

Pre-empting New Social Movements, Pioneering Social-Movement Unionism: Australian Builders Labourers in the 1970s

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ABSTRACT

Kim Moody's *Workers in a Lean World* (1997) identifies five characteristics of social-movement unionism: militancy; ultra-democratic forms of organization; an agenda for radical social and economic change; a determination to embrace the diversity of the working class to overcome fragmentation; and a capacity to lead community struggles. The use of the term 'social-movement unionism' to describe this phenomenon that arose during the 1990s in response to the challenges posed to labour movements by globalization implies its impressive attributes owed much to the influence of the new social movements of the 1970s and 1980s. However, in the early 1970s, the New South Wales branch of the Australian Builders Labourers' Federation (NSWBLF) pioneered a form of unionism that meets all the criteria in Moody's typology. The NSWBLF created this inspiring form of unionism out of the best of traditional labour movement values and practices, encouraged by the New Left in the late 1960s rather than new social movement influences, and well in advance of the development of 'social-movement unionism' from the 1990s onwards.

KEYWORDS

Social-Movement Unionism, Australia, Builders Labourers' Federation, Early 1970s

Social-movement unionism and new social movement theory

The term ‘social-movement unionism’ was coined in 1988 by Peter Waterman¹ but popularized in Kim Moody’s *Workers in a Lean World*.², which studied the rise of social-movement unionism in the 1990s in South America, South Africa, South Korea and the more industrialized parts of the Third World. Moody argues social-movement unionism grew out of the new material circumstances imposed by corporate globalization. It is characterized by militancy, internal democracy, an agenda for radical social and economic change, a determination to embrace the diversity of the working class in order to overcome its fragmentation, and a capacity to appeal beyond its membership by using union power to “lead the fight for everything that affects working people in their communities and the country”³

Robin Kelley’s study of Justice for Janitors in the United States (Kelley 1997: 6-18), Sam Gindin’s research on Canadian automobile workers (Gindin 1995), Gay Seidman’s study of workers’ movements in Brazil and South Africa (Seidman 1994), Andrew Vandenberg’s study of the 1995 ‘Toys ‘R’ Us dispute in Sweden (Vandenberg 2006: 182-84), provide other examples of the extent to which organized labour reasserted itself in militant and broad-ranging ways in social-movement unionism during the last decade of the twentieth century.⁴ These writings investigate the capacity of the labour movement to use its industrial power to effect social change, not only on behalf of workers but also on behalf of much wider constituencies, whose interests have become aligned with labour against the neo-liberal austerities imposed by globalizing capitalism. Social-movement unionism reasserted the efficacy of class struggle at the same time as it emphasized the significance of forms of oppression apart from class: the militant best of labour movement traditions informed by the inclusive values and organizational principles of the new social movements.

The phenomenon of social-movement unionism also attracted scholarly attention to the capacity of the labour movement not only to effect social change because of its power at the point of production, but also to transform itself. In pointing to the latter, the new social movements are deemed a fundamental influence, especially in the USA. For example, Lowell Turner examined the efforts on the part of American unions to change themselves from “inward-looking business unions” to an “outward-looking social

¹ Waterman, P. Social-Movement Unionism: A New Union Model for a New World Order? *Review*, vol. 16, no. 3, pp. 245-78, 1993.

² Moody, K. *Workers in a Lean World: Unions in the International Economy*. London and New York: Verso, 1997

³ *Ibid.*, p. 269, 271.

⁴ Kelley, R.D.G. 1997, The New Urban Working Class and Organized Labor. *New Labor Forum*. Vol. 1, no. 1, pp.6-18, 1997. Gindin, S. *The Canadian Auto Workers: The Birth and Transformation of a Union*. Toronto: J. Lorimer, 1997; Seidman, G. *Manufacturing Militance: Workers’ Movements in Brazil and South Africa*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994; Vandenberg, A. Social-Movement Unionism in Theory and in Sweden. *Social Movement Studies*. Vol. 5, no. 2 (September), 2006, pp.171-191.

movement”.⁵ Continuing this project in 2007 in *Labor in the New Urban Battle Grounds*, Turner defines social-movement unionism as “an activist mobilization-based unionism that, in contrast to established insider unionism, pushes for substantial social change”. It refers to “union strategies that use social movement-type approaches, such as coalition building, grassroots mobilization, aggressive organizing, demonstrations, and civil disobedience, and which typically operate outside established channels”. Alluding to further semantic development, he notes that: “The concept is at once condensed and broadened in the term *social unionism* to encompass both social movement approaches and other coalition-based innovations in areas such as economic development”.⁶

The term “social-movement unionism” suggests the labour movement required the influence of new social movements to develop its desirable characteristics—with the possible exception of militancy. The term thus replicates, perhaps inadvertently, the false binary constructed during the 1980s in new social movement theory. This dichotomy contrasts traditional labour movement concerns, such as wages and conditions, job control and job security, with issues championed by the new social movements, such as saving the environment and representing the interests of those whose identities are based on gender, sexual preference, race or ethnicity. New social movement theory even suggested that labour was incapable of providing social opposition and even shared interests in common with capital: labour and capital were both involved in the production process and committed thereby to maintaining capital growth, which was necessarily destructive of the environment.⁷

New social movement theorists persistently neglected to acknowledge the extent to which labour movements historically had challenged prejudices based on empire, nation, race, gender and so on.⁸ Long before such issues were raised by the new social movements and presented as “new”, these issues were on the agenda for social change provided by the most class-conscious sections of international labour movements, for example, the Industrial Workers of the World. New social movement activists too have

⁵ Turner, L. Building Social Movement Unionism. In: *Rekindling the Movement. Labor's Quest for Relevance in the 21st Century*, eds. L. Turner, R. Hurd and H. Katz. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001.

⁶ Turner, L. An Urban Resurgence of Social Unionism. In: *Labor in the New Urban Battle Grounds. Local Solidarity in a Global Economy*, eds. L. Turner and D. B. Cornfield. Ithaca and London: ILR Press, 2007, p.15.

⁷ Touraine, A. *The Voice and the Eye: An Analysis of Social Movements*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981, esp.p.13; Habermas, J. New Social Movements. *Telos*. No. 49, Fall, pp.33-35, 1981; Offe, C. Work: the Key Sociological Category? In: *Disorganised Capitalism: Contemporary Transformations of Work and Politics*, ed. C.Offe. Cambridge: Polity Press, pp.133-6, 141, 148. 1985; Laclau, E. and Mouffe, C. Post-Marxism without Apologies. *New Left Review* 166, Nov./Dec., pp.103, 106, 1987; Laclau, E. and Mouffe, C. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London: Verso, 1985.

⁸ Brandt, K. W. New Social Movements as a Metapolitical Challenge: the Social and Political Impact of a New Historical Type of Protest. *Thesis Eleven*, no. 15, pp.60–8, 1986; Inglehart, R. *The Silent Revolution: Changing Values and Political Styles Among Western Publics*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977; Inglehart, R. *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990, esp.371-392; Melucci, A. *Nomads of the Present, Social Movements and Individual Needs in Contemporary Society*. London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989, pp.11-12.

drawn wildly inaccurate caricatures of trade unions as “economistic” bastions of homophobia, masculinism, racism, ethnocentrism and ecological irresponsibility. In the stereotype constructed by new social movement theorists and articulated on the ground by new social movement activists, labour movements are inhabited by bigoted workers concerned only with their material self-interest, and new social movements are comprised of the educated, enlightened and altruistic, who care about much broader interests and issues.⁹

Introducing the New South Wales Builders Labourers’ Federation

It is interesting therefore to draw attention to an example of a union during the first half of the 1970s that spectacularly refutes new social movement theory and its assumptions embedded in the terminology of “social-movement unionism”: the New South Wales branch of the Australian Builders Labourers’ Federation (NSWBLF).¹⁰ This union confounds the stereotype of unions as incapable of embracing concerns beyond the workplace without the leavening influence of the new social movements. It also precedes social-movement unionism by two decades.

In the early 1970s the Australian Builders Labourers’ Federation had 30,000 members across the country. It covered all unskilled labourers and certain categories of skilled labourers employed on building sites: dog-men, riggers, scaffolders, powder monkeys, hoist drivers and steel fixers. These builders labourers were commonly known as “BLs”. The building industry was booming at this time and so was the union. Between 1969 and 1971, BLF membership rose nationally by 136%. By 1973, the NSWBLF had 11,000 members, more than doubling its membership since the late 1960s and covering a very high proportion of eligible workers in the industry. Its membership was guided by many committed officials, who were strongly influenced by New Left ideology with its emphasis on equality, participatory democracy and direct action. Especially outstanding as leaders of this union were Jack Munday, Joe Owens and Bob Pringle. Munday and Owens, and a significant proportion of organizers and rank-and-file activists, were members of the radically anti-Stalinist Communist Party of Australia (CPA); and Pringle was a fellow-traveler.¹¹ The CPA had benefitted politically from the departure of China-line enthusiasts in 1963 who had formed the Communist Party of Australia (Marxist-Leninist). The much larger CPA increasingly pursued a New Left trajectory. It criticized the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, inciting Moscow-line adherents to depart to form the Socialist Party of Australia in 1971. This left the CPA freer than ever of Old Left political baggage. In 1970 the CPA Congress outlined a new policy, the “coalition

⁹ Burgmann, V. *Power and Protest. Movements for Change in Australian Society*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1993, p.5

¹⁰ There has been inconsistency in the union’s title. Sometimes they were ‘Labourers’, other times ‘Laborers’; sometimes there was an apostrophe after ‘Builders’, but rarely during the 1970s when the union objected to its implication that the labourers were the property of the builders.

¹¹ Munday, Jack. Interview with M.Burgmann, 30 March, 1978;. Pringle, Bob, Interview with M.Burgmann, 8 March, 1978; Owens, Joe. Interview with M.Burgmann, 29 September, 1977.

of the left” concept that had been evolving since the 21st Congress in 1968, which emphasized the need for trade unions to involve themselves in “action on social and political issues going beyond the traditional concern of unionism.”¹²

The NSWBLF became the CPA’s “show-piece”, according to one of its organizers, Viri Pires: “The CPA is very small. It can have ideas but it can’t do much with them. It was the BLF which tested the ideas.”¹³ Taking its cues from the CPA, the NSWBLF developed “a new concept of unionism” committed to “the social responsibility of labour”: it argued that workers had a right to insist that their labour not be used in harmful ways and that the organized labour movement should concern itself with all manner of social and political issues.¹⁴ This principle of “the social responsibility of labour” was not brought to the union from without by the influence of new social movements, which had barely made a mark in Australia by this stage.¹⁵ Rather, it was grounded in pre-existing radical labour movement ideologies and traditions. Older NSWBLF activists still honoured the Industrial Workers of the World (the “Wobblies”), who had been especially prominent in Australia, and the syndicalist legacy more broadly.¹⁶ Mick Ross, for example, argued that “unions have more chance of changing society than any other group of people.”¹⁷ And the New Left influences on the CPA during the 1960s and thereby on the NSWBLF leadership were crucial. In pursuing this principle of “the social responsibility of labour”, the NSWBLF in the early 1970s was characterized by the same salient features in Moody’s typology of social-movement unionism. These characteristics will be examined in turn, to tell the tale of this union whose pioneering social-movement unionism suggests the capacity of labour to transform itself without guidance from the new social movements.

Militancy

Industrial militancy is defined as much by disposition as by deeds, so it is best measured by degrees of determination, usually pursued in practices such as strike action, but not necessarily so. Interviewed in 1978, Munday assessed the union’s record of militancy: “We were pushing things up to the employers. We as a union had changed”.¹⁸ Heightened militancy on the part of the NSWBLF was apparent in four principal areas:

¹² CPA. *Modern Unionism and the Workers’ Movement*. Sydney, CPA, 1970; CPA. Statement of Aims, Methods and Organisation: The Party’s Objectives as Adopted by the 22nd Congress, March 1970. In: CPA, *The Left Challenge for the ‘70s: Statement of Aims, Methods and Organisation*, Sydney: Red Pen Publications, May, 1972, p.28.

¹³ Pires, Viri. Interview with M.Burgmann, 30 November, 1976.

¹⁴ NSWBLF, ‘Minutes’, Executive Meeting, 12 May 1970.

¹⁵ Burgmann, V. *Power, Profit and Protest*. Australian Social Movements and Globalisation. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2003, pp.16-17.

¹⁶ Munday, Jack. Interview with V. Burgmann, 25 June, 1993; Burgmann, V. *Revolutionary Industrial Unionism. The Industrial Workers of the World in Australia*. Cambridge/Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, p.4.

¹⁷ Ross, Mick. Interview with M. Burgmann, 29 July, 1977.

¹⁸ Munday 1978. Op.Cit.

the fight for better wages and conditions; the campaign to improve working conditions; the strategic use of industrial sabotage; and encroachment upon managerial prerogatives.

Continual, successful wage campaigns were conducted by the union from 1970 to 1974, resulting in substantial real wage increases. Munday regularly articulated the union's commitment to industrial militancy. In 1970 he wrote that: "Most militant workers have been critical for years of the general passivity displayed in strikes, and the failure ... to really force the issues".¹⁹ Interviewed on national television on 27 September 1971, he argued the need for workers to undertake militant industrial action and develop new tactics: "Without militancy we will not improve the life of the worker." He suggested offensive strike action in service industries, such as public transport: keeping trains and buses running during strikes but refusing to collect fares; and factories producing foodstuffs should continue to make them but instead give them to "the needy in our society".²⁰ When a Labor government was elected in December 1972 after twenty-three years of conservative rule, he stated there was a danger that the union movement would be "too co-operative" with the new government and stressed the continuing need for workers to take direct action to demand "a bigger share of the cake and more social progress for the workers".²¹

The union was unrelenting in its pressure on employers to provide the best possible working conditions. In 1970 it embarked upon an aggressive campaign to "Civilise the Building Industry": it did not plead with employers to provide a safe and decent working environment, but rather it insisted that such was the right of those who laboured in the building industry.²² A union circular to organizers advocated that decisions on standards must be made by the workers concerned: "DON'T LET THE BOSS DECIDE FOR YOU".²³ Workers would refuse to work in extreme heat or in the rain—and the union ensured they received full pay nonetheless. For example, in early February 1973, workers spontaneously walked off building sites when the temperature reached forty degrees Celsius and the union warned employers there would be strike action if the workers were not paid for the day.²⁴ The union also placed bans on building sites that did not employ two dog-men per crane (one at the top and one at the bottom), to prevent dog-men being expected to "ride the hook" of the crane, a dangerous practice that had caused many fatalities prior to the union campaign against it. By the end of 1972

¹⁹ Munday, J. Towards new union militancy. *Australian Left Review*. No. 26, August-September, pp.4-5. 1970.

²⁰ *Daily Telegraph*, 28 September 1971; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 September 1971.

²¹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 December 1972.

²² Burgmann, M. and Burgmann, V. *Green Bans, Red Union: Environmental Activism and the New South Wales Builders Labourers' Federation*, Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1998, pp.103-120, esp. p.103.

²³ NSWBLF., Handy Guide for State and Job Organisers. 7 June 1974, leaflet, 2pp.

²⁴ *Broken Hill Miner*. 6 February 1973; Owens, Joe. 1996, Interview with M.Burgmann, 11 December, 1996.

“riding the hook” was virtually eliminated from the industry and two dog-men per crane became the rule rather than the exception.²⁵

The union was prepared when necessary to practice industrial sabotage in pursuit of better wages or conditions. During a long strike in 1970, rank-and-file members engaged in spontaneous demolition of work carried out by strike-breakers.²⁶ If an employer did not accede to a demand, the breaking of concrete pours—or threat thereof—was not uncommon. Wrongly set concrete has disastrous consequences on a building site. Union organizer Tony O’Beirne described how quickly the tactic spread, along with the realization of the power this gave the BLs: “breaking concrete pours [...] we said ‘that’s just the most fantastic thing that’s ever happened’”.²⁷ Another tactic was destruction of equipment. For instance, when a company in central Sydney commenced excavation of a site with no washbasins or toilets, the workers on the site hurled a compressor into the very deep hole in the ground that had been excavated. When the workers returned the next day, they found four fully lined sheds, three toilets and a full row of washbasins.²⁸

A well-known NSWBLF adage reminded the officials: “Never eat the boss’s lunch unless you occupy the site and find it on his desk”.²⁹ The NSWBLF developed serious strategies for encroachment upon managerial rights. On a national television discussion with Upper Clyde Shipyards leader Jimmy Reid in May 1975, Munday emphasized that most work-ins were defensive acts which occurred over retrenchments, but that NSWBLF work-ins were often offensive, with labourer’s insisting upon greater control of their workplace³⁰ For example, a campaign at the Opera House for a 35-hour week for 48 hours pay escalated and culminated in the workers expelling management from the site and continuing work under workers’ control from 8 April until 15 May 1972. Two of the organizers, John Wallace and Joe Owens, wrote an informative account of the experience. They recall that by “Day 2”, company foremen were “completely ignored” and were told firmly by the men that “they were not needed and could go and sit in the

²⁵ *Tribune*, 4 March 1970, p. 10; NSWBLF, ‘Minutes’, Exec. Meeting, 17 February 1970, 24 November 1970, 15 December 1970; JD Martin, executive director Master Builders’ Association to the Industrial Registrar (NSW), 21 July 1972; NSWBLF, ‘Disputes Book’, 26 July 1972, 4 August 1972; Master Builders’ Association, ‘Report of Proceedings of a Meeting with a Representative of the A.B.L.F. to Discuss the Problem Concerning Dogmen—Held on 15 June, 1972’, p.1; ‘Violence is a bosses’ weapon’, *Builders Labourer*, n.d. [c.mid-1972]; Mr Justice Sheehy to the secretary, ABLF, 11 August 1972.

²⁶ Hogan, Tom. Interview with M.Burgmann, 28 October, 1977. Munday, J. 1970a, ‘Our strike proves they fear workers’ action most’, *Builders Labourer*, July, p. 6; Pringle.Op.Cit. 1978; Ross. Op.Cit. 1977; Curtin, Mick. Interview with M.Burgmann, 29 February, 1976; Baker, Bob. Interview with M.Burgmann, 16 June, 1980; Cook, Bud, Interview with M. Burgmann, 5 March., 1978; Munday 1971: 31; *Passing Show*, 10 October 1978, p 11; ‘Monday Conference’, ABC, September 1971; Barton, Peter, 1978, Interview with M. Burgmann, 5 March, 1978; *Daily Mirror*, 19 May 1970, 20 May 1970, 28 May 1970; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 May 1970, 20 May 1970, 28 May 1970, 29 May 1970, 30 May 1970; *Sun*, 27 May 1970; CH Monk (president), report to Annual Meeting of Employers’ Federation,

²⁷ O’Beirne, Tony. Interview with M.Burgmann, 2 March, 1978.

²⁸ Hogan. Op.Cit. 1977.

²⁹ Thomas, P. 1973, *Taming the Concrete Jungle: The Builders Laborers’ Story*, Sydney, Australian Building and Construction Employees’ Union and Builders Labourers’ Federation, 1973, p.133

³⁰ ABC Television, ‘Lateline’, 20 May 1975.

office, go home or throw themselves in the harbour, but just keep out of the way”.³¹ They claim that the manner in which the 35-hour week was won and the form in which the 35-hour week operated, “substantially increased the real control the workers had over production on the job. In the final analysis, almost all of the power of management on the job rested with the workers”.³²

The militancy of the NSWBLF was facilitated by the unprecedented boom conditions in the building industry. Developers needed speedy completion of speculative projects, financed by venture capital loans at high interest rates. However, the building industry craftsmen’s union, led by SPA officials, was not so militant. SPA abhorrence of New Left ideals influenced the leaders of this craftsmen’s union as much as CPA enthusiasm for those same ideas inspired the NSWBLF.³³ NSWBLF militancy was also encouraged by the fact that BLs were more favoured by the technological changes accompanying the boom than were the craftsmen. The new construction methods required larger scale preparatory demolition and excavation, carried out by BLs; greater use of pre-cut components placed on site by BLs; increased use of concrete, which was handled by the BLs; and greater reliance on ticketed BLs, such as dog-men, in skyscraper construction.³⁴ These factors greatly enhanced the BLs’ power at the point of production. Union organizer Kevin Cook observed: “the boss wasn’t really the boss, we knew it and he knew it”.³⁵

Internal democracy

According to radical journalist Pete Thomas, the basis of the union’s militant strength was “democratic control by the rank and file”: that is, the way in which the tenure of officials was limited, and the fact that the 11,000 members were regularly exercising their strength and initiative through job-site committees and stop-work meetings.³⁶ The union’s organizational principles and practices anticipated the social-movement unionism of the 1990s in its emphasis on internal democracy and rank-and-file participation in opposition to the more hierarchical forms of traditional unionism. The leaders of the NSWBLF were determined to expand internal union democracy and to reduce the distinction between leaders and led, effectively transferring power away from themselves and back to the rank-and-file unionists who had elected them. Munday wrote in the union’s journal: “The leadership aims for ‘total involvement’ in decision making by the membership. We are opposed to ‘top’ decisions making without reference to the

³¹ Wallace, J. and Owens, J. *Workers Call the Tune at Opera House*. Sydney: National Workers Control Conference, 1973, p.6.

³² *Ibid.*, p.18.

³³ Building Industry Branch of the SPA, 1975, pp. 5, 22, 24-5, 28; SPA 1972, pp. 2-3.

³⁴ Whitehead, Dick, Interview with M.Burgmann, 8 June, 1980; *Construction*, 11 November 1971; Fiske, Pat. *Rocking the Foundations*, documentary video, 1985; Building Industry Branch of the SPA 1975, pp. 8- 28).

³⁵ Cook, Kevin, Interview with M.Burgmann, 1 December, 1976.

³⁶ Newcastle Morning Herald. 6 September 1973.

membership”.³⁷ As a result, the union improved its density; and the rank and file responded to the emphasis on internal democracy with considerably higher levels of involvement. Interviews with long-serving members who could recall earlier regimes confirm that this was indeed the case.³⁸

Organizers and officials of other building industry unions during this period noticed the unusually high degree of NSWBLF rank-and-file activity and how this was encouraged by the union leadership.³⁹ An international comparison was also drawn at the time. A bricklayer, a member of the Union of Construction, Allied Trades and Technicians in Britain, was so intrigued by the inclusive style of the NSWBLF he wrote about it in order to publicize its organizational achievements among British trade unionists. Compared with its British counterpart, he considered the NSWBLF was “like a dream”.⁴⁰

In recognition that it was often not formal constraints which most inhibited participation and democracy, the union leadership encouraged members to “drop in” to the union’s office at Room 28 at Sydney’s Trades Hall and to participate in informal discussions on union matters with officials. This increased the leadership’s accessibility, and rank-and-file perceptions of its accessibility: the ordinary member felt able to criticize and advise the leadership in a way unusual in Australian trade unionism. Secretarial staff who had worked in other union offices remarked upon this.⁴¹ Apart from standard provision of interpreters to encourage non-English-speaking members to talk, rank-and-file participation in meetings was improved by a simple change in mass meeting procedure. The difficulty most members, not just those with language problems, had previously experienced speaking in a large meeting was reduced by a new system whereby members queued at microphones and spoke in turn rather than having to depend on catching the chairman’s eye.⁴²

Unlike the officials of most other unions, NSWBLF officials received the same wage as the members on the job, including periods of strike activity. For example, during the long-running 1970 strike to reduce the “margin” in pay between skilled and lesser skilled construction workers, the union resolved “that officials’ wages be stopped whilst

³⁷ Munday, J. Our strike proves they fear workers’ action most, *Builders Labourer*. July 1970, p. 3.

³⁸ Barton. Op.Cit. 1978; Bishop, Roy, Interview with M. Burgmann, 10 March, 1977; Connell, Harry, Interview with M. Burgmann, 12 February, 1978; Cook. Op.Cit. 1978; Crotty, Don. Interview with M. Burgmann, 13 March, 1978; Hogan. Op.Cit. 1977; Kelly, Ralph. Interview with M. Burgmann, 13 December, 1977; Ross. Op.Cit 1977.

³⁹ Boyle, Mick, Interview with M. Burgmann, 29 January, 1981; Cambourn, Jack, Interview with M. Burgmann, 1 February, 1979; Lane, Peter, Interview with M. Burgmann, 19 May, 1981; Whitehead, Dick, Interview with M. Burgmann, 8 June, 1980; Young, Digby, Interview with M. Burgmann, 1 March, 1979.

⁴⁰ Coull, D. The Builders Labourers Federation of Australia. In: *Australian Politics: A Fourth Reader*, eds. H. Mayer & H. Nelson. Sydney, Longman Cheshire, 1976, p.253.

⁴¹ Cockayne, Robyn, Interview with M. Burgmann, 25 January, 1978; Cambourn. Op.Cit. 1979; Healey, Jenny, Interview with M. Burgmann, 25 January, 1978; Kalafates, Carol. Interview with M. Burgmann, 25 January, 1978; Rix, Paula. Interview with M. Burgmann, 25 January, 1978.

⁴² Pires, Op.Cit.

the strike is on". Not one official dissented from this decision.⁴³ The union officials did not change their lifestyles but continued to conform to working-class norms. They remained drinking and eating in the same places, with the same people (Judy Munday 1978; Jack Munday 1978; Owens 1977; Pringle 1978). Interviews with the female office staff reveal that they started work the same time as the workers, at 07.00 or 07.30, unlike the officials of other unions, who rarely started work before 08.30.⁴⁴

Most of the officials had worked in the industry for long periods. The union's policy was that all officials, even industrial officers and publications editors, had to come from the shop floor. Only one NSWBLF official, Bill Holley, had more than an elementary education—a situation which distinguished the union leadership from those of other unions. The central core of full-time elected officials was supplemented by temporary organizers brought on to service specific areas for certain periods of time; these temporary appointments had to be endorsed at branch meetings. Between 1973 and 1974, according to a report by Pringle and Owens, thirty-nine organizers "have come on and gone back to the job".⁴⁵ NSWBLF policy specifically encouraged rank-and-file workers to take the initiative in industrial disputes.⁴⁶ Tom Hogan, a city organizer, recalled that "stoppages would occur and you'd only find out two hours later that they'd stopped. Once I went to seven stop-work meetings in a day. There was a tremendous amount of initiative taken by the men on the job".⁴⁷

The most startling innovation was limited tenure of office: the insistence that officials, after six years at the most, return to work as a builders labourer. Designed to prevent bureaucracy, inertia and hierarchy, Munday described it as "a Wobbly idea".⁴⁸ He explained: "The driving force that made me suggest limited tenure was my own experience of seeing modern, contemporary unionism and seeing the need for some inbuilt guarantee for limiting power and having inbuilt renewal".⁴⁹ Munday suggested on national television late in September 1971 that such a practice would be beneficial for the entire union movement.⁵⁰ He applied the principle to himself, retrospectively, so when his six years was up, he returned to work as a pick-and-shovel labourer at the beginning of 1974.⁵¹

⁴³ NSWBLF. 'Minutes'. Executive Meeting, 16 June 1970.

⁴⁴ Cockayne, Op.Cit; Healey, Op.Cit, Kalafates, Op.Cit., Rix, Op.Cit.

⁴⁵ Pringle, B. and Owens, J. Rank and File Decision-making in the Builders Labourers. leaflet, 1973, 3pp.

⁴⁶ Munday, J. Job Activity the Key, *Builders Labourer*, December 1968, p.7.

⁴⁷ Hogan, Op.Cit. 1977.

⁴⁸ Munday, Jack. Interview with V. Burgmann, 25 June, 1993.

⁴⁹ Munday 1978. Op.Cit.

⁵⁰ Reported in *Tribune*, 6 October 1971.

⁵¹ *Australian*, 2 February 1974; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 February 1974.

An agenda for radical social and economic change

Social-movement unionism, Moody observes, “uses the strongest of society’s oppressed and exploited, generally organized workers, to mobilize those who are less able to sustain self-mobilization”.⁵² Early in 1972 a NSWBLF circular to all job organizers maintained that, “for a union to be meaningful it must speak up on all issues affecting the life of not only the members of a union but all Australian people”⁵³ Pringle expressed the NSWBLF viewpoint: “The strong should support the weak in issues that involve everybody”.⁵⁴ Munday insisted the NSWBLF “feels strongly about unions and the whole workers’ movement involving themselves more deeply in all political, moral and social questions affecting ordinary people”.⁵⁵ Owens believed that trade unionists should contest exploitation “not just in their workplace but everywhere”.⁵⁶ The union’s activism on a wide range of social issues such as the rights of women, indigenous Australians and homosexuals disproved assumptions in new social movement theory that the organized working-class necessarily neglected such matters.

The union was strongly committed to Aboriginal rights and assisted this cause from at least the early 1960s.⁵⁷ As the movement became more militant in the 1970s, Pringle was especially generous in providing bail for arrested Aborigines: “It was evident every time”, he informed the *Sun* newspaper, “that these people had been the subject of excessive zeal”.⁵⁸ When Aboriginal activists wanted help in advertising a major demonstration for Aboriginal rights to be held on 14 July 1972, the union arranged for banners to be hung on the jibs of cranes around the city. Pringle himself was arrested during this demonstration, receiving a black eye, bruising and abrasions, and a four-hour stint in a police cell.⁵⁹ In a subsequent leaflet, “The Black Awakening”, Pringle objected to the way in which this march was not allowed the same freedom of movement as the annual war veterans’ march, that it was forced onto the footpath by the police and when anyone overflowed on to the road they were hassled or arrested by the police.⁶⁰ The union

⁵² Moody. Op.Cit. p.276.

⁵³ NSW BLF, *Circular to All Job Organisers*, no.1/73, 24 January 1972.

⁵⁴ Coombs, A. *Sex and Anarchy. The Life and Death of the Sydney Push*, Melbourne: Viking, 1996, p.292.

⁵⁵ *Builders Labourer*, no date [mid-1972], p.1.

⁵⁶ Owens. Op.Cit.

⁵⁷ ‘Aboriginal Builders’ labourer to Represent Our Union’, May 1962, NSWBLF press clippings collection; BLF, 1965 Federal Conference Report, pp.38-9; NSWBLF, Agenda Items, 1965 Federal Conference, p.6; NSWBLF, Report to Federal Conference, 1966, p.22; Federal Council Agenda Items, Submitted from N.S.W. Branch Meeting, 15/8/67, p 537; H Cook, Acting Secretary, NSW BLF, 10/8/67, to Rev WA Clint, Co-operative for Aborigines Limited; WA Clint, Co-operative for Aborigines Limited, 1/8/67, to Secretary, Building Laborers Union; Charles Dixon, Acting Manager, Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs, 15/6/67, to Secretary, Builders labourers Union (NSW Branch); Leaflets, ‘Co-operative for Aborigines Ltd’, ‘Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs’, ‘Some Facts Concerning the Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs’, ‘Northern Territory Council for Aboriginal Rights (Inc.)’; J Munday, 19/6/68, to the Editor, *Tribune*; J Munday, 20/6/68, to JP Ducker, Assistant Secretary, NSW Labour Council, Trades Hall, Sydney.

⁵⁸ *Sun*, 13 November 1973, p.7.

⁵⁹ *Tribune*, 20 June 1972.

⁶⁰ Pringle, B. *The Black Awakening*, leaflet, 2pp, 1972.

donated frequently to Aboriginal causes. Aboriginal activist Lyn Thompson wrote to the union that “with the moral and financial support given to us such as the Builders’ Labourers give, we will soon start solving a lot of our problems”.⁶¹

Most importantly, in December 1972, the union placed a black ban on the demolition of houses occupied by Aborigines in the inner-city suburb of Redfern. A big developer had bought most of them to renovate as expensive houses and had evicted the Aborigines. This ban greatly aided the black movement’s resistance to the developer, which led ultimately to the federal government buying the disputed dwellings from the developer and granting the area to the black community in March 1973 as an Aboriginal housing scheme under Aboriginal control. At least ten Aboriginal builders labourers were employed on the reconstruction and renovation work. Many of the back fences were pulled down to create a communal recreation area. One of the two factories in the area was converted into a hall-workshop-gym and cultural centre; the other became a pre-school run by Aboriginal mothers and a medical centre linked with the Aboriginal Medical Service. The corner store became a co-operative shop, selling food cheaply. This Redfern Aboriginal Community Housing Scheme of sixty-five houses, managed by an elected co-operative committee, was proudly declared to be the first successful Aboriginal land rights claim in Australia.⁶²

In June 1973 the union placed what would later be called a “pink ban” on construction at Macquarie University. Jeremy Fisher, treasurer of the campus Gay Liberation Group, had been a resident of a university college until its Master had discovered Fisher’s role as a gay activist. The Master insisted Fisher could not remain at the college unless he undertook to have his “perversion” cured. Fisher refused so he was expelled. The Macquarie University Students’ Council approached the NSWBLF, which recommended a ban that was endorsed unanimously by the BLs on campus. “Universities are places for people to learn—they should not discriminate against individuals”, Munday explained to the press. “The ban will remain until the authorities at the University allow homosexuals to study there the same as anyone else.” The ban stopped construction of a lecture theatre, extensions to the gymnasium, a maintenance depot and a science workshop. The University Council ordered Fisher’s reinstatement, so the ban was lifted.⁶³

The union’s preparedness to jeopardize members’ work prospects by placing a ban over the issue of homosexual rights was applauded by homosexual liberationists, who found the stereotype of the homophobic building worker confounded by the union’s practical support for their cause. Pringle was interviewed about the union’s policy on homosexuality by gay movement reporters, who were clearly exhilarated by the union’s stance, because builders labouring, “probably more than any other industry, has

⁶¹ Lyn Thompson, Letter to Joe Owens, 16 August 1972.

⁶² *Wollongong Mercury*, 30 December 1972; *Grafton Examiner*, 30 December 1972; *Daily Mirror*, 21 March 1973; *Builders Labourer*, 1973, pp.33-35; Hogan, Tom. Hogan, T. 1974, ‘Strengthen that grip’, *Mereki*, vol. 1, no. 1, 15 November, p.13, 1974, p.13.

⁶³ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 June 1973; *Age*, 28 June 1973; *Daily Mirror*, 3 July 1973; Thompson 1985: 50.

masculinity as its foundation”.⁶⁴ Pringle explained to these reporters: “We as an executive believe that it is a presumption of any sort for society to be the moral judge for an individual’s sexual preference.” He made it clear that, while the homosexual liberation movement had to lead the fight, the union would stand up for homosexual rights wherever appropriate: “We will help, support and do all we can”.⁶⁵ The union sponsored a motion to its Federal Conference in 1973: “Conference calls on all sections of government to alter existing laws to allow homosexuals the same privacy in their personal relations as heterosexuals and be subject to no more control under the law.” Also in 1973, it moved a motion at the Labor Party State Conference calling for legalization of homosexual relationships and an end to discrimination.⁶⁶ The National Homosexual Conference in August 1975 cited the direct material support to NSW Gay Lib. by the then progressive leadership and rank and file BLs’ as an example of why homosexual women and men should support unions seeking social change.⁶⁷ The union demonstrated support for women’s rights in numerous ways. Both the *Builders’ Labourer* and the *Rank and File Rag* featured articles about women’s issues and advertisements for women’s day marches, the women’s unemployment centre, abortion demonstrations and so on. Caroline Graham described how the Women’s Electoral Lobby approached the union for help in raising funds for an abortion rights advertisement: “The response was typically generous: not only did we receive a large cash donation, but the union president Bob Pringle, helped our representative to compose and lay out the advertisement.” The union officials often marched on International Women’s Day.⁶⁸ The 1973 Rank and File Committee’s election policy statement favoured “giving maximum assistance to women’s struggle for complete political and social liberation in our society”⁶⁹. Its most spectacular support for women’s liberation occurred in June 1973. For some time, authorities at the University of Sydney had been resisting attempts by two tutors, Jean Curthoys and Liz Jacka, to launch a women’s studies course in the Philosophy Department, despite the fact that the staff concerned and the proposed course had been approved by the relevant undergraduate studies committee. When the Professorial Board vetoed the proposed women’s studies course, Munday deemed the decision “sexist” and, following an approach from concerned students, announced a ban on all further construction at the university, including a medical faculty building and a theatre complex. Coming only one week after the Macquarie University ban in defence of homosexual rights, Munday explained the union treated the bans as “top priority”, because the union had a social conscience—and considered that universities should reveal theirs: “In these days of social enlightenment and reform, the

⁶⁴ ‘blf on women & gays’, *Gay Liberation Press*, no. 3, September 1974, p.13.

⁶⁵ Batterham, T. and Tubbenhauer, G. Interview with Bob Pringle. *Gay Liberation Press*, no. 3, September, p. 14, 1974.

⁶⁶ NSWBLF, ‘Agenda Items for Federal Conference, 1973’, Item 33; Batterham and Tubbenhauer. Op.Cit., p.13

⁶⁷ *Tribune*, 26 August 1975.

⁶⁸ Graham, C. Anatomy of a Revolutionary Union: A Post Mortem on the BLF 1968-1975, B.A. Hons thesis, Government Department, University of Sydney, 1975, p.2.

⁶⁹ *Builders Labourer*, August 1973.

wiping out of these discriminations should start at the universities. Now we find that discrimination is being promoted at the universities. The ban will stay on all further construction until the decisions are reversed".⁷⁰ Munday affirmed this ban to a 2,500-strong meeting of students striking in support of the proposed course on 29 June. Since the university urgently required the completion of certain buildings, the dispute was resolved internally and the ban lifted.⁷¹ The course commenced in 1974 as one of the first in this field of study that became commonplace at universities around the world.

Determination to embrace working-class diversity

Social-movement unionism, according to Moody, understands the need to counteract the way capitalism fragments workers along lines of nationality, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and disability and utilizes prejudice to increase profits.⁷² In November 1971, the NSWBLF noted in a motion to the BLF Federal Conference that some trade union officials during past periods of unemployment had been "conned into supporting right wing policies of assisting capitalism in its own crisis, by restricting women workers' right to work, especially married women; sharing the job at reduced wages; and fostering anti-migrant and racial attitudes towards other workers".⁷³ The union significantly improved the participation of labourers from non-English speaking backgrounds by providing interpreters at meetings, translating union publications into various languages, and encouraging recent immigrants to run for office and act as job delegates.⁷⁴

The NSWBLF also had a significant Aboriginal membership. From at least 1962 it was encouraging its Aboriginal members and supporting them in anti-racist activity.⁷⁵ In the early 1970s one of the union's organizers, Kevin Cook, was also a prominent and well-respected Aboriginal leader. Cook's standing facilitated the union's ability to establish non-racial structures within the union, to encourage anti-racist attitudes at membership level, and to maintain meaningful links with Sydney's indigenous community. Cook's many positions within the Aboriginal movement included presidency of the Black Theatre Art and Culture Centre established in Redfern in 1974. In the first issue of its magazine, *Mereki*, NSWBLF organizer Tom Hogan wrote a feature on behalf of the union, congratulating the Black Theatre "for their guts and determination in demanding that the Black voice of Australia be heard", and assuring the theatre "of our continued support in your fight against racism and for the self-determination of your

⁷⁰ *Age*, 28 June 1973.

⁷¹ Crouch, W. Some black among the BLF green, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 November, 1974; Munday, J. . Munday, J. *Green Bans & Beyond*. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1981.

⁷² Moody. Op.Cit. pp. 269, 271, 290, 309.

⁷³ 'The Right to Work' in NSW Branch, 'Agenda Item for Federal Conference, November 1971', 2 pp roneod.

⁷⁴ Pires. Op.Cit.

⁷⁵ 'Aboriginal Builders' labourer to Represent Our Union', May 1962, NSWBLF press clippings collection.

people”. Referring to the union movement’s emblem of the black and white hands clasping, he noted how important it was to “strengthen that grip”, referring to the struggles of black Australians against developers and the union’s struggles to prevent workers’ homes being demolished. “A common enemy has arisen for Black and White. These types of attacks bring our organisations and our memberships closer together [...]. Separately we have fought tyranny [...] together we shall overcome”.⁷⁶

Most unusually, the NSWBLF promoted the right of women to work in the industry as builders labourers on an equal basis with men. The union leadership was ideologically committed to the women’s liberation struggle and actively supported the women’s cause in significant ways; yet it did so in one of the most traditionally “macho” of all industries. As harbinger of social-movement unionism, it sought from within the all-male bastion of the Australian building industry to overcome the fragmentation of the working class along gendered lines to ensure that women had the opportunity to pursue employment in the building industry on an equal basis with men. By the end of 1971 the BLF had nine female members.⁷⁷ In 1972 several strikes occurred to force bosses to accept female labour. In these confrontations the employers’ objections were couched in terms of a threat to management prerogative: a rejection of anything that smacked of “union hire”.⁷⁸ The women’s rights issue became inextricably linked to that of job-control; and this was to be a recurring motif. Strikes and work-ins in support of the right of women to work as BLs confronted employers’ sexist discrimination, and were an indication of the genuinely egalitarian atmosphere generated within the union. Many of the incidents received press coverage, so it became widely known that builders labouring was a new option open to women who did not wish to be “cooped up in an office”, as many female BLs explained it—and one that paid better wages than other women received for manual labour. The women reported good experiences of support from the male labourers, recounting individual acts of kindness and support: men who taught them how to lift things more easily and safely, strip wood, use jackhammers and so on; and men who encouraged them to become job delegates.⁷⁹

In June 1973, 17 women enrolled for a hoist drivers’ course at Sydney Technical College. One of these, Lyn Syme, who later became prominent in the union, entered the industry at the end of 1973. She says the men on her job suspected one of the women who had completed the hoist drivers’ course was going to turn up, because the area organizer, Tony Hadfield, had insisted that the company hire a ticketed hoist driver and that the union would have one on the job by Monday. She describes the men’s reactions as “quite good really”. Hadfield had just succeeded in achieving proper pay rates for the labourers on the job, so the union was in good favour at the time. The men’s reaction protected her

⁷⁶ Hogan. Op.Cit. 1974, p.13.

⁷⁷ Builders’ Labourer 1972, p.7.

⁷⁸ *Sun*, 23 May 1972.

⁷⁹ *Daily Telegraph*, 10 November 1972; *Newcastle Morning Herald*, 6 November 1972, 11 November 1972, 14 November 1972; *Sun-Herald*, 19 December 1971, 23 May 1972; Page, Glenys. Interview with M.Burgmann, 24 January, 1978; Stringer, Wendy. Interview with M.Burgmann, 5 March, 1978; Thomas . Op.Cit. 1973; Williams. Op.Cit. 1978.

from the boss's displeasure when he first encountered her after she had already been working the hoist for several hours: "he freaked at first, but I was there, I'd met everybody—there was nothing he could do".⁸⁰

By 1974 the union had eighty female members.⁸¹ It actively encouraged women to take official union positions.⁸² There were countless other examples of leadership support for the right of women to work in the building industry. The 1973 Rank and File Committee's election policy statement included "the right of women to work as builders labourers". At the 1973 Federal Conference of the BLF, the NSWBLF called on each state to "take immediate action to establish the rights of women to work in the industry". By 1974, its agenda items included abortion leave as well as paternity and maternity leave. Also during 1974 the branch sought to achieve a national industrial court ruling "that the right of women to work in the building industry be recognized without discrimination". A 1974 issue of *On Site*, published by BLs, noted: "The Builders Labourers Federation has taken a principled stand on the question of women in the building industry. Bitter struggles have been fought by rank and file workers to get women on job sites, and they are an example to all."⁸³

Capacity to lead community struggles

Moody describes the way social-movement unionism "can make the very concept of class more real" and increase class-consciousness as it extends working-class power. The ability of social-movement unionism to arouse broad constituencies to radical action is facilitated by its "class vision and content".⁸⁴ The union's "green bans" from 1971 to 1975 clearly demonstrated the union's capacity to appeal beyond its membership to lead a community struggle. Based on its commitment to the social responsibility of labour, NSWBLF members refused to work on environmentally or socially undesirable construction. Bans were placed at the request of resident action groups or the National Trust; and a significant social movement developed in support of these bans, which saved Sydney from much of the devastation that would otherwise have been wreaked by developers. It was the first such action in the world and had international ramifications within environmental politics.⁸⁵

Owens argued that unions had the ability to restrain corporations and prompt governments to reconsider foolish decisions, so had to concern themselves with "important social issues" and "become more active in opposing pollution and despoliation

⁸⁰ Syme, Lyn. Interview with M.Burgmann, 20 April, 1978.

⁸¹ Sydney Morning Herald, 20 June 1974.

⁸² *Viewpoint*, January 1972, p.10; Crotty.Op.Cit..

⁸³ *Tribune*, 1 October 1974; *Age*, 23 May 1974; *Builders Labourer*, August 1973; *On Site*, no date [1974], p.2.

⁸⁴ Moody. Op.Cit., p.309.

⁸⁵ Allaby, M. (ed.) *Macmillan Dictionary of the Environment*, 2nd edition, London: Macmillan, 1983, p.234.

of natural resources”.⁸⁶ Munday maintained unions had to become involved with environmental issues, because “too few people question the products we make”; and he stressed that working-class people had a particular interest in environmental protection, because they suffered most from environmental problems.⁸⁷ In February 1973, he coined the term “green bans” to distinguish them from traditional black bans. He claimed the use of “green” expressed the union’s determination to save open space or valued buildings and ensure people in any community had some say in what affected their lives.⁸⁸ Petra Kelly’s naming of the German Greens was motivated by her experience of these bans when she visited Australia in the mid-1970s and became inspired by the way they brought together residents, environmentalists and unionists. In this way, the “green” terminology coined by the NSWBLF green bans movement entered the world’s political vernacular.⁸⁹

In Sydney, the movement got under way in June 1971 when a resident action group from the fashionable harbour-side suburb of Hunters Hill sought the help of the NSWBLF to save Kelly’s Bush on the harbour foreshore, where developer A.V. Jennings wanted to build luxury houses.⁹⁰ These thirteen middle-class women, who called themselves the “Battlers for Kelly’s Bush”, had already lobbied the local council, the mayor, the local State member and the Premier, all without success. The union asked the women to organize a local meeting to gauge the degree of local support for a ban. More than 600 people turned up and formally requested the union to ban the destruction of Kelly’s Bush. When the union agreed to do this, Jennings declared it would use non-union labour. However, building workers on a Jennings project in North Sydney sent this message to Jennings: “If you attempt to build on Kelly’s Bush, even if there is the loss of one tree, this half-completed building will remain so forever, as a monument to Kelly’s Bush.” Jennings abandoned its plans—so Kelly’s Bush remains as an open public reserve.⁹¹ After this first success, resident action groups rushed to ask the NSWBLF to impose similar bans; and the union obliged so long as evidence of widespread local support was provided.

The green bans were of three main kinds: to defend open spaces from various types of development; to protect existing housing from demolition to make way for freeways or high-rise development; and to preserve older-style buildings of historic, architectural and cultural significance from replacement by office-blocks or shopping precincts. Environment, heritage and social issues were intertwined, as gentrification of

⁸⁶ *Canberra Times*, 2 March 1973..

⁸⁷ Munday, J. Preventing the Plunder. In: *Staining the Wattle*, eds. V. Burgmann and J. Lee, Melbourne: McPhee Gribble/Penguin, 1988, pp.179-180.

⁸⁸ Munday.Op.Cit. 1981, p.105.

⁸⁹ Brown, B. and Singer, P. *The Greens*. Melbourne: Text Publishing, 1996, pp.64-65.

⁹⁰ The first green ban was imposed by the Victorian BLF branch in October 1970, when it prevented a developer from destroying a park in Carlton in inner Melbourne. However, Kelly’s Bush is significant as the first ban in Sydney where the green bans movement was strongest.

⁹¹ Kalajzich, P. (ed.) *The Battlers for Kelly’s Bush*. Sydney: Cercus, 1996; Munday, J. Op.Cit.1988, pp.175-177; Roddewig, R. *Green Bans: The Birth of Australian Environmental Politics*, Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1978, pp.6-10.

inner-Sydney suburbs threatened low-income residents with displacement by developers keen to exploit more affluent markets. The green bans' defense of working-class residential areas was often linked with the union's opposition to freeway construction and diversion of funding from public transport.⁹²

One working-class residential area saved was The Rocks, site of the first British settlement on Sydney Cove. Despite its historical significance, only a green ban prevented the oldest buildings in the country being replaced by high-rise office blocks and luxury apartments. The NSWBLF halted the redevelopment project, "because the scheme destroys the character of this historic area and ignores the position of the people affected". The Rocks Resident Action Group mobilized enthusiastically in support of the ban and drew up a "people's plan" for acceptable renovation of the area. It announced that, in the face of the usual apathy, inaction and favoritism of the Government, it had been left to unionists "to show leadership in protecting our citizens and their historic buildings". With the green ban prompting the Sydney Cove Redevelopment Authority to propose a series of improved plans, the union position was stated clearly by Munday in August 1973: "My federation will lift its ban when the residents are satisfied with what is being put forward by the authority." In March 1974, when the latest plan was again sent back to the architect, a reporter observed: "the most powerful town planning agency operating within NSW at the moment is the BLF". When the next set of plans eliminated high-rise buildings in conformity with the "people's plan", the ban was lifted. By the 1990s the Ministry for Planning was admitting that the green ban had resulted in the plans for the area being "an overwhelming success", reflected in the millions of tourists who visit the historic site each year.⁹³

The union also worked with environmental organizations, as well as resident action groups, in defence of nature. Ancient trees in Sydney's Botanic Gardens were protected from being sacrificed to a parking lot for the Opera House. A large part of Centennial Park was saved from becoming a concrete sports stadium. The nature reserve of Riley's Island off the coast just north of Sydney was rescued from 300 luxury home sites that would have destroyed much of its fish and bird-life. The beautiful Tomaree Peninsula further north averted high-rise development on its foreshore. And there were others.⁹⁴ Not just concerned residents and environmental organizations, but the National Trust also turned to the NSWBLF to aid its efforts to save sites of architectural and cultural significance from replacement by high-rise office blocks and freeways. The union announced it would refuse to demolish any building designated significant by the National Trust.⁹⁵ Many graceful old banks, churches, theatres, cinemas and other

⁹² Burgmann and Burgmann. *Op.Cit.* 1998, pp.169-217.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, pp.195-201.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.178-193.

⁹⁵ Thomas. *Op.Cit.* 1973, p.57.

significant heritage buildings throughout Australia owe the fact that they are still standing to the green bans' movement.⁹⁶

By 1975, more than forty green bans had stalled five billion dollars worth of development at mid-1970s prices.⁹⁷ About half of these prevented the destruction of individual buildings or green areas; the other half thwarted development projects affecting much larger areas. Munday maintains that the political significance of the green bans movement was that it forged a "winning alliance" between environmentalists and unionists.⁹⁸ The bans had a significant long-term impact on environmental legislation, town planning and public attitudes. Because of the industrial power wielded by the BLs and the popularity of the green bans, governments were obliged to respond to the union's challenge. At both state and federal levels, governments initiated or improved legislation to ensure more socially responsive and ecologically responsible planning and development.⁹⁹

A social-movement union before new social movements

Nobel Laureate Patrick White wrote a public letter to Sydney's major newspapers in November 1973 to endorse the contentious green bans movement initiated by the NSWBLF:

It is a sad reflection on our so-called civilization that residents of Sydney [...] are forced time and again to turn to the BLF [...] But how much longer can the citizens of Sydney ask these men to endure the responsibility of protecting a citizen's right to live comfortably and without anxiety.¹⁰⁰

The scholarship on social-movement unionism depicts it as an aspect of labour movement renewal and revitalization, bringing social movement attributes to unionism's way of conducting itself. Social-movement unionism in this literature is a turn-of-the-millennium trend, emerging after the heyday of the new social movements and in the circumstances of globalization: a moment as much as a movement. Yet the NSWBLF in the early 1970s meets all Moody's criteria that distinguish social-movement unionism. Two decades ahead of the social-movement unionism phenomenon, its emergence suggests that the characteristics which define social-movement unionism are not necessarily dependent on the influence of the new social movements but can be generated from within the labour movement itself—from its own radical traditions.

⁹⁶ Burgmann and Burgmann. Op.Cit. 1998, pp.228-247..

⁹⁷ Bonyhady, T. 1993, *Places Worth Keeping. Conservationists, Politics and Law*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1993, p.39..

⁹⁸ Munday, J. Op.Cit. 1991, p. 148.

⁹⁹ Burgmann and Burgmann. Op.Cit. 1998, pp.278-286.

¹⁰⁰ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 November 1973; *Australian*, 5 November 1973.