THE SANYO WORK IN

In July this year, workers occupied the Sanyo factory in Wodonga in protest at retrenchments by the company.

The following interview with a woman shop steward was conducted during the occupation in the canteen where the workers slept at night.

It explains the background to the work-in and how the originally conservative workers developed their own understanding of the need for the work-in and of the importance of unions.

I understand there have been retrenchments since October 1977 when there were 79 retrenched, followed by 30 in November and 45 in February 1978. During those retrenchments there seemed to be very little response from the workers. Suddenly we have front-page headlines, the workers producing leaflets explaining their position, occupying the canteen. What happened in the meantime, what's happened to the workers?

Well, basically, the first couple of lots of retrenchments were accepted on the basis that, if they took some, it would ensure the security of the jobs of the people still in employment in the plant. After the second lot of retrenchments, the plant manager said there would be no more. If there was, he would be the first to go. That made people feel a little more secure.

However, just after Xmas retrenchment rumors started circulating again. In February, with no notice to the unions, just completely out of the blue one afternoon just before knock-off time, they served retrenchment notices on 45 people. This was done the very same day that management was meeting in Melbourne with union officials to ask them for help regarding the tariff situation.

Had the union officials been informed about the intended retrenchments?

No. When I was informed of the retrenchments, I immediately contacted Charlie Faure, Victorian Electrical Trades Union secretary. That was the first he had heard of it. At that stage it was about 4 p.m. and the only organizer in the district was Richard Young from SPU. We contacted him and when he arrived most of the employees had gone. We had a bit of trouble getting Richard in.

You mean the company refused to allow him in?

Yes, until he set them straight. What happened was there was nobody with any authority in the plant to give Richard permission to have access to the factory. They used that as an excuse to deny Richard access to the plant. The next day we had our organizers down from Melbourne. This was the third lot of retrenchments. It was extremely badly handled right from start to finish. It just created so many hassles with the people and they've lived constantly with it ever since.
What was the feeling of people? How were they affected by this third lot of retrenchments?

The employment situation had got worse. Mostly it meant to them that they had no job security. They lost that feeling of security and had a constant fear of being retrenched. Every pay day they sort of wondered - is this the week I'm going to get a retrenchment notice?

So, until the third lot of retrenchments, the 45 people who were retrenched in February 1978, people in the factory had not been so conscious of the possibility of being retrenched, they hadn't been so fearful of it. But after this lot of retrenchments their attitude changed?

Yes, dramatically. I think after the second lot they sort of thought it's right now, everything's going to be OK, and they put a lot of faith in company reassurances which are given fairly frequently, or were. About the time of the third lot of retrenchments, things started going rapidly downhill. Over the past few months they've had an increasing pressure of worry about their jobs from week to week. Just one instance comes to mind fairly strongly. Three or four weeks ago the Wodonga Credit Union distributed pamphlets which were in a white envelope, and stapled to the pay envelopes. It was so distressing for some people that when the leading hand went to hand them their pay, they either burst into tears, refused to take it, or stood back and said, "No, tell me what's in it first". That sort of attitude was created simply through fear for their jobs. For two months at least there've been solid rumors going around that there were going to be retrenchments at the end of June.

At that time did you notice any change in their attitude? Did they become angrier at the situation.

Yes, and I'll tell you why. Every week virtually, for two months, the shop stewards had a meeting once a week with management and every week we kept asking them, "Is there going to be any more, if there is we want to know". Every week, even up to as late as two weeks ago, we were given really strong denials.

The workers have been issuing statements for quite a few weeks now. If there's going to be more retrenchments, they're not going to get away with it again. This time we're going to stand and fight because if they get away with it this time, it's going to happen again and again, and there's not going to be anyone left at Sanyo, just a skeleton staff. What, in fact, it means is that they are slowly but surely cutting the workforce down a few at a time.

This was the sort of thing that people were discussing in their lunch hour?

Yes, sure. On the lines, in their lunch hour. They've had plenty of time to do it. Some of them have had quite a bit of spare time and they've been saying this for weeks and weeks.

Right. So now we come to the present situation. Can you tell me briefly what happened last week and what led to this situation of workers occupying the canteen as we can see them around us here tonight?

Well, two weeks ago, the union organisers were asked by the company to come down and sort out a possible demarcation problem. They came down and found that, at that stage, they were unable to do anything. They agreed that they'd come back in a month or so when things were actually set up and sort it out to their satisfaction. However, while they were down here the shop steward from the cabinet factory approached his organiser and said he'd had a problem for quite a few months and could Peter give him a hand with it. So Peter stayed over the next day to help him sort it out. This resulted in them putting a ban on some machinery and, subsequently, in a strike.

How long did the strike last?

Only the Friday and Monday. However, on the Friday afternoon they started standing down people from up here.

So the strike had only been going for one day?

It hadn't even been going for a day, only a matter of hours, when they started standing down ETU people.
Why did they say they were standing them down?

Because they were running out of boards, casings, wraps, things like that. On the Monday all the organisers came down again and we entered into fairly lengthy discussions and it was settled on the Monday afternoon. However, by that stage a similar situation had cropped up that caused the storemen and packers to go out. This meant that we were still stood down because we were still unable to work.

These were essentially minor grievances?

They were very minor grievances and it didn’t really mean very much at all because they were both settled within a day or so. However, on the Tuesday we were issued with the statement that on Thursday retrenchment notices would be handed out and on the Friday the people would be retrenched.

And the company claimed that the retrenchments were brought on by the fact that there’d been some limited strike action?

Yes, that’s exactly right. They claimed that the strike action was responsible for it. However, it’s the opinion of all the workers here, myself included, that those retrenchment lists had been drawn up quite some weeks beforehand. The actions of the other two unions were very minor and people here feel the company only used that as the wedge to drive between the ETU and the other two unions. They were trying to divide the ETU off from the other two unions because it weakens them if they’re a more divided group.

Why didn’t the company’s strategy work?

Well, basically, they just completely underestimated the workforce. The people here are just so fed up with the garbage that comes out of the office — their constant lies. They weren’t ready to cop it. They just said ‘no, we’re not going to cop it’. ‘Let’s all get together, keep together, then at least we have a hope of winning it.’

Following that there was a committee formed?

Yes, that’s right. The committee is calling itself the Sanyo Workers’ Committee for Continued Employment.

The committee, as I understand it, came up with some recommendations to the rest of the members of all the unions. There was a combined unions committee?

Yes, there was a combined unions committee and it comprised the shop stewards plus about seven or eight rank and file members from various unions. Each union was represented.

So rank and file members constituted a majority on the committee?

Yes, about two to one.

What were the main elements of the recommendations put to the workers, and the position adopted by the workers?

Well, the committee had a good hard look at it and discussed several things, but the only answer we could seem to come up with was that strike action was of no benefit to us. We had to try something which was completely different and catch the company completely off guard. We had a think about it and came up with the idea that we would have a work-in. We would man the production lines during the day and occupy the canteen during after work hours.

Do you remember where this idea for the work-in came from, or did it arise spontaneously?

It’s just one of those things where you’re sitting there and suddenly you say, ‘Well, damn it. I don’t see why we should be retrenched. Just refuse to leave. We won’t go. We won’t accept it.’ It’s like Topsy it just grew.

It grew from the basic idea that you were going to refuse to be retrenched and the strategy was built around that idea?

Yes.

What were the elements of that strategy? What did you hope to achieve by working in?

Well, a couple of things. Firstly, of course, we’re seeking to keep the jobs of those people that were to be retrenched. The other one was
that we need to have some job security. To obtain the job security we have to force the company to agree to give some sort of guarantee that they're not going to sack us next week or the week after. Now, to achieve these things we also had to look at the broader issues. We realise that the company has a problem because of the tariff levels on television sets imported into Australia. Admittedly, some of these are Sanyo sets which are imported from Japan and they're causing us a great deal of damage because we can't compete with those markets. So, to draw the attention of the government and people of Australia, and anybody else that's of any help, we decided it had to be something completely different, because we must get something done about those tariff levels.

So you decided on a completely new strategy, trying to gain government assistance for maintaining jobs at the same time as trying to force the company into backing down on the immediate retrenchments. When you put these recommendations to the people working here, were you confident that they would all go along with them?

I must admit it seemed such a wild idea that when I came in here on Wednesday morning and we put forward the recommendations of the committee I wasn't terribly confident we'd get them to agree to it. When we put it forward we got almost a one hundred per cent majority and I was absolutely staggered by the response from the workers.

So everyone agreed to work in. What happened then?

Straight after work in the afternoon, a group of people stayed here while the other group zipped home to get sleeping gear and organise food, because there were two problems which we had to get straight. When the first lot came back, the second lot did the same thing. So that in a very short time we had ourselves relatively well organised.

So the strategy to work in in the daytime and occupy at night has been happening since last Wednesday?

Yes, 24 hours a day the canteen has been occupied.

And has work continued?

It continued up until Friday morning when we had a temporary lock-out which the company claims was a misunderstanding. When we went in and approached them, they let us all back in. That was straight after we had the mass resignation. We manned the production lines on Monday taking with us the people who had received retrenchment notices on Friday. All those people were allowed to work the day out including the ones who had been retrenched. Very little happened on Monday.

Tuesday, which was yesterday, we arrived at work and spent the day sitting out here. On Monday, the company had made an agreement and a commitment to us that they would carry ten workers. When we got in on Tuesday they denied they had reached such an agreement. When we put this to our members they again unanimously agreed not to go back to work until such time as those people were allowed to go back to work, or we spoke to Mr. Jones or something more concrete.

Also they informed us they had contacted the Arbitration Commission. This morning people arrived ready to go to work to find themselves locked out of the factory. So, unable to resume work, we went in and approached the management and said “Do you know what’s going on?” They said they would open the factory if the production lines were manned normally, the people that were retrenched stayed in the canteen and no union organisers were in the factory. When we came back and put it to the people, they just said no. “Tell them to forget it. We’re staying here. They’re not going to divide us. What they’re trying to do is divide the group again and we’re not going to have it. Either we all go back to work or none of us do.” There was no recommendation put forward by anybody, we just told them exactly what the company had said and all of a sudden, erupting from everywhere around the floor, were people with their comments making recommendations and making moves themselves.

That situation is quite amazing, especially for a conservative community like Albury-Wodonga which doesn’t have a great history of industrial disputation. I understand that in this plant itself, attitudes towards unionism and union solidarity by the workers have not been very strong in the past?
That's perfectly true. In fact, I wrote an article for our union newspaper a couple of years ago where I accused the workers here of being the most apathetic lot of people I had ever seen because of their lack of interest in the unions and lack of knowledge, which is not a hundred per cent their fault. On many occasions, I had people grizzling to me about having to be in the union and paying union fees.

Looking around us here, there are workers sitting at tables, playing cards, writing letters, reading books, lying in beds which they brought here. There's a general atmosphere of solidarity and friendship. What sort of effect has this strategy of occupying the canteen right through the night had on the workers here? I understand people are communicating with others from different parts of the plant now, whereas before they didn't.

Well, the cabinet factory's never had a close affinity with the people up here because of being down the road a bit. Suddenly, all those people there are known to the people up here and lots of friendships have been formed. Different areas in the factory used to keep to their own groups, sit at their own tables and not mix very well. Now, suddenly, they're all one big group mixing together helping each other. Ones who can't come in at night are looking after the kids of the ones who want to come in. We had tremendous support over the week-end when we had no power. A lot of people who couldn't come in were making soup and casseroles and bringing gas lights, gas barbecues and things like that. I think it's generally been very good from the union point of view because it's made them understand their union a lot better.

I understand there's been a lot of telegrams of support which have come in from other unions in Australia?

Yes. A large number of telegrams from a large number of unions, and also some women's groups have come in and it's been a tremendous morale booster for the people here because the very first lot of telegrams arrived when they were feeling a bit down.

Even though it's sometimes a few words in a telegram it means a heck of a lot to these people because they didn't really understand that unions could have such close unity.

There doesn't seem to be much question in people's minds as to whether they can go with it. They seem more relaxed than a few days ago. Even getting some satisfaction out of being here?

I think one thing that is quite noticeable, and is probably what you're trying to explain, is that they've just got such sheer determination. No matter what, they're going to stick it out until they get the result they're after. I think it's this determination that kept a lot of them going because it's not very easy for 40, sometimes 60, all in here together. We had problems sleeping for a couple of nights. But we've overcome all those problems and nobody seems to be having any hassles. We've got the food thing running smoothly. At the week-end it was very difficult because of the hard circumstances, the cold, no power and everything, but all that did was strengthen their determination and make them more united.

The amount of friendship, co-operation and civilised behavior that's going on here is quite tremendous to see. Do you think this experience has changed anyone in their own personal attitudes, the way they relate to other people?

Yes, for sure. We had people who were anti-union and suddenly they realised why they're paying the union fees. They understand helping each other. In fact, some are on our committee and they're relating to the other workers. I think this is an experience that none of us is ever going to forget. Also, it's had a tremendous effect on the people because they know now that, no matter what, nobody is ever going to put anything over them again.

How do you see the future of the solidarity of the workers in the Wodonga factory? What do you see happening when industrial disputes occur in the future?

One thing I know is that the people here now understand that a union is only as strong as the members in it, and while they remain strong themselves then they have a pretty good chance of licking whatever it is that's the problem. I think this is fairly important because up until now they didn't seem to realise this. This is one thing they have learnt and it's valuable to them.