

Green Bans – inspired trade union organising working with community organisations

This is an inspired example of highly successful trade union organising, militant opposition and working with community organisations equally opposed to exploitative urban development in Sydney and other Australian cities in the early 1970s and equally valid today.

Australian building worker Jack Munday played a leading part in starting the 'Green Bans' in the 1970s as leader of the former New South Wales Builders Labourers Federation. This involved action by building workers on key sites and developments considered by local resident's groups and workers to be socially, financially and environmentally wrong.

Community Action Magazine interviewed him when he was in London in early 1976 and published the following in Community Action Magazine No. 24, February/March 1976. Jack Munday died aged 90 in May 2020.

C.A: How did the situation develop to the point where your union could organise militant action over development and environmental issues?

J.M: "About 15 years ago Japanese and American capital started flowing into Australia, and a very reactionary Tory government encouraged this. They lifted the height limit for buildings: it used to be 150 feet, now there's no limit. The public generally thought "well, this is good - big buildings show that we've arrived, a mini-New York. It was only in the late sixties that a re-thinking took place, particularly when residents were being turfed out of the inner-city areas. In the particular union that I was in, we had a bitter struggle to win the leadership of the union - it was controlled by thugs and semi-criminal elements who openly worked in collusion with the employers."

"With our previous involvement in campaigns for women's rights to work in the industry on all types of job, work-stoppages organised against the Vietnam War, support for opposition to the 1971 South African Springbok Tour, we were ready to take on property development issues. However, if we had not also had the confidence of our members about the basic economic issues, we would not have succeeded in this new campaign. We won a lot of confidence in our leadership by our fight to civilise the building industry, to try to give more continuity of work, and to impose the safety standards."

Green bans

C.A: How did the Green Bans begin?

J.M: "The green bans commenced in 1971. We'd carried resolutions, expressing concern at the destruction of Sydney, at the overbuilding of office space and the failure to build essential hospitals and schools, creches and kindergartens and homes, and saying that the government should intervene and divert material and human and financial resources to build things which are socially beneficial."

"A group of women in Kelly's Bush, a very upper-class area of Sydney, came to us because a big Melbourne-based developer had obtained rights to destroy the last bushland and build luxurious homes. They had lobbied members of the state parliament, and all the normal means of protest. And as a last resort they came to us and said that they had read in the paper that we were expressing concern for

environmental issues, and more or less said, here's a chance to put your feeling into practice. Well, the attitude of the builders' labourers' Executive was interesting to reflect upon: they were all 'left-wing' of various hues and political positions - and they said, why should we fight for those middle-class shits, why should we say yes? There aren't any buidering labourers living in the area. And others of us argued that, well, we've got to be consistent, if the Bush goes for building it will go to a very fortunate few people, but if it's kept, it's there for builders' labourers and their families and other low income groups."

Public meeting

"So we won the day, and we then went to them and said: provided that a public meeting is held and there is a real demonstration by the people in the area that they want to stop the development, we're prepared to accede to their request and put a ban on it. So a huge meeting was held and we imposed a ban. What really set things alight was the developer, Jennings, then said he would use piece-work labour or non-union labour to do it. And we replied by calling a meeting on one of Jennings' biggest jobs in Sydney, a multi-storey office block. The workers carried a resolution unanimously that if one blade of grass or one tree was touched on Kelly's Bush that half-completed building would remain half-completed forever as a monument to Jennings. That building was worth many millions to him. So even carving bushland up was worth not as much as that."

Anarchy gone mad!

"Now the state governor at the time was a Tory - misnamed Liberal in Australia. He, and Ministers, had really become millionaires through deals. He just went off his brain. 'Anarchy gone mad. Mere builders' labourers setting themselves up as proletarian town planners, you know'. And we replied by saying, well were not doing that, we're only giving the people a greater right or a further say - a breathing space whilst they can express their democratic right as to why they think the bushland should remain. And then we went on to say that, even if we are setting ourselves up as town planners, maybe we're doing a better job than the officials were. But I think it's important to remember that it was the women coming to us, and we at least responded. I think most unions would not have responded; they would have said: oh, we can't do it, or carried a paper resolution "that we deplore this, blah, blah."

"Then we were inundated with requests to impose similar bans. At that time we hit upon the idea of calling them 'green bans' because 'black bans' have got connotations of a union using its muscle to get money or conditions for its own members, often not being concerned with other parts of the labour movement, whereas our action was for the people as a whole. Eventually there were forty- two bans, three thousand million dollars worth of development held up. And the papers were screaming get rid of the leadership, they are using you like puppets; their job is to get better wages and conditions, etc., not to become involved in other areas of work."

"We then took up with our members very strongly at meetings about the two-sided nature of the fight ..the fight to keep parkland, and to keep buildings for people, and then to force governments to re-direct their finances; if, for example, we could stop multi-storey office building and refuse to build them, well those same capitalists would have to reinvest their money either in other industries or in other areas of the building industry that were less profitable, like housing - at least that is more socially beneficial. And in fact this did happen. In part it happened. And those workers, even though the unemployment was not at the level that it is here - that allowed us more scope, possibly - who refused to work on multi-storey buildings, lost a lot of money because the

property developers were making so much money that they could throw a few crumbs in the way of increased wages to the workers."

Government hatred

"When all the bans were on, the hatred amongst the government of the day and the developers really intensified, and there was talk of bringing in new laws against the union - in fact they did bring one in summary offences, which meant that anyone who occupied a building could be jailed. At that stage the residents were linking up with the unionists and occupying buildings."

"Then there was the Rocks – it's right on the harbour and it's always been a working-class area, mainly dockers and seamen and people who work on the harbour, ferry-people and people who service the city. And they were going to knock it down - they realised what a beautiful bit of real estate it was - and extend the concrete jungle right down to the harbour. The residents came to us, and a ban was imposed. Not only that, they drew up their own plan - a people's plan - so you had the government's plan, and then you had the people's plan, drawn up in conjunction with architects and sociologists and planners, engineers who were sympathetic to the cause. And so this was good, instead of just having the green ban as a negative, stopping, defensive tactic, we said, no, we want to build, but we want to build buildings that are socially beneficial to the community."

"And this then forced the government to change, to scrap their plan and incorporate most of the ideas of the residents plan. And those parts that have been accepted by the residents we've gone ahead and allowed to be built. So this was good for us too because when the heat was coming on us and we were being accused that we were stopping our members from working, this allowed us to do something about it."

"We have an extremely bad government now, almost Fascist, believe me. One of their election planks was that they were going to stop unions going beyond the wages and conditions issues."

Scab labour

"There were real achievements which came over the course of 4 years of really bitter fights. They tried to use scab labour, for example. In one instance they had a site completely surrounded by the police as the scabs knocked the building down. But before that happened, when the scabs first started knocking the building down, we stopped all of Sydney and marched to the site. The scabs fled in all directions. We had hundreds of workers occupying the building and that received terrific publicity. That was on a Friday and on the Monday the police came back to try and get a confrontation. The police surrounded the site and protected the scabs while they worked."

"The workers were irate and wanted to march down to the site. However, it would have been a bloody brawl and it would have lost us a lot of public support that had been building up in this period. Instead we had a mass stoppage - building workers, seamen, waterside workers, etc. Anyway, once they'd pulled the building down it would remain a park because we wouldn't allow anything to be built on it."

"They couldn't afford to have hundreds of police standing around the site for months while building work went on. So it remained a park in the Rocks. Some orthodox and traditional trade union leaders were as scathing in their remarks as the captains of industry and the newspapers and the government. So a whole range of debates went on, and it's hard to believe that a union that was a relatively small union - but certainly in a very decisive position in that no buildings could be demolished without us and no

excavation could commence without us. We had other building unions who were screaming; they were saying that we were denying them work, that we were bringing the union movement into disrepute. On the contrary, it was doing exactly the opposite."

Rank & file involvement

"This has made me think of the new potential of unionism. Most union rank and file have a position where they're held back by a union bureaucracy. Particularly by the right and sometimes even the left. We had more involvement with the rank and file and workers felt as though they were part of the union, and not just going along and formally sitting down to a little meeting and casting a vote and leaving it to the executive to carry it through. And these sorts of things made the union a hell of a lot different and gave a lot of confidence to the action groups."

CA: And are there green bans in other cities in Australia?

J.M: "Yes, about fourteen unions in other parts of the country have given support to community action and imposed green bans in connection with other issues. For example, the Queensland Labour Council, representing all the Queensland unions, put a ban on a sand-mining venture which would have destroyed for ever an island of great beauty."

"This was in spite of a government vote in favour of the mining, the legal right of the company to mine there, and unemployment in the area. In Victoria, a power station development was held up for a year and a half by a ban because of the danger of pollution to nearby Melbourne. Finally the State Premier went to the unions and asked where they would allow it to be built."

Joint action

C.A: Did you form joint committees with the action groups involved in the occupations and green bans?

J.M: "The thing that allowed us again to live as long as we did was the fact that even though our opponents were saying that we were making the decisions, we always claimed - and rigidly stuck to this - that we were responding to a legitimate and sizeable grouping of people coming together on the urban issue, and then we withheld our labour so as to allow those people to express their concern. Once we did that we had discussions with them, but we kept our own entity, we didn't merge as a coalition. We certainly fought together, but the residents' action groups could make their decisions - for example, if they made a decision to lift the ban, well then it's lifted, even if we thought it was wrong."

Other unions?

"One thing that happened was that the community group that had asked for the ban had a greater feeling of its own strength. It had called on the union movement, and in so doing, I think it created a better understanding of what it could do. I also think through having workers involved had a wider effect - it was more than just wages and conditions - they could see that if you're fighting to save homes from a proposed motorway, it was another worker like yourself whose home was going to be knocked down."

CA: What effect did the action between the building workers and residents have on workers in other industries?

J.M: "I don't think it made the sort of spectacular impact that the builders' labourers did. There wasn't the sensational development like that in other industries but other workers then started to be more conscious of wider issues and in fact fourteen unions,

mainly engineering, have been involved in a number of these actions, but mainly of a supportive nature. Then again, they wouldn't have such direct involvement in the kinds of issues which action groups were concerned with at that time."

"On things like whether industry should be coming into an area, they could, and they have been active - but not to a marked degree. I think to put it in its real perspective there's an awareness there. But the thing that I believe is the most important aspect. about the whole struggle was that the green ban movement was raising for the first time the social consequence of labour, what we should do with labour, how labour should be used."

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An additional analysis of the struggle is contained in *Green Bans, Red Union: environmental activism and the New South Wales Builders Labourers Federation* by Meredith and Verity Burgmann, University of New South Wales Press, 1998.