

When construction workers put their foot down

**The story of the New South Wales Builders Labourers Federation: Green bans
and popular power in so-called Australia**

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“Yes, we want to build. However, we prefer to build urgently required hospitals, schools, other public utilities, high-quality flats, units and houses, provided they are designed with adequate concern for the environment, than to build ugly unimaginative architecturally bankrupt blocks of concrete and glass offices ... Though we want all our members employed, we will not just become robots directed by developer-builders who value the dollar at the expense of the environment. More and more, we are going to determine which buildings we will build.”

Jack Munday

I, like a few other Australian anarchists, was pleased to discover a small report on the green bans, published on the website of the Union Communiste Liberaire. The movement around the green bans is arguably the most significant original contribution the working class in Australia has made to the global workers’ movement, and it is fantastic to see people in other countries take an interest in it. However, the UCL’s article was only quite brief, and it naturally leaves out a few important details. It is for this reason that I’ve written this article, in the hope that it will increase awareness of the struggles of the New South Wales branch of the Builders Labourers Federation (NSW BLF). These were not simply “ecological” or “conservationist” struggles, but a very real manifestation of the libertarian, militant tendency that exists within all workers’ struggles.

Historical background

After the Second World War, the class landscape in Australia went through a period of significant change. Hundreds of thousands of workers from countries like England, Ireland, Greece, Italy and Eastern Europe were encouraged to migrate and settle in Australia, gaining jobs in the booming manufacturing and construction industries.

Previously, migration to Australia was restricted by the White Australia policy, which prevented the migration of any person not of Western European descent. One of the first policies introduced after Australia became an independent country in 1901, it had the overwhelming support of the labour movement at the time. However, by WWII the policy was beginning to break down, and support for it within the union movement and within the Labor Party had begun to diminish, though it would not be formally removed until the early 1970s.

As well as this, Indigenous peoples in Australia were asserting themselves on the political and economic field more than ever before. The 1946 Pilbara strike of Indigenous agricultural workers proved that with the solidarity of the wider labour movement, Indigenous people could use their position as exploited proletarians to not only secure better pay, but to also fight against brutal state racism.

Technological changes in the construction industry had led to a crisis among construction workers. Innovations like increased use of concrete and cranes had led to a relative decline in importance of “skilled” tradesmen like carpenters, stonemasons and bricklayers, and the rise of “unskilled” builders labourers like concreters, demolition men, scaffolders, riggers and dogmen – the brave souls who would stand atop crane loads and guide them across the sky, hundreds of metres in the air. As one upset architect remarked at the time, “the crane driver and the dogmen [...] can tie up the whole site”. The new methods of constructing the massive high rises relied on these newly important workers.

By the late 60s, these changes had resulted in the creation of a sector of the working class that had not only gained increased powers as a result of technical changes, but was also more diverse, and often had some experience of struggle outside the arena of the workplace. Many of the workers were young, without a great deal of experience on construction sites; they were not assimilated to the traditional means of dealing with industrial disputes, and were thus more willing to employ bold, radical means to secure better pay and conditions. The increased work that came from “boom” conditions gave workers confidence to demand more, and if work on one site was bad, they had the possibility of easily finding better work elsewhere.

Political changes: setting the scene for the BLF

The rise of the militant NSW BLF and the emergence of the green bans was facilitated by political changes in the Australian union landscape. Since the turn of the century, the Australian union movement has traditionally been dominated by forces adhering to the Australian Labor Party (ALP). The leadership of the unions tend to align themselves with one or another faction of the party. Broadly speaking, these factions coalesced in the post-war era as a broadly social-democratic left-wing faction, and a anti-communist and Catholic-dominated right-wing faction.

The position to the left of the Labor Party was dominated by the Communist Party of Australia (CPA), which emerged in the 1920s out of the ashes of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). In the 1930s, the CPA began to win official positions in a number of unions, including the dock-workers union and the miners union. The CPA’s industrial power peaked in the 1940s, though it would decline in the aftermath of a government-broken coal miners strike in 1949. However, they maintained a significant influence in the decades to come. The CPA and all its splits, which never had any electoral successes like those of the French or Italian communist parties, placed immense strategic importance on the union movement.

In the aftermath of the 1956 Soviet invasion of Hungary, the party entered a protracted period of internal change. In 1961 a pro-China faction around the barrister Ted Hill broke away to form the Communist Party of Australia (Marxist-Leninist) (CPA ML), a Maoist party. The 1960s had seen the rise of a CPA faction desiring more independence from the USSR. The dominance of this tendency under the leadership of national secretary Laurie Aarons had resulted in the USSR severing ties from the group, and in 1968 the CPA openly condemned the invasion of Czechoslovakia. As a result, a USSR-loyal faction broke away in 1971 to form the Socialist Party of Australia (SPA). These political differences should be kept in mind when understanding the trajectory of the NSW BLF and the green ban movement generally.

Fighting for control

In the 1940s and 50s, conditions for labourers in the construction industry were bad: workers were underpaid, employment was temporary, work was dangerous, and the facilities on-site like bathrooms and break rooms were bad at best, non-existent at worst. To quote famous BLF organiser Jack Munday:

“Conditions, as they were understood in the majority of work places, did not exist. You would come on the job and you were lucky if you found a nail to hang your clothes on.

There would be one tap outside the dressing shed, practically no soap, and the first fight was to get hot water. There were no tables and chairs to sit on in the breaks. The toilets would be old pans, often in a filthy condition. The sheds were filled with cement. Nobody was detailed to look after hygiene or other amenities. If workers raised their voices on behalf of these basic decencies, they would often be sacked that same day.”

Despite much will to fight, the NSW BLF in the 1940s and 50s was neither a militant nor particularly leftist union. It was run by a coterie around the violent and corrupt Fred Thomas, who had assumed control in the early 1940s. Thomas’ anti-communism led him into intense conflict with the CPA-led Building Workers Industrial Union (BWIU), which represented skilled tradesmen like carpenters and bricklayers. He played on tensions between the tradesmen and the labourers in order to undermine the BWIU’s militancy and to keep BLF members from being swept along by its relative assertiveness. He continually undercut his own members by negotiating back-room deals with certain employers; he would even go out of his way to mock the accents of migrant BLF members in the BLF’s journal.

The CPA organised opposition to the leadership by creating a rank-and-file group. The group was led by party members like Joe Ferguson, but it also included supporters of the ALP left-wing and politically unaligned workers. They published and distributed a monthly newsletter called “The Hoist”, discussing the bad pay and bad conditions, encouraging more militant actions, and supporting joint actions between BWIU tradesmen and BLF labourers. Distributing the newsletter also gave them an opportunity to come into contact with labourers and tradesmen across the city.

The rank-and-file opposition incensed Thomas, who would frequently use violence against militants. As one rank-and-file member reported,

“So then when [the rank-and-file] got to a certain stage Thomas had to go to Newtown [a suburb of Sydney] and get these blokes that had the white long dustcoats and the hats on them. And come in and say, ‘Fucking say anything and we’ll fix you.’ And they used to open up their coats and show you the butt of their revolvers at the meetings.”

After a number of years of patient work, the rank-and-file was able to get into a position where they could seriously challenge the leadership. In 1958, a rank-and-file ticket for the branch elections was organised with the former Thomas-aligned figure “Banjo” Patterson. It won, and the NSW BLF now had the space to publicly begin a number of militant campaigns. They were able to link together with members of the BWIU and other trades unions to carry out joint struggle. After a corrupt election in 1958 that saw the right wing re-elected for three years, the CPA men were able to decisively win the 1961 election on a joint ticket with left-wing ALP members, taking advantage of splits among the right-wing.

They assumed control of a union drowning in debt, with little experience of what to do; newly elected secretary Mick McNamara was only twenty-one. Within a short period they were able to increase participation in the monthly branch meetings and launch a number of militant actions. Around the same time, the federal leadership of the union was taken over by Norm Gallagher, a CPA member. The federal office was based in Melbourne, Victoria, where the state BLF branch there was led by another CPA man, Paddy Malone.

Despite a formidable challenge to the NSW BLF leadership from the right-wing in 1964, the rank-and-file group was able to win again, even more decisively this time. In 1968, CPA member

Jack Munday was elected secretary. He formed a team around himself with other CPA members like Joe Owens, and Labor members like Bob Pringle and Mick McNamara. It would be under the influence of these men that the builders labourers of NSW would enter their most decisive period in the 1960s and 70s.

A dynamic workforce

The struggles for better pay and conditions launched by builders labourers in the 60s and early 70s resulted in a radical transformation of this section of the working class. No longer were labourers at the bottom of the scrapheap. They were now being paid wages that were occasionally in excess of the wages of tradesmen. Whereas once builders labourers felt ashamed of their job, they now walked around with their heads held high: they were no longer “just a labourer”, they were now “a bloody BL”!

This transformation affected the confidence of both migrant members and Indigenous members beyond their immediate identities as builders labourers. One Portuguese-born BLF member reported at a meeting that he felt he was no longer “just a wog” as a result of his involvement in the BLF. The union had begun to facilitate migrant involvement in struggles by employing translators at all branch meetings and hiring multilingual union organisers. For some migrant workers, this was one of the first experiences of inclusion in Australian society.

A number of prominent Indigenous activists of the era worked day jobs as builders labourers, supported at every turn by the union. The union helped fund the creation of a Indigenous workers’ newspaper, *The Aboriginal Worker*. They also employed an Indigenous organiser named Kevin “Cookie” Cook. He helped organise union resistance to the eviction of Indigenous squatters in Redfern, an area of inner-city Sydney that was and remains one of the centres of Indigenous life in the country.

The nature of labouring work meant that it often attracted “unconventional” personality types. Work was dangerous, temporary and hard, usually taking place outdoors, with labourers braving the intense Sydney sun year-round. Workers went from job-to-job, employer-to-employer, enduring regular periods of unemployment when no work was to be found. A government inquiry in 1975 found that of a sample of 46 labourers, only seven were married, and only four owned or were buying a house. In the words of a complaining building industry employer, the full employment situation meant that bosses were forced to use workers that were “neither interested in, nor suitable for, permanent employment”.

Builders labourers in this era were youthful, and embodied the stereotype of a “larrikin”: a good-humoured but uncivilised man, with no respect for authority but utmost respect for his fellow “battlers” – working-class underdogs. In the words of former labourer Mick McEvoy, “if you’re the lowest of the low, then who gives a fuck?”. The comedian Paul Hogan was a rigger on the Sydney Harbour Bridge in this period, and would use the workers he met as material to create the Crocodile Dundee character. The spirit of these young workers would lead the BLF into every kind of struggle imaginable – the NSW BLF even helped protest a rugby league club that denied entry to some BLF members, whose long hair broke club rules.

Militant methods

The militancy of builders labourers in this period was facilitated by the basically federalist structure of the union at the time. Leadership positions were rotated regularly, paid staff received the equivalent of an average builders labourers' wage, all bans were to be decided on by mass meetings of union members, and control of strikes was given to member-run strike committees.

The builders labourers employed bold strategies to achieve their aims and threaten employers into submission. For instance, if a concrete pour is interrupted, left unfinished or set improperly, then it has to be ripped up and it all has to start again. If bosses did not give in to their demands, builders labourers would simply walk off the site mid-pour. The mere threat of a disrupted concrete pour would force employers to the bargaining table before construction began.

Other means of sabotage employed by the labourers include the organising of vigilante squads to destroy work carried out by scabs, and the occasional smashing of a time-keeper's clock. Though these methods would scare many unionists, like the tradesmen in the BWIU, they were undoubtedly successful. In the late 60s, the NSW BLF had around 4000 members. By 1973, that number had skyrocketed to 11 000, influenced by the building boom, but also as a result of the NSW BLF's effectiveness and down-to-earth structure. The practice of sabotage itself led to the development of the labourers' fighting skills: in order to coordinate their activities, the vigilantes learned to use switchboards, typewriters and maps.

The officials had high standards of their organisers, who were appointed at branch meetings. In 1970 it became policy for organisers to be appointed temporarily; after they finished their term, they went back to their tools and resumed labouring work. All officials, after a maximum of six years, were to step down and return to work. In a decision controversial even among other NSW BLF activists, secretary Jack Munday himself declined to seek re-election in 1973, returning to work as a labourer on the site of St. Vincent's Hospital whilst also pursuing speaking arrangements.

The NSW BLF displayed consistent solidarity with other workers in other unions, even those unions with whom they had ideological differences. They had few demarcation disputes with the BWIU, even though fights over coverage were routine in the construction industry in other states, and in other countries. NSW BLF members gave practical solidarity to striking plumbers, tram drivers, nurses, painters, dockers and many others. When they were expelled from the NSW Labor Council in 1971 after being unfairly blamed for rowdy behaviour in the Council's hall, they refused to use the courts to demand re-entry, since they were in principle opposed to using a state body against a worker organisation.

The NSW BLF was inclined to take snap action in response to grievances, rather than engage in a drawn out process of negotiation and reflection. Labourers would often take action without even consulting the union first, knowing they would be unconditionally backed up. The rebelliousness of the labourers was fostered by the structure and the practices of their union. The officials even explicitly advocated the abolition of Australia's mandatory arbitration system, preferring proper collective bargaining led by the unions; they regularly expressed their willingness to break contracts that restricted their ability to strike.

Their militant strikes were the most bold in the country at the time. By 1971, NSW BLF members had secured incredible pay rises: on many sites, skilled labourers like dogmen were earning 99% of a tradesman's wage, and "unskilled" labourers like jack-hammerers were earning 88.5%. By comparison, labourers in the UK in the same period were earning around 77% of a tradesman's

wage. The NSW BLF journal never hesitated to publicise the enormous growth of their employers profits; they were always demanding more.

Unionists felt emboldened to take more militant action in the aftermath of the 1969 general strike, when over a million workers successfully struck to free the tramways union leader Clarrie O'Shea. O'Shea had been imprisoned for refusing to pay fines imposed on the union by the industrial arbitration court. The success of the strike meant that both the state and federal governments were more hesitant than normal to use the law against unionists. Prior to this, unionists fell prey to "arbitration-mindedness", an excessive concern with the judgements of the industrial arbitration courts. The strike to free O'Shea proved that workers could break the law, strike outside of the confines of the court and succeed. According to Jack Munday, the general strike was "decisive in cracking the sense of frustration which was becoming universal among workers".

The CPA in the late 60s/early 70s was in a state of flux: cut off from the mothership of the USSR and equally adrift from China, it was forced to pursue a range of strategies in order to survive. One should not mistake the bottom-to-top structure of the NSW BLF as representing a uniform CPA approach to union organising; in other unions, and in other time periods, CPA unionists could rule as brutally and as bureaucratically as any other unionist political faction.

However, the openness of the CPA to new ideas in the 60s led to members becoming interested in the global New Left, and some of the topics associated with it: workers' self-management, womens' liberation, anti-war activism, environmentalism, and so on. This included rank and file democratic unionism, thus providing a space for the CPA BLF activists around Munday who had been practicing grassroots militancy for years, and who had explicitly identified the French student and worker struggles of the late 60s as an inspiration. The abandoning of strict democratic centralism meant that different tendencies could co-exist within the party.

Green bans by a red union

Contemporary historians of the green bans tend to look back and wonder how this group of construction workers became fashionable environmentalists. Many imply that the workers were in some way commanded by New Left communists like Jack Munday, but such a perspective does not explain the fact that *all* bans placed by the BLF were endorsed by general meetings of members, and never imposed by officials. They were incredibly popular and were consistently supported by majorities of union members. What explains this?

The truth is that concerns about capitalist over-development among workers were not new. One of the first recorded actions of builders labourers was in 1957, when the NSW BLF journal ran a small report on a group of labourers and other unionised construction workers who were contacted by a resident. She complained that the block of flats she lived in was being demolished to make way for an unneeded car park. The union men arrived and chased the non-unionised demolition workers off the site, preventing its demolition.

In the construction boom of the late 60s and early 70s, enormous amounts of money was poured into the redevelopment of Sydney, particularly suburbs of the inner-city. Old buildings with important heritage value – including some of the first buildings ever built in Australia – were being knocked down and replaced with high-rise office buildings. The builders labourers themselves could see clearly that these valuable old buildings, that were often still inhabited, were being replaced with commercial properties that would often sit empty.

They were also acutely aware of the other social problems that affected the working class of Sydney, like the gentrification of suburbs close to the city and the lack of affordable, good quality housing. Throughout the 60s, the NSW BLF's journal was filled with criticism of the way construction was "for profit, not for use"; tens of thousands of workers were in need of good housing, but the bulk of construction was dedicated to the building of offices. Workers were risking their lives building "concrete jungles" that were miserable to live in – if they could live in them at all. It's common for workers to feel a sense of indifference or even disdain for the products of their work; building workers are no exception.

The first formal environmental ban by the NSW BLF came in 1962 when a committee of residents in North Sydney requested the BLF stop the demolition of houses in order to build an expressway. The first of the famous green bans, however, was the ban on the development of Kelly's Bush. Kelly's Bush was a 5-hectare piece of public, native parkland located by the water, near to the city in the middle class suburb of Hunters Hill. It was taken over by the property developer A.V. Jennings, who wished to build medium and high density apartments on the land.

This was strenuously opposed by a committee of local housewives, who formed together in 1970 as the "Battlers for Kelly's Bush". They began a letter-writing campaign, publicising the native flora and fauna in the parkland, and identifying a number of native Indigenous carvings. Their activism was largely ineffectual in the face of the state government's determined support of A.V. Jennings. Out of desperation the Battlers approached the BLF, who gave their support after mass meetings of local residents demonstrated that the cause was locally popular. In June 1971, a "black ban" (which would later be renamed as a green ban) was placed on Kelly's Bush, promising that no work would be done there.

It was an odd alliance: middle class conservative heritage enthusiasts banding together with rough, working class communists, but it was an undoubted success. When A.V. Jennings threatened to proceed with the development of Kelly's Bush by hiring scab labour, BLF members working on an A.V. Jennings office development in North Sydney stopped work. This forced the developer to back down, and Kelly's Bush remains untouched to this day.

Inspired by the Kelly's Bush Battlers, dozens of residents' committees would spring up in the coming years, aiming to protect heritage buildings and stop unwanted high-rise developments in their local areas. A number of these successfully approached the NSW BLF to place bans on certain local developments. It became a regular occurrence: concerned residents would approach the BLF regarding an unwanted development in their area, or a heritage building at risk. BLF officials like Jack Munday would invite local residents to attend a meeting of labourers, who would then vote themselves about whether to place a ban or not. Bans were never imposed on the labourers; they had to freely agree to it.

Examples of NSW BLF actions

The bans were never simply about the environment, or about old buildings. The NSW BLF facilitated the involvement of builders labourers in a large number of causes. They include:

- Opposing the construction of a new maximum security wing at Long Bay Gaol; they refused to pour the concrete for the roof of the complex and demanded better treatment of prisoners. They maintained the ban on work even after other unions abandoned it. Ultimately, the ban failed, but the union was vindicated in 1978 when the maximum security

wing was closed, after a Royal Commission into New South Wales prisons found it was too inhumane.

- Placing a “pink ban” on all construction work at Macquarie University in 1973 after a gay student was expelled from his residence on account of his sexuality. The union forced the university administration to offer the student his place back, but by that point the student decided he no longer wanted to study there. This was one of the more controversial bans among the membership, but it was still endorsed by both a general branch meeting and by all the labourers working at Macquarie. According to participants, the pink ban was driven as much by hatred of the autocratic Macquarie College Master than it was concern for gay rights.
- Also in 1973, they supported strippers in the nightlife district Kings Cross, who had struck for better pay and conditions, even as significant sectors of the Catholic-influenced labour movement opposed them. The union banned construction work at one strip club until owners gave in to the strippers’ demands. The state union also passed a motion demanding that police cease “the persecution of prostitutes by the law and their exploitation by court fines”.
- Demanding equal rights for women working in the construction industry, going so far as to strike to demand bosses hire female labourers. “Work-ins” of women were carried out; men would bring a woman BLF member to a work site, have her start working and then force the bosses to pay her. Though I cannot find a hard source for it, I have been told that the union even once submitted a demand that women workers receive one day off a month as “menstruation leave”.
- Putting a black ban on all sites owned by Leighton Industries, after a number of BLF members were arrested and fined in the course of an industrial action at a Leighton Industries site in the suburb of Baulkham Hills. The ban worked and all the charges against the men were dropped.
- Introducing direct struggles for workers’ control, such as when BLF workers held a work-in at one job in 1972 – after fifty labourers were dismissed, they all gathered on the site the next morning and gained entry. They locked out the company managers and foremen, elected foremen and safety officers from among themselves, and continued to work under their own control. A workers’ control work-in even took place during the construction of the famous Sydney Opera House.
- Waging a non-stop campaign for health and safety, demanding the hiring of safety officers from the union, the abolition of dangerous “hook-riding” practices expected of dogmen, the fitting of noise and dust control devices on machinery and power tools, the provision of full accident pay by the employers, as well as the provision of proper amenities like bathrooms and showers on-site.
- Backing up members who resisted conscription and supporting campaigns against Australia’s joint war with the United States against Vietnam.
- Supporting resistance to the Apartheid regime in South Africa. This included participation in the protests against tours to Australia by the South African Springbok rugby union. Bob

Pringle was even arrested for disrupting a match during one tour by sneaking into the Sydney Cricket Ground with an ironworker comrade and attempting to saw the goal posts down.

The counter-offensive

The global upsurge in class struggle that occurred in the 60s and 70s was met with intense counter-attacks from the capitalist class; attacks that continue to keep the working class under its thumb today. However, the destruction of the NSW BLF is dissimilar to the bourgeois counter-offensive that was carried out in other industries. Whereas capitalists in manufacturing and similar industries fought their war with new technologies (like automation) and a restructuring of production (like offshoring), the capitalists in the construction industry primarily fought the builders labourers through politics and brute force. Shamefully, they were aided in this task by other forces on the left.

By 1973, thirty-six black bans in Sydney were holding up an incredible AUD \$3bn worth of property developments. Adjusted for inflation, that figure amounts to approximately €17bn. A recession was underway that ended the construction boom. It was becoming harder and harder for builders labourers to fight, and the employers knew it. Employers took the opportunity to attack workers, sacking thousands. A concerted offensive by the ruling class was underway to smash the NSW BLF: police harassed unionists and allied residents; goons in the pay of property developers assaulted workers and activists, resulting in the still-unsolved killing of conservationist Juanita Nielsen; the media ran non-stop attack pieces smearing the BLF; the corrupt Askin state government went on the offensive and claimed that the BLF needed to be brought to heel, or else chaos would reign in the streets.

In addition, the NSW BLF – which once had a decent relationship with the tradesmen of the BWIU – was now isolated within the union movement. The leadership of the BWIU under Pat Clancy had left the CPA to join the USSR-loyal SPA, and positioned themselves in opposition to the green ban movement generally. They were also strongly opposed to the NSW BLF's federalist organisational practices: whereas the NSW BLF held meetings *constantly*, the centralised BWIU once went fourteen years without a single mass meeting.

The only other union to show consistent solidarity with the NSW BLF and the green bans was the Federated Engine Drivers' and Firemen's Association of Australasia (FEDFA), which was not only also led by similarly-militant CPA members, but also represented crane drivers. Crane drivers worked closely with BLF riggers and dogmen in day-to-day work and engaged in constant united struggle with them.

Power flows from the barrel of a gun

The NSW BLF was isolated even within their own union federation. The BLF on the federal level was controlled by Norm Gallagher, who had split from the CPA together with Paddy Malone to join the breakaway Maoist CPA ML. The Maoists also controlled the Victorian branch, which was the other strong BLF union. They were opposed to the green ban movement. Though the Victorian BLF implemented bans of their own, they were much tamer than the bans of the NSW

BLF, and they never cohered into a fully-fledged movement like the green bans. Gallagher and the other Maoists regarded the NSW BLF as being strung along by “residents, sheilas and poofers”.

In 1973, Jack Munday adhered to the term-limit tradition and stepped down as secretary of the NSW branch. The election held to decide his replacement proved the Maoists’ relative unpopularity in Sydney: the Maoist candidate lost to the Munday ally Joe Owens by a margin of two-to-one. The employers managed to use the courts to have the BLF deregistered on the federal level in response to the NSW BLF’s frequently illegal industrial actions. This was the last straw for Gallagher. Not only had the actions of the NSW branch led to repercussions for the entire BLF, but deregistration also threatened his campaign to gain a seat on the executive of the Australian Council of Trades Unions (ACTU), the national Australian union peak body.

In 1974, with backing from employers groups, Gallagher launched his federal intervention into the NSW branch. All elected NSW officials were replaced with his unelected loyalists. From then on, there were two BLFs in NSW: the actual NSW BLF, and the Gallagher-aligned branch of the federal BLF. NSW BLF loyalists were intimidated into submission by Gallagher’s gun thugs, flown in from interstate and put up in five-star hotels. It is a widespread belief among veterans of that era that some loyalists were even murdered, their deaths arranged to appear like workplace accidents.

At one point, FEDFA crane drivers struck rather than work with those loyal to the imposed Gallagher officials. Gallagher broke their strike by flying in scabs from Melbourne. FEDFA took the most militant action in support of the NSW BLF, but the telecommunications union and the teachers union both issued statements of solidarity. However, this support was nowhere near enough. Even other CPA union leaders, like Laurie Carmichael in the metalworkers union, refused to provide actual support. In 1975, the resisting NSW branch office was burgled, and its records stolen. The theft of these records benefited no-one but Gallagher.

The deregistration of the BLF had incensed Gallagher, but it also gave him a perfect opportunity. Since the BLF was no longer a legally registered union, it was no longer bound by the courts to follow its own rules. It was no longer legally obligated to hold meetings or conduct fair elections. In any other circumstance, the victims of the federal intervention would have been able to win a case in court for reinstatement, but here, their options were limited. In the cases where they did win legal victories against Gallagher, he simply ignored the decisions.

Resistance continued, but was becoming harder and harder. Gallagher was unpopular; the legitimate NSW BLF had the support of around seven thousand labourers, whereas Gallagher’s branch had the support of only around one thousand. However, the NSW BLF had only limited means to resist. Whilst they were supported faithfully by residents’ groups, conservationists, feminists, gays, students, activists, Indigenous people and often the membership of other unions, they had hardly any support from other union leaderships. NSW BLF loyalists were being black-listed from the industry and employers were forcing labourers to switch to Gallagher’s union or else they would be denied employment.

A week after the burglary of the NSW BLF office, the officials called a final meeting in Sydney Town Hall. With tears in their eyes, they told the thousand workers assembled there that they should sign up to the federal BLF ticket and continue the fight from within, as a dual union situation “only benefits the employers”. The officials Jack Munday, Bob Pringle and Joe Owens all resigned, carried away on the shoulders of the crowd with a ten minute long round of applause.

Aftermath

With Gallagher now at the head of the BLF in NSW, employers found themselves in a much more comfortable position. The green bans were gradually removed by Gallagher over the heads of the members, despite his own rhetorical commitment to them. Within a few years, the union was re-registered. Former officials were expelled, and it took years of court cases for them to win readmission. The majority were blacklisted and could never find regular construction work again. The small number of women BLF members found themselves locked out of the industry with the collusion of the Maoists, who had always opposed the participation of women in the industry.

No branch or general meeting was held in Sydney for two years after the intervention; the first in 1977 saw two-thirds of those present vote in opposition to the leadership. The leadership walked out of the meeting and declared it void after the membership voted through a motion of no confidence in them. The Builders Labourers for Democratic Control, the rank and file group that had been formed to carry on the fight of the old NSW BLF, maintained the support of many labourers but it was never able to regain control of the union or restore federalist practices. The structure had completely changed. Organisers and officials never picked up the practice of heading back to work after a limited term, not least of all because many of them were plucked out of the Maoist university scene and had never actually worked in construction!

The union movement was shifting substantially, and shifting rapidly. In the 1970s, the view that strategy should be built around industrial action gave way to the notion that unions needed to restrain themselves and cooperate with employers and the government in exchange for social benefits. This viewpoint had been pioneered in part by intellectuals and union leaders from the CPA, which had settled into a bureaucratic perspective, similar to that of the Eurocommunist trend in Europe. The BLF was left unsteady by a series of corruption scandals, such as when Gallagher was imprisoned for accepting gifts of money and materials from employers to be used on the construction of his beachside holiday home.

When the Labor leader Bob Hawke came to power in 1983, the first Prices and Incomes Accord was agreed upon between the ACTU and the federal government. The unions promised to restrict industrial action and accept a limit in wage rises, in exchange for promised increased government spending on health and education. Of course, such spending never truly materialised. Successive Australian governments – both left and right-wing – slashed spending on welfare, privatising large swathes of government-run services. The Accord accomplished peacefully what Thatcher accomplished with brute force against the miners.

There was only limited resistance from the union movement to the Accords. Only one delegate to the ACTU voted against the first Accord: Jenny Haines, from the New South Wales Nurses Association. Norm Gallagher was at this point on the executive of the ACTU. He was opposed to the Accords, but only meekly at first, perhaps not understanding the implications of what was going to happen.

Gallagher and the BLF found themselves under the hammer when they pushed for wage rises outside the bounds of the Accord. Despite his crushing of the militant NSW BLF, the Gallagher-run BLF was still one of the most militant unions in the country, particularly in his home state of Victoria. They supported the tiny Federal Confectioners' Association when they struck for a reduction in work hours beyond those set by the Accord. The BLF themselves would engage in a number of industrial actions securing improvements beyond the Accord. This incensed Prime Minister Hawke, who was determined to crush the union.

Finally, in 1986, it was deregistered. BLF supporters in Victoria waged a struggle to continue that would last until 1993, but by that point the bulk of its membership had been raided by FEDFA and the BWIU. In a number of cases, police literally forced workers into abandoning their BLF cards and signing up with the BWIU.

Eventually, the rump BLF joined with the BWIU and other unions to form the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union, which has since merged with the Maritime Union of Australia and the Textiles Clothing and Footwear Union of Australia to create the CFMMEU “super-union”. The CFMMEU is the most left-wing, militant union in the country, though it should be made clear that it does not even begin to approach the militancy of the BLF of the 80s, let alone the NSW BLF in the 70s. It is also riveted with internal rivalries, and the prospect of the union breaking up into separate organisations is real.

Legacy

In a way, history has been kind to the green bans. They are taught to children in schools, spoken about in proud tones to tourists by City of Sydney tour guides, and commemorated by local right-wing politicians. By a cruel twist of fate, the buildings and green spaces saved by the union are no longer inhabited by workers, who were largely priced out of the inner-city long ago. The heritage buildings that remain are likely worth more to capitalists now as tourist and heritage attractions than they would have been if they were razed and turned into office blocks, as originally planned.

However, the gentle history of nice, altruistic construction workers who decided to act as muscle for middle-class conservationists out of the goodness of their own heart is a byproduct of the NSW BLF’s ultimate defeat. This is the case even if some green ban participants like Jack Munday pandered to this viewpoint. The struggle of the builders labourers of NSW in the 60s and 70s was not like this. They were rebellious workers, who had managed to get themselves in the position of the de-facto vanguard of the working class of Australia.

These proletarians, a grab-bag of young men, misfits, adventurers and migrants, fought some of the most advanced struggles ever seen in the country – taking on capital head-on. They broke out of the narrow confines of arbitration courts, going beyond simple wage rises in line with inflation, undermining the division of labour that put tradesmen at the top and the labourers at the bottom. They went beyond simple strikes, engaging in sabotage, sit-ins and work-ins.

The union bureaucrats of today, who would happily crush any group of workers that wanted to behave like the members of the NSW BLF, now refer to the green bans as a model of “socially engaged unionism”. The union movement, which has been in a continuous decline ever since the union bureaucrats signed their organisations’ death certificates via the Accords, now makes an effort to mobilise “the community” (students, the unemployed, middle-class citizens, left activists, etc) to back the few strikes that are carried out. Unions will pride themselves on “social responsibility”, like giving money to the successful campaign for gay marriage; just recently, the CFMMEU announced a green ban of a kind on a historical building threatened by development.

However, this is not a strategy of offense, but in large part a strategy of desperation. The union movement is no longer able to muster the strength it once could. Constrained by both draconian labour legislation and their own unwillingness to break the law, some unions look to

other forces to do what they cannot or will not do. In many instances, it's just another way for the Labor Party bureaucrats that control unions to drag workers into their inane party-politics.

It's senseless to simply oppose the strategy outright – it certainly has its value, and unions should be creative enough to use other forces to help circumvent the law and mobilise as much support as possible – but it can't be forgotten that there is nothing more powerful than direct action by workers. As the NSW BLF themselves knew, a single crane driver refusing to leave the cabin of his crane in protest is more impactful in an industrial dispute than a solidarity rally of a thousand students.

The NSW BLF was not simply crushed by an employer offensive, or by the violent sectarianism of other forces on the left; it was also crushed by the overall failure of the working class to defeat capitalist forces in the 1960s and 70s – both within Australia and overseas. Isolated as they were within the union movement, the tactics and ethos of labourers never fully spread to the wider working class. It maintained an influence on workers in the construction industry, but workers in industries like manufacturing remained largely separated, even though these workers themselves engaged in many strikes.

One anarchist's reflections

The struggles of the BLF proved practically how wrong the Leninists are when they suggest that workers in unions can only ever develop “trade union consciousness”, never advanced socialist consciousness. The “trade union consciousness” of these workers went far and beyond the established socialist and communist groups. The labourers linked their demands for better pay and conditions with concern for the effects of capitalism on the working class as a whole. The methods they used to achieve their goals, like industrial sabotage, were perfect embodiments of the spirit of direct action, though I'm sure none of them had ever heard of the name Pouget. Their organisational practices embodied federalism though, again, I doubt any would have been familiar with Proudhon.

One may well notice the absence of anarchists in this story so far, despite the presence of a union that embodies anarchist principles in a significant way. The unfortunate truth is that anarchists in Australia have historically been a marginal force. Anarchists had some influence in the Industrial Workers of the World of the early 20th century, but this influence had largely faded away by the time the Second World War rolled around. The surviving anarchist scene in Australia consisted largely of middle-class bohemians from the intellectual “Sydney Push”, and a number of migrant working-class revolutionaries isolated from other workers on account of their beliefs and language.

Some anarchists were able to participate in the green ban struggles. The 1973 pro-green ban ticket in the BLF elections included one anarchist, alongside CPA, ALP and unaligned members. Some women associated with the union, like Pat Fiske, the director of the *Rocking the Foundations* documentary, had anarchist sympathies, and it was known that men like Munday and Owens had been exposed to anarchist and IWW ideas. However, libertarians remained on the margins: the process of cohering together as a greater force was slow in Australia. Even today, there is no Australia-wide anarchist federation – only the tiny anarcho-syndicalist ASF-IWA, which has no presence in Sydney. There was an attempt to set up such a federation in the 70s, but it splintered into nothing as a result of personal and ideological disputes.

I don't care much for "what ifs", but my strongest feeling after writing this article is that things may have been different had there been greater number of organised anarchists active in the workers' movement of the time. The latent libertarianism that had been brought to the surface in the course of these struggles could have been identified explicitly; there could have been a greater push for radicalisation outside the control of the Marxist parties; there could have been different tactics pursued when the union was fighting its defensive actions against the employers and union bureaucrats. Perhaps the dual union idea that unnerved the CPA men could have been pursued. Perhaps the union itself could have made explicit what was already implicit in their practice, and endorsed a socialist objective. Could the anarchists have helped the union secure the independent perspective it needed, away from the political sects, as people like Pelloutier, Broutchoux and Pouget did in the French movement so many years ago?

Regardless of "what ifs", I am confident that there is no excuse for a lack of anarchist participation in the labour movement. It is an opportunity that cannot be wasted. The BLF only became the militant entity that it was as the result of long, patient work by committed militants, who – thanks to solidarity from fellow communists – were able to brave violence, intimidation and humiliation to facilitate some of the most impressive struggles ever seen in this country. It is exactly this kind of work that we should be doing. We should be forming organisations in workplaces. We should be writing workers' newsletters. We should be trying to bridge the divides between workplaces, places of residence, trades, industries and places of origin. We should be conducting workers' inquiries, gathering our knowledge and feeding it back to our fellow workers. We should be doing all this and more.

This is not to say that militancy is simply an issue of willpower. It would be stupid to think that the Green Bans and the NSW BLF could have survived if all the CPA men were replaced by anarchists. Munday, Owens and Pringle all made mistakes; we would've too. That's not it either: the builders labourers were the victim of the same worldwide counter-attack that occurred in response to the hot period of the 60s and 70s; there's no reason to believe that we possess some unique property as anarchists that would have allowed us to stop that tide.

Rather, our activity is about identifying struggle as it occurs already within the working class, and trying to push it forward: trying to let the struggles develop as fully as possible, without being diverted or snuffed out by bureaucrats, Leninists, bosses, conservatives, and all the other people that laugh when they think about a revolution. Intervention in workplace struggles isn't a question of gaining a cult following, winning elections or capturing official positions, but about facilitating the working class' self-organisation, their own process of attaining self-knowledge.

The unions that existed in the 1950s, 60s and 70s are not the unions that exist now. I cannot speak for France, but in Australia, whatever existed of union federalism back then has since been thoroughly destroyed. Even when the BLF was under the leadership of a corrupt right-wing thug like Fred Thomas, it still had regular elections every three years and elected its organisers. This is strikingly different from today's unions. Meetings occur rarely. Strikes are managed by officials, who refuse to endorse any wildcat actions. Organisers are appointed by the officers, who often select them based on political allegiance, not ability. Many of them have never worked in the industries they intend to organise. The organisers and officers themselves treat their union activity as a stepping-stone to a career in the Labor Party.

Organisational structure is not "neutral". To bastardise Marx, we cannot simply lay hold of the centralised union machinery and wield it for our own purposes. If the aim of our activity is to secure official positions and run the organisation for our own purposes, as countless left-

wing factions aim to do, then we will inevitably become the same sorts of bureaucrats we decry. Our involvement in the unions puts change in structure and increased engagement from union members front and centre.

Exactly how we conduct ourselves to achieve our goals is an open question, depending on the many unique circumstances we find ourselves in. Whether we can even achieve these goals without forming new, separate unions is another question altogether. Whether we even need unions at all is another! My point is not to outline some one-size-fits-all strategy; it's that we must get ourselves into the position where we need to ask these questions out of practical necessity. They cannot remain hypothetical. We owe it to every rebel worker that has come before us, and to every rebel worker that will come in the future.

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Daniel Rashid

When construction workers put their foot down

The story of the New South Wales Builders Labourers Federation: Green bans and popular
power in so-called Australia

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