

LESSONS FROM THE PAST: THE NEW SOUTH WALES BUILDERS' LABOURERS' FEDERATION



The story of the New South Wales Builders' Labourers' Federation in the 1970s remains one of the most impressive examples of working-class struggle to save the environment. They are a model for what we need today.

Men who worked in the building industry from the 1940s to the 1970s acknowledged that the working conditions were extremely poor. The work was particularly arduous. There was very little mechanisation, and ladders and scaffolding were often unsafe. Toilets, clean water and lunchrooms either did not exist or were in very poor condition. As Darcy Duggan said: '... make-shift bloody ladders, the likes of toilets of which were only four posts with a bit of hessian around, the state of the sheds was bad, just made out of corrugated iron.'

And Keith Jessop: 'There was no payment for public holidays, there was no wet weather pay, no annual leave and no sick leave. In all, it was a very hard, arduous, dusty and dirty and thankless job as a builder's labourer in those days.'

The union did not appear to do very much about these poor working conditions. A number of men became active on the job, fighting for basic conditions like clean drinking water on the sites, better amenities and basic work safety. In response to the thuggery and lack of democracy in the official union, Builders' Labourers Federation meetings were called at the Railway Institute Hall to work for a change in the running of the Union. Brawls ended these meetings when the leadership sent in their 'standover men'.

Finally, in November 1961, the Rank and File team was successful in the elections to a number of positions. Mick McNamara was elected General-Secretary, and Jack Munday became a temporary organiser the following year. In the 1963 elections the Rank & File team won all contested positions. In 1968, Mick McNamara resigned from the Secretary's job due to ill health and Jack Munday became the new Secretary. In 1969 Bob Pringle became the new President and Joe Owens, a temporary organiser.

The first job of the new leadership was 'to civilise the industry', as Jack Munday put it. By the end of the 1960s an enormous amount of money was flowing into Australia and invested into the building industry. Height restrictions on buildings were lifted in Sydney and building workers were expected to develop new skills

In May 1970, builders' labourers went on strike over an increase in their wages as well as industrial recognition of their skills. This became known as the 'Margins Strike'. It was run by a Strike Committee which was characterised by a large migrant representation in order to match the make-up of the industry.

The employers responded to the strike by employing 'scab' (non-union) labour. The Strike Committee decided to form what they called vigilante groups – flying pickets – to go out to work sites and talk to the workers about conditions and the employers' use of 'scab' labour.

Some buildings were occupied by the 'vigilantes' and no work was done on the site. After five weeks,

the employers accepted the demands of the union. The builders' labourers won the principle that with increasing technological change, the gap between tradesmen and labourers was closing and this should be reflected in their wages.

Victory in the Margins Strike increased the Builders' Labourers (BLs) confidence. As Tom Hogan said: 'If I were asked prior to the 1970 strike, what I did for a living, I would probably mumble, I'm just a builders' labourer. After that, if someone asked me what I did for a living, I was a bloody BL.'

In May 1971, the BLF joined forces with the Building Workers' Industrial Union (BWIU) over the issue of workers receiving full accident pay. Prior to this, workers would only receive half-pay if injured on the job. All the building unions joined in the struggle, with the BLF adopting tactics used in the Margins Strike.

On 21 May, the New South Wales (NSW) Industrial Commission awarded compensation on full pay for injured workers. The great achievement of this strike was that this decision flowed on to other industries. Once again, the BLF's reputation was enhanced as a militant industrial union that achieved results.

Jack Munday asserted: 'If it wasn't for that civilising of the building industry in campaigns of 1970 and 1971, well then I'm sure we wouldn't have had the luxury of the membership going along with us in what was considered by some as 'avant-garde', 'way-out' actions of supporting mainly middle-class people in environmental actions. I think that gave us the mandate to allow us to go into uncharted waters.'

By 1971 the opposition to the Vietnam War had become so great that it was the main political topic in Australian society. Two large 'Vietnam Moratorium' demonstrations took place. The BLF played a significant role in helping 'draft dodgers'. Many builders' labourers and BLF officials were arrested, and this helped 'politicise' the membership. The movement that had originated on the university campuses against the Vietnam War began to branch into other areas and started

to develop an ideology, becoming known as the 'New Left', and it influenced the BLF.

The BLF was also involved in supporting the Black Movement. During the 1960s the union organised demonstrations and 'talk-ins' in support of the Gurindji people. In 1972 the Black movement organised the 'Black Moratorium' following the model of the Vietnam Moratoriums. Many BLF members took part in this demonstration.

Also in 1971, the Rugby Union team of South Africa's apartheid state toured Australia. Prior to their match in Sydney, Bob Pringle and John Phillips (then BLF president) broke into the Sydney Cricket Ground and started to saw down the goal posts with a hacksaw before being arrested by the police. Many builders' labourers attended the last day's hearing when both men were fined \$500 and placed on good behaviour bonds.

Many labourers worked on buildings in the inner city. After work BLs congregated in inner-city pubs where political activists also met up, particularly on a Friday night. As Joe Owens explained: 'Pubs are very important places for building workers. They are not only places to drink and meet people. You can find out lots of things in pubs when you work on the buildings. For example, if you are looking for a job, you go to the current watering hole, where someone will let you know if they've heard of anything going. You get all the latest rumours in pubs, you hear of what jobs have the best wages, or where you can pick up a day or a couple of days work. You can find out who's got sacked, where, and why.'

The BLF also participated in an annual picnic with other building unions. These were very large gatherings of over 20,000 people, including wives and children. In December 1964, 30,000 people attended a picnic at Gunnamatta Bay. This was an Australian record for a picnic crowd. Ten years later, 22,000 people attended a picnic at the same place.

The BLF tried to ensure a democratic structure of organisation. One of its principal policies was 'limited tenure of office'. This meant that after a

certain period of time, an official should step down from his position in order to allow 'fresh blood' to come into the organisation. In 1973, Jack Munday as Secretary and Dick Prendergast as Organiser stepped down from their respective positions. Then Munday stood as Treasurer, a rank and file position, and won.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, the concepts of workers' control and self-management were much discussed on the left. In 1973, the BLF, with other unions, was involved in the organisation of a conference on this issue. The BLF produced a booklet called 'Workers Call the Tune at the Opera House' which was a result of work-ins at the Opera House in 1972, resulting in improved pay and conditions and the BLs being able to elect foremen and regulate production. At the Kent Street site, BLs elected their own safety officer and foremen who would discuss with management the work schedules each day.

Early in 1974, after a four-week strike on the Wyong Shopping Plaza site, workers were offered money to leave the site so that no militant action could take place. On 9 May a worker was sacked on the site, and a week-long strike followed. It developed into an occupation as seven men took over the jib of a crane on the project. A large crowd supported the men, and Joe Owens set up a radio station, radio 2BLF, to give the men support. An attempt was made to bring a crane driver in to shift the men, but intervention by another union, FEDFA, prevented this.

After the men came down from the cranes, workers occupied the site. Calls were made for more decision-making on the job and the social usefulness of the building was questioned. A meeting of local residents and workers was held on 13 May in order to decide on the future of the project. Jack Campbell, from the FEDFA, and Joe Owens questioned whether the town needed a shopping complex more than a hospital. Much debate followed, though finally a motion was passed in support of continuing with the shopping centre project.

After six weeks the dispute was won and the union established conditions on the job that had been won earlier in Sydney.

According to Harry Connell, who worked there: 'We returned to the site but we also had some conditions there, important ones in regard to the management structure. We said the foreman must leave the site over his behaviour in the lockout, etc. The only one that's allowed on the site of the past management would be Rick Mirtus, and he's the man who brings the money up to pay the workers... In fact, we're running the job. The workers met every second day. We put our own leader-foreman in, our own leading hands, all the structure to organise the workers in production. We put our own foreman in. This was a totally new situation for the Australian trade unions.'

By 5 June 1974, the NSW BLF listed 49 green bans in the Sydney metropolitan area. Some of the green bans were still in operation, some had achieved their aims, while others had been lifted at the request of local resident action groups or the National Trust. Green bans were successful because the BLF had control over demolition and excavation work.

The first 'green ban' was round Kelly's Bush, a parkland in Hunters Hill, Sydney, in June 1971. The struggle to preserve the parkland had begun in 1968 when A.V. Jennings, a corporate developer, unsuccessfully attempted to re-zone the site. In 1969 the Council switched the area from Open Spacing Zoning to Residential Zoning. In September 1970, 'The Battlers for Kelly's Bush' were formed to oppose the re-zoning and to campaign for the State government to purchase the land.

In June 1971, the Battlers phoned the NSW BLF and other unions. Bob Pringle investigated, and recommended at the next executive meeting that the union should impose a ban. The proposition that a left-wing union should support a group of middle-class women was fiercely debated, as Joe Owens confirms: 'Pringle was the first bloke that brought the green bans to the union's attention – with the green bans in Kelly's Bush. When he came along to an executive meeting and said that these

people from Kelly's Bush didn't want a building built there, a lot of us were very sceptical. My question at the time was, what the fuck are we doing tangling around with the blue-rinse brigade from over there. You know, they weren't our natural allies. But, however, Bob insisted and it went ahead.'

In Jack Munday's words, 'Our cities had to be for people, not for corporations to plunder and destroy. Kelly's Bush wasn't just for its neighbours, it should be public land and used by everybody who wanted to use it.'

When A.V. Jennings responded that they would use 'scab' labour, a meeting of BLF members was held on a half-completed North Sydney building site and a resolution was passed that 'if one blade of grass or one tree is touched in Kelly's Bush, this half-completed building will remain forever half-completed as a monument to Kelly's Bush'. This decision provoked outrage. Tom Hogan recalls that the popular feeling in the press was that they were 'mere builders' labourers' who had the gall to make monumental decisions.

The struggle to preserve Kelly's Bush lasted for 20 years, but in 1994 the land, having been purchased in 1983, was entrusted to the care of the Hunters Hill Council by the NSW government.

The struggle to save the Rocks, Sydney's first area of European settlement, from proposed redevelopment was considered the most important green ban of the BLF. Local people had formed the Rocks Residents Group (RRG) in February 1971 to oppose plans for massive high-rise development in the area. The president of the group was Frank Ashton, a crane driver from Cockatoo Island, and the Secretary was Nita McRae, a fourth generation resident. They argued that the area housed workers and retired workers who had traditionally lived in the inner-city at affordable rents, and who with the proposed redevelopment would be forced out by increased rents.

The BLF imposed a ban, and the Rocks Residents Group developed a 'People's Plan' for the area after discussions with the Sydney Cove

Redevelopment Authority (SCRA, set up by the NSW government) and the BLF. Jack Munday pointed out that many office buildings had been erected during the building boom of the 1960s but lay idle whilst there remained 'a scarcity of hospitals, schools, universities, kindergartens, creches and quality homes'.

In October 1973, scabs were sent in to knock down buildings needed for the redevelopment. For two weeks the Rocks became a battleground for Premier Askin's law and order campaign leading up to a State election. Local residents demonstrated against the scabs, who were protected by a large number of police. Many residents were arrested along with Jack Munday, Joe Owens and Denise Bishop of the BLF and R. Divers of the Waterside Workers' Federation. When they were released in the middle of the day, they held a meeting at the Sydney Trades Hall and a mass rally at Circular Quay the next day.

The green ban stayed in the Rocks until the 1975 takeover of the NSW BLF Branch by the federal union.

Woolloomooloo was probably the most successful BLF green ban. Woolloomooloo had traditionally housed maritime workers who worked on the nearby wharves. Prior to the 1970s, the area had suffered major disruption when the Cahill Expressway was built through the suburb. The proposed Eastern Suburbs railway line was also planned to cut through the heart of the area. As the central business district began to expand close to the city, Darlinghurst and Woolloomooloo, like the Rocks, were earmarked for redevelopment.

In 1969 the State Planning Authority (SPA) proposed a plan which would demolish housing so that 90,000 people could work in high-rise office blocks.

The 'Loo residents established an action group at a street meeting on 8 October 1972. The Secretary of the group was Edmund Champion, a Catholic priest at a local church, St. Columbkilles. They approached the BLF, and a green ban was placed on the area in February 1973.

Pressure from the local residents, coupled with the continuing BLF green ban, enabled a satisfactory community solution to be reached in the beginning of 1975.

Victoria Street in 1969 was a street of terraced houses built around 1900 in Kings Cross, overlooking Woolloomooloo. Its residents were artists, wharfies, seamen and other people who worked in the area. In 1969 the developer and wealthy Sydney businessman, Frank Theeman, submitted a plan for three 45-storey towers to be built in the street.

In early 1973, Theeman submitted another plan – with a 20 storey tower set on a three-storey podium with stepped development and a six-storey car park – and on 3 April, Victoria Street residents were given notice to vacate their properties within the week. By the end of that week, 100 residents had left. Some were offered money inducements, some had their gas and electricity cut off, and others had their houses broken into and bricks thrown through windows.

The BLF placed a green ban on the street. By the middle of 1973 only a handful of residents remained in their houses and these included the wharfie and seaman, Mick Fowler. After consultation with residents and BLF officials, Mick, who had returned to Victoria Street after a long stint at sea, decided he would ‘make a fight of it’ and stay for as long as he possibly could. A number of politically active people organised to squat in the buildings. The next six months saw a battle to evict the squatters with a combination of physical intimidation and legal action. Theeman’s security guards patrolled the streets, carrying pickhandles and intimidating the squatters, who set up child-care facilities, a playgroup and other community projects such as a food cooperative, and issued a newsletter called Victoria Street.

On 3 January 1974, at seven o’clock in the morning, a team of 30 men moved into 13 houses which had been occupied by the squatters. Eighty squatters were cleared from the buildings and 44 people were arrested, including Joe Owens.

The evictions of the squatters forced the remainder of the tenants to leave – everyone except Mick Fowler – who remained in the street for the next three years. The struggle ended with a stand-off. The developer had been forced to alter his plans, but the residents had been forced out.

Other green bans include the fight against the Opera House Car Park, the struggle to save the Newcastle Hotel from demolition, the fight to prevent the North West Freeway cutting a path through the inner-city suburbs, and the struggle to save the Theatre Royal from demolition.

The Newcastle Hotel, on the outskirts of the Rocks, was a pub frequented by residents of the area as well as by artists, poets, political activists and the famous ‘Sydney Push’. The pub was to be demolished as part of the Rocks redevelopment plans. The BLF placed a green ban on the site, and, standing at the bar of the hotel, Jack Munday stated: ‘This pub is a symbol of what all thinking Australians are concerned about. Builders’ labourers are not going to say ‘Thank you’ to the boss and build what we are told. We will preserve the best of Sydney and we will decide which buildings will be put up and which will be pulled down’.

The hotel was eventually demolished, but only many years later.

The BLF also used industrial bans to protect the rights of the vulnerable. In 1973 the BLF came to the support of Jeremy Fisher, a Macquarie University student expelled from a residential college of the university for declaring himself a homosexual. When Bob Pringle addressed the workers at the Macquarie University site about the issue, they immediately walked off the job and determined that no work would occur until he was reinstated at the college – which he was, fairly swiftly.

When a proposed women’s studies course, to be offered by Joan Curthoys and Liz Jacka, was vetoed by the Professorial Board at Sydney University, the BLF threatened the university with a green ban on some building projects which needed urgent

completion. The University allowed the course to be taught by the women.

The success of those two actions encouraged the BLF to take further action. Penny Short was a Macquarie University student financed by a Teacher Education scholarship from the NSW Department of Education. She wrote a poem for *Arena*, the University's student newspaper, about the experience of making love to another woman. She was summoned to an interview with a psychiatrist, who told her she would lose her scholarship 'because the Department didn't allow this sort of thing'. Later she was told officially that her scholarship was terminated because she had 'personality and emotional problems'.

A 1,000-strong student general meeting on 27 March 1973, addressed by Penny Short and representatives of the New South Wales teachers' union, called a demonstration to demand that Short be reinstated. The BLF responded by saying that all maintenance work on Education Department and other government offices would be banned unless the scholarship was restored.

This surge of working-class action was eventually broken when the federal leadership of the Builders' Labourers Federation, under the Maoist Norm Gallagher, intervened to smash the New South Wales BLF and set up a new loyalist NSW branch. In June 1974 the federal BLF was 'de-registered' – had its legal status removed – on grounds of the NSW BLF's green bans. In October the federal BLF started issuing new 'federal' union tickets in NSW, and major employers started sacking BLs who kept NSW BLF 'tickets'. By April 1975 the BLF Federal Council felt strong enough to expel Jack Munday and 25 other NSW builders' labourers from the union for life. In November 1975 came the 'Kerr coup': the Governor-General [appointed by the British Queen] sacked the reforming Labor government of Gough Whitlam and installed the Liberal Malcolm Fraser as prime minister. After an upsurge of demonstrations and strikes, Fraser kept office, and the whole Australian labour movement swung rightwards.

This article is an adapted excerpt from Greg Mallory's University of Queensland PhD thesis, Going Into Uncharted Waters, Department of History, University of Queensland, 1999.

Further resources:

A copy of the documentary *Rocking the Foundations* is available from Workers Climate Action. A shorter 20 minute version has been produced by the *Reel News Collective* www.reelnew.co.uk

For a detailed history see *Green Bans, Red Union* by Verity Burgman and Meredith Burgman (UNSW Press: 1998).



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