

THE AMBULANCE EMPLOYEES ASSOCIATION OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA - A BRIEF HISTORY

The AEA was formed in 1981 when a group of Ambulance Officers approached **United Firefighters Union (UFU)** Secretary, Mick Doyle, and asked him to help them break away from the Union covering them (**Australian Government Workers' Union** which later became the **Miscellaneous Workers' Union (MWU)** and is now known as the **ALHMWU (Australia Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union)**), and to create their own ambulance-specific union. The UFU has been formed the same way; that is by breaking away from the MWU.

The MWU is, as its name suggests, a large union covering a range of workers and industries of which the Ambulance Service formed a very small part. For this reason Ambo's felt they were not getting the service they needed and there were many significant issues to be confronted. For instance, the professionalisation of the service; the lifting of clinical standards; a proper career and wages structure; increased staffing and acceptable rosters.

In March 1987 the AEA appointed Phil Palmer as Organiser, then in July that year the membership elected him as General Secretary. Within 2 months of that election, the AEA commenced what became a 30-month dispute to bring the Service up to a national and professional organisation. During the course of that dispute the Union had dozens of different bans in place – the most effective of which was case card bans – blocking revenue.

In March 1989, the dispute “peaked” with virtually every Ambo in the Metropolitan Area suspended (“stood down from duty”) without pay over their support for their Union and the refusal to lift bans. The then Minister of Health (Frank Blevins) threatened AEA officials with prison under the Essential Services Act. The Service, with the Minister's approval, used volunteers as “scab” labour in the metropolitan area. Country members were also taking action, but the Service did not have the nerve to stand them down as country volunteers refused to act as “scab” labour. This action ultimately broke the Service and the Government as the volunteers could not sustain rosters – the Minister conceded defeat. Within 6 months we were gearing up for a fully professional Ambulance Service, proper tertiary education and associated improved clinical standards.

Once we settled the professionalisation issue, we were able to gain wage parity with the rest of Australia (1990) and reduce the unacceptably high reliance on on-call in the country areas.

In 1991, as a result of a high profile AEA dispute over the dismissal of Alf Gunter, St John decided to remove itself from the Service – a process that was finally complete in 2001. Alf Gunter was the Operations Manager for the Service and supported the AEA's push for higher clinical standards – that is why he was sacked and why the AEA fought for him. We did not get his job back, but we got rid of the then CEO (Bruce Patterson) and St. John. The new name SAAS and the new CEO (Ian Pickering) and a new clinical direction came out of this dispute.

Given the background of dispute after dispute, it is no surprise that the Government and the Service decided that it was better to involve the AEA than fight it - so we now have two spots on the Ambulance Board. We also have a spot on every Selection Panel and are influential in formulating policy and procedures in all levels of the Service. The AEA Executive meets regularly with SAAS Executive, our State Councillors meet regularly with District Managers and officials are involved in negotiations over every aspect of SAAS operations – staffing levels, rosters, education issues, OHS&W, Workers Compensation, Enterprise Bargaining, clinical debriefs, pay and related issues, conditions of employment and so on and so on. **We intervene daily on behalf of individuals, groups and the membership as a whole.**

The latter 1990's were spent fighting for improved staffing, better Government funding, protecting ambos right to have something to eat at a reasonable time and trying to reduce the outrageously

high AO injury rate. We are seeing some of the fruits of these struggles as we move into 2001; more crews are being put on every year. In the country we have tightened up casual staffing arrangements to protect both casuals and full-time staff and continue to work on incentives to attract Metro Officers out there. There is still plenty of work to do.

The Ambulance Service would not be as it is today if not for the struggles of the AEA and its membership – it would still be run by St John, still have inappropriate levels of volunteer involvement, still have Third World clinical standards and still be the worst paid Service in Australia.

The AEA of SA is quite unique in Australia. It is one of the last small unions that have not been swallowed up by a large conglomerate union. Our bite is definitely worse than our bark. Despite our small size we have kept SA Ambos up with, or ahead of, interstate wages, and we have succeeded in pushing clinical delivery where SAAS is easily the best in Australia. We are admired and envied by other unions for the conditions and rights we have won. In an age where not everyone sees the benefit of belonging to union, people should be reminded that without this union, most of them would not have a job as an Ambo and those that did would not enjoy anywhere near the rights they currently have.

As good as things are, there is always room for improvement – with the support of our dedicated Shop Stewards and members the AEA will continue to create those improvements.