

Safety is always first...

Martin Kingham has been standing up to authority for a long time. Long before he became a carpenter, long before he became an OH&S Rep, and long before he became an official with the Union in Victoria in the late 1980s, he was upping the anti to the Joh Bjelke-Petersen's Government in Queensland.

Corporal punishment was still widely used in Queensland state schools in the 1970s. As the then head of the Queensland Secondary School Union, Martin organised among his fellow students and eventually won the support of the teaching profession for his campaign to outlaw the use of the cane.

Caned by Joh

Martin paid a price for his campaign, being expelled from his school for handing out leaflets outside the gates of another school. Such was life for a rebel in Queensland during the 1970s.

'At that time Brisbane was a very conservative place,' Martin was quick to point out. 'It was easy to be a rebel. You didn't need to do much.'

But he did quite a lot, it seems. The campaign achieved its aim, and corporal punishment was eventually banned from Queensland schools.

'It taught me that it's always worthwhile to have a go.'

And since then, he hasn't stopped.

Brisbane, London, Melbourne

Martin began his working life in the construction industry as a brickie's labourer in Brisbane, before taking off for London where he stayed with this older brother. He eventually completed an apprenticeship in carpentry in Britain, and became active in the building union there during the period when safety reps secured legal rights in line with Australia's current OH&S laws.

When Martin returned to Australia in 1982 and settled in Melbourne, he was very quickly elected shop steward and threw himself into organising for better safety on jobs.

'It became apparent to me that safety was a crucial weapon in the ability to organise effectively on jobs,' he said. 'The only way to stop killing ourselves on jobs was to organise into a union and agitate for better policies and practices.'

Our first OH&S Officer

Martin's experience in London and his passion for safety quickly drew the attention of the leaders of the Building Workers Industrial Union's (BWIU) Victorian Branch, who appointed him as the Union's first Occupational Health and Safety Officer in 1986.

CFMEU member Peter Medina, who was working in asbestos removal in the 1980s, remembered Martin's commitment to safety during the removal job at the former immigration building site in Lonsdale Street.

'He was single-minded in his pursuit of better laws for removing asbestos, and he was dogged,' said Peter. 'There was a large crew of Latin American workers on that site, and a lot of them have stuck with the Union because of Martin's hard work during those early days. He just pushed really hard and got a lot of support.'

Another Union member, former BWIU official Phil Leckie said that Kingham took safety very seriously.



'There has been an increase in fatalities and a general erosion of standards. And we can't let that happen. We must fight to stop it, and rebuild again.'

'He was fair dinkum about health and safety and put the issue right up the front there in the industry.'

Uniting Victoria's construction unions

While proud of his achievements in health and safety during that time, both within the Union and the wider Victorian community, Martin has mixed feelings about his early years with the Union, because of the fighting that was going on between the BWIU and the Builders' Labourers Federation (BLF).

'I began in the Union during the deregistration of the BLF, and it was a really tough time.'

The division of the unions on construction sites was ugly, and the unions were fighting each other rather than winning conditions on the job.'

Martin was instrumental in bringing together the two unions in the early 1990s, and the unity that developed in the following years contributed to the growing militancy and strength of the CFMEU.

'Rebuilding the Victorian Branch after that destructive time was hard work. When I was elected Secretary we had 9,000 members, and owed millions of dollars to people,' he recalled.

'But building up from that mess was easier, working alongside the likes of John Cummins, Bill Oliver and John Setka.'

Fighting on many fronts in two countries

During Martin's time at the helm of the CFMEU, the Union was at the forefront of many industrial and political campaigns. To name some:

- Securing new laws for the removal of asbestos;
- Shorter hours campaign that went over three EBAs;
- Justice for the East Timorese, and rebuilding of that country after the independence vote;
- Winning back better workers' compensation laws that were lost under the Kennett Government;
- Defeating Daniel Grollo's attempt to introduce a non-union agreement into the building industry; and
- The Union's participation in the 1998 MUA dispute.

'We took that dispute very seriously,' said Martin, 'because we knew it was the Federal Government's training for their next target, which was us. We knew they were going to come

after the CFMEU, and they did with the Cole Royal Commission.'

Martin said that the support of the CFMEU's officials, stewards and members was crucial in achieving success in those campaigns.

'The members at Grollo who voted against the non-union agreement, the workers who were prepared to down tools and march for a return of their common law rights – all of these campaigns depended on the willingness of ordinary workers to stand up.'

Community and Public Sector Union Victorian Secretary, Karen Batt said that Martin's commitment to the wider union movement was evident during this dispute.

'Martin took over from me as VTHC President in 1998 around the height of the Maritime dispute, and I was impressed with his ability to see that the interests of his members were interrelated with the broader interests of all unionists,' said Karen.

'He always sees the bigger picture. I have found his support to be invaluable when I am arguing for OH&S issues on behalf of white-collar workers.'

Full circle on OH&S

After 22 years with the Union's Victorian Branch, Martin has now stepped up to a new role with the CFMEU's National Office, coordinating the safety work of the Union nationally, the first position of its kind.

'I feel as if I've done full circle, back doing OH&S, but this time on a national scale,' he said. 'We need to help the smaller branches rebuild, and safety is the best tool to do this.'

Martin believes that his new job is timely, given the Howard Government's nods and winks to construction bosses to weaken the industry's safety regime and the rise of the ABCC.

'There has been an increase in fatalities and a general erosion of standards. And we can't let that happen. We must fight to stop it, and rebuild again.'

As his working experience proves, he seems to be just the right man for the job.

Thankyou to our members

Martin Kingham would like to thank everyone he has worked with in the CFMEU Victorian Branch over the last 22 years.

'Without your help,' he said, 'The work of the Secretary would not be possible.'

'I look forward to promoting the interests of construction workers around Australia in my new role.'

