yeah, and had a great big recruitment campaign and we were getting every student that come in 'cause nobody else was bothering to approach them for about two or three weeks later, you know. We were there, by then they were COHSE members. And they were some of our good members, you know, they were really good members. They were students – King Edward's was a very, very old-fashioned hospital, you know, and they didn't really believe that students had any say at all, you know. And they had this crazy rule that everyone had to be out of the nurses' home at half-past nine at night, and, you know, you could only get pregnant after half-past nine, you couldn't have intercourse

Transcript of interview of Bill Dunn by Mick Carpenter (MSS.229/6/C/CO/9)

with a guy or anything, like, before half-past nine. And that was the golden hour, you know, after that everything suddenly sprang loose, nurses running round naked and raping men and God knows what else, you know. And we decided that this would be – a couple of the girls had complained, you know, that the guys had come down and they were kicked out at half-past nine, they used to have to go round the pub. So we decided that we would break that rule, you know. And we took that aboard and we eventually got the rule rescinded.

78. **MC:** Did you break it as well?

79. **BD:** Well I didn't break it because I had no need to go there being a married guy, you know, but I was one of the breakers because I was one people who got in the nurses' home at nine o'clock and decided I wasn't going to move for anything, you know. And we forced this home warden into, you know, saying to me "you'll have to go." I said "why?", you know, she said "well it's not allowed, men are not allowed", I said "well, why?" And she didn't know why men weren't allowed and she eventually, to cover her embarrassment, said she'd call the police, you know. I said "well, don't you think that'd be a bit silly? You know, you heap yourself with embarrassment and everything else, you know, bring the hospital into disrepute." I said "I'll go at half-past ten." So we all sat round with her sitting at the end of the room, like, watching us that we didn't do anything wrong, you know. That was it broken, and then, course, the district [?administrator], the district nursing officer were involved, and they wanted to know why, you know, and I said "well, you know, don't you trust your nurses? It seems I trust them more than you." "Yeah, but we're *parentis locum*." I said "not any more you're not, you know, that went out the door years ago," I said and "these girls are looking after sick people, they're sometimes deciding between life and death, you know, whether they will make the cardiac arrest call or not," and I said "you're saying that they're not fit enough to be the masters of their own body, or to tell a guy when to get lost," I said "I personally have got a lot more faith in them." And after a long – I think that meeting went on for about three and a half hours, you know – they eventually reluctantly agreed to waiver [sic] the rule, but it would still be put in the prospectus. And it still is to this day, it's put in the prospectus but nobody bothers to uphold it, you know. It's not a bad thing that it's still in the prospectus when you look at it, you know, I was totally opposed to it at the beginning, but if a nurse is really, you know, causing hassle to her colleagues - I'm not worried about her from the management's point of view - but if she's causing a lot of hassle, and we've had it, you know, where one nurse has been making life intolerable for two or three or four or even a whole floor of other nurses, you know, with her attitude and people coming in at three and four in the morning singing and shouting, and at one stage we had a guy playing a guitar on the landing, you know. So we invoked the rule against her, you know, and that frightened the life out of her, the fact that she was going to be thrown out. And maybe it's not a bad idea that the rule is still there, you know.

80. **MC:** Fallen into disuse.

81. **BD:** That's right, as long as everyone plays the game by it, you know.

82. **MC:** Does that often happen in trade unionism? You don't worry so much about what the book says but you . . .

83. **BD:** That's right. The agreement you work to, and as long as people are all prepared to keep the agreements then there's no need to rub the fine print out. You know, I'll never forget, while we were in this negotiation we had a very backward – not backward, no, very strait-laced – lady who was sitting in on it, you know, she was the divisional nursing officer,

Transcript of interview of Bill Dunn by Mick Carpenter (MSS.229/6/C/CO/9)

she said "Mr Dunn, do you realise really want these girls could be up to, you know, with guys staying all night?" I said "yeah, course I realise, I'm a man of the world, you know", but I said "look Miss" (I won't name her) "you know, I've always found that, you know, somebody who's loudly playing the radio is more disturbing than somebody who's quietly screwing" I said "because they don't seem to make a lot of noise, you know" I said "but if you've got somebody playing a radio loud they're much more disturbing to the other people on the floor than the person who's screwing." "Oh Mr Dunn, Mr Dunn!" the administrator said, "we can't accept this kind of language!" I said "hey, this is what we're talking about, you know, to screw or not to screw, that is the question, you know." Eventually I think we embarrassed them into, you know, it was getting so embarrassing that they eventually backed off, you know, and allowed us to just carry on. And we done a few other things there, like, good things I thought, you know. One of the nurses was complaining to me one day about the state of her bed, it was like a ploughed field. True enough, it was one of the old flock beds, you know. And I went up to her room and had a look at this flock bed and it was, you know, you wouldn't've slept on it anyway, you know. So, it even made it worse, we found out there was enough beds to put one in each room and they were being stored in the nurses' recreation room. The nurses couldn't use the recreation room because the beds were stored in there and they needed the beds, you know. So, silly enough, that took us three days to get those beds issued, you know. And the nurses started to come, they realised that if they stuck together, you know, they could really do something and they could make changes in the hospital.

84. **MC:** But a lot of it was about things in the home, not so much on the wards.

85. **BD:** That's right because, you know, there was no real need on the wards. The wards were, at that stage, were adequately manned, because we weren't suffering the cuts that we're suffering at the moment, you know. So the wards were adequately manned and at that stage the nurses didn't think they had any chance of actually turning the nursing officer over or anything like that, you know. And I suppose that we sailed along like that for about a year and we, easy thing to say as we doubled the membership, you know.

86. **MC:** What period, what time was this, roughly?

87. **BD:** Oh, about eight years ago I suppose.

88. **MC:** So early seventies.

89. **BD:** That's right, yeah. And it was hard for a nurse then, you know, things still hadn't come out of the closet, you know, nurses lived a much more rigorous discipline than they do now. And . . .

90. **MC:** Wasn't like *Angels*, where they're all so nice to one another.

91. **BD:** No, no, no, nothing like that. They were under discipline but that's what they expected so they didn't see any big hassle in it, you know, they didn't see any[thing] wrong. So, the other thing that we decided we had to then make some inroads into the actual working of the hospital, one of the things that always appalled me was the split shift system, I could never agree with that. So the branch meetings were quite well attended at that stage, you know, really well attended.

92. **MC:** How many?

Transcript of interview of Bill Dunn by Mick Carpenter (MSS.229/6/C/CO/9)

93. **BD:** Well, we used to get about two thirds of the membership there. The membership wasn't that big, you know, I suppose we had about a hundred, hundred and twenty, you know. So you'd get about two thirds of that there because we used to hold it in the nurses' recreation hall, and we used to supply coffee and biscuits, and then afterwards we'd put a record-player on and the ambulancemen'd have a bit of a disco going. You know, there was something to bring them there. And, you know, they all had something to tick about as well, and we decided that we'd beat the split shift system, and we done that and we'd just recently got a new divisional nursing officer and she wanted to change the hours anyway, which we thought were a good thing, was a good thing. And we sold her this split shift system for the hours we wanted to work anyway, you know, the hours were more advantageous to us anyway, or to the nurses, and we beat the split shift system on that. And I think that's where we done business, you know, we've tried to negotiate most of the things. And I think that sometimes that's what's lacking in the union and in all unions, you know, we too often go for the final alternative before we've taken all the options. We don't really take the bother of seeing if we can really negotiate a way round it, you know. Thing that springs easily to my mind, having said that, is, we had a satellite station of Hanwell ambulance station, and it was called Brentford. And it was so bad and so old and dirty and pigeon droppings all over the place that we decided that it was a health hazard and we'd pull the guys out of there, you know. So we pulled them out and they all come to Hanwell station. And obviously it got very over-crowded and people were getting on eachother[']s nerves and fisticuffs almost coming about, you know. Well as you know fisticuffs is the final straw in any health service and you could be sacked, so we decided we'd try and get some other accommodation for them, and the management were totally, couldn't care less, 'cause they hoped we would get so brownd off we'd go back into this Brentford. So, the obvious thing, they said "no, there's nothing we can do for at least five months, you know, you've no chance." The obvious thing we should've done was struck. But, you know, if you strike all you really succeed in doing is taking money out of your members' pockets, and your job is to put more money in, not take it out, or that's as I see it. And we had a branch meeting, or a station meeting, and at that stage everyone on the whole complex by now was in COHSE, some hundred-odd members in the ambulance service. So we then worked out ways we could beat them without actually striking. And I made them a suggestion that if we put tents up on the lawn in front of the ambulance station, and let the people of Ealing know that we had to put tents up to make room for us to live, you know, it might work. So everyone thought this was a fantastic idea, I said "OK, four of five of you, go home, get you tents, bring them back" 'cause a lot of ambulancemen camp, you know. And away they went, you see, and I come in eight o'clock the next morning, near fell off my car. The whole lawn was full of tents, everybody seemed to have tents, and everybody wanted to get in the act. Well I was surprised, but you should've seen the officer! He nearly had a coronary, you know. And within an hour the divisional nursing officer was down there and you could imagine that something like thirty or forty tents parked on the lawn outside the ambulance station.

94. **MC:** Near the hospital?

95. **BD:** Well, it's right on the main road, right on the Boston Manor Road, which is one of the main roads of Hanwell, you know, the buses go past there and everyone was sitting on the buses chuckling away, you know. So the divisional officer come down very quickly and he said "right, get 'em down, joke's over, get 'em down!" I said "no way! They're staying," you know. So he said "well", he said, "it's easy, all I do is have you all sent out on jobs and then we take 'em down." I said "OK, you do that." I said "but if you take 'em down, you know,

Transcript of interview of Bill Dunn by Mick Carpenter (MSS.229/6/C/CO/9)

we will then strike and we will let everyone know through the publicity,” I said, “that you, we were doing an industrial action that didn’t hurt the patients at all, and you forced us into taking the next step, and we’ll name you,” I said, “‘cause you’re the guy who’s going to cause the strike. If you can handle that, take ‘em down.” And they never did take ‘em down, you know, and within five weeks instead of five months we had a new satellite station built.

96. **MC:** That’s a really nice story.

97. **BD:** Yeah. This is why I say, you know, what we try to do in our branch is try to take all the alternatives first, you know, not just to dive into strike action. I think that’s too easy, sometimes I think it’s the result of a weak [end of side A].

Side B

98. **MC:** You were saying about weak branch secretaries.

99. **BD:** I think it’s the ploy of a weak branch secretary, you know, I think he hasn’t taken the avenues open to him, he hasn’t negotiated enough, he hasn’t been forceful enough, he hasn’t put enough industrial muscle [?other than] strike action, you know. I’ve very rarely found strike action to be as frightening as we think it is, you know. I believe the threat of [a] strike is far more worrying to a management than the actual strike because the minute you’re out there they start making plans of how best to combat that strike. And, you know, you could be in a very dangerous position because while you’re out on strike they could well find out that your job could be run a lot easier with less men. And that’s a bad thing, you know, so I’m not altogether, I’m not against strike when it’s necessary, but I’m against some of the stupid strikes that happen in the health service, you know.

100. **MC:** Like?

101. **BD:** Well, like the one where the guy was caught with his bike in the theatre and he was asked to move it and because they moved it - he wouldn’t, they moved it - he immediately called a strike. Now I think that is ridiculous because, you know, you’re giving the management two weapons to use against you [indistinct] you’re out there your members are going to trickle back anyway, health service workers are not known for their long strikes, you know, and their ability to stay on strike like miners who live in their own communities and they’ve always got someone to back them up and keep them on the straight and narrow, you know. But no, I think that is wrong. We had a similar problem where our station officer told us to get the bikes off the station, and we said we couldn’t, you know, and we’d want a bike rack outside with a covered roof, and he wouldn’t give us it so we parked all the bikes in his office the following morning, you know. Of course, we had to take them out when he ordered us but every morning he come in he had the bikes in the office and it was getting on his wick and suddenly from nowhere we found there was a bike rack being brought down, you know. And that was three days, but OK it was three funny days, everyone enjoyed upsetting the officer, you know. These things’ll work, I think you’ve got to put a bit of thought into industrial relations, you know, and give them some challenge.

102. **MC:** Can you give any other examples like that where you sort of used your imagination to .. ?

Transcript of interview of Bill Dunn by Mick Carpenter (MSS.229/6/C/CO/9)

103. **BD:** Well, we used to have a situation at Hanwell ambulance station where the controllers were having a little bit of a go at us. So what they used to do is, they'd wait 'til the night shift, about three o'clock in the morning, you know, and they'd decide to put an ambulance on stand-by at Hammersmith Broadway. And then when that didn't really drive us round the bend they decided to do two or three of these a night, you know, so you'd spend maybe two hours just sitting on Hammersmith Broadway, knowing that Chelsea were in and Fulham were in and the other stations round you were in but you were sitting out covering their ground. So we complained about this and they said "well, give us a few examples" and course we couldn't give them off the head, you know. So for a week we kept a list of the stand-bys we done, and they said "yeah but, you know, we appreciate that you are being taken on but there's not a lot we can do about it." I said "OK, well, don't bother," I said, "we'll do it." I said "in future every ambulance that goes out from Hanwell on a stand-by will take with him one of our placards, one of our big COHSE posters." I said "and on that COHSE poster it'll have 'this ambulance has been deployed from Hanwell because your area is not adequately covered by ambulances, but now we have two areas uncovered by ambulances, both Hanwell and Brentford.'" "You can't do that." I said "try us." I said "everywhere we go we'll set that up." I said "we'll also take out with us a calor gas stove and we'll make tea alongside the road like bloody gypsies." And they bottled, we never got another stand-by from that day on. You know, and I think this is what you've got to do, I think, all right, maybe I haven't got all the answers, I'm sure I haven't, but I think there's not enough imagination goes into trade business, you know, I don't think we fly enough kites.
104. **MC:** Do you think it keeps people together more often than strikes 'cause everyone just goes home, don't they?
105. **BD:** That's right. You see, not only that, especially if you're winning your members stick closer to you, and even if you lose they've enjoyed the battle because they've been involved in it and it hasn't cost them a lot of money and it hasn't stopped them from paying their mortgage and they've turned somebody over and they've embarrassed somebody, and we all love to see somebody fall on their bum as long as it's not us, you know, and I think that's indicative of the whole thing, you know, that somebody's fell on their bum and you've helped them to fall and you can be the guy standing back laughing, you know, and that is what makes my branch strong anyway, the fact that they know that I will strike at the last resort.
106. **MC:** You can do that in a local dispute, of course, you know, where you've got a battle with local management. It's a different thing when you've got a national, an immovable government, isn't it? Or isn't it different?
107. **BD:** Well yeah, I think it is different. I think that is totally different. I think the only thing an intransigent government can understand is when you take totally intransigent methods or means along with them. Unfortunately that doesn't always lead where you want it to lead because you've then got people wanting to increase the action, and you've got your everyday solid member who just can't increase it any more, you know, because, let's be fair, you know, health service workers are not highly paid, they haven't had the time to save, they haven't had the chance to save and they don't have a lot of savings in the bank, and in the main, and I'm not being derogatory to them, but in the main they're not noted for their banking abilities and, you know, some of the porters, I mean if you're paying sixty-five pound a week you're not getting no Albert Einsteins in there or researchers or anything like that, or people with five or six O levels. You know, you're

Transcript of interview of Bill Dunn by Mick Carpenter (MSS.229/6/C/CO/9)

getting the guys who just want an easy life, you know, and've left school at an early age without any qualifications. Now unfortunately - I'm not being derogatory to these people, I know them, I've got them in my branch - they don't save money, they don't bank, they don't, you know, they're not in a position to save money. Most of them have got large families, or single-parent families amongst the domestics, and they just haven't got the ability to stay out on total strike. And, you know, then you've got your nurses who are totally opposed, and even some domestics and porters, that are opposed to leaving patients unattended, you know, and ambulancemen as well, and I think you've got to take all those things into consideration. I think in this dispute in particular we should've used far more of the publicity, we should've, you know, there's been a lot of money floating around in the TUC available to us from the miners and from the railwaymen and from people of others. I mean, our branch alone has got over seventeen hundred pound now as a strike fund, which has been donated by teachers, railwaymen, shops, God knows where, you know, old people just come up and give us five pound while we're standing on the picket line. And, you know, I think we could've got money, you know, from the other unions and from our own union and put our case plainly as a full-page spread, even in the Tory press, and said, you know, that the strong were defying the weak, that we didn't want to fight with like, you know, other people who can go out on total strike. I think our case should've been put more forcefully in the press and there should have been more officers appearing on television. In 1979, you know, I was on television nearly every night because that's where I had to be, and the ambulancemen got the highest pay they ever got, the highest pay rise they ever got through Clegg, you know, and I'm proud to be associated with that and I think I went an awful long way to being a part of getting that settlement. For about three months it wrecked my home life completely. Eight weeks I didn't have my kids with me at all, we had to send them off to the mother-in-law's and they were under threat of being assaulted on the way to school and I was under threat of castration, the windows were going to be smashed in. And when you're getting something like twelve or fourteen anonymous letters every day, you know, and not one of them wishing you well, well then, you know, you've got a right to get your kids out of that situation. Though fair play to mine, they didn't want to go, you know, because I hope I'm bringing them up as socialists, all I can do is try, you know, but they didn't want to go because we are a fairly close family and we believe in supporting one another, you know. But you see, in this dispute we haven't had officers appearing regularly on television and putting the case across for the health service worker. And it's got slightly political in some ways, you know, we've been deviated a little bit from really pursuing the case for money and we've got more interested in really breaking down a government. Well, that's fine for me, you know, there's nothing I would rather see that the Tory government get kicked out of office, but I should imagine something like sixty per cent of my members voted Tory at the last election, and some of them are intransigent Tories. Now they're not going to be party to that, you know, no way. They're quite happy to fight for a straightforward battle on pay but once we've had some speakers down and they've gone on about "you could wreck the government" we've had a lot of people walk away from the picket line and never come back. And, you know, sometimes these very left-wing speakers can do you more damage than good in the dispute, you know. So yes, I think in the national situation strike action is a very strong weapon, especially if you can encourage enough people like we did on the twenty-second of whatever when there was the national day of action and we put all those people on the floor, that was a magic day. But it's how long you can sustain that kind of effort.

108. **MC:** I'm switching a bit now, but, 'cause I mean obviously it's fading out a bit now, looks like it anyway, doesn't it? As if war-weariness has set in.

Transcript of interview of Bill Dunn by Mick Carpenter (MSS.229/6/C/CO/9)

109. **BD:** That's right.

110. **MC:** Finally. I mean, after a long time, much longer than most people would have predicted I think, that people could've sustained it for so long. I don't know whether you would have predicted that or . . .

111. **BD:** No, as a predictor I think I should be kicked out of the game altogether, you know. In January somebody said to me "do you think the nurses'd ever go on strike, Bill?" I said "no way," I said, "I can see nurses eventually going on strike in about three or four years' time," you know, I said "I can see this happening" but I said . . .

112. **MC:** Yes about predicting, Bill, you were saying, in January.

113. **BD:** Yeah, in January I predicted, you know, somebody said to me, "will nurses strike?" you know, "when do you see nurses? Why don't we have a strike?" And I said "I can't see it," you know I said "three or four years maybe", you know, "and nurses are getting increasingly more militant, I said "two, three, four years at the outside, I can see nurses being on the street and actually taking strike action, you know." And then in April we had this branch meeting and the nurses voted unanimously and we had a tremendous response at Ealing, you know. So much so they completely shook me, I never expected them to take the actions they did, you know, we virtually brought the hospital to a halt more than once, you know. And shop stewards really got going, you know, and really done fantastic things. Course the day out to Brighton, to the TUC conference, was one of the magic moments of my life.

114. **MC:** You were involved in that?

115. **BD:** Yeah, they were all my nurses who were there, you know.

116. **MC:** What, in the gallery?

117. **BD:** That's right, and I was with them. And some of those girls had got up, been on night shift all night, you know, and carried on and just got on the coaches as they come off the nights and went straight on down to Brighton, you know. We didn't get back gone seven o'clock at night. So, you know, it was, and that was tremendous, you know, because, like I say, I'm thirty years a trade unionist and that was the first time I'd ever really seen the strong ready to support the weak and, in the main, they done just that. But I think everyone now is looking at Christmas, you know. I know my domestics are, I mean nurses as well, you know, they just really have got to now decide whether they give their kids a Christmas or not 'cause, you know, my domestics are looking at taking home lousy pay from now 'til Christmas if we carry on the dispute. And their money is important in their houses; most of them, a lot of them are single-parent families, a lot of them are with husbands out of work. Well, there wages is vital, vital in the households, you know. So it's going to be very, very difficult, to say the least, to carry on.

118. **MC:** Yeah.

119. **BD:** Very difficult.

120. **MC:** That's sort of . . . But nevertheless it's not the end, is it?

Transcript of interview of Bill Dunn by Mick Carpenter (MSS.229/6/C/CO/9)

121. **BD:** But I don't think they've beat us, you see. I don't see it as the defeat that everyone's saying. Maybe, you know, all my life I've tried to look for some good in the bad things that've happened to me. You know, I come to terms with my cancer doing just that. So I look at this and I've tried to work out the good in it. We brought nurses out for the first time ever. We've fought this government longer than any other union or group of unions. We, with our action have got a better, *forced* a better deal out of this government than the steel workers did, who were costing this country thousands of millions of pounds every week. We've done better out of this dispute than the Civil Service did, who were stopping millions of pounds coming in every week, even threatened to hit the people on the dole, and all of this, you know. Now, we have got, we have forced from them more money than both of those sections of very militant and very able people who could actually make a difference in the economy. And we can't, and we were only fighting with one hand behind our back. What the hell does this government think they'd do if they ever tried to hurt the National Health Service? If they ever tried to disband it?
122. **MC:** Do you think that's why they're back-tracking a bit?
123. **BD:** I'm sure that's why they're back-tracking. They realise we *are* a powerful force. Look, the consultants in the National Health Service come out and had a dispute a few years ago. Nothing happened, the Health Service still run. Shortly after that the junior doctors and the registrars had a go. Nothing happened. We still run, the Health Service still run, and run adequately. We run without both of those groups of people. Now in 1979 the ancillary workers and the ambulancemen struck and we brought this service to a stop, or to a virtual stop. So the power *is* with the workers, the power *is* with the workers, not the doctors, not with the administrators, the power's with us. And we've proved it again this year. There's many, many hospitals who are diving around empty beds at the moment, with waiting lists. Now, that has got to be a feather in our cap, that has got to be a knock to them. What the hell would this crowd do? And, you know, if you go back to this national day of action on the twenty-second, when there was something like a hundred and fifty thousand people, and I believe that was a reasonable estimate, a bit conservative even, you know, 'cause there was an awful, awful lot of people there. And if they had prepared to turn out, and we were only arguing about something like six per cent then because we'd already got six, you know, and we were looking for twelve so we were really only arguing about six per cent. And I think at that stage everyone would've settled under ten anyway, you know, if we'd all been offered nine we'd've settled, so you could be talking about three per cent. Now, if you can encourage that many people on the street for three per cent, what would you encourage if this government or any other government tried to destroy the National Health Service? So no, I don't believe we've lost, I believe we've, there's a lot of good come out of this. We've encouraged a lot of people to take militant action. We've found pockets of resistance that are still there. I mean a lot of people in my branch'll go on forever. You know, we've also got people coming up to us and saying "how can I become a shop steward, Bill? How can I get more interested in this union business, Bill?" Our branch meetings are bigger, people are more aware.
124. **MC:** You don't think there'll be disillusioned with the TUC and the national unions?
125. **BD:** No, no, I don't. I think the mad militants will. But, you know, I think the others are just about ready for giving in now. I think they've had enough, you know, and I think they've proved all they wanted to prove, you know, we *have* got nurses out, and not one of them's been disciplined by the General Nursing Council like they were in '79. Nurses've wore

Transcript of interview of Bill Dunn by Mick Carpenter (MSS.229/6/C/CO/9)

uniform on demonstration, never allowed before. They stuck it, you know, and they've been going since April, and this is what people glibly forget, you know. And you'll find some of these militants who are now screaming "sell-out" and all of that are the ones, their branches done less than the so-called middle-of-the-road branches and the branches who were looked to be easy riders and right-wingers, you know. And you'll find, I've looked into this fairly deeply, you know, I've listened, I've watched some of the people who were up at conference screaming for a total strike, and I've checked back since then what their branches've done. You know and there's one lady springs readily to mind and her branch is doing nothing, she can't get them out at all but she was on the conference begging for [a] total strike. It's a good job she didn't get it 'cause she would've made hell a fool, she'd have been out on her own.

126. **MC**: This is a problem, isn't it? Yeah.

127. **BD**: That's the trouble, you know, and this is the other really, something else, you know, going back to earlier statements about conference being a magic time and all that. One of the problems with conference is that people come there and express their own opinions and they're not really expressing the opinions of a branch. You know, I remember a guy from Oxford once coming to conference and screaming for all-out strike and he wanted this and he wanted that, back this resolution. When he got back they kicked him out of office, the shop stewards, because he should never have said it, you know what I mean? And I think that happens a bit too often at conference. People are riding their own hobby horse and not the hobby horse of the branch. At our branch we go through the resolution book before conference, we make our own resolutions, we decide then whichever resolutions we'll support or second, and on some of them I'm given leeway: "go, listen to the argument, and decide", you know. But on most of them I'm under instruction.

128. **MC**: How did you get involved in the wider union from the branch?

129. **BD**: What, going to conference and all that?

130. **MC**: Well, and also the region.

131. **BD**: Well, because once you got fifty members you're entitled to go to regional council, and I went when I got fifty members, you know. And then I took somebody else with me when we got the next magic figure. And I was quite impressed at the way COHSE builds up its structure of influence, you know. And I decided then that I wanted to be a regional chairman, and I am now chairman.

132. **MC**: Why chairman? Why was that what you set yourself?

133. **BD**: Well, because I think as a regional chairman you can do an awful lot of good in the union. You can lead by example, you can . . . I think it's important, it's an important position, not that I want to be important, but I believe it's an important position that should be done properly. I don't believe the regional councils in this union or any union have enough direct influence. I reckon they should be more involved in the actual running of the union, you know.

134. **MC**: In the old days when conferences were fewer and farther between, every three years, the main avenue of influence was between the regional council and the NEC. But that doesn't happen so much now, does it?

Transcript of interview of Bill Dunn by Mick Carpenter (MSS.229/6/C/CO/9)

135. **BD:** No, well, yes, you've still got your avenue open to the NEC, and you've still got direct access to the national officers, you know, through your regions. But I find that they tend not to take as much recognition of regional councils as they should be, you know, I feel the regional council really has a far bigger role to play in the union if regional chairmen are responsible, and if the regional councillors are responsible, to take it with both hands. But unfortunately, you know, regional chairmen allow a whole lot of drivel to go on, or some of them do, you know. That's one of the things I tried to do in our region is to try and, you know, make sure that the debate is valid and to make sure the debate is interesting and to the point, you know. Once we get people citing off personal memories and all of that business we blow them out.
136. **MC:** You have resolutions that go forward to NEC and things like that.
137. **BD:** Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. You know, our regional council is quite militant. We're one of the only regional councils who've taken up the option of having an extraordinary regional council. The only regional council that in my knowledge has moved vote of no-confidence against the president of the union, and that was when he made what we considered was a terrible error of judgement on the business when they held a Miss World conference, COHSE, Miss COHSE at conference one year.
138. **MC:** And he condemned them.
139. **BD:** Well, he condemned the picket line, and he listened to the side of the people, you know, who'd gone to him and complained about dresses being torn and all of this business. He listened to all of that, and he give them a fair hearing, and yet he never listened to any of the people, you know, he never made it his business to find out. He knew Number Six region was involved, least he could've done was call the regional secretary, the regional chairman and one other, you know, to come and put our point of view to him. But he didn't do that, he just castigated us as terrible people. But it so happened this very important dress that was so-called destroyed, and we still denied that, but it was a guy in drag anyway. Now, no woman's going to give a guy a nice dress to wear, you know, is he?
140. **MC:** So you were going along with the protestors at the conference.
141. **BD:** Yeah, I was hundred per cent in favour.
142. **MC:** Why was that?
143. **BD:** Because I don't believe that at a trade union, I don't believe in women cavorting anyway purely on bodily build, that they are better than some other woman, you know. I believe all women are equal whether one's got a nice body and the other one's got a bad one, that's no criteria, you know, a woman is a woman. And I just don't see that we need that kind of crap in this union at all.
144. **MC:** D'you think that's part of that problem with conference not being serious enough?
145. **BD:** Yeah, I think that was done by silly people who come to the conference with more thought outside the conference hall than in it, and I think, you know, what really should have happened was that when they sent up the invite to all the delegates from the chair,

Transcript of interview of Bill Dunn by Mick Carpenter (MSS.229/6/C/CO/9)

the chair, the president should've said "look, I don't want be a party to that", you know, "this is totally opposed to the best interests of women" and I think he should have kicked it out there, but he allowed it to go on, he allowed it to take place, he even made the announcement. And then he done something that I would never do. You know, what he done, in effect, was like one of my managers saying to me "look, Bill, one of your members is a right pain in the bum," you know, and "we ought to have him out" and all of this and "tell me a few things about this guy" and I just say to him "oh yeah, I think that's terrible, let's sack him," you know, and not give the guy any support. I mean, it's my job then to go and find out the guy's side of the story. But the president never done that, you know, he just simply took their word and we were wrong and they were right and we were totally wrong, we got no right to reply. The other bad thing was that he kept the press in there all the time, he used this thing against us, you know. And we felt that we had a legitimate case, and I still feel they did, you know, and I think the Number Six region acted admirably, you know, I was proud that day to be the regional chairman and I still am, you know, and I supported them then and I support them now.

146. **MC:** When's the next regional council?

147. **BD:** The next regional council is, there's an executive council on the 25th of November, and then the next one is the annual general meeting in January some time.

148. **MC:** Would it be possible to come along?

149. **BD:** Certainly it would.

150. **MC:** Just to observe it, I mean I'd like to get round some of the regions.

151. **BD:** Certainly it would.

152. **MC:** When is that?

153. **BD:** I'll inform Pat McGinley tonight [?at Holborn], I'll make sure you're invited.

154. **MC:** January the . . .

155. **BD:** You won't be able to come to the executive, it would have to be the full council in January

156. **MC:** That's fine, I'd just like to get the flavour of the . . .

157. **BD:** That's right.

158. **MC:** January the . . .

159. **BD:** I'm not sure of the dates. Pat will give you the date. Do you know Pat McGinley?

160. **MC:** Well I don't know him very well, no.

161. **BD:** Well I'll get the date to you, if you give me a ring in a few days.

162. **MC:** OK.

Transcript of interview of Bill Dunn by Mick Carpenter (MSS.229/6/C/CO/9)

163. **BD:** I don't know whether he's booked already but I think he has.
164. **MC:** OK, I'll ring you about that, Bill.
165. **BD:** OK.
166. **MC:** Great. Sort of, rushing on, but , you mentioned Harry Short, maybe, I'd like to get some, I mean, who are the people that've really impressed you in COHSE?
167. **BD:** Well, a lot of people have impressed me in COHSE.
168. **MC:** Can you mention some of them?
169. **BD:** I'm basically impressed by the whole union. I like the democracy, that's the main thing I like because I believe in councils and I believe in conferences and I believe in the members having a full say of running that union, you know, 'cause without their brass we haven't got a union, so I believe they've got a right to have a say the way the union's run. So basically, you know, I'd love to see COHSE be a little bit more left-wing, as I've said earlier. But basically I'm quite happy with the union, you know, I'm quite happy with the way it runs.
170. **MC:** You mentioned people like Harry Short. What was . . . ?
171. **BD:** You know, he was a very small man - I'd doubt if he was above five foot - but he was a giant, you know. He was socialistically well-read, he was [a] very thoughtful, caring person, he was a terrible fighter for the rights of man in general, you know, he believed in, that was his sole aim in life, you know. And he not only done an awful lot of work in the Fire Brigades Union but he done a hell of a lot of work in COHSE and he was a voice that was always listened to and always spoke extremely good sense, you know. And then when he retired from the service altogether he stepped straight into another fight, you know, he started working for old age pensioners and all that. He was a guy who was going to, and did in fact, work until the day he died, you know, purely for the socialist way of life and the principle of the trade union movement and to me he was a giant, you know. When he said at conference "Short, Hammersmith", beautiful modulated speaking voice, everyone stopped and listened, you know. And there's other people, you know, who are giants: Tom [Courtley] always made a lot of sense and built an extremely big branch, you know. Scotland he comes from.
172. **MD:** Fife, wasn't it?
173. **BD:** Yeah, Fife. He always had the best interest of the union at heart and could see the other side of the penny and I believe he is a true socialist, you know. And I think that's what I admire most about people, you know, that they don't bend their socialist principle, the union principle, you know.
174. **MD:** It's interesting both people you mentioned are quite close to the shop floor.
175. **BD:** Well yeah, because I think this is where trade unionism really happens, you know. Yeah, the negotiator who's doing the big negotiations [sic] on the pay and all of that business, they've forgotten what it's like down here, they don't know from day one what

Transcript of interview of Bill Dunn by Mick Carpenter (MSS.229/6/C/CO/9)

the membership really wants. It's impossible for them to keep their finger on the pulse of what the members want. And, you know, when they ask people like me and we tell them they tend to want to pooh-pooh it because it doesn't fall in with their particular idea of what they think you should want. You know, I think Albert now, God rest him, you know, is very, very far away from the members, people like Terry Mallinson and David Williams. And it's not their fault, I'm not knocking them for this, don't get me wrong, I'm not saying anything derogatory about them, but the very fact of their job. I remember when I was a convenor for the ambulance service I was still very close to the floor and I done that for four years, but I never rode an ambulance for those four years, and when I eventually come back to ride an ambulance, Christ, I had a hell of a job to get back into it because it was, you know, it was different than the ambulance world I'd retained as a memory, and it was totally different, and hard to get back into, and it took me a month or more to get back into the day-to-day running of being an ambulanceman, you know. So they must've grown an awful long way away from us.

176. **MD:** Do you not think, I mean you say you're very loyal to COHSE, do you not think it's a, I'm not making it as a suggestion, but some people might say it was a nurse-dominated union, a psychiatric nurse-dominated union.
177. **BD:** Well I would've said, yeah, I would've said when I joined COHSE that it was really well dominated by the psychiatric nurses and the psychiatric management, which was even worse, you know, at that stage I can remember . . .
178. **MD:** What, the high-ranking nurses got onto the NEC?
179. **BD:** That's right, that's right. You know, they were all nursing officers or sisters or charge nurses. We didn't have any porters up there or anything like that, you know. And I think at that stage it was really a psychiatric union, you know, in more ways than one maybe. But I think that's changed over the years and I think now, you know, you get a lot of input from ancillary workers. And some of the work COHSE does on the ambulance staffs side, you know, some of the research department work on that is fantastic, and their submission to the Clay, Clegg Commission, you know, was extremely good. And I think we are stepping out of that psychiatrically-based system and becoming more of an across-the-board Health Service union. I think conference shows that fairly plainly because when I first went to conference nurses and midwives was really the only big issue of the week, you know, and I was there as, there was me and another guy, and that was ambulance commitment to COHSE. But now, you know, if the ambulancemen have a meeting we're looking at something like forty, fifty delegates, you know, so they have got to have, the ambulance used to be over in about ten minutes, you know, two resolutions, that was your lot. But now, you know, you've not only got ambulancemen moving resolutions about ambulancemen but they're also moving resolutions on administration, on nuclear disarmament, on political basis, you know, and all of these other things.
180. **MC:** I was going to say one of the things that's said about ambulance workers is that they're pretty sectional, not good trade unionists, they're militant on issues, but not good trade unionists
181. **BD:** They're very introverts, they tend to look at themselves rather than the whole spectrum of trade unionism. I'm proud to say my branch are not like that, you know. For the last two years we have followed trade union guidelines right done the middle, and we would've followed them before but they never had any, you know.

Transcript of interview of Bill Dunn by Mick Carpenter (MSS.229/6/C/CO/9)

182. **MC:** It's a code of practice?
183. **BD:** That's right, yeah. And if the union say "strike on that day" we strike on that day, but the ambulancemen tended to strike on other days and we got ourselves into an awful lot of hot water from the other ambulancemen, but we told them categorically "we are trade unionists, we belong to COHSE and we going to do what COHSE advises to do," you know, and we done just that over the last two years. Like I say, every year we've had an awful lot of stick, but we intend to carry on because that's the way you've got to be.
184. **MC:** Is it because it's a closed, they're a bit isolated from other groups of health workers and perhaps feel that health workers don't understand their job very much?
185. **BD:** I don't think it's that, I think they just think they're something special and they're not, they're only a part of the team.
186. **MC:** What, because of what they do, the emergency . . .
187. **BD:** Yeah, that's right, I think they would like to be special.
188. **MC:** Professionalism.
189. **BD:** Well they, no I wouldn't say that. I don't think they're ready for professionalism but, although we have guys who are already doing [indistinct] and infusion, you know.
190. **MC:** What I meant is, do you think there's an elitist attitude?
191. **BD:** Yeah, I think that's it. I don't know, I don't know quite what it is, I think they're just perverse, really. You know, springs to mind again, you know, that we were at a meeting last year in County Hall, and they knew that the trade unions were going to strike and they picked another day. Now that isn't elitist, that is bloody perverse, you know, no matter what way you look at it. And we said then that we wouldn't go along with that, and that's when we started going our own way, you know, because we didn't want to get into that kind of business, what you're talking about the trade union movement, especially me because it's my life, I don't really have any other hobbies, only this is my hobby, it's my life, I enjoy doing it, and I'm a trade unionist.
192. **MC:** I suppose being in local government, being engaged in local negotiations before . . .
193. **BD:** I think that was . . .
194. **MC:** . . . '74 must have had a . . .
195. **BD:** Yeah, I think that, I think that's always been a big thing. I think that's been the big thing with it that they, for an awful lot of years, they made their own rules, you know, they decided their own future with a local council, or in our case with the GLC⁷, you know, and whatever you done with them was the rules of the game. But now they're involved with a bigger ball game and, you know, to be honest, they're third division players trying to play in the first division and they're not used to it. You know, that's how I see it, anyway. I'm pretty disappointed with ambulancemen in general.

⁷ Greater London Council

Transcript of interview of Bill Dunn by Mick Carpenter (MSS.229/6/C/CO/9)

196. **MC:** What about, you mentioned the Federation of Ambulance Personnel.
197. **BD:** That's right.
198. **MC:** You said that, sort of, was on the way out when you were starting.
199. **BD:** Well, when I was starting up in a branch it was on its way out. It was very prevalent when I was just belonging, you know. It was something I could never have personally joined because I believe if you're going to be a part of a national body you've got to have highly-skilled negotiators who've come through the whole gambit of trade unionism, you know, started off as a shop steward, elevated himself or elevated or whatever, you know, to chairman and then to branch secretary, maybe been the auditor of the branch as well, you know, and then gone on regional chairman and then on to, you know, being very much involved in the Labour Party, seeing some of the negotiations at local level, maybe been a councillor, and then work your way through the system, you know, assistant regional secretary, regional secretary. That's the only grounding I understand for a guy who's going to eventually deal nationally with ambulancemen's pay. Now, you know, I reckon I'm as good a trade unionist as anyone, but I wouldn't want to dive in tomorrow and sit on the national negotiating committee. I'm sure I'd make a pils of it, you know. But this is what they were really suggesting, that we done our own negotiating, you know. And I particularly feel there's more to a national, or there *should* be more to a national negotiator than that, which is even, you know, [indistinct]
200. **MC:** 'Cause they merged in the end, didn't they?
201. **BD:** That's right. I was instigational, actually, into getting them into COHSE. I spoke to Terry Mallinson in the first instance after being approached by some of the lads from [the] Federation and so I was . . .
202. **MC:** Was it mainly a London-based thing or?
203. **BD:** Well, it was basically Southend, you know, and London with the big issues, but there was some very, very strong areas of it, you know, Avon was very strong, and Cornwall, Devon.
204. **MC:** Did it have paid officials and things like that?
205. **BD:** Well, it did, but it was so haphazardly run, you know, that there was no really, I suppose I shouldn't say this, I didn't see it as a very well-run organisation, you know, I wouldn't want to say any more than that in case somebody hears this and then takes me [indistinct] for libel, you know. But no, I didn't see it as a particularly well-run thing. Like our COHSE magazine, they had a magazine called *The Blue Light* and, you know, this was a treacherous thing, it used to really pick out people who were involved in the trade union movement, you know, and who wouldn't go into COHSE, and union officers, and it'd say terrible things about them, you know, and, you know, make out that they weren't the people they were supposed to be. Ted Sheehan particularly suffered through it, he was Transport and General, and some of the guys from NUPE and, you know, and some of the branch secretaries. They really had a, you know, very, it was something like an ambulanceman's *Private Eye*, but it wasn't, there was very little humour in it, you know. And it's never, I've always believed it's never been any part of me to slag another socialist

Transcript of interview of Bill Dunn by Mick Carpenter (MSS.229/6/C/CO/9)

just for the pure fun of doing it, you know. If I'm going to slag someone I'd like to get him off in a room on his own, I wouldn't want to do it in public or, you know, I would never go into press and say what a horrible guy the branch secretary next door was even if I believed it, you know. So, that alone was sufficient to keep me out of it, you know. And the fact that I've always been a trade unionist and I didn't see what a friendly society could do for me.

206. **MC:** It could never have broken into the negotiations.
207. **BD:** No, it was never allowed to break into the negotiation[s], and quite rightly so, you know, quite rightly so in my opinion, quite rightly so.
208. **MC:** Is there anything I haven't mentioned, covered at all in my questions that you think . . . ?
209. **BD:** Not really . . .
210. **MC:** We've covered quite a lot of ground.
211. **BD:** Covered a lot of ground, a lot of talking. I think, one thing I'd like to say is, you know, and I think it's important that - I see you're wearing the badge so I'm on safe ground, I'm not going to get an argument - but I think every trade unionist ought to be totally committed to the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. I think that's one of the best things I done in my life was to become an active member of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and I'm like you, I believe that wherever I go should wear my badge and let everyone else know, you know. 'Cause one of the problems with the campaign is while everyone's prepared to go on marches and all of that business, they forget to wear their badge at the office the next day, or they're frightened to because they feel a little bit isolated but [if] they wore the badge at the office, you know, they might find that there's ten other people who are also feeling isolated at that office, you know.
212. **MC:** Yeah, that's a good point.
213. **BD:** And I think it's important. I think the wearing of your badge, the same as the wearing of your union badge, I believe that's important too.
214. **MC:** You obviously, I mean, you feel, when I phoned you up and I was going to come on November the fifth and made a joke about fireworks. I mean, obviously, you feel strongly about those kinds of . . .
215. **BD:** Yeah, I . . .
216. **MC:** I mean being an ambulance worker you see terrible accidents, you'd know what the damage of bombing or fireworks can actually do, isn't it?
217. **BD:** Well, as an ambulanceman I am particularly opposed to fireworks, but, you know, I'm also opposed to the idea of the firework, you know, it's training our children to think of bombs and how attractive they are and how pleasant they are. There's nothing pleasant about a bomb, especially a nuclear bomb, you know, and there's nothing pleasant about the air-to-sea missile which the rocket can represent to them, you know. My children never had fireworks and I'm not ashamed to say that. We give them books, we give them

Transcript of interview of Bill Dunn by Mick Carpenter (MSS.229/6/C/CO/9)

a night out in a Wimpey Bar. We spend the same money as they'd have if they had fireworks, you know, but we tend to either buy them a game or a book or a record or something like that. We find that that is far more for them, you know. We've also never had war toys in the house, we don't believe in them. And I'm glad to say that both my daughters are gradually becoming at least feminists, and socialists . . .