The Poster

Billy Robinson

There were a lot of attacks taking place on people in work, going to work and coming home from work. A lot of intimidation took place… it was really at its height from the late 70s to the early 80s. There was a heightening of tension in the workplace. There was shooting of Catholic and Protestant taxi drivers. It was taking place on a nightly basis. It was in the home, it was in the workplace, in the streets. There really was a lot of fear and lots of tensions.

I hated the divisions in this country to the extent that I had wanted to leave it from my early teenage days. I hated that other people would tell me who I could socialise with or who I could be friends with. That really got to me big style and I never liked this place for that reason and I never ever wanted to be seen as a Catholic… you know this traditional Catholic. I wanted to be taken as I am and to have whatever friends I wanted.

At this time I was involved in the (Trade) Union and then I became a rep' in it and then I was asked if I would stand for office. Even though I was getting fed up with the job itself, I stood for office and was elected.

One of the crisis points happened one morning. I received a phone call from one of our members in an establishment in East Belfast -he informed us that there was a poster up in the premises; a recruitment poster for one of the paramilitary groups. It was there on the wall and management was aware of it, but for obvious reasons there was a fear of actually removing it. His concern was that it would cause conflict within the site. We thanked him for calling and my colleague and I had a discussion about it. We were very frightened because we knew we had to remove it or somebody had to remove it. So we arrived at the site and went into the room where all the staff would congregate to get their jobs in the morning - probably about 200 people. We spotted the poster. The noise level was pretty high - people were on their phones or having conversation with mates or whatever, so the only way to draw attention was to knock a locker over… a steel locker. There was silence. We stood on a chair and we made a statement - "this was a place of work, no place for politics." We removed the poster. When we got down we were half expecting some reaction, but there was no reaction … just the noise level went back up again, people went back to their work. So we were leaving and truthfully we were trying to get out as quick as we could but individuals came to us, particularly of a Protestant background because it was a majority Protestant site and they thanked us and said that they were glad we took it down because their fear was that it would cause fear, conflict and really destroy relationships in the site.

I had felt very frightened and nervous. I felt you know I am a fool for putting myself out? But on the other hand it felt good in the end - it was good to do it. Fear- it's a four letter word but it sits across everything in this society and stops us having conversations.