

**Frank Cooper interviewed by Peter Atherton on 10 March 2010 for
Britain at Work 1945-1995 Oral History Project**

FC: Well, really, my history within the trade union movement is more concerned with the smaller workshops. And I joined the National Union of Sheet Metal Workers the year the war broke out, 1939. And I did get called up and when I came back out of the forces I worked in various shops. Basically, in the Battersea, Wandsworth and Mitcham areas. And then I got married to Joan, who died in '78. I got married to Joan, who was a teacher in Middlesex. So we managed to scrape enough money together and buy a house in Ruislip. So the logical thing to do then was to sort of seek a job in that area. Cut out the travelling.

PA: So what year would this be?

FC: This would be '49 and '50.

PA: Right.

FC: And over those years I worked in West London. I worked at Carrier's, which was off the North Circular Road, ACI, which was a factory in Ruislip, which is now a supermarket, I believe. John Lyons, Park Royal, Benham's at Park Royal, MacDowell's at Wembley and then I went into a job with the Regional Health Authority. One of the difficulties was of course that having been an active trade unionist, and a shop steward in many of those shops, finding jobs wasn't very easy! Because they didn't--

PA: They didn't want you.

FC: --they didn't want you, oh yeah.

PA: So how did you know that?

FC: Only that you would go and apply for a job and be told, well, I haven't got any vacancies now but I'll take your name and address and write to you and then you know somebody else that goes along the following week and gets the job!

PA: So on your application you would submit the fact that you were a union member?

FC: Oh, yes. And most of the applications was personally turning up and seeing the manager and the foreman.

PA: It was word of mouth, presumably.

FC: Yes. So I worked in all those shops and I earned very good money in all those shops. They were all good paying sheet metal shops in the ventilation industry. Air conditioning. And it was that sort of job that I got with the Regional Health Authority in the end.

PA: Which region was that?

FC: Northwest Thames Regional Health Authority. And being that I was a practical bloke that had worked on the shop floor, I was so much different to all the draughtsmen that was in there. I got on ... I got promoted and I got better jobs it was a very good move. Very good.

So that was really my history of that movement. Of course, while I lived in Hillingdon, I was a local councillor. And I was chairman of the planning committee and I can well remember going to the meetings when Ferry Aviation at Hayes closed down. Ferry's had just shut down at Hayes and went to Yeovil. I think it was Yeovil.

PA: Right. And when was that?

FC: That would have been mid-'50s.

PA: And they had shut down just to re-locate --

FC: And at that time, the then member of parliament for Hayes, who was a bit of a renegade because he went to the SDP, but was a chap by the name of Sandleson, who was a very good friend of Slater Walker. You remember Slater Walker?

PA: No.

FC: Well, Slater Walkers were really people that bought factories and sold them and bought businesses and sold them. Anyway, we went to see this bloke Walker, and we managed to get, with a lot of effort from the borough council, a lot of industry back on that Fairey Aviation site. And I would probably hazard a guess, but I would suggest that with the office blocks and the two or three factories, and Marks and Spencer's have got a very large depot there, there's probably more people employed there now, although in different jobs than there was before.

PA: Yeah. How did that come about then? Who put forward, and how many meetings did that take?

FC: Oh, we instigated it on the borough council.

PA: So as a council you instigated it?

FC: Oh, yes. We tried to get involved before the final bits of Ferry Aviation closed down. To avoid ... Although EMI were nearby, and they was a big factory, the Fairey Aviation closure could have been quite serious.

PA: How many redundancies would that involve about?

FC: Well, on Fairey Aviations, where they used to build and develop helicopters of course, there was probably about six or seven hundred jobs. And they were sheet metal workers, fitters, turners, and those sort of people. So I can remember those negotiations very well. And of course, one of the things you could never keep pace with, in those days, and in fact it took up a lot of the spare, was the perpetual growth of Heathrow Airport. Heathrow Airport went on growing, and I think as a result of Fairey's going, they finally packed up the whole caboose. Even their tool room and their design offices, which still stand in North High Road, when Fairey's finally went I think there were no unemployment consequences.

PA: Really?

FC: But we were living in better times than we are now.

PA: Yeah, yeah.

FC: So that was my involvement. Of course ---

PA: *Can I ask you how long that procedure took? From the notification that Fairey's were moving --*

FC: I would say from the day that the planning officer and I as chairman decided to get the council's permission to make a direct approach to the new owners of the Fairey Aviation site, to in fact building work going on there to convert existing buildings for another use ... Probably took about fifteen to eighteen months.

PA: *Right. And who financed it?*

FC: In the first place, Slater Walker. He didn't sell the site. He had put it up for sale, but he never sold the site. Instead he developed it and rented it out.

PA: *Did he?*

FC: And he was lucky in as much that he got some very good people. Marks and Spencer's moved in there with a very large store, where they did their shop from, you know. And then there was Dickinson's, and engineering company that went in there, not with factory jobs, but they went in there with draughtsmen and design jobs and that sort of things. Dickinson's really sub-contracted all their engineering work out. But there was all those sort of jobs which I was deeply involved with, and at the same time, at the other end of the borough, on the Uxbridge trading estate, we had a very good trading estate which is owned by the borough council. But the demise of engineering jobs was going on then. There was Wright Engineering. There was a company there that used to produce stand-by generators, for electricity. We lost a lot of jobs on Uxbridge because they ... In some cases, they were taking government grants and moving out. So that was really my experience of West London. And then of course where I worked at ACI Ruislip, I think that's a Focus ... It's not a supermarket, it's a Focus now.

PA: *And you were at ACI whilst you were a councillor?*

FC: Oh, yes, while I was a councillor while I was at Carrier's, ACI, Lyons and MacDowell's.

PA: *Right. So how long were you a councillor for then?*

FC: Altogether, with a period on the GLC, which was the later part ... I'd say about twenty-three years. And I've still got children that live in Ruislip, so when I'm over there I usually grab hold of the local people and keep meself aboard. My other trips to Ruislip really are when I get notified by the town clerk, or chief executive, as he calls himself, that so-and-so has died, and you go to the crematorium!

PA: *What moved you to get involved in local politics?*

FC: Pardon?

PA: *What moved you to get involved in local politics?*

FC: I was always interested in politics.

PA: *Right from a young lad?*

FC: Oh, yes!

PA: *It's quite interesting, if I could --*

FC: I got a grant from Surrey County Council and my union and the TUC and I took Economics and Politics at Ruskin.

PA: *Oh did you?*

FC: Mm.

PA: *When did you do that, can I ask?*

FC: That was 1950 and '51.

PA: *Really? And how did you apply for the grants?*

FC: Well, you could apply in those days through the trade unions and if you got a place, which I managed ... I didn't get a place on me first application, but I did on the second. And then you fished around for a grant. And at that particular time, I was contemplating moving to Ruislip but I was living here in Bartlett. And I applied to Surrey County Council for a grant and got a grant. I managed to do it on the cheap. My wife was a teacher and she had a relative that ran a small pub in the town of Wheatley, which is just this side of Oxford, really. So I did what you did. I took me bike down to there and I didn't live in the campus, which would probably been a bit prohibitive financially, but I used to cycle from the college to Wheatley and serve behind the bar over night. I earned a few bob that way.

PA: *How much did you earn?*

FC: Eh?

PA: *How much did you earn? Can you remember?*

FC: Oh, I can't remember. I can't really remember what this relative paid me to work behind the bar. But my wife was at work as a teacher and I used to leave me bike around there and I used to catch the Thames Valley Bus ... Because the bus fares were cheaper than the train fares in those days! And used to come up Friday afternoon and go back early Monday morning.

PA: *Did you?*

FC: Yes. So I took politics and I did better at economics in the end than I did at politics. But I never practised economics but I did practise politics! I spent those years between 1950 and '70, earning very good money. Those sheet metal shops that I told you. Wages were always fairly good in West and Northwest Middlesex. Basically, because I think with the growth of the airport, there were good job opportunities. You know, and if a bloke didn't pay the money, well you left him and went to work with somebody else.

PA: *Because you could in those days.*

FC: Yeah. You could. Now whether those jobs exist at the moment, certainly none of those factories that I mentioned to you still exist. All of them have gone out of existence. They

vary ... They tend to have been ... Well, not Joe Lyons, but the others tend to have been bought up by somebody else and shut down.

PA: Yes. It's common, isn't it. It's common. Can I ask you why in the beginning you chose to go into sheet metal work? Can you remember?

FC: I think really, when I left school in '38 --

PA: How old were you then?

FC: Fourteen. Clearly my father wanted me to go into some sort of a job. And I think he played darts with a man that worked at this sheet metal shop. At Shepherd's Bush. And I went to work there and he said oh, you'll learn sheet metal work and all that and of course I joined the union pretty early on.

PA: Why was that? Is your family a union family?

FC: My father was a trade unionist.

PA: A strong link.

FC: Most of the men in industry were in trade unions.

PA: Right.

FC: So I joined it. And then of course when the war broke out, this company that I worked for, British Acoustic Films they was called, were moved down to the west country. And I certainly didn't want to go down there. So I left them and I went to go to work for a company called Russell and Russell in Hammersmith. And I worked for them as a junior ... I went to night school at Wandsworth Technical College, partially at the expense of Russell and Russell's, took me City and Guilds there.

PA: In sheet metal work?

FC: In sheet metal work. Application, yeah. So really, I got to meet friends there and it was an interesting trade.

PA: What does it involve? I don't know what it involves, really. Could you go through --

FC: Well, there are various many grades of sheet metal work. You can be in stainless steel vessels, which is really people that are building brewery vats and cooking utensils and stainless steel stuff. You can be in motor car panels, which is a big section. You can be in panel beating. You can be in the aircraft trade, which wasn't dissimilar to the motor trade. It was mainly panel work. You could be in sort of general sheet metal work. But the branch that I was interested in was the ventilation. Which made all the duct work and the air conditioning equipment, that I think carries most of our diseases now, though I try not to think about it! No, I just got into it and I joined the Sheet Metal Workers' Union and --

PA: So you joined the union in '39?

FC: Oh, yeah, when I was very young.

PA: And was that a political belief? A belief in better rates and ...

FC: No, I worked with blokes, I went to night school with blokes ... There was a fellow there he didn't work with me, but we went to Wandsworth Technical College and we took our City and Guilds together. And I worked with him and he was already in the union. He said I've joined the union. And we talked about when we joined it, we was under eighteen, we was paid tuppence a week. Union fees are a bit different now. No, I've still got a lot of cards and papers dating back from those days. But I mean, the sheet metal industry, the ventilation trade, that is very concerned with pattern development. You know, triangulation, parallel line method --

PA: *What's that?*

FC: --long radius --

PA: *Can you tell me what that is?*

FC: They are various systems of developing a pattern. If you're gonna get a piece of duct work which is say nine inches square, and you want to convert it to nine inches diameter, there's a method of developing that as a pattern. Then you form it up and you've got your object.

PA: *Can you say more about that? Because these sort of techniques and things, the fact that you've been involved with that --*

FC: Well, I mean, members that were well-versed with pattern development, and that's what you'd learn when you take your City and Guilds --

PA: *Pattern development?*

FC: Yeah. There are various methods, as I say. Triangulation is one, you develop everything from the principle of a triangle --

PA: *Are you talking about a design perspective?*

FC: Yeah. Development of a pattern. Parallel line methods. Long radius methods, and various systems of development. And if you were versed with that, it was probably a thing that they asked you. Because what you're given is a drawing. And you make whatever's on that drawing. And you can't go back to the foreman and say well, I can do those bits, but I can't do that bit! And you did the lot. And of course, as time went on, as time went on and the industry developed piece work, the governor having given whoever he was subcontracting on a price for that would give you a piece work price for that. And if you beat that, well you earned very good money.

PA: *So it wasn't piece work in '39, it was a flat rate in '39 was it?*

FC: No. Well, I think industry moved from a flat rate to piece work over those years.

PA: *And how did the workers feel about that?*

FC: Generally speaking, they took it on. Because they earned very good money.

PA: *And the unions supported it?*

FC: Oh, yes, the union wasn't opposed to piece work. I mean, I'm getting the benefit of it now, because during the years that we had graduated pension, Macmillan's graduated pension, I was earning very good money. Where the more you earned, the more you paid into your pension fund and you got credit when you get it.

PA: Are you prepared to say what sort of figures you earned?

FC: I ... Well, in those days of course ... I can remember when I moved from one shop where they were paying two and four pence an hour to another shop that was paying two and six. You might think that paltry today but it was important in those days. I can remember very distinctly at a couple of places going out on strike for tuppence an hour and probably agreeing to go back to work and settling for a penny or three haypence or tuppence. Wages were a lot different then. I've got a son now that works for a company at Wembley. He went into the sheet metal industry. Alan. And I don't need to see him but I wanted some brackets for me shed made so I gave him a drawing and told him to make some brackets! Anyway, he came up and he said to me: We was out on strike last week for three days. So I said oh yeah? So he said yeah, he said. We put in for a pound an hour rise. We agreed to go back eventually. We got seventy p. Which is fifteen shillings an hour more. So of course in the end I said to him what are you earning now? He said well, it's just short of fourteen pound an hour. And you nearly fall off your bench, don't you? But they are the sort of wages. I still go occasionally to my sheet metal work branch in London, which meets at Blackfriars. I mean, there are men earning thirty and forty thousand pound a year. And they live very comfortably. And I mean wages ... You can't talk about what wages you got. It's --

PA: Well, it's interesting to know.

FC: They've gone astronomically through the roof, haven't they?

PA: It's interesting to know.

FC: When I think of the years that I served as a councillor, when I first became a councillor ... Because I lived within five miles of the council offices, I wasn't allowed to claim me fares! I had Labour councillors further down in South Ruislip that was outside the four mile, they could claim their fares. I wasn't allowed to claim me fares. Now, you read in the papers that councillors get an allowance of nine and ten thousand pounds a year!

PA: It goes back to who makes the rules, doesn't it?

FC: We're living in changing times. If you went from Boiler Arms to Hammersmith, which I did as a kid, that was a penny bus fare. It's two pound now. You don't notice it when you've got a freedom pass!

PA: Can I ask, when you said you went on strike, where was that and who organised it? How did it get organised? And what was the strike--

FC: Oh, I went on strike ...

PA: What was the first time you went on strike?

FC: I went on strike at Carrier's. They sacked our shop steward at Carrier's --

PA: When was that? Do you know?

FC: I don't know. I really forget now. But he wasn't a bad bloke. He was an Irishman. But they sacked our shop steward at Carrier's and we went out on strike. And they took him back.

PA: How long was that?

FC: I think we were out on strike for about three days.

PA: Was there strong feeling ... How big was --

FC: Not only did the sheet metal work stop, but there was a small welding section and a larger machine shop and after one day they came out on strike with us.

PA: And what unions were involved with that?

FC: That would have been the AU ... The old Boilermakers' which is part of the GMB, and the Sheet Metal Workers.

PA: Right. So there's unity there.

FC: Oh, yes, most of the time. Most of the time inside factories, unions worked very well together. They might have squabbled outside amongst the hierarchy, but they worked well together in factories.

PA: How big a work force would it have been in Carrier's?

FC: What, Carrier's? When we came out on strike, I think there would have been about sixty of us working there, including fitters and machinery.

PA: And it would have been union members --

FC: And then when of course, at Air Controls, we came out on strike when the Confederation of Shipbuilders' Union called a strike. For an increase. I think we went back and settled for tuppence an hour then. And another case in ... when I was at MacDowell's we went on strike. (Laughs.) That was a funny old strike.

PA: Why? What was that about?

FC: The Management sacked the foreman! So we went out on strike and saved the foreman his job.

PA: Why do you say that was a funny strike then?

FC: Well, you didn't go out on strike to save the foreman as a rule, did you? You usually went out on strike because of the foreman! But no, he was a good bloke and something went on in the factory and they decided to give him his dismissal. It was owned by a firm called Crickle's, which were big people --

PA: Crickle's?

FC: Crickle Windows. And they used to be big people in the ventilation industry. And they owned MacDowell's. And they used to send a lot of their work to MacDowell's. And oh yeah, we went out on strike to save him from dismissal.

PA: *Why was he dismissed?*

FC: We didn't know why ... We were never given. When we asked to see the management, they said it doesn't affect you sheet metal workers on the floor, get on with your job. We have a right to manage our factory in the way we think. And we just went out and said unless they told us the reasons why the foreman was sacked, we wouldn't return to work.

PA: *How long ago did it happen? Was a meeting called?*

FC: Oh, we called a shop meeting.

PA: *You called a shop meeting?*

FC: I was shop chairman at the time.

PA: *You were shop chairman?*

FC: Oh, we called a shop meeting and it was carried unanimously.

PA: *Right.*

FC: And all of a sudden, we had problems there. I remember the management of Crickles and MacDowell's weren't at Wembley, and he made an appearance and one of the blokes in the shop nearly set about one of the managers! We had to restrain him. 'Cause that don't do your case any good.

PA: *Would the management go to the shop meetings?*

FC: No, the management wouldn't go.

PA: *So you'd be able to say ... And how was it notified, a shop meeting? Would there be like a notice board, and you'd take --*

FC: Well, I think a notice went up that the foreman had been dismissed and a replacement would be appointed at a suitable date or something like that. And of course the shop steward ... I was away on holiday, actually. And the shop steward and the member of the committee went in and they wouldn't tell them why he had been sacked so they came out and they called a factory meeting, and somebody moved from the shop floor that we stop work until they do tell us, and to the best of my knowledge the shop steward said well, let's consult the union office first, and this bloke wouldn't have that and he said no, we'll make a decision and they went out on strike.

PA: *And would that happen on a shop floor during work?*

FC: Oh, yeah. Used to call a meeting in the tea break.

PA: *Right.*

FC: Or the lunch break.

PA: *Right.*

FC: Oh, yes --

PA: *So the--*

FC: All those sheet metal shops that I have spoken to you were all very well organised. If a man came there for a job, the first person he was sent to see was the shop steward. If the shop steward was satisfied that his union ticket was in order, he'd go in and talk it over with the foreman and get a start.

PA: *Did that meant that there would be a political bias within the workforce, or --*

FC: I think you had a mixed bunch, yes. It would have been in the days when some of us were classified as right wing, because the Communist party was a big party then.

PA: *Was it present in the union?*

FC: Present in every union. I mean --

PA: *This is '39. Are you talking Carrier's '39? Or is that post-war?*

FC: No, that's all post-war.

PA: *This is post-war. So even the Communist at this time was still a --*

FC: Oh, yes.

PA: *-- quite a presence. Were you a Communist?*

FC: No.

PA: *No.*

FC: I am ... I've got strong radical feelings, but I don't think I would ever support any form of totalitarianism.

PA: *Right.*

FC: I mean, I think you should be a socialist, but I think you should be a socialist by choice.

PA: *Yes.*

FC: And let us face it, you know, the Communists in this country had a wonderful opportunity to administer themselves in the interest of the people that lived in the country, and very clearly they didn't.

PA: *Yes. That's right. That's absolutely right.*

FC: That's really the straw. They're almost a non-existent party now, aren't they?

PA: *In Britain, well I suppose anywhere.*

FC: They are almost non-existent in France. And they were the largest party in France at one time. They were the largest party in Italy at one time. They're not now.

PA: *So what sort of mix, at this period would you have said? There was Communist, Labours, party members.*

FC: When I first got elected to the London Branch Committee of the Sheet Metal Workers--

PA: *When would that be?*

FC: That was in 1960. I would say there was almost fifty-fifty. In fact our elections used to be for really, to that ... well, in many cases on whether it was Communist or Labour party. The Communists were very strong in a lot of unions.

PA: *Did you feel differently towards them because you worked with them?*

FC: No. No, when you're working alongside, you talked like you and I. You might fundamentally disagree, I mean I went to a meeting last night and I had a pint with a Tory councillor. I would wish him dead politically, but he was all right. I bought a drink and he bought a drink and then we got in our cars and came home. I don't think you should get into the hatred state. I don't think it's justified in this day and age.

PA: *I'm just interested in how it's moved along. I suppose the Communists --*

FC: The AEU in West Middlesex was organised through the Southall District Committee. It had offices in Oxford Road, Southall. And there was a very strong ... I would say the AEU in West Middlesex was Communist-controlled.

PA: *When did that drop off?*

FC: Well, I don't know, really. The AEU's influence in the engineering industry had been dropping off for years.

PA: *Yeah, yeah, and the Communists influence in the unions generally – [Loud saw noise; unclear]*

FC: I suppose it dropped towards the end of the seventies.

PA: *Yeah.*

FC: Oh, yes, I could name you people that were very active in the Communist party in West Middlesex.

PA: *Were you active in the Labour Party?*

FC: Yes. When I first got elected to Ruislip Northern Urban District Council in the mid-fifties, I had a chap by the name of Charlie Leslie who stood against me. He was a Communist. He only got fifty votes. I think I got about thirteen hundred. Charlie Leslie was an active person in the Communist Party Ruislip for years. A very good musician.

PA: *Was he really?*

FC: Oh yeah, he was in the Middlesex Jamboree Band. And he was a Communist! He was quite a good drummer actually. Oh no, you wouldn't dislike him. He was quite a ... I never got him to have a drink. Charlie Leslie. He never drunk. I think he lived a very abstaining

life, he was a Communist candidate. And now you can't go round and find Communist candidates in local elections anywhere! Tragically, you can find the other extreme.

PA: Yes, I'm afraid that's true.

FC: But I think ... One of the people I worked with very closely in my union life... because I eventually became president of the union, was George Guy. George Guy was a communist.

PA: You became president of the ...

FC: I became president of the Sheet Metal Workers, yes. Eventually I --

PA: So how did your union career progress?

FC: We had in those days ... shop stewards' associations. We had an association of all the ventilation shops in the London area and we used to meet and discuss ventilation methods --

PA: What was their role within the trade union itself?

FC: Purely consultative, really.

PA: Between different factories.

FC: But from there I went on to the branch committee --

PA: As?

FC: As a just an ordinary member. From there I became Branch President and then I went on to the National Executive Committee and then became National President. It's just how you sort of progress. But --

PA: Did you see it as a natural progression thing or were you ambitious?

FC: Sometimes you work at it.

PA: So you wanted it?

FC: Oh, yeah, you had to work at it! You don't go into an election and not want to be elected! It's like standing for the European Parliament, you know. I wouldn't want to be in the European Parliament if people paid me! And that's a waste of time, really, but there we are. That was ... it's true. And it didn't present any problems. So that really was my history. I never worked at Heathrow, although I had a lot of friends and it was in fact the Heathrow people that first proposed me as National President. I never worked at Fairey's, I never worked at Napier's, another big firm. I never worked at any of the very big firms, but I worked all around the small shops in the sheet metal industry. And I earned very good money.

PA: What were the changes that you saw from the beginning of your career to well, up to '95. But towards the end of your career, within sheet metal work itself, what were the --

FC: Basically, the trades and practises.

PA: And how did that change?

FC: Well, it changed in so many respects, didn't it? You see, working alongside the ventilation industry would be the heating industry. At one time they would come to your house, or at your factory, and they would measure it up for pipes and bends and radiators, and boilers and specify it all on the drawings. Nowadays they don't do that. They send a lorry load of pipe, a lorry load of bends ... radiators as required, and the boiler as required ... And they build it on site. Now, in the ventilation industry, we would design and manufacture all the ductwork to go in the various rooms. Nowadays, it's all done with spiral stuff that bends and twists and it's all pre-made and it's all manufactured on site. So all those ventilation shops have disappeared. There are parts of the country where they manufacture this mass production stuff but it's all done by machinery. In the last years that I was working at the bench in the ventilation industry, we were moving to instead of developing a pattern or with trimmels and dividers, and all that, we was doing it with a computer screen. Now they design airplanes and they design boats on computer screens.

PA: When did computers first come into it?

FC: Well, I suppose they've grown over the years. I mean ... the whole of industry has in fact sort of changed. If you go out into our conservatory at the back there's two television sets out there. And I've got a son-in-law who had to come out of the Daily Mirror when Maxwell messed it up and so he put his redundancy money into a van and he's worked ever since as a painter and decorator. He'd come and decorate your room. He's now got a contract with the local councils. They will say to him number sixty-five so-and-so road, the tenants have moved out, will you go in and clear it and re-decorate it and we'll pay you a lump sum. And he'll get six or seven thousand pound for doing that house. And he can do it. So things like this standing lamp, things like those television sets he goes into houses and they're still there! Well, if he was to start to get on the telephone and try to find the owner of them, he'd spend a fortune. His best thing is to do as he's told and clear it. So I went to the shop in Barnes High Street actually and I said to him, some time ago and Dave will keep bringing this stuff in and Joan takes it in ... like I said but I said to this bloke I've got two televisions sets at home I'll bring them to you. I don't want them. I don't want anything for them, but they both work. Take them to the dump, mate, I don't want to know. And I can remember taking those two television sets to the dump and now I've got another one to take now... I can remember taking them to the dump and the bloke at the dump at Mortlake plugged it in and it worked straightaway.

PA: Why did it work?

FC: People move out and leave them.

PA: But why did the shop not want them?

FC: Can't sell them, I suppose. Can't sell them. If they could sell them, they'd take them. I mean, it's exactly the same with clothes. You try and get rid of good quality second-hand clothes, and nobody wants them, do they?

PA: No, not anymore.

FC: You can't get rid of second-hand furniture. You know, you just can't get rid of ... We've got a young couple that moved in over there. Horrible great mortgage and when they moved in, just nine months ago ... And we bought this suite of furniture at Marks and Spencer's. It

was very handy because we could give them ours! Otherwise we've got to put it out in the garden and pay the council to take it to the dump. And you know, you see that now, you drive around the streets and you see a bloody mattress laying in the road and all that.

PA: Yeah, you do. I have to go back to this, sorry. In terms of enjoyment of the work that you did, where were the best places you worked?

FC: Oh, I think they was all good. The enjoyment is the blokes that you work with. I still have some contact with different people that I worked with at different times. I was talking to a fellow who lives at Kingsbury, actually, on the telephone the other day. He said I saw somebody the other day who told me you were still alive, he said! And we had a chat and he's ninety-two. And he was a sheet metal worker I worked with. I think the enjoyment is the people you work with. Yes, when you go to work you do meet up with some miserable bastards, but by and large they're not. You have a laugh and a joke and ... you know. I think that's great.

PA: Do you think the conditions were good? How did they change? From when you first started and into the fifties and stuff?

FC: By and large you have very good shop committees and you got reasonably good conditions.

PA: How long was your working day?

FC: Well, of course when the war ended it was a forty-seven hour week. The Labour government in those days reduced it to a forty-four. And then over the years, the unions have fought for a reduction in the working week, and I think it's currently thirty-seven, isn't it?

PA: I think it varies. I don't know what it is in your trade.

FC: I think currently there's a thirty-seven hour week. Of course, you're talking about, from effect ... I don't want to see the governor's point of view, but if he's got a very expensive piece of machinery that he's bought, the more hours he can work that piece of machinery the better for him, isn't it? I think my son at Wembley works a thirty-six or thirty-seven hour week. And all that sort of thing.

PA: Did you ever work Saturdays and things like that?

FC: Oh, there was always overtime in the industry. If a firm got a lot of orders for ventilation duct work, well... what you've got to realise is that once that drawing gets in front of a sheet metal worker, the people that are building that building down the road want it. So there's always peaks and troughs.

PA: And as workers you would work with that?

FC: Oh, yeah. And of course, during those years that I'm talking about, fortunately there weren't many troughs!

PA: So do you feel that your worker relationship and your relationship as a union rep --

FC: I enjoyed my trade union life and I've earned good money out of it.

PA: *Did you have good relationships with management, in the main?*

FC: In some cases you did, in some cases you didn't.

PA: *So that would be over a specific instance, it wouldn't just be about managers and you ...*

FC: Well, yes. By and large I think it worked very well. You know, I go over now and again as President of the NPC and I go over and speak with some pensioners at Hayes Working Men's Club. They're all airport workers and they meet there first Wednesday of every month. You ought to consider going there, actually.

PA: *Really?*

FC: Yeah.

PA: *Where is that to?*

FC: Dave should be able to find out.

PA: *What's it called again, sorry?*

FC: I think they call themselves the West Middlesex Retirement Association. And they meet at Hayes Working Men's Club, Pump Lane --

PA: *Pump Lane?*

FC: Pump Lane, Hayes. At 10:30, on the first Wednesday of every month. They meet from about 10:30 to 12:30 then they go downstairs in the bar.

PA: *I'll mention it to him.*

FC: Their secretary is a chap by the name of Ian Morris. And he lives in Staines. I wonder if I've got Ian Morris's telephone number ... I might have Ian Morris's telephone number. [Looks for it.] No, I haven't.

PA: *It's fine. I'll mention it to Dave and if he --*

FC: Ian Morris is the secretary and he lives in Staines. Former welder, Ian Morris. I worked with him many, many years ago and he finished up on the airport. But that's when they meet.

PA: *Well, maybe somebody, maybe even me could just pop down --*

FC: Oh, they'd welcome you. Ian Morris would welcome you. I think you ought to go along. I had a letter from Ian Morris, in which his group had sent a donation to the NPC. But I sent the letter and the donation to the NPC's offices, so I haven't got it in front of me. But Ian Morris lives at Staines. He's currently indisposed because he fell off his bike! But he's the same age as me. He oughtn't to be riding a bloody bike! Yeah, Ian Morris ... Well, they would be a very good --

PA: *You said you used to ride a bike. Did you used to ride bikes to work and stuff?*

FC: Oh, yeah.

PA: Was that a big thing then?

FC: Oh, yeah.

PA: Before the car.

FC: Well, we've all got cars, but a bike was a means of getting from A to B. And in fact you ride one in London now. I was in London on Tuesday at the TUC at a meeting and ... They've been doing the pavements all around the TUC. They put a bloody great string of bike racks in!

PA: Were you much involved with the TUC when you were working? Did you go to like, did you go to any meetings?

FC: Well, I didn't go to many TUC Congresses because the make-up of the Sheet Metal Workers' Executive Committee was almost fifty-fifty, Communist and Labour. And of course, the Communists couldn't go to the Labour Party conferences, so I used to go to the Labour Party conferences on behalf of the union almost every year, so I used to stand aside and let them go to the TUC. But in latter years, the NPC, the National Pensioners Convention, always had a stand at the TUC conference and I've been going down and helping out with that stand for a couple of days. So I still know a lot of people in the TUC, but of course trade unionism is living in a different world, isn't it?

PA: Absolutely.

FC: When I worked in Ruislip, there was two AEU branches that used to meet in Ruislip.

PA: How often?

FC: One used to meet one Monday and the other used to meet the other Monday. They used to meet in the cafe at Ruislip Manor. When I was a local councillor I would be invited to go along and say what we'd done and what we hadn't done on the council. And they used to meet alternatively in a cafe. Neither of them exist now. I was talking to an AEU bloke the other week, and I said to him well, how many branches ... Oh, he's actually on Uxbridge Trades Council, that's right. So I said, how many branches have you got affiliated to you? Because he was asking me to get my London branch of the Sheet Metal Workers ... London council. So I said how many ... And so I say we've only got one T&G now, and he said we hadn't got any AEU. And that's Uxbridge and Ruislip, Southall and all that lot.

PA: And you just put that down to ...

FC: I don't really know ... I wouldn't really know what to put it down to. But if you go along as Sharon and I did the other week to a couple of villages in Norfolk ... We stopped up there for a couple of days and addressed a pensioner's meeting. There were thirty or forty people at the pensioners meeting. You go to the same towns and go to the local trade union branch, there's only about three there. And I think if you were to take away the retired people that are running trade union branches, you'd have a lot less. We are living in an age where the youngsters don't go to meetings. When you'd start general elections, you'd have hustings meetings, and all that. None of the parties do it now because nobody goes!

PA: Did you participate in that? In general elections?

FC: When I was first councillor we used to have hustings meetings locally, yeah. All the locals used to come along and say why you hadn't done this. Good fun.

PA: As a strong trade unionist, what was your recollection of the eighties? And the anti-trade union laws and Thatcher ... Do you remember?

FC: Yes, I remember it very well. Well, of course she was determined to smash the influence of the trade unions. And I think the trade unions presented themselves to be smashed.

PA: Do you? Why do you think that?

FC: I think they behaved wrongly. I mean, a lot of people will talk about the Miners' strike ... talk about the Miners' strike with a degree of reverence. But I don't think so. I do think Arthur Scargill played it all wrong, actually.

PA: Because he didn't get a ballot?

FC: He didn't get a ballot. He had adjacent to his headquarters in Nottingham a whole load of mine workers that had broken away once before and the chap that represented them on the Executive voted in favour of strike action and Chadwick. And instead of Arthur going to Nottingham and helping Chadwick out of his problems, he just walked away from it. He said no, I'll go to Durham. They'll cheer me there. So I think he did play it all wrong. And we were going through a change. I'd packed up burning coal on my fires. I suspect you'd packed up burning coal on your fires. And you can say what you like about power stations, but in its heyday, 82% of the coal that was hewed out of the ground was sold in bags to households. People weren't buying coal.

PA: Was it --

FC: Now, what have we got now? If you look at the TUC report, the National Union of Mineworkers is one of the smallest unions there. Not a power in the land. They're talking about digging coal out of one or two places, but I don't think you can talk about burning coal and talk about climate change at the same time. They are just a contradiction. I can just about remember as a very young man, you probably wouldn't, but the fogs in London, which it was renowned for, weren't caused by anything else than all the houses in London burning coal fire! Those were the cause of the fogs. And we don't burn coal. I don't think I've bought coal since 1954, '55. I mean that's the drill. That's the habit. I do it, you do it.

PA: Was there much discussion in your union in the '80s? Were people talking about the changes?

FC: Well, there were changes going on. Because the motor trade and the aircraft trade were going through a very sticky period. Whereas we had hundreds of panel beaters that used to beat out car panels and all that. People have stopped doing that. If you dented your car wing, undo three bolts, throw it in the scrap heap and buy a new one. That's what they do now. You and I live in a throwaway society, you know. I mean, a few weeks ago, well now it was a few months ago, I had a fault on my car. I took it to the Ford main dealer and he said I think I know what that is. And he lifted the bonnet ... You can't maintain that bonnet in my car. You can't get at anything. And he pulled this plug out, that plug out, that plug out, that plug out, and he pulled a thing out and I suppose it was a sort of a computer. It was all

in a plastic glass case, threw it in the skip. No question of looking at where the fault was. And put a new one in. And he said I won't charge you for the labour, but the new unit's 42 quid. And that was the fault. He never tested anything. He never put a probe ... I said to him, do you want to run it round the block? No, no, no, bring it in here mate. I don't want the trouble. And that thing was thrown straight in the skip.

PA: I've got a car and I've got the engine light keeps coming on. This car drives fine, doesn't ... And they don't know what it is. They can't fix this engine light. This car drives fine, it's fairly economical, it doesn't burn oil. I've never had any problems with this car. In fact, the car is fine except the computer in this car keeps putting the light on telling me there's something wrong with it. I mean, what is that about?

FC: Well, that was my trouble. My trouble was that my passenger side indicator, if I was on a motorway, used to isolate on the switchboard, it went off with the turn of the wheel. And yet I'm still flashing at the back. On one occasion I was travelling with my son-in-law and I said you can test this. I said I'll change lanes as we go down from Hammersmith to Ruislip and check my offside indicator. And he said yeah, it didn't shut off. You were still indicating. And I was offside. When you stopped at the road, and I would say to Joan, do this and do that, it worked. But when I was going along the road ... And of course now and again you get flashed at by people because you are still indicating. Well, you are misleading people. And no, they didn't mess about. They didn't check anything. I think that's true.

PA: I remember when I was a kid we used to change the brakes on my Dad's car. I couldn't possibly do that on my car. I wouldn't have any idea how to get in.

FC: Well, donkey's years ago we used to de-coke our cars, didn't we?

PA: I don't know what you did.

FC: We used to take the cylinder head off, de-coke the carbon that build up on the head of the pistons, and put new gaskets in ... De-cokers don't do it now.

PA: That's such a shame. It's rubbish. I hate it. Can I just ask you another question? Because you said before, after MacDowell's you decided to go for the job with the Regional Health Authority.

FC: Well, it was advertised. I happened to be looking at the paper one day. I was working at Benham's. And Benham's, for some unknown reason ... Well, they were bought out by another company but we weren't getting the amount of work ... And I saw this advert ... well, they wanted a practising metal working engineer to come and deal with minor problems in their various hospitals. And I thought that's a funny old advert. And the salary --

PA: Was that in the newspaper?

FC: Yes. The salary wasn't bad. It was in The Evening Standard. So I applied and of course you go up for a bloody interview and all that, and I got a letter saying I'd been appointed to the job. And when I got there I worked under a man who was a draughtsman usually by trade, and we worked quite well. And he used to say ... I used to come back ... I used to come back and say who ever did that job didn't do a very good job. The following are what needs to be done. I went to some places where they were complaining about their air conditioning, and when I got to the filter box the filters weren't there! And when he spoke

to the hospital engineer, he said oh, I found a lot of bits on the floor. He hadn't thought about replacing the filters! I said I'd plan out what filters he wants, he put them on order, I said, and when they come in I said I'll go down and put them in. And this man went on and on and he said oh, we've had a meeting on Monday --

PA: Who's had a meeting?

FC: I don't know. Somebody. He said we decided to re-grade you. And I remember saying to him I hope it's not painful. And he said no, you're gonna get another £700 a year. And I never put foot wrong. And in the end they created a department which was really checking up on sub-contractors that were doing work in various hospitals, and commissioning them and setting them to work. And make sure of the work. And in the end I was in charge of that department and I retired in '89 with a reasonable ... Well, in those years I was earning quite good money so I bought some extra years in me pension. So I retired with quite a good Health Service Pension.

PA: Do you think you got that position because they were modernising and they saw the need for it, or do you think you got that position because they recognised that they had a good worker who knew what he was talking about and created that position for you?

FC: Well, no, they must have created the position because they advertised the position. He said when he appointed me that we've advertised this twice before and we've interviewed people and none of them was satisfactory. So he gave me to believe I was. And he said we'd see how I go. And of course, I was granted a car allowance. In the first case I had to put mileage on my own car. Then I was given a car allowance. Then they increased my car allowance. I never put a foot wrong.

PA: Really. How long were you there?

FC: I was there over twenty years.

PA: And that was all hospitals in the area--

FC: That was all the southwest Thames area hospitals. And administrations. And all that. And sometimes you went to a job and they'd employed a local person to sub-contract things, and I don't know what sort of labour they'd employed. But when you saw what they had done, it wasn't a very good craftsman, whatever his trade. And then sort of silly things happened. We built a new ambulance station on the Edgware Road and I had to go there and check that the pumps were doing their duty and check that the air conditioning was doing its duty and doing everything and we also put a petrol station ... It wasn't a petrol station, it was a paraffin station. Most of the ambulances run on paraffin. Put this paraffin station in there. It was quite a development. And after it was open, I got to meet the officer that was in charge of the ambulance station. He wasn't a bad bloke. And I went there and we would go around the corner and have a drink and he said to me, I've had to send that complaint in again. Bloody television set don't work. Well, I said, if that's the only think in your ambulance station that don't work, I said I'm not gonna spend a lot of time worrying about that! So he goes up on the roof and I then called the small firm that had been sub-contracted by the electrical sub-contractor, you know who subbed ... To in fact move and adjust the aerial. To their credit, they came in. And it weren't no better. Just couldn't pick up a decent picture. And this ambulance officer was a bit of a card, he was, and he climbed

down and he said I'm gonna move the wire so that it doesn't lay on top of the glass. I said if that's where the aerial is running, I said the glass won't affect it. If it's running across a metal roof, it might do. So he climbed over this wall and he climbed down and he slipped and he had to grab hold of the aerial. And it came away from the aerial on the roof. And the bloke that was down in the room said that's better! So in the end I said you better get off of there, you're not to be climbing on the bleeding roof! I said we'll all be in trouble if you have an accident. So we come out, we went downstairs, had some cups of tea with these ambulance men. Perfect picture. So of course I said leave that bloody wire alone, I said. And then I had a chap, John Rudd, who was working in my department, and there was a need to go back to the ambulance station so I said to John, don't spend a lot of time on it, but just check, because all they kept writing about was their bleeding television set wasn't working. Just check that their television set was working all right. So anyway he went. He said but I was a bit worried about their television set, he said, because the wire's come all the way away from the aerial and laying on the roof! I said that's how it's been for years. Anyway, I always remember that. And then I got a phone call from the works officer once and he said I'll get you to go out to Burr Heath, that's where --

PA: So you had to cover all sorts of stuff?

FC: He said, they're having trouble with their television set, he says, and I understand you're an expert on television sets! And then on one day I was in the office and I was talking to some of these design engineers and they said to me oh, apparently amongst your qualification is television engineering! And so it got around. I hadn't done anything, the bloody wire came away from the aerial! And when John Robb went there, he said I've got it down in me report, and I said no! Cross it out, John! For crying out loud, don't start that again, I said. I said the wire was disconnected from the aerial on the roof, and it's just laying on that glass roof, is that right? He said yeah. I said well, leave it in. Never heard another word about a television set! That was the only complaint they made. Mind you, they had a lot of other troubles. We had to put a fire alarm system into the petrol station which meant that if in fact the fire alarm went on, the petrol station rolled the shutters.

PA: The petrol station in ...

FC: The ambulance station. Paraffin station, it was more like. All the roller shutters had to come down to shut off the petrol station. That was really the required health and safety, we did all this and we got it all done. And of course, one day the head of the London Fire and Ambulance Service paid a visit to the thing and parked his car and the shutter come down on the roof of his car! So I got a phone call. I said well, he's not supposed to bloody well park his car there, I said. That shutter is supposed to shut! I said I'll go down there and find out why the shutter shut, I said, because it should only go if there's a fire in the adjacent ambulance station. I said so if there was a fire, and when I got down there, there was one of the ambulance men, he didn't think the fire ... there was smoke detectors and heat detectors everywhere in the ambulance station ... He didn't think one was working, so he climbed up a ladder and was sodded about with it and he set it off! And I just said to the officer in charge of the station, I said, I don't want to know. A, he shouldn't have parked his bleeding car under the shutter, and B, your member of staff shouldn't have been sodding about with the bleeding fire alarm system! I said in any case, that fire alarm system is under contract to the suppliers and they're supposed to come here once a year and put it through its pace. So I said what I'm gonna go do, back to the office and do, is just check they're meeting their

contract requirements. But things like that happen and you become a genius! You become a television specialist! Anyway, how are we going because I must move off in a minute.

PA: It's half past one. No, it's half past twelve, sorry...

FC: Yeah.

PA: Yeah, we can stop it there, it's fine.

FC: Well, if you've got enough.

PA: What I'd like to do, if it's all right. I need to type this up and I need you to sign a form, actually. But I need to type this up and then I'll send it here and you can read through it. But if I think of other things to ask you, or other stuff, I'll give you a call and then I'll come back.

FC: Or you can ask it and I'll put it in the post back to you.

PA: It's all got to go on a sound, that's the only thing.

FC: I think it's important. I don't know what the answer is, you see. There was a time when the Sheet Metal Workers Union, you know, had something like two hundred and sixty men working on the airport. They weren't all working for British Airways. A lot of them were. They worked for Lufthansa. They worked for Northeast Airlines. They did all that. And in those days British Airways used to service all the aircraft for what's its name ...

PA: Virgin.

FC: Eh?

PA: Branson's people.

FC: No. Oh gosh, what's his name? Bloke that never wears a tie.

PA: The Irish guy. The Ryan Air guy.

FC: Not Ryan Air. I'll think of it in a moment.

PA: EasyJet?

FC: The big people that go across the Atlantic.

PA: Virgin.

FC: Virgin! Yeah. Well they used to be all serviced by British Air. Well, now you see, none of that's done there. I think our membership over on the airport now, is something like about sixteen or eighteen men --

PA: No!

FC: Yes. And most of them are employed in maintaining the air conditioning plants in the terminals. And the offices. Yeah, every time a British Airways or a Viking ... Every time one of those planes has to have anything done to it, it's flown to an airfield in Cardiff.

PA: In Cardiff? Really?

FC: You see, there used to be two sections. There used to be the flight section and there used to be the workshop section. And they were basically when it used to be BOAC and BEA, which of course came together under British Airways. We haven't got the men working at the airport now.

PA: *Why'd they move that? Do you know?*

FC: I suppose they can off load it and get it done cheaper elsewhere. I mean, it was exactly the same when ... I don't know the actual truth about it, but I understand in talking to these blokes when I go to the pension meeting now, that when these aircraft, British Airways aircraft, and Lufthansa, and Air France, when they go for a re-spray, they fly to China and do it.

PA: *Yeah. That's not surprising at all.*

FC: Now, you can't fly an airplane from here to China for nothing, can you?

PA: *But the workers must be getting such bad money. They must just be paid awful wages.*

FC: Well, they must be paid awful wages, that's true. But, you know, you've decided that this aircraft needs a re-spray, or they change the logo, that's another thing, they change the logo, so you don't just put a pilot in, who's earning between eighty and a hundred thousand pound a year, you put a co-pilot in, you must put some crew in, so you've got all those people and you fly an airplane to China! To re-spray it. And what happens to those staff while it's being done? They've either got to be flown back or they sit on their backsides in China. I really can't ... I cannot see how it pays.

PA: *It must. It must pay.*

FC: Oh, they do it. I mean ... I think the number of men that are employed in productive, and I use the word productive loosely, in productive work at the airport has seriously diminished. I think there's been an increase in the number of people employed in maintenance work. Well, there must be a load of engineers employed in Terminal Five Baggage Systems! Because they haven't got that right yet!