

GREEN BANS MOVEMENT VINDICATED

Big business, property developers and the NSW Liberal Government, led by infamous Premier Robert Askin, attacked the NSW Builders Labourers' Federation when, in the early 1970s, the union launched the Green Ban movement. This movement of Resident Action Groups and environmentalists linked up with the NSW Builders Labourers' Federation (BLF) and forged an alliance which was unique and quite revolutionary.

The building boom of the 1960s and '70s changed the face of Australian cities, particularly Sydney. When I commenced work in the building industry in 1956 the height limit on city buildings was 150 feet (45.72 metres). This restriction was lifted in 1958 and the sky became the limit. In the ongoing rush for development, many heritage buildings were demolished and the thinking segment of the population questioned whether all development was in the interests of ordinary people.

The Green Bans and their importance

Petra Kelly, founder of the first Green Party in the world, states that her inspiration came from the Green Ban movement in Australia. When she visited Australia in the early 1970s she was greatly impressed by the way middle-class environmentalists had linked up with the NSW Builders Labourers' Federation and the successes they had in many combined campaigns. It inspired her to return to Germany and form the first Green Party to win power anywhere in the world.

Turbulent History of the Builders Labourers' Federation

Builders labourers are essential on building sites. They are engaged on demolition, excavation, steel fixing, concretion, material handling, rigging, scaffolding etc. For many years the NSW Builders Labourers' Federation was controlled by officials who colluded with the employers at the expense of the members, but the workers removed them from office in the 1960s. At the same time, carpenters and bricklayers were covered by a much more progressive union, the Building Workers Industrial Union (BWIU).

With the expansion of the building industry in the 1960s and '70s, a progressive rank and file militant group was elected to the leadership of the Builders Labourers' Federation and it quickly formed a united front with the BWIU on many campaigns around wages and conditions in an industry, which had been notorious for its lack of safety and poor conditions.

The NSW BLF raised wages and conditions for its members, civilised the industry and delivered a new dignity to builders' labourers who had previously been neglected by their leadership.

The Union responded to women seeking to work as builders' labourers. After a six-week strike on a North Sydney project it won the right of women to be members of the Union. It responded to migrants, Aborigines and women by appointing organisers in each of these groups. It supported a homosexual student who had been expelled from student accommodation at Macquarie University by stopping work on a project at the university. He was reinstated. It was unique for a union to champion women's and gay's rights. The Union

supported Aboriginal land rights and brought striking Aboriginal stockmen down from the Northern Territory to speak to other workers about their struggle. Aboriginal members, Ray Peckham and Monty Moloney, were appointed organizers of the Union.

The Environment Becomes an Issue

In the 1960s and '70s the environment emerged as a political issue throughout the world. The first ever conference on the environment was held by the United Nations in Stockholm, Sweden, in 1972. In 1976 a second conference on the environment, Habitat, the Built Environment, occurred in Vancouver, Canada. The built environment is as important as the natural environment. Because of the NSW BLF's historic Green Bans of the 1970s I was invited to speak at this first ever international conference on the built environment.

In tracing the BLF's involvement in the built environment, the most important ingredient was its ability to respond to requests for assistance from the community. It had issued a statement saying that it was not enough for unions to consider wages and conditions alone: "What is the use of winning higher wages and better conditions if we live in cities devoid of parks and denuded of trees?" Concerned citizens' groups began to approach the union for help after passing resolutions at meetings to do so. After hearing from those concerned, the Union membership would make a decision on whether to impose a ban or otherwise.

Residents, Environmentalists and Trade Unionists Unite

The combined action saved workers' homes, heritage buildings that had historic and/or architectural significance and some important open spaces. It also brought about changes in environmental legislation, such as demolition controls and the enactment of new legislation such as the Land and Environment Act after the election of the incoming Wran Government. It also won the extension of legal aid for environmental legal actions. These are lasting testimony to the Green Bans and peoples' action.

During the leadership of Jack Munday, Bob Pringle and Joe Owens, the BLF was involved in 43 Green Bans. Many were resolved by negotiations during the period from 1971-75.

Examples of Green Bans

KELLY'S BUSH at Hunters Hill remains the only open space and bush land on the Parramatta River. Middle-class women residents of the area sat down in front of the bulldozers. At their request a Green Ban was imposed. Wran Government legislation of the 1980s ensures the bush land will remain forever.

THE ROCKS, the birth place of European Australia, was threatened by high-rise development. The Residents' Action Group led by a wonderful, earthy barmaid, Nita McCrea, staged a great fight with support from the BLF and other unions and saved the historic Rocks for future generations to enjoy. Public housing in the area was saved.

WOOLLOOMOOLOO. The Askin Government wanted to destroy Housing Commission homes in the area and extend the high rise Commercial Business District to the whole area. The Green Ban saved the workers' homes and Tom Uren, Minister for Urban Planning, joined forces with the unions after the Whitlam Government came to power and Woolloomooloo, Sydney's oldest suburb, was saved.

CENTENNIAL PARK. The great writer, Patrick White, and thousands of citizens rose up in anger at the proposal to destroy this huge park which is the lungs of the Eastern Suburbs. A BLF Green Ban won the battle and 33 years on, no one would suggest building on Centennial Park. It was saved forever.

Green Bans and the CFMEU Currently

Though political circumstances have changed since the heady days of the 1970s the spirit of the Green Bans lives on.

Support for Green Bans from the leadership of the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) in recent years has contributed to a number of important successes.

- The Woolloomooloo Finger Wharf was saved from demolition in the 1990s by a CFMEU Green Ban opposing its demolition.
- In 2000 the imposition of a Green Ban by the Union at the request of the National Trust helped save the Maritime Services Building near Circular Quay.
- In 2004 Pyrmont Point was saved by an interim Green Ban which allowed the Sydney City Council to negotiate with the Carr Government to save the Point and open space.

So the unique alliance of environmentalists, residents, concerned citizens and trade unionists with a social conscience continues the proud tradition of social responsibility, respect for the environment and hopefully a sustainable future.

Broadening the Role of Trade Unions in Society

Whilst trade unions must always address wages and conditions, there is no doubt that the involvement of trade unions in wider political activities has greatly enhanced respect for trade unions. Such political activities have included involvement in peace and anti-war movements, opposition to apartheid & racism and fighting for the rights of women, blacks, gays, migrants, refugees, pensioners and other disadvantaged people in the community.

Some of the actions trade unions have been involved in during the 20th Century are:

- In 1915 left-wing Australian trade unions opposed conscription in World War I.
- During the Depression in the 1930s progressive unions fought against evictions of workers from their homes.
- In the 1930s miners, metal workers, building workers, seamen, wharfies and other unions opposed the military build-up of Germany and Japan. The

Seamen's Union and the Wharfies, led then by Ted Roach, banned the export of pig iron to Japan. Roach was jailed.

- More than 20 progressive and left trade unions led a people's campaign against the war of aggression in Vietnam in the 1960s and '70s, a campaign that was finally successful.

These actions are just snap-shots to show that, for more than 100 years, the trade union movement has been at its best when it reaches out and becomes involved in wider activities of the people. This is an important lesson for the trade union movement today.

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