PART II

CHAPTER 10

Economic, Ideological and Structural Pre-conditions

In reviewing the activities of the N.S.W. B.L.F. during this period the question which inevitably arises is, why did such a movement emerge at that time, in that place and in that union? The point which must be stressed is that no single condition was unique. Each contributing factor was also present in the situation of other unions.

For instance, if the Sydney building boom was primarily responsible, why did the B.W.I.U. fail to respond to the stimulus? If the cause was the strategic position the B.L.F. held within the industry, how did the B.L.F. in the other states remain unaffected? If the influence of the C.P.A. was the answer, why did other C.P.A. unions remain unchanged?

The point is that a particular conjuncture of economic, structural and ideological factors occurred in Sydney during the early 1970s.

Hyman, in a discussion of "overtly revolutionary trade-unionism", warned that "no general theory is available to relate the struggle for material reforms to the development of consciousness". Although all the builders labourers believed that the 1970 Margins strike was the event which altered their collective consciousness, they could never adequately explain why. Hyman argues:

...involvement in a specific victory or defeat, in itself of little obvious world historical significance, may have critical consequences in terms of workers' subjective confidence and aspirations.2

The important point on which both bourgeois and revolutionary theorists agree however is the need for favourable objective conditions to be properly interpreted and acted upon by union leaderships. H.B. Davis argued that, just as many campaigns failed because conditions were not favourable, so did many discontented workers remain unorganised because union leaders neglected to step in at the propitious time. Similarly, Lenin continually emphasised the need for social democratic leaders not to lag behind popular upsurgings "both in their 'theories' and in their activity".

While the above opinions might appear self-evident it is important

¹ Richard Hyman, Marxism and the Sociology of Trade Unionism, p.53.

² Ibid., pp. 52-53.

³ H.B. Davis, "The Theory of Union Growth" in W.E.J. McCarthy (ed.), Trade Unions: Selected Readings, p.211.

⁴ V.I. Lenin, What Is To Be Done?, p.53.

to counteract the prevailing media opinion that B.L.F. militancy and political activity was simply a product of the building industry boom and that when the boom faded so too would green bans. 5

Certainly the building boom brought about a favourable situation for militant activity and easier organisation. The concentration of building projects in the C.B.D. and the need for speculative developments to complete construction in the shortest possible time contributed towards a favourable bargaining position for unions in the building industry. Whether the builders labourers were more favoured by these changes than the tradesmens' unions is debatable, but the objective conditions alone could not fully explain the obvious difference in industrial philosophy between the B.L.F. and the other unions.

Poulantzas points out that "to reduce the ideologico-political differences within the working class to technico-economic differences in the organization of labour, or even to differences in the size of wages" can lead to contradictory generalisations. Such generalisations lead one "either to maintain that unskilled labourers, etc., have a higher class consciousness and revolutionary potential than the rest of the working class, or to attribute the same thing to skilled workers". Whilst there were obviously aspects of a builders labourer's work and status which might encourage revolutionary ideology, the same could be said for the tradesmen. The answer does not lie in the difference between skilled and unskilled labour:

...generalizations based on purely technico-economic criteria are arbitrary. Differentiations within the working class do not purely and simply coincide with positions in the organization of labour. They depend rather on political and ideological criteria, on forms of struggle and of combative organizations and on tradition; and these criteria have their own autonomy.7

For the building unions, ideological criteria were of crucial significance. The Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia hit the building industry in Sydney "like a time bomb". The consequent B.L.F.-B.W.I.U. split left both the C.P.A. and the B.L.F. wide open to the influence of the "new left" ideologies of the sixties and early seventies. It was the B.L.F. leadership that became most affected by "new left" ideas such as personal

⁵ This did not occur. Despite a downturn in the building industry and severe unemployment during 1974-75, only one green ban was ever lifted for reasons other than a successful resolution of the situation.

⁶ Nicos Poulantzas, "On Social Classes", New Left Review, No. 78, March/April 1973, p.35.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 35-36.

⁸ Interview: Joe Owens, 4 April 1978.

liberation, participatory democracy, direct action tactics, anti-sexism, anti-racism and environmental awareness.

It was also the B.L.F. leadership which forged out of "new left" ideology an industrial variant. Determined not simply to <u>react</u> to events but to <u>shape</u> them, the Union moved away from the traditional defensive or protective role of the trade union and towards an offensive political stance.

The Union achieved a momentum which had its own political dynamic. Spriano described such a situation in his analysis of a specific factory occupation, but for the B.L.F. the militant activity of 1970 could be described as one ongoing act.

We see a dynamic of occupation which in itself drives forward to a choice: either an extension of the movement to confront the crucial problem of power...or else a trade union adjustment of a wages dispute whose gains however are never realised unless the general situation is altered to the benefit of the workers.10

Something must explain why the B.L.F. took that leap which dramatically extended the concept of unionism whilst other unions in similarly militant periods remained bound by traditional parameters. Why was it the B.L.F. that physically confronted capital on the question of socially useful labour and not other unions? What were the combination of factors which produced the green bans?

My analysis of the situation groups the numerous contributing factors under six main questions. What were the economic conditions? What were the factors specific to the building industry, to the occupation of builders labourer and to that union in particular? What were the ideological influences on the membership and why did the new spirit of unionism specifically manifest itself in the form of green bans?

The first point to make is that the late sixties and early seventies was a period of general union militancy, not only in Australia but in many other industrialised countries. 11

⁹ Both Roy Kriegler (Working for the Company, p.256) and Ross Martin (Trade Unionism in Australia, p.134) make the point that Australian trade unions are essentially dependent institutions with a tendency to react to events rather than shape them.

¹⁰ Paolo Spriano, The Occupation of the Factories: Italy 1920, p. 19.

¹¹ S. Hill and K. Thurley, "Sociology and Industrial Relations", British Journal of Industrial Relations, Vol. 12, No. 2, p.160 and also Richard Hyman, "Industrial Conflict and the Political Economy: Trends of the Sixties and Prospects for the Seventies", The Socialist Register 1973, p.110 conveniently summarise the trend in Great Britain.

The figures in Australia speak for themselves. Working days lost in industrial disputes per employee averaged around 0.2 during the fifties and sixties but rose dramatically to 0.46 in 1969 and then to a high of 1.29 in 1974, only to fall back to 0.36 by 1976. Not only was strike activity high but the pattern of industrial action was changing "as groups of previously quiescent workers...discarded their industrial virginity and helped swell the strike statistics". This was best illustrated in Australia by the 1967 A.A.E.S.D.A. ** strike and the 1968 N.S.W. Teachers' Federation strike, ** an industrial first for both groups.

In Australia, the trend towards union militancy was spurred by a generally booming economy and by several specific incidents. In 1967, the Metal Trades Work Value Case granted wage increases without making it clear whether over-award payments were to be absorbed in the new wage rate. When many employers tried to absorb over-award payments, considerable strike action took place. Eventually the Full Bench of the Commission admitted that substantial absorption was impracticable and decided upon a compromise solution favourable to the unions.

This successful strike activity demonstrated to many for the first time the efficacy of collective action and also emphasised the impotence of the Arbitration system to downgrade the importance of over-award payments. This naturally induced many unions to seek over-award payments by negotiating outside the system. Some observers also believe that the election of Bob Hawke to the Presidency of the A.C.T.U. and his opinion that "the tribunals would increase their own irrelevance if they did not hand down decisions that the unions regarded as 'just'", reinforced the push for higher wages both inside and outside the system.

¹² C.B.C.S. & A.B.S. Labour Reports, Industrial Disputes, cited in D.W. Rawson, Unions and Unionists in Australia, p.131.

¹³ Richard Hyman, "Industrial Conflict and the Political Economy: Trends of the Sixties and Prospects for the Seventies", The Socialist Register 1973, p.101.

¹⁴ Association of Architects, Engineers, Surveyors and Draughtsmen of Australia.

¹⁵ Bruce Mitchell, "In the Public Interest?" in John Iremonger, John Merritt & Graeme Osborne (eds), Strikes, pp. 250 & 252.

¹⁶ This case was particularly relevant for the B.L.F., tied so closely as it was to the Metal Trades flow-on.

¹⁷ See Raymond O'Dea, <u>Principles of Wage Determination</u> for a full description of the case.

¹⁸ Philip Bentley, "Australian Trade Unionism" in Henry Mayer and Helen Nelson (eds), Australian Politics: A Fourth Reader, p.250. Bentley also cites the "tight" labour market and the fact that people entering the work force during the late 1960s had no memory of the depression or the war years and therefore had higher expectations than previous generations of workers.

Also from the end of 1971 to mid-1974, inflation was rising but job security was not really threatened. This combination of economic circumstances encouraged militant activity in both the blue and white collar sectors. ¹⁹

However, as Mundey so clearly perceived, it was the Clarrie O'Shea case and the subsequent defeat of the penal sanctions which really cleared the way for militant action and the chance for unions to be "on the offensive". 20

In the building industry the conditions were particularly propitious. Relatively unaffected by the stock-market collapse and the recession of 1971-2, the industry enjoyed boom conditions and full employment from the late sixties until 1974. The Coalition Government's reluctance to revalue the dollar because of Country Party pressure had encouraged the flow of millions of dollars of "hot" foreign investment into Australia. Development projects in the Sydney C.B.D. were to soak up much of this speculative investment. Rydge's commented of this period:

...Richard Baker was progressing in his building ambitions, Dickie Dusseldorp was becoming very well known in the construction industry and Sir Paul Strasser was gathering momentum as a property man. A good many other smallish builders were on their way to becoming household names of the 1970s.22

These developments were to have a dramatic effect upon the construction industry.

Throughout Australia, the value of new buildings approved jumped from \$1204 million in 1960-61 to \$1734 million in 1965-66 and then to \$2943 million in 1970-71. Even more significant is the distribution of construction activity. In 1960-61 N.S.W. represented \$450 million worth of this activity whilst Victoria represented \$331 million, whereas by 1970-71 N.S.W. had expanded to a figure of \$1095 million compared with Victoria's \$677 million. Another significant set of figures shows that whereas building approvals for houses, flats, shops, factories

¹⁹ This point is particularly emphasised in G. Barrington, <u>How to Win</u> this Strike!, pp.10-11.

²⁰ Jack Mundey, "Interview", Australian Left Review, No. 32, September 1971, p.10.

²¹ This situation was continually explained to builders labourers by the leadership. They saw it as important that the membership properly understood the rampant uncontrolled nature of the building boom.

²² Rydge's, July 1973, p.25.

²³ Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, Building and Construction 1970-71, Bulletin No. 7, p.31.

²⁴ Ibid.

etc. approximately doubled between 1966-67 and 1970-71, the approval rate for offices almost tripled, jumping from \$118 million to \$326 million. So the boom was most spectacularly concentrated on office block construction in the Central Business District of Sydney.

With this rise of capital inflow, the number of workers engaged in the industry also rose, although because of new technology not in direct proportion to the value of new construction. The number of building workers classified as builders labourers in N.S.W. increased from 7,101 in 1961 to 8,568 in 1970 and then to 9,111 in 1971. This figure then remained reasonably constant until the end of 1973 peaking at 9,302 for the 1972 June quarter. 28

The 1960s also brought the first real "skyscrapers" to Sydney. Prior to 1956 when the Caltex building was built to 65 metres, the tallest buildings had been 45 metres. Following the Caltex building came the first A.M.P. building of 27 storeys and then the 32 storey State Office Block. The "new" A.M.P. building was 207 metres and the "new" M.L.C. Centre was 262 metres. The clustering of these enormous projects around the lower end of Macquarie Street and Circular Quay meant that, for the first time, large numbers of builders labourers were concentrated in one area. As Marx and Engels pointed out:

...with the development of industry the proletariat not only increases in number; it becomes concentrated in greater masses, its strength grows, and it feels that strength more.31 [my emphasis]

There is certainly considerable evidence that the "feeling of strength" was an important factor in B.L.F. militancy. The largest jobs at any

²⁵ Ibid., p.36.

A point made very strongly by the B.W.I.U., Some Notes on the Building Industry and the Need for Stronger Unions Through Amalgamation, March 1970, 3pp. roneod, pp.1-2.

²⁷ Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, <u>Building and Construction</u> 1970-71, Bulletin No. 7, p.130.

²⁸ Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, Building and Construction Tables: Number of Persons Working by Occupational Status. The figures show a dramatic fall between the December quarter of 1973 (9,274) and the March quarter of 1974 (8,417).

²⁹ Lorne Webster, Department of Labour and Industry, (now D.I.R.). Interviewed by Pat Fiske, 1980.

³⁰ Other large projects were British Tobacco, Goldfields' House and of course the Opera House.

³¹ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, The Manifesto of the Communist Party, p.53. Richard Hyman (Marxism and the Sociology of Trade Unionism, p.6) mentions that the thesis that concentration of workers in large numbers encourages unionism recurs in recent academic analysis, e.g. D. Lockwood, The Blackcoated Worker.

one time tended to become the most militant. ³² For example, during the 1960s the Opera House and the State Office Block were mentioned as centres of dispute at virtually every Executive meeting.

Many labourers when giving reasons why they believed big jobs became militant, reported "a feeling of safety in numbers" and the fact that "you weren't in face to face contact with the boss like you were in bungalow building". They also believed that workers on a particular job tended to reflect the ideology of that particular job. Therefore one militant on a large job could often influence all the workers on the site by effectively demonstrating that militancy worked. An axiom often repeated by B.Ls was that "militant jobs produce militant workers". The "bunching" of militants on to particular sites, described in other chapters simply reinforced this process.

Another important aspect of feeling their strength was the fact that large numbers of labourers drinking together for the first time in Quayside hotels fostered a culture of solidarity, and enabled great acts of militancy to be remembered, repeated and even organised. Radical B.L.F. philosophies often were claimed to have originated in pubs such as "The Ship Inn", "The Paragon", and "The First and Last".

Possibly the most important effect of the large projects was that B.Ls remained on one site for a much longer time than previously. This created a feeling among building workers that it was worthwhile to fight for decent safety conditions and amenities. No longer would they finally win an amenities shed just as their work finished and they moved on to the next job. The motivation to fight hard on particular issues was dramatically increased.

There was another advantage that long-term projects offered which had been lacking in the previous short-term enterprises. As those who tried to organise the Californian fruit pickers discovered, "...the work was seasonal, the work force migratory, and with such a short-term employer-employee relationship, the organisers could never generate any real leverage against the growers". 33 Although not in as industrially desperate a situation as the Californian pickers, the itinerant nature of the building industry has in the past certainly rendered many

³² A building union official was cited on this aspect in the Sydney Morning Herald, 2 May 1981: "The issues of the industry are fought out where there is a concentration of production, employment and power and this determines the standard of the industry".

³³ John Dunne, Delano, p.52.

traditional industrial strategies inoperable. Now that workers could look forward to five years ³⁴ on a site instead of the usual three or four months, many more doors were open. The long term projects also produced an enlarged nucleus of skilled builders labourers such as riggers, dogmen and scaffolders who began to see the building "game" as their life time occupation and it was this core of ticketted men who provided the impetus for much of the struggle.

The skyscrapers also attracted a huge influx of labourers, often migrants, who had never before worked on building sites. With no predetermined attitudes as to how a building site should operate, these industrial virgins were quick to appreciate the effectiveness of advanced action. Duncam Williams, job delegate, explaining how Union meetings were conducted on the Dillinghams (Qantas) site during the early stages of the project, enlarged upon this theme:

Because a lot of the blokes hadn't been on building sites before, the meetings we held were really explanatory about what the workers were entitled to and what sort of action we could take. I made a point of that because of my own experience before 1970, because of my own ignorance when I began. Some of us were reading award books for the first time and finding out just what our entitlements were.35

This experience of cohesion, of "growing with the job" was also reinforced by the fact that large numbers of workers were needed to get the project under way. The new technology, although reducing the overall amount of labour, still required large numbers of workers on the site, particularly in the early stages of a development. "Growing with the job" was an important factor in many labourers' experience of industrial radicalisation, particularly the newcomers. One explained:

I got more involved on the job because I was there at the early stages when a lot of things were being thrashed out among the workers and with the Company...eventually I was elected a delegate.36

Large sites also provided the inexperienced labourers with plenty of available industrial sagacity. Glenys Page, one of the newcomers, explained how "there was always someone on the site who could explain what was happening and what the Company was trying to do to us". She also described how militancy on the site progressed, "...the nature of the job changed. The workers, even men who'd worked for Watts for nine

³⁴ Noel Olive told me (Interview: 9 March 1978) how surprised he was to be still working on the same site (Qantas) after more than seven years. Three years later he is still gainfully employed on the same site.

³⁵ Interview: Duncan Williams, 25 February 1976.

³⁶ Interview: Glenys Page, 24 January 1978.

years became more militant as time went on and were prepared to strike. We became stronger and more unified". ³⁷ She also pointed out that towards the end of a long job "a lot of the militancy went out of the site". She ascribed this to the fact that more militants such as riggers and crane drivers were involved in the beginning of work on her particular site than at the end. ³⁸ However, the site, The North Shore Hospital was not a particularly tall building and crane drivers and riggers would have been involved for longer on a skyscraper. The fact that militancy normally wound down with the job was generally true though, and only serves to illustrate the point that workers feel disinclined to fight for wages and conditions they will not be able to enjoy for very long.

Many of the newly recruited labourers found the better wages and conditions that the Union was able to extract from the large developers particularly tempting. Previously the occupation of builders labourer had been seen by most workers as a stepping stone to other industries. In particular, migrants would work as a labourer until they learnt enough English to gain a better job. Those who came into the industry in the late sixties and early seventies often decided to stay, despite their original intentions. For some, their first union experience was the 1970 strike and that set the pattern for future expectations. As Dean Barber explained: "At last we were no longer training militants for other unions. They stayed around and got involved".

This new section of the labour force was also without many of the conservative attitudes of some industry veterans who "were old and staid and invariably pro-company and pro-boss. They had worked for the company for a long time and steered clear of industrial action. When trouble started they would talk about the depression days and hang onto their jobs".

Not only did the new work force greatly outnumber the oldtimers but many previous conservatives were actually caught up in the spirit of the times and became involved in radical industrial activity for the first time in their lives. All Many builders labourers of all ages

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Interview: Dean Barber, 18 December 1976.

⁴⁰ Interview: Duncan Williams, 25 February 1976.

⁴¹ Dick Whitehead (Interview: 8 June 1980) tells the story of a conservative builders labourer who found himself involved in a crane occupation and was so affected by the experience that he even "tried smoking some marijuana and has been smoking it ever since".

reported experiences of being radicalised by "the big, militant, well organised city sites" and often compared them with the smaller, less militant suburban jobs.

Of course the militancy of the large jobs did flow on to the smaller projects as the Union's image of potency increased and as militants from the large jobs travelled round to the smaller suburban sites. This occurred mainly through the mobility of the specialist labourers who operated in roving rigging and scaffolding gangs. Also, as the building boom spread to the suburbs, veteran militants with families such as Ralph Kelly would take jobs on the suburban sites because of their proximity to their homes in the Western suburbs.

However the strength of the Union always did remain centred upon the large sites in the C.B.D. One of the major reasons for this was the peculiar industrial muscle the building workers in general and builders labourers in particular, were afforded by the nature of the new developments. Disregarding financial considerations, the new projects brought major changes to the structure of the industry and to the role of builders labourer. First of all, large-scale demolition, mainly builders labourers' work, had to take place before construction could proceed. Secondly, excavation work (once again largely within the scope of the B.L.F.) for the foundations of huge buildings was dramatically increased. 42 Thirdly, the sheer height of the structures, assured riggers, scaffolders, dogmen and crane drivers of long-term work on each site. Fourthly, the trend towards the use of pre-fabricated units which had to be placed on-site by cranes, reinforced the strategic position of dogmen and crane drivers; and finally the increased use of concrete allowed labourers the use of effective guerrilla tactics such as the "breaking" of concrete pours.

The fact that the F.E.D. & F.A., another C.P.A.-influenced union covered crane drivers and bulldozer drivers was an essential ingredient for many of the builders labourers' successes. Demolition and excavation could rarely take place without F.E.D. & F.A. involvement and their support was never lacking. As for crane drivers on the high rise sites,

⁴² For instance, for the N.S.W. Institute (Watts) job on Broadway, more than a quarter of a million cubic yards of earth and rock was excavated. Builders' Labourer, March 1970, front cover.

⁴³ The A.W.U. has coverage for earth moving equipment not involved on construction sites. Sometimes, such as the Fig Street, Ultimo green ban, this proved a problem as the A.W.U. claimed that demolishing houses for a road was A.W.U. work.

their traditional co-operation and friendship with the dogmen, 44 fortified by ideological brotherhood, produced a combination of immense strategic importance. Apart from their ability to bring most high-rise sites to a virtual standstill within a few hours of stopping work, the special problems of transporting the pre-fabricated units to the central city sites often resulted in even greater industrial strength accruing to this section of the labour force. Large pre-fabricated units could often only be delivered outside of working hours and with a police escort. The crane driver and dogmen had to be on-site waiting for them because of lack of storage space. One disgruntled architect complained: "The crane driver and the dogmen...can tie up the whole site. Some builders use hoists and a larry pole to avoid a hold up. Neighbours often object to the noise nuisance. They get court orders to restrict working hours". Thus, a simple refusal to work overtime or a strategic "sickie" became an industrial weapon of great potential.

The height of the skyscrapers and the new technology involved also demanded increased skill on the part of dogmen, scaffolders, riggers and hoist drivers, at the expense of the tradesmen. They used their "ticketted" position in a tight labour market to bargain mercilessly with the developers.

Joe Owens referred to this combination of circumstances as the Union's "peculiar industrial muscle" and spoke with pride of the use of this "muscle" to promote "a deliberate challenge to the existing authority". The tradesmen however were less than thrilled about such developments. They complained that:

The production on most major construction projects could be stopped almost at an instant by the action of a very few key members of the B.L.F. It was relatively easy for this particular union leadership to ban demolition of buildings, to suspend crane work or hold up concrete pours by involvement of [a] small group of workers.47

Their conclusion from this was that the B.L.F. was conducting an elitist struggle. "The situation was wide open for conducting strikes on an elitist basis where a small group could decide to hold up a job regardless of the views, standpoints or levels of conviction of the majority

⁴⁴ A dogman's life, particularly before the B.L.F. banned the hook, often depends on the reliability and skill of the crane driver. Naturally the two groups enjoyed close working relationships.

⁴⁵ Sydney Morning Herald, 18 November 1971.

⁴⁶ Joe Owens, Speech, 2 November 1975.

⁴⁷ Building Industry Branch of the S.P.A., Six Turbulent Years, p.8.

of workers around a given issue." ⁴⁸ The tradesmen also concluded that "the other building unions...in the main, did not have the same industrial power". ⁴⁹

This ready assumption, both by the B.L.F. leadership and the S.P.A. building unions, that the B.L.F. was in a position of unique strategic power can lead one to erroneous analyses. Strategic importance without a radical ideological stance is of no industrial benefit whatever. Perhaps the best example of facile analysis comes from Frenkel and Coolican 50 who accept the tradesmen's critique of the B.L.F.'s strategic position and seemingly extrapolate much of their industrial schema from purely structural considerations. They underrate ideological considerations to the point where, within their schema, a union's specific "mode of production" ⁵¹ and position within the industry is almost exclusively responsible for the way in which a union operates. For instance, they claim that "...the plumbers' specific mode of production is not conducive to the development of union militancy". 52 A simple comparison with other states would soon contradict such a statement. Plumbers' unions in other states, particularly Victoria, are as militant as the B.L.F. and often more so. The Federal union is controlled by the Socialist Left except for the N.S.W. Branch which has been dominated by the N.C.C. since the forties. Frenkel and Collican have perceived a conservative union and worked backwards from there to deduce that a plumbers' structural position is not conducive to militant action.

Plumbers are capable of wielding strategic power, almost equal to that of the F.E.D. & F.A. and the B.L.F. Certainly demolition does not involve plumbers but from then on plumbers are vital to each new procedure. Pipes must be laid amongst foundations, downpipes inserted as walls are constructed, cores placed before a concrete pour can proceed, sprinklers fitted before a building can be declared safe and last but certainly not least, water connected to amenities sheds before workers will even start work on a site.

The fact that the N.S.W. plumbers used none of these strategic weapons was a reflection of their conservative ideology. It was not

⁴⁸ Ibid., p.9.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p.28.

⁵⁰ Stephen Frenkel and Alice Coolican, "Competition, Instability and Industrial Struggle in the N.S.W. Construction Industry" in Stephen J. Frenkel (ed.), Industrial Action: Patterns of Labour Conflict, pp. 24-63.

⁵¹ Their terminology. Not specifically used in the Marxist sense.

⁵² Ibid., p.57.

just the strategic position of the B.L.F. and the F.E.D. & F.A. which brought about their militancy during that period. It was much more than coincidence that they were the only two C.P.A. unions operating within the building industry in N.S.W. at that time. Their strategic position was important but without their revolutionary ideology little of significance would have occurred.

Another important development that came with the boom in city skyscrapers was an alarming increase in the number of on-site accidents, and in the occurrence of occupational diseases such as "dusting" and industrial deafness. The building industry has traditionally been considered a particularly dangerous area of work, averaging around ten percent of Australian industrial accidents. But the new developments magnified the old problems and produced new ones.

Demolition work, a relatively new field, attracted unskilled contractors who took advantage of the State Government's reluctance to introduce a licensing system for the demolishers, despite the obviously dangerous nature of the work. Under-tendering from these "wreckers" caused even the minimum safety standards prescribed by the D.L.I. to be neglected. Reputable demolishers, such as Whelan the Wrecker gave evidence to the N.S.W. Parliamentary Select Committee of the "malpractice" which occurred in the industry "and of course the loser must be the worker who does all the heavy dangerous work".

Excavation, too, developed its own particular problems as foundations and below-ground construction bit deeper into the sandstone shelf on which Sydney is built. Silicosis among excavation workers increased as did industrial deafness and throat problems caused by working with, and shouting above, the noisy jack picks with which they worked.

However it was the height of the new structures which really took its toll on the building workers and particularly the labourers. Death by falls accounted for an increasing percentage of building industry deaths each year. Dogmen were most at risk but virtually any occupation was hazardous on the multi-storey projects unless safety standards were rigidly adhered to. An additional problem, previously not encountered, was that of turbulence caused both by the height at which work was now being carried out and by the skyscrapers themselves changing wind patterns and creating "tunnels" of unpredictable activity. With the need to

⁵³ Daily Mirror, 20 November 1971.

⁵⁴ Bud Cook, "Time for a Clean-up", Builders' Labourer, July 1970, p. 43.

complete projects in the shortest possible time, developers and contractors alike were inclined to cut corners with regard to safety precautions. A Master Builders' Association journal even admitted, "...there are still too many builders who are...guided in their action by the mistaken belief that rules are made to be broken".

Ray Rocher also conceded that "some jobs at times are allowed to be in an unsafe condition".

That the new developments created dangerous working conditions can be easily demonstrated. In the year ended April 1973, 44 building workers were killed in N.S.W. 57 On the less serious level, a regular job survey disclosed that, on just one site in Sydney, 178 accidents were reported in nine months. 58

These dangerous conditions had important effects at two levels. Firstly they created circumstances which encouraged job solidarity and secondly they emphasised the role of the union in the fight against the employers.

Labourers continually stressed that "nothing unites a job more than a safety issue". The ceaseless struggle over safety standards "attracted workers who would not otherwise have been involved. They could see they were affected in a direct sense". 59 The workers were prepared to fight hard over safety issues and this experience at a job level helped raise union consciousness. When the labourers discovered that the Union was prepared to fight just as hard on the issue, many hard core militants were created. B.L.F. safety campaigns included the election of full time safety officers; the banning of free fall hoists and of "riding the hook"; water attachments being fitted to jack picks to eliminate dust; and silencers being fitted on noisy equipment. Often the Union was accused of fighting for conditions in excess of D.L.I. standards. But safety was so important at the time that the Union's hard line on the issue gained it tremendous support from the rank and file. As one labourer remarked: "It's bad enough having to go to work, let alone having to die there".61

⁵⁵ Queensland Master Builder, April 1970, p.3.

⁵⁶ Ray Rocher: Interviewed by Pat Fiske, 1980.

⁵⁷ Pete Thomas, Taming the Concrete Jungle, p. 12.

⁵⁸ N.S.W. B.L.F., Citra: Warringah Mall, 13 March 1973, 3pp. roneod. Safety problems were also experienced in other states, especially Victoria, see for example A.B.L.F. (Victorian Branch), Unity, Vol. 12, No. 2, June 1967 and Unity, Vol. 13, No. 1, March 1968. The problem was magnified in Sydney because of the scale of the new construction.

⁵⁹ Interview: Glenys Page, 24 January 1978.

⁶⁰ The Australian, 28 June 1978.

⁶¹ Interview: Tony Hadfield, 13 December 1976.

The other issue which gained the leadership considerable support was that of amenities. It was in this area that the "get rich quick" mentality of the development boom most clearly manifested itself.

Working conditions, which had always been poor did not improve as the value of development, and the profits made by the employers, increased. The inch by inch struggle which the Union leadership had waged during the sixties had won admiration and support from the members but little in the way of material gains. One of the more enlightened developers, Civil & Civic, wrote in 1970:

The standard of site accommodation provided by most builders for their workers on site is deplorable. Steps have been taken in our Company over the last several months to improve the level of site accommodation that we offer our workmen. Prior to this some of our conditions on site were below standard.62

As many historical experiences testify, the demand for "civilized amenities" has often been the lynchpin for outbursts of militant action.

Mundey himself ascribed the "shocking conditions" in which he worked as one of the major causes of his own radicalisation. ⁶⁴ Joe Owens saw the Union's militancy stemming from the long period of struggle "in a raw industry where every inch of conditions was a battleground". ⁶⁵ Mick Tubbs, who observed the struggle as a C.P.A. organiser recalled: "The men really resented their bad amenities. The hatred [of the employer] was really there. It just needed to be given an opportunity to come out". ⁶⁶

The opportunity was provided by Tom Hogan's luddite campaign against sub-standard amenities sheds in 1970, and by the vigilante activity of the 1970 strike. As Tubbs commented, "...it was amazing how quickly things changed when the hatred did explode". 67 Lenin believed that "exposure of abuses in some backward trade...serves as a starting point for the awakening of class consciousness, for the beginning of a trade-union struggle, and for the spread of socialism". 68 The leadership never

⁶² Attachment "Labour Relations in the Future" to Document, <u>Productivity</u>
Agreement: Building Trades Unions (N.S.W.) & the Electrical Trades
Union (N.S.W.) and Civil & Civic Pty. Ltd. 1970-71, 30pp. roneod, p.7.

Amenities campaigns were important in the radicalisation of the Western Federation of Miners, (Melvyn Dubosky, We Shall Be All, p.56) and the United Farm Workers (John Dunne, Delano, pp.22-23).

⁶⁴ Interview: Jack Mundey, 3 April 1978.

⁶⁵ Joe Owens, Speech, 2 November 1975.

⁶⁶ Interview: Mick Tubbs, 26 October 1977.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ V.I. Lenin, What Is To Be Done?, p. 56. Lenin stressed however that such exposures could lead to a "purely trade-union struggle" if not properly channelled towards greater political consciousness.

under-estimated the importance of what was sometimes called "shithouse seat" organising. With the booming conditions of 1970, gains such as hot showers, properly lined sheds, pie warmers and so on, became easier to achieve but they were always considered to be important victories. The leadership, who had all worked on the job themselves for considerable periods knew how important amenities were for rank and filers. Part of the pride that builders labourers experienced in being "B.Ls" and not just labourers was that during the early seventies their amenities became equal to, and often better than, the tradesmen. The gaining of human dignity is an important ingredient in the development of one's political consciousness. The labourers could see very clearly two things. Firstly, that it was their Union's action which had brought about the changes and secondly that the developers, despite record profits, 69 would have given them exactly nothing if left without union pressure. This reinforced both the membership's loyalty to the Union and their hatred of the boss. If more developers had acted like Dusseldorp from Civil & Civic, much of the B.L.F.'s on-site militancy might have been still-born. But, as Laurie Aarons put it, the B.L.F. were up against the most backward section of Australian industrial capital, the developers, 70 and this made the class struggle clearer to those engaged in it at the job level. For the B.Ls, the issues were not obfuscated by pleasant conditions and amiable employers. "Industrial troglodytes" was how Jack Mundey described the N.S.W. M.B.A. 71

One of the reasons why the building boom exacerbated the poor relationship between employers and employees in the building industry was the change in the structure of the industry itself. As the B.W.I.U. lamented:

Big business has entered the industry in a big way. Corporations and consortiums and project management companies are now replacing the master builders of yesteryear, and franchise builders now proliferate.72

The "project management" system entailed a firm being paid a fixed fee to

⁶⁹ For instance, in the six months to December 1971, Jennings Industries boosted its net profit by 80%, Lend Lease by 94%, Hanover Holdings by 152% and Mainline Corporation by more than 300%. Also of 38 construction companies surveyed in 1970-71, only three reported a decreased dividend for the period. (N.S.W. B.L.F., Results of 259 Companies 1970-71, lp. roneod.)

⁷⁰ Interview: Laurie Aarons, 28 December 1977.

⁷¹ Interview: Jack Mundey, 13 August 1975.

⁷² B.W.I.U., Some Notes on the Building Industry and the Need for Stronger Unions Through Amalgamation, March 1970, p.3.

run a job with construction done by sub-contractors who had particular tasks on site. This eliminated the conventional building contract with "rise and fall" clauses 73 and encouraged the companies to adopt tough industrial attitudes.

Another side effect was that sub-contracting proliferated. ⁷⁴
"Subbies", always a notorious section of the industry with a reputation for undercapitalisation, ⁷⁵ bankruptcies and bad debts, became even more notorious during the boom. Hutton explained why:

When trade is buoyant and expanding, all builders in a particular area would be seeking the services of well established sub-contractors and the relative scarcity of this type of labour naturally attracted into the industry ill-prepared and uncoordinated teams of workers.76

Not only were these new "subbies" ill prepared, many were downright dishonest and confrontations between the B.L.F. and sub-contractors over unpaid wages and other financial irregularities were common.

A further exacerbation of the already poor relationship between the Union and the employers was the increased participation of multinational companies in the construction industry. These, according to the B.W.I.U., "...bring with them ideas about management-worker relations and work practices which quite often are repugnant to the unions". Although there is little evidence that foreign based companies behaved any worse than domestic employers, the B.W.I.U. complaint was indicative of the general feeling among building unions that the changes in the industry both in financial structure and in technology had adversely affected work conditions: "It is generally agreed that the building industry is no longer an attractive one in which to work".

⁷³ David Shaw, "Crisis in the Concrete Jungle", <u>International Socialist</u>, No. 8, Autumn 1979, p.15.

⁷⁴ Between 1961 and 1970 the number of sub-contractors in the N.S.W. building industry rose from 6,167 to 12,090 while wage earners in the industry only rose from 31,102 to 41,006. (C.B.C.S., <u>Building</u> and Construction, 1970-71, Bulletin No. 7, p.127)

⁷⁵ In 1962 the Victorian Statute Law Revision Committee reported that the high rate of failures in the building industry were due to, under capitalisation, the willingness of suppliers to extend credit and inefficient management of contracting organisations (cited in The N.S.W. Builders' Labourer, 25 October 1974, p.4).

⁷⁶ John Hutton, Building and Construction in Australia, pp. 146-147.

⁷⁷ See Minutes 1968-1971.

⁷⁸ B.W.I.U., Some Notes on the Building Industry and the Need for Stronger Unions Through Amalgamation, March 1970, p.3.

⁷⁹ N.S.W. Branch Report, Minutes: Federal Conference, November 1967, p.56. Aspects of these new conditions were continually attacked in the B.L.F. journal. See especially Ralph Kelly, "She's all in Mate" [an attack on pyramid sub-contracting], Builders' Labourer, March 1970, pp.43 & 45 and Bud Cook, "Time for a Clean-up", Builders' Labourer, July 1970, p.43.

Many labourers echoed such sentiments. They stressed in their interviews that although long-term projects offered the opportunity for stable employment over a prolonged period, this did not really affect the basic insecurity of their position as builders labourers or even the chronic instability of the building industry as a whole. Large developers such as Mainlines and Home Units Australia went to the wall just as disastrously as suburban subbies. But more importantly, labourers were still employed on the "one hour hire and fire rule" and the large contractors were just as likely as the old style master builders to use the power of dismissal.

Labourers were dismissed for the same sorts of reasons as in the past. These included supplies being held up, finance running out, accidental over-employment, strikes by other workers, employers' reluctance to pay for public holidays, labourers arriving late or having too many days off, labourers arguing with the foreman or not working as directed and so on. Militant labourers still found it difficult to find employment and almost as hard to keep it. One of the newcomers to the industry explained:

You soon learned that the only thing standing between you and the boss was the union. In my previous jobs I had a certain amount of security. It really changed my whole attitude to employers when I first got the sack. I was paid off on one hour's notice. I realised very quickly that the employers could pick and choose who they wanted and we all could be shunted along tomorrow.82

Pat Fiske, who lost her job when Mainlines collapsed, described how "...it really freaked me out the first time I was fired - just getting one hour's notice". B1 is easy to see why workers' control struggles over such issues as the employers' right to hire and fire won such support from the B.L.F. rank and file.

Jack Mundey believed that the casual nature of the industry meant that labourers had few loyalties to their employer "in the long term sense". This attitude was reinforced by the structural changes in the industry whereby the old style construction companies which hired all

⁸⁰ This point was clearly made in Labor Council of N.S.W. Building Trades Group, Submissions to the Premier of N.S.W., 22 June 1967, 3pp. roneod, p.1.

⁸¹ Mick Ross and Don Crotty who had worked through the fifties and sixties agreed that "getting jobs became a little bit easier but not a great deal" for known militants "except on the really unionised jobs". Interview: Don Crotty, 7 March 1978.

⁸² Interview: Tony O'Beirne, 2 March 1978.

⁸³ Interview: Pat Fiske, 2 March 1978.

⁸⁴ Interview: Jack Mundey, 13 August 1975.

labour and played the traditional "boss" role, were becoming displaced by large development companies and a confusing array of sub-contractors.

"All chiefs and no Indians" as one labourer put it. Thus any loyalty to their "boss" which labourers may have felt was further weakened.

Labourers were more loyal to their union because that was their central pivot. They always belonged to that even though their employers changed continually.86

Or as Dean Barber expressed it: "We quickly absorbed the fact that we would always get more from the Union than from the boss". 87

Another aspect of the construction boom which served to radicalise the labourers was the nature of the development taking place. What was being built and the way it was being built was having a profound effect on the rank and file labourers. It soon became obvious to them that the C.B.D. was becoming massively over-developed.

The boom in commerical property caused a major re-shaping of central Sydney at the behest of an elite with control of finance capital (and influence on governments).88

Workers on the various city sites predicted the glut in office space well before the financial pages of the daily newspapers were even vaguely aware of it. They also perceived that Askin "would do nothing to control his friends the developers". Their own perceptions were continually reinforced by the leadership's emphasis on the need for proper planning and the construction of "socially useful projects". When a sixteen storey office block in Woolloomooloo failed to attract a bid at auction 2 and then remained vacant for years afterwards it was the topic of many discussions amongst building workers. They were well aware that they were also constructing office blocks, probably destined to remain vacant:

[While] people are desperate for homes, caught by a housing shortage that has been chronic, and the N.S.W. Housing Commission chairman has confessed himself to be "sick with worry" about the housing plight of low-income people. Yet, while this crying human need persists "developers" have under way or in planning

- 85 Interview: Dean Barber, 18 December 1976.
- 86 Interview: Jack Mundey, 13 August 1975.
- 87 Interview: Dean Barber, 18 December 1976.
- 88 Michael Eyers, "The Sydney Property Boom", Paper, Class Analysis Conference, 1977.
- 89 Bud Cook was complaining about office block over-production in 1967. Builders Labourer, April/May 1967, p.11.
- 90 Interview: Don McPhee, 9 December 1977.
- 91 Builders Labourer, July/August 1966, p.9. Articles on these subjects appeared regularly in the journal.
- 92 Australian Financial Review, 28 November 1973.
- 93 Michael Eyers, op.cit., claimed in 1977 that 24% of C.B.D. office space was lying vacant.

over \$600 million worth of Sydney city office, retail, and other commercial construction projects, to add to an existing glut of empty office space.94

Whilst alienation is generally perceived to stem from either one's relationship to the means of production or the nature of the work there is evidence that workers who question overproduction or waste in their industry, also experience alienation and radicalisation. John Foster for instance argued that the Oldham cotton workers' critique of overproduction and competition in their industry was significant in forming their anti-capitalist analysis of the situation.

Perhaps also the nature of builders labourers' work helped to emphasise the waste in the industry. It was basically builders labourers who demolished the already existing, often still useful, buildings to make way for the office block mammoths. It may have been easier for builders labourers to see the contradictions inherent in the building boom than for the other building workers.

A further alienating feature for many labourers was the sheer size of the projects they worked on and the companies that employed them. Novack refers to "man's impotence before the forces of nature and of society" which he believes is intensified by contemporary monopoly capitalism. ⁹⁷ Certainly, many labourers expressed feelings similar to those of Dean Barber who exclaimed: "...I didn't realise how big the enemy was until I became involved in big building. It's just more obvious in the building game". ⁹⁸

It is clear from such a statement, that the building boom had in no way alleviated the labourers' dislike for the "enemy", in fact in many ways it had exacerbated the antagonism. Paul Gardiner, writing at the height of the boom observed:

...one of the predominant features of the industry and the B.L. role within it is the remarkable hostility that exists between employer and employee.99

However, one advantage the new "enemy" had over the old, was the employers' need for speedy completion of projects. This tactical

⁹⁴ Pete Thomas, <u>Taming the Concrete Jungle</u>, p.5. The importance of this quotation is that the book was an official publication of the Union and Thomas was accurately recording the views of the leadership who continually harped on exactly these issues.

⁹⁵ Reflecting roughly Marxist and non-Marxist viewpoints.

⁹⁶ John Foster, Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution.

⁹⁷ Ernest Mandel and George Novak, The Marxist Theory of Alienation, p.7.

⁹⁸ Interview: Dean Barber, 18 December 1976.

⁹⁹ Paul Gardiner, "Union Power and Developers (once naughty words) Beat the Bad Old Days", Australian Financial Review, 7 June 1973.

advantage enjoyed by the unions, reinforced by the rising expectations of builders labourers led to large scale wages struggles and significant victories. And of course each new victory whetted the workers' appetite for more.

The B.L.F.'s wages campaigns of the early 1960s had produced increases in the real wages of skilled B.Ls but little for the unskilled labourers. 100 It was the Union's concerted campaign around the metal workers decision in 1968 which began to raise all labourers' rates. 101 This in turn led to the demands made during 1970 to eliminate the tradesmen's margin altogether. The remarkable success of the 1970 strike created rising expectations and further demands. As Marx has commented "the value of labour is in every country determined by a traditional standard of life" in which "historical tradition and social habitude" play an important part. 102 For the labourers, the gains of the sixties were now their traditional standard, and the spectacular gains of the Margins strike changed their status within the industry forever. Virtually every interviewed labourer mentioned the process of "no longer being a second class citizen...no longer being lowest of the low...no more just 'shit' labourers" and so on. This increased psychological status was not just a reflection of the strategic position that technological innovation had brought the B.Ls as has been argued by the tradesmen, but was a reflection of their changed position within the complex economic hierarchy of margins, relativities and loadings on which so many inter-union relationships are based. Wage demands made by the B.L.F. during the seventies no longer accepted the inferior wage relationship expected of "unskilled" labourers. 104

¹⁰⁰ Between 1962 and 1966 the margin for skill of riggers, dogmen and drainers increased by 160% and scaffolders by 121% whereas unskilled labourers rates only increased by 45% (N.S.W. Report, Minutes: Federal Conference, November 1966).

¹⁰¹ Mundey believed that the introduction of the total wage concept was an attempt by the court "at the behest of the employers" to create a "two standard working class". He commented "only our militant struggle allowed us to win what we did. Contrast our performance with non-tradesmen in the metal and other industries?" Minutes: Federal Conference, November 1968, p.52.

¹⁰² Karl Marx, Wages, Price and Profit, pp. 50-51.

¹⁰³ Building Industry Branch of the S.P.A., Six Turbulent Years, p.8.

¹⁰⁴ This was of course the source of much of the tension between the unions in the building industry. See for example the reaction of the B.W.I.U. to the B.L.F.'s condition that the tradesmen accept the labourers' margins demands before the B.L.F. would join the Accident Pay campaign of 1971.

The labourers discovered anew the truth of the old maxim that militancy thrives in a favourable economic climate. An organiser observed:

Militancy worked differently to what I'd always thought. When there's plenty of money around, the fridges are full and there's no worries about getting a job, that's when blokes become militant.105

The overtly profitable nature of the new developments also encouraged huge wage demands. As Niland has pointed out:

...it is clear that unions covering higher productivity industries are hardly reluctant to seek wage increases in line with that higher productivity. A sense of injustice emerges when they are held to a wage level reflecting the national average.106

Several firms did negotiate productivity agreements. Civil & Civic, for instance, believed that their N.S.W. agreement "has been worthwhile as Civil & Civic have been subjected to a minimum of union interference over this period of time". Implementation of an Australia-wide Productivity Agreement for the company was urged because "cost attributable to stoppages over a period could well surpass the actual cost to the Company in paying the Productivity Agreement". It was not uncommon for the large non-M.B.A. building firms to be paying 10-15% above award rates "to buy industrial peace". The reason for this was quite simple. Wages were insignificant in the totality of costs on any given project. A building executive remarked: "...who cares about wages compared to losses you are looking at if you don't complete on time...

Any industrial builder or developer will tell you it [the wages bill] is bugger all as long as the job is completed".

Because the developers were, on the whole, not members of the M.B.A., they were not tied by award guidelines and were therefore "more open to negotiation and pressure". Also, because developers relied on credit at high interest rates, the difference between bankruptcy and profit was often the simple matter of a few weeks either side of a completion date. Contractors and sub-contractors generally had protection

¹⁰⁵ Interview: Dean Barber, 18 December 1976.

¹⁰⁶ John Niland, Collective Bargaining and Compulsory Arbitration in Australia, p. 63.

¹⁰⁷ Civil & Civic, op.cit., p.5.

¹⁰⁸ Statement made by J. Martin, M.B.A. Australian Financial Review, 21 June 1973.

¹⁰⁹ Quoted in Richard L'Estrange, "The Make-or-Break Men", The Australian, 27 February 1981.

¹¹⁰ Interview: Joe Owens, 4 April 1978. Another factor could have been that many of the developers were multinational firms familiar with collective bargaining practices.

clauses which forced the developer to pay any increase agreed on. As it was the developer who stood to lose most by hold-ups in production "he generally agrees because he panics". Developers, in fact "...were the Union's main weapon".

However, some of the most militant sites in Sydney were not projects funded by developers but by the public sector. Because large jobs such as Qantas or the Opera House shared all the other ingredients for militancy common to large sites but without a nervous developer as client, wage demands were often resisted for weeks and even months. Long strikes were the norm at Qantas, particularly in the early stages. Qantas, still incomplete, is eight years behind schedule and running at five times the original cost estimate. Industrial disputes are believed to have "accounted for up to 50% of time lost".

There is some debate whether public sector construction inevitably leads to cost and time overruns. For instance, architect Harry Seidler believes that it does, whereas C.S.I.R.O. researcher Frank Bromilow who did a study of 300 major buildings in the late 1960s said it showed that: "Cost jumps depended more on individual cases rather than on which sector supplied the capital". He pinpointed three major causes of massive overruns. They were inflation, labour unrest and alterations in design as the building progressed. One effect of such large-scale overruns which first became obvious with the Opera House has been increased resistance on the part of developers to invest in large building projects. "The major building users are avoiding commissioning large buildings because of uncontrollable increases in time and costs." 116

Another spin-off effect of rising prices during the early seventies was increased wage demands. Not only were wage rises being demanded, they were being demanded more often. Such demands were also relatively successful, not just in the building industry but in all sectors of the economy. As Davis has argued, in a period of inflation, when employers can pass cost increases along to customers, wage demands are more readily met. Although this process which culminated in the wages explosion

¹¹¹ Interview: Roy Bishop, 10 March 1977.

¹¹² Interview: Kevin Cook, 1 December 1976. As early as 1968 the State Executive complained that in their wage negotiations "the small employer groups continued to drag us back". Minutes: Executive Meeting, 25 June 1968.

¹¹³ Sydney Morning Herald, 1 May 1981.

¹¹⁴ The Australian, 28 June 1978.

¹¹⁵ P.J. Young, "The Last of the Tall Buildings?", The Australian, 13 May 1980.

¹¹⁶ Frank Bromilow, Ibid.

¹¹⁷ H.B. Davis, "The Theory of Union Growth" in W.E.J. McCarthy (ed.), Trade Unions, p.218.

of 1974, was common to all industries, it particularly reinforced the militant role of the B.L.F. in the building industry. Continual, successful, wage campaigns were conducted from 1970 to 1974. While the membership were receiving regular wage rises, their ability and eagerness to involve themselves in the political activities of the Union were facilitated. As many theorists have observed, the economic struggle is the most effective means of drawing the masses into active political struggle. The leadership's success in "demanding \$6 and getting \$6" commanded respect and support from the rank and file.

This bread and butter aspect of B.L.F. organisation was very important. In previous boom periods, "the Union had failed to get out and sign up members". It was obvious from the first day of Mundey's secretaryship that there would be greater concentration on organisational details.

We have such a fine record of militant activity in the interest of the members at job level, we can and must improve the financial unionism, for if we fail, we cannot possibly do a real job and expand, improve our services to the Builders Labourers in N.S.W.119

Two factors aided the Union in its concerted campaign to increase its membership. One was that the geographic concentration of the majority of members in the C.B.D. greatly facilitated organisation. The other was that, as the large projects provided long term jobs, members became less itinerant and this led to more stable job-delegate situations. Often the same people were elected delegate and co-delegate on a site for four or five years. As their competence grew, the basic site-organisation work was increasingly left in their capable hands. Some sites such as Qantas, Royal North Shore Hospital or Dillinghams (Clarence Street) rarely required the services of an organiser.

The autonomy of job-sites was greatly encouraged by the leadership both for ideological and practical reasons. They believed strongly in rank and file initiative and had unbounded faith in the membership's ability to make "correct" decisions. Besides, while the large sites were looking after themselves, the organisers, fourteen at the Union's peak, could organise those areas which the Union recognised had been largely neglected. These were the Western suburbs and the country areas. Whilst the Western suburbs, mainly because of the nature of building activity which was predominantly single cottage construction, remained a

¹¹⁸ Interview: Brian Rix, 20 December 1977.

¹¹⁹ Jack Mundey, Minutes: General Meeting, 11 June 1968.

troublesome area for the Union, ¹²⁰ country organisation proceeded apace. By 1974 areas as far-flung as Lismore, Coffs Harbour, Gunnedah and Wyong were properly unionised, often for the first time.

In 1973 the Union claimed a membership of 11,000. Rawson shows the national increase in B.L.F. membership between 1969 and 1971 to have risen by 136% compared with an overall union increase of 7% for the same period. Only the Shop Assistants and the Nurses Federation showed a higher percentage increase. There is no doubt that this huge leap in membership was mostly attributable to the building boom but over the same period the B.W.I.U. experienced only a 2% rise, and the F.E.D. & F.A. nil. Although, as Rawson continually points out, there are many reasons why these figures could be inaccurate, such a huge discrepancy cannot satisfactorily be dismissed as a statistical error. Further, it is obvious from B.L.F. records that the N.S.W. Branch grew out of proportion to the other State branches. By 1973 virtually half the membership came from N.S.W.

So the picture that emerges of the building boom in N.S.W. is of a dynamic, well organised B.L.F., increasing numerically in relation to the tradesmen, ¹²² and also in status. The relationship was bound to be a difficult one and the ideological split dramatically compounded the problem.

The most important aspect of the new building methods was not that labouring jobs proliferated at the expense of tradesmen's positions. They did not. The fundamental change was that B.Ls on the whole no longer "assisted" tradesmen but worked autonomously in other skilled or semi-skilled occupations.

Although one might have expected a different result, the statistics show that between 1961 and 1971 the number of carpenters in N.S.W. increased from 14,351 to 18,079 and bricklayers from 3,556 to 7,151.

¹²⁰ Although the Executive continually discussed the problems of organising the Western suburbs it is obvious that a vast improvement had taken place. Don Crotty (Interview: 7 March 1978) for instance mentions that at stop work meetings he met "members from the Western suburbs who previous to the seventies had been billed by the Union for years and had never seen an organiser...and now they were coming along and getting involved".

¹²¹ D.W. Rawson, Unions and Unionists in Australia, p. 36.

¹²² Mundey (Interview: 3 April 1978) estimated that the percentage of builders labourers on a construction site rose from 20% to 35% because of new building methods. The tradesmen believe that the percentage was always "only slightly less than 20% of the building industry workforce" (Building Industry Branch of the S.P.A., Six Turbulent Years, p. 10).

¹²³ Carpenters and bricklayers are the bulk of B.W.I.U. membership.

In the same period the number of builders labourers increased form 7,101 to 9,111. In percentage terms these figures represent a rise of 40% for the tradesmen and only 28% for the labourers. However the tradesmen felt they were losing work. This belief was most obviously expressed in a paper prepared by the B.W.I.U. for the March 1971 Conference of Building Unions. The B.L.F. were also under the impression that "tradesmen's work is getting less and less which means that they have to find other fields of work in the building industry and of course that field is naturally the field of the Builders' Labourers".

What was occurring was not a loss of jobs but a loss of skill and status. The new technology encroached upon the old skills of the tradesmen and enhanced the newly acquired skills of the labourers. The most dramatic changes were the increased use of concrete and the move towards prefabricated components. Concrete, previously only used in foundations, could now be used in a variety of ways, "carried, conveyed, chuted, hoisted, pumped or sprayed". 127 and the B.L.F. had coverage of almost all concrete work. Prefabricated components arrived on-site pre-cut and already painted or coloured. Factory-made truss roofs, ply and particle boards, gyprock plaster boards, pre-cast concrete panels and pre-hung doors all arrived and were placed in position by the huge Favco cranes. 128 Aluminium replaced timber joinery; and plastic pipes, stud-nailing machines and other innovations replaced the craftsmanship of the tradesmen. Although new areas of skill opened up for some tradesmen, such as air-conditioning and sprinkler fitting for the plumbers, and lift installation for the metal-workers, the B.W.I.U. craftsmen became permanently deskilled. Rarely were the old skills of carpenters and bricklayers required on the large building projects. Gone forever was

¹²⁴ C.B.C.S., Building and Construction, 1970-71, Bulletin No. 7, pp. 129-30.

¹²⁵ B.W.I.U., Some Notes on the Building Industry and the Need for Stronger Unions Through Amalgamation, March 1971.

¹²⁶ Statement by Gallagher (Minutes: Federal Conference, November 1965, p.12). He was particularly peeved about the B.W.I.U. log of claims including scaffolding work.

¹²⁷ Pete Thomas, Taming the Concrete Jungle, p.9.

¹²⁸ Crane driver Dick Whitehead, now an F.E.D. & F.A. organiser, believes that Favco cranes were the most important factor in changing the working relationship between the tradesmen and labourers (Interview: 8 June 1980). A good example of the way prefabrication and Favco cranes reduced the need for on-site craft skills was the T & C Whittle project in York Street. 1986 pre-cast concrete exterior panels measuring 15ft x 14ft x 3ft and weighing more than 3½ tons were hoisted into position by B.Ls and crane drivers. No further work was needed. (Construction, 11 November 1971)

the old relationship between the artisan and his assistant who carried his bag and undertook the menial duties while the master performed the difficult tasks of the tradesman. This process of deskilling became so obvious that, "...carpenters on city building sites are a bit of a joke, all they have to do is hang doors and sometimes not even that. Even bosses knew it". 129

With large-scale deskilling taking place even the apprenticeship system began to break down. Apprenticeship has traditionally been viewed as a mechanism whereby craftsmen can control entry into a craft, and craftsmen's unions can control working ratios in the industry.

Rules on apprenticeship and the ratio of helpers to journeymen are set to prevent dilution of work and to maintain the number of jobs for craftsmen. Job duties are similarly defined to ensure the maximum number of jobs.130

Previously a worker in the building industry could only become a member of a tradesman's union if he had completed five years' apprenticeship and passed the appropriate exams. With the changing mode of construction, any worker that the employer deemed fit to perform a certain job, became eligible for union membership and received, regardless of his qualifications, the same rate of pay as the qualified craftsman. Ruth Johnston reports that tradesmen "felt depressed about these unwelcome changes". There is nothing surprising about this reaction. The craftsmen were experiencing a diminution in their ability to control the industry and in their own autonomy. Braverman, in his discussion of Taylorism pin-pointed its real danger as "its essential effort to strip the workers of craft knowledge and autonomous control". This "stripping" process also involved loss of opportunity to exercise "discretion" in the work place, an ingredient which Tawney believed essential for groups of workers who were likely to "push the frontier"

¹²⁹ Interview: Rod Madgwick, 21 December 1977.

¹³⁰ Solomon Barkin, "Labor Unions and Workers' Rights in Jobs" in Arthur Kornhauser, Robert Dubin and Arthur M. Ross (eds), Industrial Conflict, p.123.

¹³¹ One area which opened up for unskilled tradesmen was sprinkler fitting. Although no formal qualifications were necessary, these workers, through militant action, soon won wage rates higher than their fellow members in the Plumbers' Union - a situation bound to cause resentment.

¹³² Ruth Johnston, Partners at Work: Building Workers, their Union and their Employers, p.58.

¹³³ Harry Braverman, Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century, p.136.

of the workmen's control further into the employer's territory". 134
Worse still, the labourers were not losing the power to exercise
"discretion". In many ways they were gaining it. Working on large
building sites in semi-autonomous teams of labourers, 135 constraints
(or lack of discretion) 136 were at a minimum. Although the tradesmen
should not have felt more alienated than the labourers by these changes
because they were still in a privileged position, Hyman reminds us that
notions of "fairness" come into play even when measuring relative
alienation. Previously the tradesmen may have been alienated but they
were "as Marx and Engels put it, 'comfortable and confirmed' in their
alienation". Now they were not even that. Stedman Jones wrote of
the skilled cotton workers:

It was not so much their privileged position as the vulnerability of that position that changed their industrial outlook.138

For the tradesmen their new vulnerability increasingly led them to adopt conservative industrial attitudes.

The B.L.F., which was experiencing the reverse process, reacted predictably to this rise in status. Ralph Kelly described the process of change with great pride:

It required so much labour to actually place the materials on site that the strength of the B.Ls was growing rapidly. We were developing skills that were becoming necessary with the new technology. We became scaffolders, riggers, hoist drivers, dogmen, steel fixers and concrete finishers. We were builders labourers but it was not an artisan's job. It was a labourer's job, a new kind of labourer, a skilled construction worker, a builders labourer!139

As early as 1964 Gallagher attempted to change the name of the Union because he believed that "the work our members are being asked to do was highly skilled and the term 'labourer' does not fit into

¹³⁴ Foreword by R.H. Tawney in Carter L. Goodrich, The Frontier of Control.

¹³⁵ Blauner claims "There is much evidence to support the proposition that the greater the extent to which workers are members of integrated work teams on the job, the higher the level of job satisfaction". Robert Blauner, "Work Satisfaction and Industrial Trends" in Amitai Etzioni (ed.), A Sociological Reader on Complex Organisations, p.239.

¹³⁶ Martin Meissner, "The Long Arm of the Job: A Study of Work and Leisure", Industrial Relations, Vol. 10, No. 3, p.241.

¹³⁷ Richard Hyman, "Inequality, Ideology and Industrial Relations", British Journal of Industrial Relations, Vol. 12, No. 2, p. 175.

¹³⁸ Gareth Stedman Jones, "Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution", New Left Review, No. 90, March/April 1975, p.65.

¹³⁹ Ralph Kelly: Interviewed by Pat Fiske, 1980.

present day conditions". 140

In this situation of flux, demarcation problems were inevitable. The formwork dispute of 1970-71 was a reflection of the need to negotiate tradesman-labourer ratios in new areas of work. On the whole it is remarkable how few disputes occurred between the B.L.F. and the tradesmen's unions in N.S.W. Largely because of an ideological objection to demarcation disputes, the N.S.W. B.L.F. avoided the problems which occurred in other states over issues such as plasterers' work and plumbing installation.

There is some debate as to whether fluid industrial situations such as occurred in the building industry in the sixties and seventies exacerbate or break down traditional trade union sectionalism. Hyman appears to believe that, on the whole such situations are beneficial.

Changes in technology and in the structure of occupations make traditional trade union forms obsolsecent. Old skills are displaced and new ones created; traditionally clear-cut boundaries ...become blurred...Inevitably, such developments demand changes in the internal relationships of the working class. It is reasonable to expect that in future years, capital itself...will continue to undermine traditional trade union sectionalisms.142

Although Hyman does go on to warn that "...the process must be expected to remain gradual and tentative: labour history demonstrates only too clearly the strength of organisational inertia", 143 I feel that he underestimates the psychological threat posed by deskilling and loss of status. The dominant group was no longer "comfortable and confirmed". V.L. Allen also believes that such factors

...create acute exigencies for people who live by selling their labour...they compel existing unions to collaborate or federate or amalgamate; they produce needs for centrally organized class action.144

However his final conclusion is much more pessimistic than Hyman's.

Unions are always made conscious of the need for solidarity and attempt to achieve it but they are hampered and frustrated by forces

¹⁴⁰ Minutes: Federal Conference, November 1964, p. 12.

¹⁴¹ The present N.S.W. B.L.F. leadership opposes this policy and still cites it as one of the faults of the Mundey, Owens, Pringle leadership. In the B.L.F. 1980 Union Handbook, Steve Black wrote: "We will continue to stop other Unions from poaching our work, particularly the B.W.I.U., A.W.U. and the Ironworkers' Union. We should press on with recovering B.L.'s work lost by previous leaderships..."

A.B.C.E. & B.L.F. (N.S.W. Branch), Know Your Rights: Union Handbook 1980, p.3.

¹⁴² Richard Hyman, Industrial Relations: A Marxist Introduction, pp.61-62.

¹⁴³ Ibid., p.62.

¹⁴⁴ V.L. Allen, "The Centenary of the British Trades Union Congress, 1868-1968" in The Socialist Register 1968, p.247.

which are divisive in their impact and which derive from the same environment as that which produces solidarity...Whenever the market mechanism creates a diverse interest, it will in some way divide workers against each other in their struggle against the conditions which that mechanism creates.145

Perhaps the B.W.I.U. would have handled the change of relationship better if the ideological split with the B.L.F. leadership had not taken place. There is little evidence from the other states to test this theory either way. Perhaps it is significant that the relationship which really blossomed under the new conditions was that between the B.L.F. and the F.E.D. & F.A. Members of both unions gained considerable status and strategic power from the new conditions and as Jack Cambourn, Secretary of the F.E.D. & F.A. points out:

F.E.D. & F.A. rank and filers worked with the B.L.F. rank and filers and this explains why the two unions were more involved with each other. Although the metalworkers had more members on building sites [than the F.E.D. &. F.A.] they generally worked as sub-contract groups on air conditioning and lift installation and had little to do with the B.Ls.147

It is probably also significant that rank and file builders labourers were much less likely to be working alongside B.W.I.U. members than previously. However one cannot ascribe the close collaboration between the F.E.D. & F.A. and the B.L.F. purely to structural causes because, once again, ideological factors are involved. The B.L.F. leadership had a close political affinity with the F.E.D. & F.A. leadership, particularly with Cambourn and Vic Fitzgerald, the F.E.D. & F.A. organiser in the building industry. Both Cambourn and Fitzgerald remained with the C.P.A. and were actively involved in all the green ban struggles.

The most obvious material manifestation of the changed relation-ship between the B.W.I.U. and the B.L.F. was the reduced margin won in the 1970 strike. The B.L.F. demands had all been couched in terms of increased skill and "versatility of work performed". The reluctance

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ The B.W.I.U. had varying relationships with the B.L.F. ranging from hostile in South Australia and Victoria to polite in Queensland. But little can be extrapolated from these circumstances because the ideological alignments of the two unions differed from state to state. See chapter 1.

¹⁴⁷ Interview: Jack Cambourn, 1 February 1979.

¹⁴⁸ The relationship was also close at a personal level, in fact Mundey tells the story of being followed home after a Union meeting in the 1950s "by a strange man on a bike" who then proceeded to sign him up in the C.P.A. The "strange man" was Cambourn.

¹⁴⁹ Jack Mundey, "Demand for the 70s: Narrow the Gap", The Builders' Labourer, December 1969, p.1.

of the tradesmen to support these demands was criticised strongly by the B.L.F.:

The mentality of craftism is strong among tradesmen's officials and this often results in unions, including the left ones, giving prior concern to the tradesmen's interests...It appears to me that all hangovers of craftism must be eradicated if we are to build genuine industrial unionism.

Mundey however did not limit his criticisms of craftism just to the building industry. He saw the issue in general terms:

...what relativity of wages should exist between tradesmen and non-tradesmen? It is in the latter category that we find the most exploited of the industrial workers in the steel works, metal factories, motor car plants etc., where the profits are enormous.150

In fact the B.L.F. raised the whole issue of relativity at the 1971 A.C.T.U. Congress. 151

All of this must have been very galling for the B.W.I.U. 152 Once again the notion of "fairness" in industrial relations becomes an important factor.

As there is no absolute criterion for deciding whether wages are fair, workpeople tend to judge fairness by comparing their wages with those of other workpeople... Appeals to the principle [of fairness] thus typically represent claims for the restoration of customary relationships between the pay of different groups. 153

Customary wage relationships, which showed considerable historical stability, implied more than just a difference in earning capacities. They implied different expectations of living standards which were "within a specific range of variation, tacitly recognised by both employers and employed". The tradesmen were not just being threatened on the job by loss of discretion and skill, they were being threatened in their home and social life by a (relative) drop in living standards.

¹⁵⁰ Jack Mundey, "Interview", Australian Left Review, No. 32, September 1971, p.13.

¹⁵¹ Interview: Bob Pringle, 8 March 1978.

¹⁵² Even a unionist ideologically opposed to elitism finds it difficult not to fall back on relativity-type arguments when membership interests are threatened. To be faithful to one's members one must resist moves which will place members in a relatively worse position. This only properly became clear to me when I was caught in a situation where, as a union delegate, I had to argue against redundant C.A.E. staff being found positions in universities because that would relatively lower the status of university academics. It is impossible to avoid craft-type arguments within the present trade union structure.

¹⁵³ Richard Hyman, "Inequality, Ideology and Industrial Relations", British Journal of Industrial Relations, Vol. 12, No. 2, p.176.

¹⁵⁴ Beatrice and Sydney Webb, Industrial Democracy, p. 332.

Although the B.W.I.U.'s position is understandable it does cast some doubt on the claim made by the B.W.I.U. that enmity between the two unions was caused when the B.L.F. "turned its back on combined union action and set out on a course of what came to be correctly described as adventurism and 'one-outism'".

It is obvious from the 1970 strike onwards that the B.W.I.U. felt antipathy towards the labourers. That this antipathy was fuelled by the split in the C.P.A. is best exemplified by the actions of B.W.I.U. organiser Jack Healey. The only B.W.I.U. offical not to break away from the C.P.A., Healey, remained on good terms with the B.L.F. leadership and co-operated with them on many issues. He even spoke at the Rocks Green Ban rally which was not attended by other B.W.I.U. officials. After the formation of the S.P.A., which he did not join, Healey lost his position in the B.W.I.U.

The B.W.I.U.'s repeated charges of "one-outism" against the B.L.F. have to be seen in context. What "one-out" really meant in B.W.I.U. terms was that the B.W.I.U. no longer supported their "extremist policies and actions". In fact all the left-wing unions in Sydney except for those influenced by the S.P.A. continued to support the B.L.F. Even individual officials in right-wing unions such as the A.W.U. and the T.W.U. remained supportive. It is interesting to note that the B.W.I.U. also has a poor relationship with the present B.L.F. leadership, despite its completely different industrial and ideological complexion.

B.W.I.U. rhetoric continually harps on the "united front" theme, perhaps because of its obsession with the formation of the "scab".

A.S.C. & J. in 1948. 160 The clearest demonstration of this thinking

¹⁵⁵ Building Industry Branch of the S.P.A. Six Turbulent Years, p.5.

¹⁵⁶ For example, he gets a special mention in the journal for his help on a building site at Dee Why. <u>Builders Labourer</u>, March 1970, p.7. He is also mentioned in the Executive Minutes throughout the 1970 strike.

¹⁵⁷ Building Industry Branch of the S.P.A., Socialist Building Worker, Vol. 1, No. 4, 24 June 1974, 2pp., roneod, p.1.

¹⁵⁸ The major "left" unions to take action in support of the B.L.F. during Intervention were the Teachers' Federation, the Metalworkers, the F.E.D. & F.A. and the A.T.E.A. A.T.E.A. State President Jack Kreger (Interview: 25 July 1980) claimed that "a few days after we sent a telegram to Gallagher telling him what a Bastard he was, two of his thugs turned up in the office looking for me".

¹⁵⁹ See for instance claims made in Builders' Labourers Rank and File, Building Workers: Why Won't Builders' Labourers Co-operate with the B.W.I.U.?, n.d. (1980), 2pp., roneod.

¹⁶⁰ A good example of this obsession is contained in Building Industry Branch of the S.P.A., Socialist Building Worker, Vol. 1, No. 4, 24 June 1974, p.1.

occurred during the tumultuous 1973-74 period when, horrified by the radical action being taken in the building industry by the B.L.F. and the F.E.D. & F.A., the B.W.I.U. fell back into a "united front" with the right-wing unions. This eventuated in the B.W.I.U. supporting candidates from right-wing building unions such as the Plumbers against B.L.F. candidates in B.T.G. elections. This resulted in a situation where the B.L.F., the second largest union in the B.T.G., did not hold an official position, a most unusual occurrence. The B.W.I.U.'s easy relationship with the right-wing unions stems partially from an agreement arrived at in the fifties between the Left and Right union "heavies" in N.S.W. 161 The agreement was that those unions controlled by the Left would be left untouched by the Right and vice versa.

The B.L.F. belives that the B.W.I.U. set out purposely to isolate them "but they failed".

There is controversy among the labourers over whether the Union could have tried harder to build stronger site committees and whether the Union tried hard enough to get the support of the B.W.I.U. Many rank and filers reported strong site committees and good relations with the tradesmen.

Probably the most successful experience occurred during the Opera House work-in of 1972:

Only when the trade-consciousness barrier was broken and the workers began to look upon each other as workers without any qualifying tags, did any really important gains become possible.165

However other labourers reported situations where "we were ribalded by the tradesmen for demonstrating about the Rocks" or "we tried to get a committee going with the carpenters but their organisers came down and told them to stay well away from us and that we were mad bastards". B.L.F. policy was actively to encourage site committees "but after a while we gave it away, it was bloody awful hard". Or as Joe Owens more elegantly put it:

¹⁶¹ There is no documentary evidence of this agreement but it is regularly cited in conversation as the reason for certain actions.

¹⁶² An agreement which has done much to hinder the growth of militant rank and file movements in right-wing unions in N.S.W. The B.W.I.U. for instance has so rigidly adhered to the "no interference" policy that it refused to support the left-wing federal plumbers in dispute with the right-wing state plumbers.

¹⁶³ Interview: Bud Cook, 5 March 1978.

¹⁶⁴ Good relations and strong site committees were reported at Kingsgate, Qantas, Crystals, Metropolitan Freeholds and Royal North Shore Hospital,

¹⁶⁵ John Wallace and Joe Owens, Workers Call the Tune at Opera House, p. 15.

¹⁶⁶ Interview: Duncan Williams, 25 February 1976.

¹⁶⁷ Interview: Mick McEvoy, 10 October 1977.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

We became used to the idea that the other unions weren't going to give us any support and therefore began depending on ourselves. We moved away quickly in those years. May I say they didn't want to have anything to do with us either.169

Mundey believed that the B.W.I.U. membership did not altogether support their leadership's attitude towards the labourers:

It's not true to say that the carpenters as a whole were against us. There was a lot of good gut feeling towards B.Ls. But workers always have a strong degree of loyalty toward their leaderships and the B.W.I.U. leadership have always put a lot of stress on the word "unity" which appeals to workers and they were successful to some degree in painting us as "Left-wing adventurists".170

The picture that emerges is of two unions on extremely bad terms, one believing the other was "adventurist" and the other rejecting this view. When asked was the enmity industrial or ideological Mundey replied "how can you differentiate?" ¹⁷¹ Joe Owens remarked bitterly: "In action we managed to attract a considerable number of advisers. It's not difficult to find advisers".

There was even a difference in style. Jenny Healey, caught with a foot in both camps, 173 remarked that one of the big differences between the B.L.F. and other unions was:

The B.L.F. was always prepared to take action on the spot whereas other unions like the B.W.I.U. liked to sit down and talk it over for a while.174

Mick McEvoy believed that the B.W.I.U., "the so-called craftsmen, were tied up with notions of respectability...they actually disapproved of us, even the way we dressed".

The important point however is that, disregarding trivialities, the two unions had nothing in common. The B.W.I.U. simply did not believe that the B.L.F. policies were valid. They disapproved of all the innovations which distinguished the N.S.W. B.L.F. from other unions.

Of limited tenure of office they wrote: 176

Anarchistic opposition of union leadership in general led to imposition of a rigid rule automatically removing union leaders

¹⁶⁹ Interview: Joe Owens, 24 January 1978.

¹⁷⁰ Interview: Jack Mundey, 30 March 1978.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Joe Owens, Speech, 2 November 1975.

¹⁷³ She had worked in the B.W.I.U. office before she worked for the B.L.F. Her father-in-law was Jack Healey, a B.W.I.U. official.

¹⁷⁴ Interview: Jenny Healey, 25 January 1978.

¹⁷⁵ Interview: Mick McEvoy, 10 October 1977.

¹⁷⁶ Mundey unkindly remarked "you must remember that Clancy began as a union official as a very young man", (Interview: Jack Mundey, 13 August 1975).

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from office just as they were becoming experienced and capable representatives of the union and the working class.177

They opposed vigilante activity during strikes, ¹⁷⁸ referring to it as "violence" and making no distinction between violence towards people and violence towards private property. They basically opposed workers' control situations on job-sites, believing that real workers control was not achievable in capitalist society while workers did not control the means of production, so to struggle for workers' control on any particular site was a fruitless exercise. ¹⁷⁹ Finally they did not really believe in the policy of green bans. In fact the S.P.A. had an ambivalent attitude towards any form of union bans as was shown by their opposition to bans on war materials being sent to Vietnam. They wrote, "...the decision to withdraw the trips must be made by a government and not by some queer form of workers' control".

Incidents which reveal the B.W.I.U.'s position on green bans were that union's decision to pull out of the Katingal ban when pressure was applied from Labor Council; ¹⁸¹ their decision to refer the Redfern ban in support of Aboriginal Housing to Labor Council; ¹⁸² their hostile attitude to the labourers during the Rocks lock-out; ¹⁸³ and their decision to call for the lifting of most of the green bans in August 1974. ¹⁸⁴ Their attitude towards the bans on Parklea Prison imposed by four building unions in 1979-80 ¹⁸⁵ reinforces the impression that the B.W.I.U. does not see union bans as a valid form of class struggle. Finally not once did B.W.I.U. officials either physically defend or encourage members to physically defend any green ban.

¹⁷⁷ Building Industry Branch of the S.P.A., Six Turbulent Years, p.8.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., pp.24-25.

¹⁷⁹ The S.P.A.'s Socialist Program, p.32, argued: "The present demands for workers' control within the capitalist system...cause confusion, sow illusions, result in class collaboration and divert the working class from the necessary task of extending workers' rights over new fields ...it is necessary to resist the tendency to follow this discredited path of anarcho-syndicalism and Trotskyism". McIntyre claims that the S.P.A. also regarded "workers control" as a threat to the established trade union structure. (Angus McIntyre, "Australia", Yearbook on International Communist Affairs 1974, p.390.)

¹⁸⁰ Australian Socialist, No. 2 cited in Winton Higgins "Reconstructing Australian Communism", The Socialist Register 1974, p. 187.

¹⁸¹ See chapter 8.

¹⁸² Builders Labourer, 1973, p. 35.

¹⁸³ See chapter 7.

¹⁸⁴ See chapter 8.

¹⁸⁵ The B.W.I.U. opposed Jack Cambourn's suggestion that those unions such as the B.W.I.U. who did not have bans imposed should at least refuse to undertake work traditionally done by those unions which did have bans in operation.

The B.L.F.'s ideological break with the B.W.I.U. and the changing relationship between the labourers and tradesmen had as dramatic an impact on the labourers as it had on the tradesmen. The new feeling of confidence is clearly enunciated in their propaganda:

...any meaningful moves towards amalgamation must include the principle of "a rate for the job" determined by the unions and respect for the builders laborers as equals, and not as second-class building workers...[my emphasis]186

This new feeling of equality must not be underrated. Just as rank and file tradesmen felt threatened by deskilling, rank and file labourers felt the power that their new industrial position brought them. More importantly they felt pride in their Union. So many labourers, when interviewed mentioned their new-found self respect before they even mentioned green bans. O'Beirne claimed: "My brief period in the B.Ls gave me a different idea of how I should be treated". Duggan added"we got our identity back and we weren't being cudgelled by other unions". McEvoy explained: "The spirit was different. We were saying 'we're the B.L.F. and ain't nobody kiss my arse'". Baker argued: "It certainly convinced lower paid workers that we weren't garbage, and that we had some rights" and Kevin Cook summed up "the boss wasn't really the boss; we knew it and he knew it".

Dean Barber explained how his own consciousness was affected: What I seen I admired. I seen a group of blokes prepared to get up and look authority in the eye and tell them to get stuffed. That was the first time I'd seen that even though I'd been in some stupid riots inside institutions but they were only one-off situations. Here was a group of blokes prepared to stay, look authority in the eye and keep fighting.

Now for a lot of blokes, that's what they marched down the street about - not green bans.192

I suspect that this feeling was particularly strong among migrants. At one mass meeting in 1974 Viri Pires made an emotional speech where he described how he was no longer just "a wog", he was a builders labourer, "I can hold up my head with pride and say I am a builders labourer". 193

This pride, which was sometimes mistaken for arrogance manifested itself in small ways:

¹⁸⁶ N.S.W. B.L.F., An Urgent Call from Builders Laborers to all Workers, n.d. (1971), 4pp.

¹⁸⁷ Interview: Tony O'Beirne, 2 March 1978.

¹⁸⁸ Interview: Darcy Duggan, 12 July 1977.

¹⁸⁹ Interview: Mick McEvoy, 10 October 1977.

¹⁹⁰ Interview: Bobby Baker, 16 May 1980.

¹⁹¹ Interview: Kevin Cook, 1 December 1976.

¹⁹² Interview: Dean Barber, 18 December 1976.

¹⁹³ Tape recorded, October 1974.

Years before, blokes didn't say they were builders labourers. If someone asked them in the pub they'd say "I'm in the building game" or "I'm just a labourer" but now they'd say, "I'm a builders labourer" because there was a certain amount of dignity attached to it.194

When B.L.F. officials approached building sites they no longer sought out the employer to tell him they wanted to speak to the members. Bosses were lucky to get a nod of acknowledgement from the average B.L.F. organiser. I actually observed one employer becoming steadily more perplexed as Bob Pringle giggled while he (the employer) was laying down the law.

The rank and file became imbued with a similar disrespectful attitude towards the boss. This was enhanced by the Union leadership's policy that rank and file initiative in industrial disputes was to be encouraged. The strikes of 1970 and 1971 had developed an independence among the members. Tom Hogan, city organiser, recalled:

At that stage [1971] stoppages would occur and you'd only find out two hours later that they'd stopped. Once I went to seven stopwork meetings in a day. There was a tremendous amount of initiative taken by the men on the job.196

Further more, even without active leadership encouragement it is likely that the status of rank and file members vis-a-vis officials would have been enhanced. Both Hinton and Hyman 197 and Bentley have observed that in times of depression and unemployment the focus of power and influence within unions shifts upwards towards full-time officials. The corollary of this is obvious. In boom conditions, such as existed in the building industry at the time, the employers' vulnerability to militant demands and his inability to suppress job-site activity through victimisation and the threat of dismissal greatly enhanced the position that rank and file activity can occupy in union strategy.

Another point which Hyman touches upon is the workers perception of the mechanics of material improvement. He uses as an illustration Lenin's discussion of the workers' bread - the fact that a Petrograd worker perceived that, after the July days: "'They' dare not give us bad

¹⁹⁴ Interview: Seamus Gill, 28 December 1977.

¹⁹⁵ Jack Mundey, "Job Activity the Key", <u>Builders Labourer</u>, December 1968, p.7.

¹⁹⁶ Interview: Tom Hogan, 28 October 1977.

¹⁹⁷ James Hinton and Richard Hyman, Trade Unions and Revolution: The Industrial Politics of the Early British Communist Party, p.18.

¹⁹⁸ Philip Bentley, "Australian Trade Unionism", in Henry Mayer and Helen Nelson (eds), Australian Politics: A Fourth Reader, p.248.

bread now". 199 Although not totally analogous I think it is important that the labourers correctly perceived from where their improved conditions and status stemmed. They saw clearly that it was from their own activity and that of their Union that their improved wages and conditions flowed. Whenever labourers spoke of the amenities they had won (and these were so often cited as the major symbol of their improved status, rather than the wage increases) they never once saw the employers as the benefactors. "We got stuck into the builders. We demanded hot showers and we got them. We demanded lined sheds, fridges, stoves, and improved safety - and we got them."

However many of the above factors were common to other groups of "unskilled" workers in the period. What further conditions differentiated builders labourers from process workers or waterside labourers?

Perhaps the most significant difference was the itinerant nature of the work. An industry which relied on a mobile labour force ready to move from job to job and employer to employer had produced an itinerant, "knockabout" culture among builders labourers. It was accepted that labourers would suffer periods of unemployment between jobs. It had also been accepted that employment was not secure or stable. Dismissal rates in the building industry has always been high.

Itinerancy builds a culture with specific characteristics. It was not by chance that the Wobblies' most fruitful recruiting grounds were among migratory workers. Itinerant work not only induces a state of mind in those involved, it also attracts to it a certain type of personality. The employers' perceptions of who such people were, are interesting. Rydge's believed that the building boom attracted "a lot of men from the sea with a tradition of radical unionism". A building industry employer claimed that the full employment situation forced the industry to use workers who "are neither interested in nor

¹⁹⁹ V.I. Lenin, "Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?" (1917),

Collected Works, Vol. XIV, p.120, cited in Richard Hyman, Marxism
and the Sociology of Trade Unionism, p.51.

²⁰⁰ Interview: Ralph Kelly, 13 December 1977.

²⁰¹ This expression was continually used by the labourers themselves to describe their attitude towards life.

²⁰² The tradesmen were less itinerant, both because of the value of their craft skills to their employer and also because many tradesmen, while changing work sites may be employed by the same contractor for many years. Thus continuity of employment is more likely.

²⁰³ Many of the labourers interviewed mentioned the itinerancy of the industry as the reason for their becoming builders labourers.

²⁰⁴ Rydge's, July 1973, p.25.

suitable for permanent employment". 205

While conclusive figures on itinerancy in the industry are not available, the <a href="Interim Report of the Inquiry into Employment in the Building Industry" does suggest that employers generally held similar views to those quoted above. However the union did not fully agree:

The employers' view was that the main reason for termination of employment was the voluntary act of the worker; the high turnover level was due to the independent nature of the building worker. On the other hand, the unions' view was that some employees leave for reasons related to retrenchment reasons. For instance, a worker might voluntarily leave one job close to its completion to go to another project just beginning.207

The tables in the Interim Report on labour turnover 208 also suggest that the accepted B.L.F. wisdom that the Union suffered a 50% turnover in membership each year 209 was probably as close to accurate as such estimations can be. The various surveys showed that movement into and out of the industry did not change as dramatically as might have been expected during the industry's expansion period. This is probably explained by the fact that the 50% turnover figure relates mainly to unticketted labourers and whilst those ticketted men who intended to remain builders labourers were able to stay on specific jobs for longer, the unskilled labourers remained just as mobile. So, although the actual number of unskilled labourers who remained in the Union for long periods increased, the percentage did not. However the Report did continue:

The figures suggest that the building industry has a higher percentage of persons whose jobs have lasted less than one year than industry as a whole. There is also a higher percentage of jobs of less than 13 weeks duration. However when building tradesmen are compared with tradesmen in other industries it appears that the differences are less marked; the same applies to labourers. The differences are greater between tradesmen and labourers in the building industry than between these groups in the building industry and comparable groups in other industries.211

So the Inquiry's findings reinforce the view that job duration was short,

²⁰⁵ Cited in John Hutton, Building and Construction in Australia, p.211.

²⁰⁶ Elizabeth Andreas Evatt, <u>Interim Report of the Inquiry into</u>
Employment in the Building Industry, April 1975, 86pp. roneod.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 17.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., especially pages 14-18.

²⁰⁹ See for example Gallagher's report in Minutes: Federal Conference, November 1968, p. 47; and Paul Gardiner, "Union Power and Developers (once naughty words) Beat the Bad Old Days", Australian Financial Review, 7 June 1973.

²¹⁰ Elizabeth Andreas Evatt, Interim Report of the Inquiry into Employment in the Building Industry, p.17.

²¹¹ Ibid.

even for tradesmen. What it fails to throw light upon is the period of unemployment between jobs:

The Inquiry sought information about unemployment in the building industry and the period a building worker has to wait between the finish of one job and the start of the next job - the time during which he is willing and able to find one...Very little information was discovered.212

I would venture that the culture of itinerancy was as important in modelling industrial attitudes as was the actuality of instability and the threat of unemployment. There is no evidence from my interviews that ticketted labourers with secure job prospects, had markedly different attitudes than the unticketted labourers. According to Mick McEvoy this is because "lairs are attracted to those sorts of jobs [i.e. dogman, rigger, scaffolder] in the first place". Presumably dangerous, outdoor work contributes to a "knockabout" culture as much as does itinerancy. 214

Another epithet which the labourers attracted or used about themselves was "larrikin". Seamus Gill commented:

The larrikin style was definitely there and I think we worried some of the respectable trade union officials. We didn't wear suits and ties or anything like that. I think a lot of that comes from working in a ratshit job to begin with - not the best of conditions. It does tend to make you a bit more of a knockabout.215

McEvoy believed that the "larrikin" style came from a "nothing to lose" mentality: "If you're the lowest of the low then who gives a f...". 216

Once again the similarity to the Wobblies is striking:

Their lives were accompanied by the ever present threat of unemployment. They had no incentive for the acquisition of property or the establishment of family relationships. Their nomadic life engendered a spirit of self-reliance and rebelliousness and an alienation from the bourgeois social order.217

A cursory analysis of the home lives of the 46 builders labourers I interviewed certainly seems to confirm this view. Only seven were married and living in a family situation and only four owned or were buying a house. But of course I was only interviewing activists and this would probably distort the figures towards a more "nomadic" profile.

²¹² Ibid., p.19.

²¹³ Interview: Mick McEvoy, 10 October 1977.

²¹⁴ There was a tendency among these groups to see industrial action in terms of "get what you can as quick as you can" (Interview: Roy Bishop, 10 March 1977).

²¹⁵ Interview: Seamus Gill, 28 December 1977.

²¹⁶ Interview: Mick McEvoy, 10 October 1977.

²¹⁷ Gordon Adler, "The I.W.W. and the Fight Against Imperialist War", Socialist Worker, No. 4, Winter 1978, p.41.

A general characteristic of builders labourers though is their youth. It is a physically demanding occupation and evidence suggests it became even more so during the building boom. The Union journal recorded in 1966:

Because of the strain of multi-storey work, most of our delegates and active unionist are young. (In fact the pressure of building construction today makes it difficult for most men over 45.) However we do have tough veterans who help by blending their experience with the drive of the younger blokes.218

During the 1970 strike, old timer Theo Austin commented: "The strike... showed that younger workers had what it takes" which indicates that the vigilantes were probably young. Mundey believed that "even the older people like Dick Prendergast and others were generally in a mood of being young":

When the B.Ls started to buzz it was a pretty young-thinking outfit. I can't think, looking back, on any serious division between old and young. I suppose on some issues like women in the industry the older men were less inclined to take that step - but it was seen as a pretty important step in an all-male enclave.220

By the 1970s all the organisers except Prendergast were in their twenties or thirties which is very young compared with most other unions. Mundey claims that the great advantage of this situation was that "there was no old entrenched hierarchy in the Union".

Finally, in discussing the factors that create militancy in the building industry it is interesting to note that historically the industry has provided good revolutionaries. Writing of Marx's efforts to enlist trade union support for the First International, Collins and Abramsky write:

Throughout its history the International's trade union support was to come largely from building unions and from such relatively backward industries as tailoring, clothing, shoemaking and cabinet making. In mining engineering and in heavy industry generally, its strength was to remain small or non-existent.222

So having established that the building industry and the occupation of builders labourer have certain characteristics that engender militancy,

²¹⁸ Builders' Labourer, July August 1966, p.11.

²¹⁹ Minutes: Executive Meeting, 16 June 1970.

²²⁰ Interview: Jack Mundey, 3 April 1978. I have been able to find little material on the difference that age makes in industrial outlook.

Joe Eyer, "The Society we Face" in Root and Branch (eds), The Rise of the Workers' Movements, p.110, touches upon the subject but comes to no firm conclusions.

²²¹ Interview: Jack Mundey, 13 August 1975.

²²² Henry Collins and Chimen Abramsky, <u>Karl Marx and the British Labour</u>
Movement: Years of the First International, p.70.

what factors specific to the Union itself would also contribute towards a radical philosophy?

There are three main factors that must be taken into account. The first two relate to the history of the N.S.W. B.L.F. and the final one relates to its size.

First, the protracted and difficult campaign against the gangster regimes of the fifties and sixties had greatly affected those who were to become the leadership. As Trotsky deduced:

It is only in the course of long struggles, severe trials, many vacillations, and extensive experience, that insight as to the right ways and methods dawns upon the minds of the best elements of the working class, the vanguard of the masses. This applies equally to party and trade union.223

Second, the fact that when the Rank and File took "office" in 1961 they were basically without any of the facilities, staff, experience or structure of a normal union, meant that, in terms of theoretical analysis, the Union could almost be regarded as a "new" union. This meant that the whole process of "taming" described by Lester in As Unions Mature 224 was inhibited. Co-option and incorporation can and does occur at all stages in a union's growth but is much less likely in its early stages. Like the militants described by Hinton and Hyman who "tended to see themselves as rank-and-file leaders first; as aspirants to full-time union office second", 225 the B.L.F. leadership moved in and out of full time Union positions with apparent ease. Even before the introduction of limited tenure most of the senior officials such as Bud Cook, Brian Hogan, Tom Hogan, Peter Barton, Roy Bishop and Duncan Williams all voluntarily returned to "the tools" for lengthy periods. Even Joe Owens who became Secretary in 1973 returned to industry in 1970. The journal remarked:

Joe Owens, who has been organising for the past year, has decided to return to industry. Joe did a very good job as organiser, but despite the fact that everyone appreciated Joe's ability, he could not be talked into remaining an official. Everyone realises what a fine job Joe performed, but we also realise he will do the same job back at his place of work.226

The leadership of the Union during the seventies was not an entrenched oligarchy. Except for Mundey, not one official had held a position for

²²³ Leon Trotsky, "A Necessary Discussion With Our Syndicalist Comrades", in Leon Trotsky on the Trade Unions, p.8.

²²⁴ Richard A. Lester, As Unions Mature, Princeton, 1966.

²²⁵ James Hinton and Richard Hyman, Trade Unions and Revolution: The Industrial Politics of the Early British Communist Party, p.12.

²²⁶ Builders' Labourer, July 1970, p.7.

more than a few years.

Finally, the size of the Union was also a radicalising force. Despite the impression fostered by the mass media, the N.S.W. B.L.F. was not a large union. At its height it only boasted 11,000 members. Mundey regarded the Union's size as being significant: "There was a lot we could do as a small union we couldn't have done if we were bigger". Robert Michels describes in detail how the "iron law of oligarchy" operates as organisations expand but Lester summarises the position succinctly:

As the organisation grows in size and its activities and responsibilities enlarge, it faces new problems of administration, discipline and public relations. The need for specialists becomes more pressing, a hierarchy and bureaucracy tend to develop, and the relationship of top officials to the rank-and-file grows more impersonal. Some functions and decisions shift from the local to higher levels in the organisation. And, as the top positions come to require more administrative and manipulative talents, the oratorical agitators are superseded by skilful managers.229

The B.L.F. leadership did not really have time for these problems to develop nor did the Union's size present any great difficulties. Mundey as Secretary visited jobs less frequently than when he was city organiser, but his day-to-day contact with those members who were in dispute maintained a close link with the rank and file. Such was the activity of the period that it would have been rare for a builders labourer to go a month without personal contact with an organiser. Also, the way in which the Union office was organised encouraged members to "drop in with their problems" or just to socialise. Tom Hogan recalls how, when the Union moved to Room 28 of Trades Hall in 1971, they purposely organised the interior so that "there was no counter between the organisers and the members like there is in other union offices". 230 Members took advantage of this welcoming atmosphere and would gather around the coffee machine during strikes or after work to discuss the Union's activities. 231 Bob Pringle maintains that the caretaker of Trades Hall once complained to him: "Not only do I have to open the joint an hour earlier 232 now that you're here but nine out of ten blokes that

²²⁷ Interview: Jack Mundey, 13 August 1975.

²²⁸ Robert Michels, Political Parties, New York, 1959.

²²⁹ Richard Lester, As Unions Mature, p. 22.

²³⁰ Interview: Tom Hogan, 28 October 1977.

²³¹ This situation created some problems for the female clerical staff. See chapter 9.

²³² The B.L.F. officials began work at 7.00 a.m. This was later changed to 7.30 a.m. Few unions open their offices before 8.30 a.m.

come through the door are headed for Room 28". 233

Because the Union's size remained manageable the "need for specialists" did not become a problem. Besides, the Union's policy on such matters was rigid. All officials, even industrial officers and publications editors, had to come from the shop floor. Only one N.S.W. B.L.F. official had more than an elementary education, a situation which distinguished them from other unions in the building industry and from the Federal and Victorian bodies of their own Union.

Perhaps another aspect of the Union's size which may have contributed towards a militant stance was that, with the rapid expansion of the industry, the officials found it very difficult to unionise the outer suburbs and the country areas adequately. Although this was a serious organisational problem it did mean that the majority of the Union membership were willing unionists, well serviced and therefore highly politicised. There were few "conscripts" of the type that industrial relations analysts write about. Because of the weakness of the Union's organisation on the small scattered sites in the outer suburbs, these workers tended to be non-unionists rather than reluctant unionists. Those labourers "conscripted" to join the Union on larger, more central sites soon learned the advantages of belonging to an active, militant

²³³ Interview: Bob Pringle, 8 March 1978. A situation which provoked much comment and hilarity was the fact that the room next to the B.L.F. in Trades Hall which was occupied by the Felt Hatters Union, was always totally deserted whereas Room 28 was always overflowing. Myths were created about what went on in Room 27 and inspired one of B.L.F. organiser/entertainer Seamus Gill's better songs "For the Felt Hatters Union Had a Very Good Year".

²³⁴ Bill Holley, a failed medical student, had been working at the Opera House for a year before being asked by Mundey to stand as publications officer.

²³⁵ The B.W.I.U. regularly recruits University graduates to act as research officers, industrial officers etc. These officials also act as organisers. The P.G.E.U.A. which has a similar policy to the N.S.W. B.L.F. has no organisers who are not plumbers but does employ a non-plumber as Federal research officer. He takes no part in decision making. The F.E.D. & F.A. normally recruits officials from the shop floor but the present State Secretary Serge Zorrino is a university graduate.

²³⁶ The present N.S.W. and Federal B.L.F. recruitment patterns are different from the other building unions. Although many B.L.F. officials have university educations, they are normally selected from amongst "Maoist" student groups and spend a statutory few months as a builders labourer to qualify as a "real worker". Some officials to whom this situation apply are Dan Hillier (Assistant Federal Secretary), Peter Galvin (N.S.W. Assistant Secretary) and Jim Dixon (N.S.W. official). In the circumstances it is ironic that one of Gallagher's attacks on the N.S.W. Branch was that it had become middle class.

union and often became enthusiastic leadership supporters. So the outcome was that those workers who in less diverse and more easily organised industries, become unwilling and therefore conservative members of the union, were less influential as a conservatising force.

Possibly the most interesting radicalising force operating on the N.S.W. B.L.F. was the ideological climate within which they were acting. Especially significant was the effect of this climate on the C.P.A., but the shift in people's political priorities was quite general. Even the A.L.P. became imbued with "new left" philosophy during the sixties and early seventies. Connell describes the Whitlam leadership's move towards "a pluralist and anti-racist foreign policy, action to improve the position of aborigines and of women, [and] attempts to involve local 'communities' in the process of planning". 237

Most of the central precepts which distinguished "new left" ideology were common to other countries. The demands "by ordinary people to have some control over their own lives in a meaningful way" 238 were widespread. Most theoretical concerns which have come to be identified as specifically "new left" spring from this central demand. Issues such as personal liberation; participatory democracy; the struggle against racism and sexism; direct action forms of political activity; community decision-making; and environmentalism were all encompassed by the B.L.F. in their struggle and all involved, according to Joe Owens, the question of "who makes the decisions".

The leadership all agreed that "new left" ideology had influenced them but when questioned about specific acts such as the introduction of limited tenure, claim that "it arose out of the struggles we'd had within the B.Ls". It is certainly true that, although limited tenure had been discussed within the Left, that it was the B.L.F. which actually initiated the practice in Australia. Similarly with other "new left" issues, the soften the B.L.F. that put into practice what for others was idealistic theory. Libertarian and squatter Wendy Bacon described the process:

²³⁷ R.W. Connell, Ruling Class, Ruling Culture, p.115.

²³⁸ Ken Tarbuck, "Students and Trade Unions" in Ken Coates, Tony Topham and Michael Barratt Brown (eds), Trade Union Register, London 1969, p.105.

²³⁹ Joe Owens, Speech, 2 November 1975.

²⁴⁰ Interview: Joe Owens, 4 April 1978.

²⁴¹ Bruce McFarlane even suggested forms of limited tenure for politicians and public servants. Bruce McFarlane, "Challenging the Control of the Australian Economic System", in Richard Gordon (ed.), The Australian New Left: Critical Essays and Strategy, p.120.

²⁴² The subjects mentioned have all been dealt with in other chapters.

New Left-type politics, taking control of your own life, community politics - what seemed to flow on from all that was the B.L.F. It was the lifeblood, the only thing that gave us a fighting chance; squatting was really very secondary. But the B.L.F. was taking on the whole thing of property and capital in a direct way. It was so much more direct and clear cut than anything I'd been involved with before.243

It is not crucial to decide whether "new left" ideology influenced the B.L.F. or vice versa. As with the C.P.A. it was obviously a two way interaction. The point to make is that in the "new left" climate of the period the B.L.F. style was allowed to flourish and develop. As one labourer remarked, the B.L.F. "reflected the times". 244 It is hard to properly encapsulate the "euphoria which enveloped the left in those heady times". 245 Frank Moorehouse's description, Days of Wine and Rage is as accurate as a personal chronicle can be. Donald Horne actually makes the point that:

Even Wendy Bacon's <u>Tharunka</u> and Jack Mundey's green bans, though founded in local idiom and reflecting local traditions, and able to be explained in local terms, arose at the time they did from moods (of permissiveness and environmentalism respectively) that were similar to moods overseas.247

Another important ingredient in the political climate in Australia was also occurring overseas. This was the intense interest in workers' control-type issues being shown by the C.P.A. and other left groups. The C.P.A., which had been pushing the issue since the late 1960s²⁴⁸ sponsored a Workers Control Conference in Newcastle in 1973²⁴⁹ which was a resounding

²⁴³ Interview: Wendy Bacon, 16 January 1978. Roelof Smilde, another Libertarian, believed that the B.L.F.'s "direct action approach" was what appealed to most Libertarians. (Interview: 11 March 1978).

²⁴⁴ Interview: Warwick Neilley, 21 January 1978.

²⁴⁵ Richard Hyman, "British Trade Unionism: Post-war Trends and Future Prospects", <u>International Socialism</u>, Series 2, No. 8, Spring 1980, p.69.

²⁴⁶ Frank Moorehouse, Days of Wine and Rage.

²⁴⁷ Donald Horne, Time of Hope: Australia 1966-72, p.84.

²⁴⁸ See for example, Bernie Taft, "Communists and Workers' Control",
Australian Left Review, No. 6, December 1969; Bruce McFarlane,
"Theories and Practices of Workers' Control", Australian Left Review,
No. 6, December 1969; Brian T. Carey, "Workers' Control Today and
Tomorrow", Australian Left Review, No. 6, December 1969; H. Austin,
"In Defence of Workers' Control", Australian Left Review, No. 6,
December 1969; and Joe Palmada, "Trade Unions and Revolutionary
Strategy", Australian Left Review, No. 37, October 1972.

²⁴⁹ Broadsheet, National Workers Control Conference, Newcastle, Easter 1973, 4pp. Authorised by John Wallace for the N.W.C.C.

success, being attended by 446 delegates from four states. Work-ins occurred in various industries in the early 1970s, mostly but not always with overt C.P.A. encouragement. Miners took control at the South Clifton colliery and Nymboida; metal workers at Harco Steel at Silverwater; building workers at the Opera House; female process workers at a glove factory in Whyalla; and builders' labourers at Lanray (Sussex Street) Dillinghams (Clarence Street) and Miruzzi South Seas (Wyong).

Both the B.L.F. and the C.P.A. monitored with interest the progress of the U.C.S. Work-in in Britain and Mundey discussed workers' control issues on an A.B.C. "Lateline" programme with Jimmy Reid. 255 Mundey emphasised that most work-ins were defensive acts which occurred over retrenchments whereas B.L.F. work-ins were always offensive and labourers' demands were always more than simply the right to work. Workers control for the B.L.F. was another of those demands which sprang from the desire to control one's own life, the desire to "make one's own decisions".

Many of the "new left" who had been radicalised by the Vietnam issue and later the Springbok tour, were beginning to feel the need for a focal point. "New left" ideology particularly in Sydney under the strong influence of Andersonian libertarianism was quite specifically "anti-Party". The small Trotskyist groupings had absorbed some of the ex-student radicals as had a rapidly de-Stalinised C.P.A. but basically a vacuum had occurred for the non-party activists. Those who had drifted into "Community politics", Resident Action Groups and squatting campaigns soon came in contact with the B.L.F. As the B.L.F. widened its scope to include women's issues, prisoners, blacks, and homosexuals, it began to form a rallying point for the unattached left. The B.L.F.'s blend of

²⁵⁰ Gavin Souter, "Sacking the Boss", Sydney Morning Herald, 28 July 1973.

A detailed report on the Conference was included in <u>Builders' Labourer</u>,
June 1973, p. 19. Mundey was a speaker and other officials attended.

²⁵¹ See Pete Thomas, The Nymboida Story: The Work-ins that Saved a Coalmine.

²⁵² See Lloyd Caldwell and Mick Tubbs, The Harco Work-in: An Experience of Workers' Control. The B.L.F. donated \$100 to this "very imaginative dispute which all of the progressive section of the Labor movement is watching with interest". Correspondence: J. Mundey to George Marks, 3 December 1971.

²⁵³ See John Wallace and Joe Owens, Workers Call the Tune at Opera House.

²⁵⁴ See Jim Moss, Industrial Relations or Workers Control: South Australian Experiences, March 1973, 31pp. roneod.

²⁵⁵ Interviews with Jack Mundey and Jimmy Reid, A.B.C. "Lateline", 20 May 1975.

"new left" idealism and morality, blended with the rough larrikin element of macho working class toughness, was an irresistible mixture for the basically middle class "new left". Mundey was one of the first to see the importance of this alliance:

It wasn't really until I got involved with the Resident Action Groups that the importance of the more enlightened middle class and the more enlightened working class coming together really hit me.257

The B.L.F. with its range of class support and its comprehensive ideology became almost a party. 258

Its adherents wore "B.L.F. Supporters" badges and carried bumper stickers proclaiming "Green Bans Forever" and "BLF supports green bans - We support the BLF". As Trotsky described the French syndicalists, "...what else is an active minority, held together by the unity of their ideas, if not a party?"

The clincher, according to Wendy Bacon, was the B.L.F.'s ability to provide positive direct action solutions. This appealed both to the idealists and the activists among the Sydney left.

With the Rocks and Victoria Street, when hundreds of police were brought out and the B.L.F. still won - that's pretty exciting stuff for most left-wingers.260

The continual physical involvement and the sheer pace at which the Union moved provided almost daily surges of adrenalin. Although this frenetic activity attracted support from both inside and outside the Union, it had its drawbacks. Owens remarked: "There was too much going on but there was nothing we could do about it". Darcy Duggan explained further:

We got a dirty big world moving and it was gaining momentum. We were moving too fast for a small union and we couldn't slacken up because people were coming to us with their problems when no other trade union would help them.262

²⁵⁶ It is probably significant that 1973, the year that really marked the B.L.F.'s burst into national prominence was also the year that Paul Hogan's "ocker rigger from the Harbour Bridge" character first became popular.

²⁵⁷ Interview: Jack Mundey, 3 April 1978.

²⁵⁸ There is evidence that even some of the labourers regarded the B.L.F. as a party. Graham Pitts (Interview: 2 May 1980) and Mick King (Interview: 2 May 1980) both gave party-type arguments for why they joined the B.L.F. King, a fifteen year old when he joined the B.L.F. said, "I thought at the time they were the people that would bring the most social change for the workers' movement".

²⁵⁹ Leon Trotsky, "A Necessary Discussion with our Syndicalist Comrades" in Leon Trotsky on the Trade Unions, p.9. W. (Big Bill) Haywood also described the I.W.W. as "free to develop...its own political reflection, a party of the working class". William D. Haywood, Bill Haywood's Book: The Autobiography of William D. Haywood, p.222.

²⁶⁰ Interview: Wendy Bacon, 16 January 1978.

²⁶¹ Interview: Joe Owens, 26 January 1981.

²⁶² Interview: Darcy Duggan, 12 July 1977.

As all the activists commented, it was difficult to find a period for consolidation. Not only were requests for green bans snowballing as residents became aware that there was an environmentally conscious union able to help them; but attacks from the employers, police, government and media were also building up. At times the Union seemed to be in a state of perpetual seige.

There would also appear to have been a "bodily dimension" to the activists' life during this period. The long hours and the constant pressure would have caused physical breakdown without such an extra dimension. Connell, in his discussion of Sartre's general formulation of the relation of the body and social process through labour, writes:

...complex and highly conscious social practices, such as liberation struggles, have a bodily dimension. People actually feel different, have a heightened sensibility and greater energy, in the upswing of a major strike or resistance movement.264

Bob Pringle gave his explanation for the leadership's remarkable resilience:

We always had the members to fall back on. They were solid and that was our strength. See, someone like Jimmy [Staples] has to fight on his pat [own]. He's got no one to pull him into line or to back him up. We always had the rank and file.265

That the leadership had the majority support of the rank and file cannot be doubted. Besides comfortable election wins throughout the sixties and in 1970 and 1973, the leadership won every major confrontation with the employers from the 1970 strike until Federation Intervention. As Sheridan has commented:

Even if it were accepted, for the sake of argument, that somehow Communists were able to initiate strikes at will, such stoppages must speedily collapse without the support of the mass of non-communist rank and file union members. To believe otherwise is to ignore the realities of industrial conflict. 266

The leadership was highly regarded for its hard work on wages and

²⁶³ Jean-Paul Sartre, Critique of Dialectical Reason, London, 1976.

²⁶⁴ R.W. Connell, How Should We Theorize Patriarchy?, March 1980, 11pp. roneod, p.4.

²⁶⁵ Interview: Bob Pringle, 8 March 1978.

²⁶⁶ T. Sheridan, Mindful Militants: The Amalgamated Engineering Union in Australia 1920-1972, p.224.

conditions issues; its honesty; ²⁶⁷ its accessibility ²⁶⁸ and its solidarity. The unusual consensus-style of leadership decision making was widely known about and commented upon among the members: "The media always talked about Jack Mundey deciding this or saying that but we knew that it had been a collective decision". ²⁶⁹ One of the interesting features of the officials' relationships was the ideological closeness of Mundey and Pringle. Despite the fact that Pringle was active in the left of the A.L.P. his political philosophy was identical to Mundey's: "Jack and I had that same open approach to everything. We believed everybody should have the right to be wrong. We had the same reactions to situations".

The reason that such similarity of ideological position could be adopted by members of two different parties was because the left of the A.L.P. in Australia had never developed an independent political position as had the <u>Tribune</u> Group in Britain, and had remained an essentially C.P.A. fellow-travelling pressure group within the A.L.P. Also the C.P.A. was undergoing immense changes within its own organisation in the late sixties and early seventies. The invasion of Czechoslovakia finally aired the tensions in the Party rather than causing them. As Mundey pointed out, the program which arose out of the 1967 C.P.A. Congress, <u>Australia and the Way Forward</u> shared many similarities with the Czech action program of the same period and certain sections of the Party had been very influenced by the debate going on in Prague around Dubcek's reform.

²⁶⁷ The officials were regularly offered bribes to lift green bans. The fact that no bans were lifted except at residents' request implies that no bribes were accepted. Mundey relates one such incident in an interview with Passing Show (10 October 1978, p.10). The developer (un-named) offered him \$20 million to allow the Woolloomooloo green ban to be lifted to allow half the original development proposal to take place. "He [the developer]...said 'I believe you can't be bought but nominate any charity you like (I thought of Jack Mundey, Switzerland immediately) and you can have 10% of the proceeds'. So we are talking now in really huge amounts of money."

²⁶⁸ As mentioned previously, most of the officials had worked in the industry for long periods so were well known among the members.

²⁶⁹ Interview: Viri Pires, 30 November 1976.

²⁷⁰ Interview: Bob Pringle, 8 March 1978.

²⁷¹ C.P.A., Australia and the Way Forward, 1967.

²⁷² Correspondence: J.B. Mundey to the Editor, Outlook, 30 October 1968.

²⁷³ Interview: Laurie Aarons, 28 December 1977.

completely by surprise. 274 Even those who eventually came out in support of the "intervention" expressed disbelief. 275 Mundey announced to the Union Executive that the news was "shattering" 276 and the September Branch meeting passed a resolution that: "The A.B.L.F. (N.S.W. Branch) unequivocally opposes the action of the U.S.S.R. and other members of the Warsaw treaty in occupying Czechoslovakia". 277 As previously discussed, the Czechoslovakian situation caused total consternation in the building industry: "It was terrible...white heat...there were even punch-ups on jobs". 278 Clancy resigned from the C.P.A. in August 1970 and most of the B.W.I.U. officials followed him into the S.P.A. when it was formed.

The industrial differences within the C.P.A. which had been merely simmering before 1968, burst into the open. The Aarons faction had become increasingly dissatisfied with the "narrowness, conservatism and timidity" of certain Communist union officials. Tom O'Lincoln describes this conservatism as being typified by "a fear of confrontation [combined] with the desire for unity at any price". Certainly, Mundey's complaints in the famous Australian Left Review article echoes these judgements. Clancy, naturally, did not see the situation in the same light. He claimed:

Attacks were made upon the standing of various trade union leaders who held positions in the Party, some of these attacks were open, some were snide. As part of the preparation for an ultra-left-line

²⁷⁴ Several hours after the news arrived in Australia I was part of an impromptu demonstration which had gathered in Martin Place. I was included in a delegation which was sent to C.P.A. Headquarters to ascertain their reaction. The place was in turmoil. Laurie Aarons asked us to wait for half an hour. Eventually, after many phone calls, he informed us that the C.P.A. opposed the invasion and C.P.A. members accompanied us back to the demonstration.

²⁷⁵ Janet Hancock (Interview: 24 May 1981) was Pat Clancy's private secretary at the time. She said: "I don't think they believed it. They were running round like chooks with their heads cut off. Clancy's letter to Labor Council on the matter got re-drafted fifteen times. At first he strongly condemned the action and then it got watered down."

²⁷⁶ Minutes: Executive Meeting, 27 August 1968.

²⁷⁷ Minutes: General Meeting, 3 September 1968.

²⁷⁸ Interview: Joe Owens, 24 January 1978.

²⁷⁹ Tribune, 12 August 1970.

²⁸⁰ Eric Aarons, "As I Saw the Sixties", Australian Left Review, No. 27, October-November 1970, p.68. Aarons mentioned in particular the C.P.A. National Committee call for a challenge to the penal clauses in February 1969. "This fell largely on deaf ears among communist union officials."

²⁸¹ Tom O'Lincoln, "The Communist Party Since the War", <u>International</u> Socialist, No. 8, Autumn 1979, p.33.

in the trade union movement an all out attack was made against trade union officials generally declaring them to be conservative, seeking to push trade union comrades on to a so-called "revolutionary" line, a left sectarian adventurist line which had proved so disastrous in past periods.282

Not all members of the Party with conservative industrial philosophies did break away. This was especially true in Melbourne where cadres such as John Sendy "with an eye to the dangers of leftism" ²⁸³ remained in the C.P.A. Winton Higgins believes that:

In certain areas, particularly Victoria where the earlier split [1963-4] had hit the party hardest, active steps were taken to prevent the defection of elements which had most in common with the splitters. Thus many who were still steeped in the old stalinist traditions remained in the party. 284

Also the Andersonian position was still an influence on the Sydney Branch of the Party. Gollan writes of John Anderson:

His influence had made the Trotskyist critique of Stalin and the communist parties an active part of Sydney intellectual life. Andersonianism, however it may be defined - empiricist, pluralist, realist - was a complex philosophical position which produced in most of those it influenced an overwhelming scepticism and a powerful critical capacity. This, more than anything else, made the university and the circles that spilled out from it much less fertile ground for the radical nationalism, the undifferentiated socialism, and (for the communists) the attachment to the Soviet Union, than was Melbourne.285

Certainly the Sydney branch of the C.P.A. was the one which most came under criticism from the S.P.A. grouping for "conformity with Trotskyism", and the act most often cited was the admittance of Sydney Pabolite Denis Freney into the C.P.A. 286

Another S.P.A. attack on the C.P.A. was also specific to Sydney and this was that the C.P.A. had become preoccupied with middle class issues such as conservation at the expense of working class interests.

Angus McIntyre regarded Mundey's appointment as Aaron's campaign manager for the seat of Sydney in the 1972 Federal Election as "an attempt by

²⁸² P. Clancy, "The Formation of the Socialist Party of Australia",

Paper, Communists and the Labour Movement Conference, August 1980,

7pp. roneod, p.5.

²⁸³ John Sendy, Comrades Come Rally, p. 228.

²⁸⁴ Winton Higgins, "Reconstructing Australian Communism", in Ralph Miliband and John Saville (eds), The Socialist Register 1974, p.171.

Robin Gollan, Revolutionaries and Reformists: Communism and the Australian Labour Movement 1920-1955, p.200; also Ken Gott, "The Left Revisited", National Times, 25-31 May 1981, concludes: "Anderson was both an ex-communist and an ex-Trotskyist and there could hardly be a better background for a teacher who set out to steer students away from Stalinism".

²⁸⁶ See W.J. Brown, What Happened to the Communist Party of Australia?, pp.9-16.

the C.P.A. to convert into votes some of the middle-class support which the B.L.F. has gained from its very active conservation role in the electorate". 287 This attempt by the C.P.A. to capitalise on the undoubted popularity of Mundey and the green bans movement was exemplified by the C.P.A.'s propaganda material for the 1974 Senate election campaign. The Party's major leaflet featured a photograph of Mundey speaking in front of a banner proclaiming "Support B.L.F. Green Bans" and the slogan for the campaign was "Vote Red for a Green Australia". 288 Mundey headed the C.P.A. ticket with a female aborigine, Pat Miller (now O'Shane) and a homosexual, Brian McGahen, as running mates. This selection of candidates was indicative of the Party's orientation at the time. "New left" philosophies of personal liberation and egalitarianism greatly influenced the C.P.A. leadership. As Higgins comments: "The split....seemed to have accomplished the catharsis that had been necessary all along, and for the left in general, the C.P.A. took on a new complexion". 289

Emphasis was shifted downwards towards a concentration on rank and file organisation as opposed to the previous C.P.A. policy of capturing leadership in trade unions. The Party's involvement in the power workers' rank and file organisation, E.C.C.U.D.O. and its active support of rank and file activity in the Plumbers' Union are examples of the new industrial outlook. It was not just a policy born out of necessity. The split had indeed denuded the Sydney branch of virtually its entire traditional industrial base, but the seeds of the new industrial policies had been sown well before the split had occurred. Modern Unionism and the Workers' Movement had warned against "undue emphasis on official trade union positions and relative neglect of rank and file organisation and the development of their initiative".

Nowhere was the new C.P.A. philosophy more obvious than in the B.L.F. The Union's policies of limited tenure, temporary organisers, job-site autonomy, open Executive meetings etc. were all geared towards

²⁸⁷ Angus McIntyre, "The Narcissism of Minor Differences: The Electoral Context in Sydney Between the Communist Party of Australia and the Socialist Party of Australia" in Henry Mayer (ed.), Labor to Power: Australia's 1972 Election, p.99.

²⁸⁸ C.P.A., Vote Red for a Green Australia, n.d. (1974), 4pp.

²⁸⁹ Winton Higgins, "Reconstructing Australian Communism", in Ralph Miliband and John Saville (eds), The Socialist Register 1974, p. 172.

²⁹⁰ See Rod Pickette, op.cit.; and also <u>Power</u>, A Communist publication, June 1973, 2pp. Red Pen Publications.

²⁹¹ C.P.A., Modern Unionism and the Workers' Movement, March 1970, p.6.

maximum rank and file involvement. This does not mean however that the C.P.A. had initiated or even suggested all these reforms. The relationship between the Union and the Party was a complex two-way affair. C.P.A. influence on the B.L.F. and vice versa was through individuals rather than structures.

The Party had abandoned the notion of democratic centralism at the 22nd Congress in 1970. Although this was not stated outright, the Party's emphasis on the "coalition of the left" concept and its declaration that "...we reject the idea of so-called 'monolithic' organisation which our own experience has shown stifles new ideas, democratic discussion and decision..." clearly outlined the new policy for co-operation with other organisations. The C.P.A.'s inchoate formation of its new industrial policies also militated against an over-domination of the ever more powerful B.L.F.

The Party's main vehicle of influence within the Union was the building branch of the C.P.A. In the sixties this had consisted of officials from the B.W.I.U. and Painters as well as the B.L.F., but by the seventies, with the defection of the tradesmen, the Building Branch became totally dominated by the B.L.F. The only other participants were the rank and file plumbers. One of these, Peter Lane, described the Building Branch as "just an addendum to the B.L.F. I criticised them for that. They really only discussed B.L.F. business". B.L.F. Communists such as Janne Reed also criticised this aspect of the Building Branch: "Sometimes the Plumbers wanted to say something about their struggle and it just got drowned out".

The large number of builders labourers who joined the C.P.A. (estimated at about a hundred), having been radicalised by the Union, ensured the continuation of B.L.F. influence in the Party. Numerically the labourers were significant within the Party but more importantly the Union had become the C.P.A.'s show-piece. Viri Pires described the relationship: "The C.P.A. is very small. It can have ideas but it can't do much with them. It was the B.L.F. which tested the ideas".

²⁹² C.P.A., "Statement of Aims, Methods and Organisation: The Party's Objectives as Adopted by the 22nd Congress, March 1970" in May 1972, p.28.

²⁹³ Interview: Peter Lane, 19 May 1981.

²⁹⁴ Interview: Janne Reed, 18 April 1978. The Building Branch faded away after the defeat of the B.L.F. with most of the labourers leaving the Party. It was reconstituted as the Construction Branch in 1981 and has begun holding regular meetings again.

²⁹⁵ Interview: Viri Pires, 30 November 1976.

Dave Shaw regarded the Union as being "more involved in the practical aspects of class struggle than the Party was". 296

The point was that both the Union and the Party were grappling with a totally new situation after the split. The C.P.A. had lost many of its senior cadres just as the B.L.F. had lost the paternal (some say smothering) influence of the B.W.I.U. For Joe Owens the most significant aspect of the post-Czechoslovakian situation for the C.P.A. but even more so for the B.L.F. was its fluidity:

We'd broken from the tradition. There were no rigid rules, no guidelines. Everything was decided as it came along.297

In this situation, the influence of such dominant personalities as Jack Mundey, Joe Owens, Tom Hogan and Bud Cook was bound to have more effect on the Party than the presence of Mick Tubbs and Joe Palmada at Building Branch meetings, would have on the union. As discussed in Chapter 11, the way in which C.P.A. philosophy was transmitted to the B.L.F. activists was not through Party schools or learned reading matter but rather via "pub" conversations and discussions over tactics at B.L.F. meetings. None of the activists had read turgid texts like Eric Aarons' Philosophy for an Exploding World, 299 yet all were aware of its basic precepts.

There is little evidence that C.P.A. involvement in the Union was ever resented, or even particularly noticeable 300 except during Intervention, 301 and at that stage frustration and disappointment probably magnified such grievances.

One final question has to be asked about this period. Why did the Union's "new concept of unionism" most spectacularly manifest itself in environmental bans? The green bans were a product of many different forces, the most important being the radical ideology of the B.L.F. leaders and members. However, it is interesting to note that the Union leadership had displayed an interest in environmental issues long before they became fashionable. In fact the first "environmental" ban placed

²⁹⁶ Interview: Dave Shaw, 7 August 1977.

²⁹⁷ Interview: Joe Owens, 4 April 1978.

²⁹⁸ The C.P.A. functionaries most involved with the B.L.F.

²⁹⁹ Eric Aarons, Philosophy For An Exploding World: Today's Values Revolution, Sydney, 1972.

³⁰⁰ Even the non-Communist activists I interviewed seemed almost surprised by my questions about C.P.A. interference in the Union.

³⁰¹ Dean Barber (Interview: 18 December 1976) claimed that the decision to physically occupy the E.A. Watts site on Broadway had been reversed "down in Dixon Street not in Trades Hall".

by the B.L.F. was in 1962 when a group known as the North Sydney Citizens' Rights Committee approached the Union for support in their fight against the D.M.R. only providing them with one month's notice to quit their homes to make way for the Warringah Expressway. Secretary, Mick McNamara made an announcement which was later to achieve a familiar ring:

Members of my union will not demolish any house or flat which is occupied and we control this section of the building industry.302

However, a later statement from McNamara indicated the distance between the B.L.F. position in the early sixties and its position during the green ban days. In explaining the Union's ban on an invalid pensioner's home in the path of the Expressway, "Mr McNamara said his union did not oppose building the expressway, but it objected to people like Mrs Davies being evicted without suitable accommodation".

Thus the leadership's environmentalism which eventually encompassed an anti-expressway philosophy was largely unformed at this stage. by the mid sixties there is evidence that town-planning issues were increasingly concerning the Union. 304 In a 1966 issue of the Builders' Labourer Jack Mundey pleaded for the construction of socially useful projects and violently opposed the boom in office-block development. 305 He critically analysed the "boom" in a later issue of the journal. In 1967 the journal editorial called for the construction of schools, homes and hospitals 307 and Bud Cook criticised the number of office blocks being built. 308 At a delegates conference in that year. "Cde. Mundey... thought that we should demand that the Federal Government make more funds available for essential and useful work". By 1969 Bud Cook was attacking the State Planning Authority for "scandalous" activities, 310 arguing the urgent need for pensioner housing and complaining that working class people were being forced to move further out of the city. 311 By 1970 the journal was full of articles attacking developers and loan

³⁰² McNamara Papers: Unidentified Newsclipping (July 1962?)

³⁰³ McNamara Papers: Unidentified Newsclipping (August 1964?)

³⁰⁴ The C.P.A. was showing a similar interest in the area. See Roy Nelson, "Cities for the Future", Australian Left Review, No. 4, December 1966/January 1967, pp.46-50.

³⁰⁵ Builders' Labourer, July/August 1966, p.9.

³⁰⁶ Builders' Labourer, September/October 1966, p. 11.

³⁰⁷ Builders' Labourer, April/May 1967, p.3.

³⁰⁸ Ibid., p.11.

³⁰⁹ Minutes: Delegates' Conference, 18 June 1967, p.3.

³¹⁰ Bud Cook, "A Real (Estate) Scandal", <u>Builders' Labourer</u>, February 1969, p.15.

³¹¹ Builders' Labourer, December 1969, p.33.

sharks 312 and Bob Pringle was advocating "War on pollution, not on people". 313 The B.L.F. officials were quite consistent in their environmentalist stance. Neither Mundey, Owens or Pringle own cars and Mundey, in particular rails against the "god car" continually. 314 The Union actually switched from cars to light motor bikes for the city organisers in 1972 - a move which gained great publicity 315 and ruffled a few union feathers when Dave Thomason, one of the newly equipped organisers announced that cars provided by unions for their officials were "perks" and inefficient for city work. 316 The experiment was eventually abandoned when Joe Owens fell off his bike and broke his ribs.

So the leadership's interest in environmental and planning issues was well established by 1970. When the women of Hunters Hill approached the Union in June 1971, the Executive Minutes record a historic but, at the time, unremarkable resolution: "Moved Bro. Owens, seconded Bro. T. Hogan that R. Pringle investigate a report next Tuesday on Kelly [sic] Bush". The following week the ban was recommended and a historic era had begun, but as Tom Hogan mused:

We can't truly say that eleven great people sat down and decided what we were going to do. It was thrust on us in the first place. I think it was picked up very well. I mean, we were the same people that destroyed that city. We had all those ideas in our heads but not till something came up was anything done. There is no doubt that Kelly's Bush was the start of the Union going outside of the traditional union role.318

An event which also gave impetus to the environment movement in Sydney during 1970 and 1971 was the mass support that the anti-Clutha campaign had generated. As Zula Nittim comments: "The Clutha campaign showed the possibility of popular action in environmental and planning matters". The Clutha campaign had an essential ingredient missing however, and that was union involvement. In fact, the union concerned opposed the environmentalists and supported the Clutha project on the

³¹² Builders' Labourer, July 1970.

³¹³ Bob Pringle, "War on Pollution, Not on People", Builders' Labourer, March 1970, pp.11 and 13.

³¹⁴ See especially Jack Mundey, The Role of Workers in a Modern Industrial Society, Social Responsibility and Ecology (Lecture, Harrison Hot Springs, B.C., Canada, 25 February 1977), p.1.

³¹⁵ See Daily Mirror, Sun and Newcastle Sun, 24 October 1972.

³¹⁶ Tribune, 23 October 1972.

³¹⁷ Minutes: Special Executive Meeting, 4 June 1971.

³¹⁸ Interview: Tom Hogan, 28 October 1977.

³¹⁹ Zula Nittim, "The Coalition of Resident Action Groups", in Jill Roe (ed.), Twentieth Century Sydney: Studies in Urban and Social History, p.233.

basis of the need for jobs. 320

But the issues were the same. The need for resident action against rampant over-development and poor government planning decisions was becoming widespread. Resident Action Groups were formed in many areas throughout Sydney during 1971 and 1972. Murray Geddes, one of the founders of the Coalition of Resident Action Groups (C.R.A.G.) explained:

The B.L.F. were exactly what we (the residents) needed. They weren't like other unions. They were really interested in the environment and what we had to say. They listened. The other unions' officials used to come along and give us "the line".321

Pete Thomas described the situation:

The Kelly's Bush episode really started something. Environmentalists everywhere, and others who had felt powerless to halt destruction, realised that there did exist an organised strength - in the trade unions - whose help they could invoke to bring effective force to their cause. 322

The Resident Action Groups were soon joined by two other groups who were becoming increasingly concerned with the threat posed by the development boom. These groups were the National Trust, and the Environment Committee of the N.S.W. Chapter of the Institute of Architects.

By 1972 both these groups were co-operating closely with the B.L.F.

That the architectural profession had become concerned about the progress of construction development in Sydney is indicated by several public statements made in 1972.

The Dean of Architecture at Sydney University, R.N. Johnson, spoke of proposals to take "disciplinary action...against architects who accept commissions involving the destruction of historically or architecturally valuable buildings". Don Meisenhelter, a member of the Environment Committee of the Institute complained:

The main trouble as far as historically aware architects and engineers are concerned is the powerlessness of the councils...

³²⁰ See Jim Hagan, "Clutha: The Politics of Pollution", Politics, Vol. VII, No. 2, November 1972, pp.136-148.

³²¹ Interview: Murray Geddes, 23 January 1981.

³²² Pete Thomas, "Those Green Bans", Shelter (Australian Department of Housing), Vol. 1, No. 3, October 1973. The extent to which radical ideas had permeated the Department of Housing is indicated by the fact that Jack Mundey had an article, "Strangling the Unemployment Ghost" in the same issue of Shelter and the Inner Sydney Resident Action Groups also had made a contribution.

³²³ Mundey was a guest speaker at a seminar co-sponsored by the N.S.W. Chapter of the Institute and by the Architecture Department of the University of Sydney, Sydney Morning Herald, 26 February 1972.

³²⁴ Sydney Morning Herald, 26 February 1972.

Anyone who owns a building is free to knock it down when and how they choose. A council can refuse a permit to build but not to demolish. 325

He argued that an amendment to the local government act was urgently needed:

At the moment the National Trust has the means of determining which buildings should be saved, but we cannot determine which buildings will be saved. Until that power exists, the only way to stop demolition is for the builders to refuse to destroy.326

Peter Keys, a Federal councillor of the Institute of Architects wrote in late 1972 that every building of historic importance in Australia was in danger of being demolished. He once again cited the problem that state governments had no legal right to prevent demolitions.

The director of the National Trust in N.S.W., R.N. Walker referred to the Union's bans as allowing "a breathing space" and commented that the Trust was "pursuing every avenue available to it to secure the enactment of adequate legislation to protect historic buildings". 329

Hugh Stretton in fact argues that the green bans "were intelligently chosen to do more good for the city than its planners had ever been allowed to get away with". Gilpin considers that green bans "reduced the scale and rate of social displacement in the inner city area of Sydney [and] probably encouraged at least in part a review in N.S.W. of planning procedures generally". Roddewig concludes, from his lawyer's viewpoint that "political, planning and legal factors gave rise to the green ban movement. They explain why Australian unions were the first in the world to use the strike weapon for environmental purposes".

Mundey, Owens and Pringle regarded one of the major reasons for the

³²⁵ Neal Swancott, "Builders will not knock History", The Australian, 20 January 1972. Max Neutze, Urban Devolopment in Australia, p.209, confirms this view, adding that "local governments are required to perform relatively few functions".

³²⁶ Ibid.

³²⁷ Pete Thomas, Taming the Concrete Jungle, p. 41.

³²⁸ The Australian, 20 January 1972.

³²⁹ cited in Pete Thomas, Taming the Concrete Jungle, p.41. However some split within the profession's thinking on union bans is indicated by Walker's refusal to comment on "the propriety or otherwise" of the B.L.F.'s decision to ban the National Trust list of 1700 N.S.W. buildings. The Trust for instance had endorsed the original Rocks scheme in 1971. (The Australian, 20 January 1972.)

³³⁰ Hugh Stretton, Ideas for Australian Cities, Melbourne, 1975.

³³¹ Alan Gilpin, The Australian Environment: 12 Controversial Issues, p.168.

³³² Richard J. Roddewig, Green Bans: The Birth of Australian Environmental Politics, p.35.

need for green bans was that in Australian society, "LAND OWNERSHIP is basically in private hands". They never saw green bans as a permanent solution and always considered proper planning to be impossible in a capitalist society. This did not deter them, unlike the B.W.I.U., from trying to alleviate the effects of capitalism's excesses. They regarded the creation of the resident action groups as an exciting development with great potential. Mundey wrote:

New South Wales has in the past two years seen the emergence of resident action groups linking up with builders' labourers and other unions to become a powerful countervailing force against institutionalised bureaucracy and the power of the developers' dollar 334

The B.L.F. did not regard the fact that many of the resident action groups were from middle class areas as a problem. Mundey wrote with approval of the green bans' "wide and growing support from people of diverse social and class backgrounds". They implicitly believed that action against the development companies and the conservative State Government would radicalise residents from middle class areas and in most cases they were correct. Betty James and Kath Lehaney, two of the "Upper Middle Class Morning Tea Matrons" from Hunters Hill often remarked on how their experience with the Kelly's Bush campaign had changed their political outlook. Many of the resident action groups became involved in other social issues such as low cost housing, public transport, tenant's rights and even prison issues. Also most of the

³³³ Bob Pringle, Jack Mundey, Joe Owens, Submissions to Habitat Australia, November 1975, 3lpp. roneod., p.30. Mundey takes up this theme in Jack Mundey, "Urbanisation: A Challenge to Socialism", Australian Left Review, No. 54 (1976?), pp.7-12; and also "Ecology, Capitalism, Communism", Australian Left Review, No. 51, May 1976, pp.30-34. In the Introduction he writes: "...this Communist Party is one of the very few parties in the international communist, socialist, revolutionary movements which really believes there is a global ecological crisis...and at least tries, in a modest way, to advance some socialist ecological policies and possible solutions to the most urgent political problem of all time".

³³⁴ Jack Mundey, "The Bans Enjoy Wide Support", Current Affairs Bulletin, Vol. 50, No. 7, December 1973, p.27.

³³⁵ Ibid.

³³⁶ A phrase Peter Manning claims Mundey "endearingly termed" the Kelly's Bush Battlers. Marion Hardman and Peter Manning, Green Bans, (pages unnumbered).

³³⁷ A good illustration of this process is provided by the proliferation of resident activist publications. See as examples: Inner Core of Sydney Resident Action Groups, Low Cost Housing, 1973, 42pp. roneod; Save the Public Transport Committee, The Commuter, (produced by concerned unionists, residents, students and commuters) n.d. (1973?); The Rapier, (produced by the concerned resident of the inner city of Sydney) n.d. (late 1973); Robert W. Bellear (ed.), Black Housing Book; and Foundation Day Tharunka, 2 August 1973 (Issue devoted to green bans and resident action on social issues).

green bans were placed to protect traditionally working class inner-city areas and the generalisation that resident action groups were a middle class phenomenon is not correct.

Leonie Sandercock in particular has referred to the R.A.G./B.L.F. relationship as "surprising" ³³⁸ and even anticipated "that the alliance between middle class and working class is likely to be short lived". ³³⁹ Perhaps, because of Federal Intervention the green ban period was too brief to demonstrate any of the tensions Sandercock expected. The green ban movement was remarkable for its unity and enthusiasm. The only argument of any importance that the Union ever had with a resident group was with the Victoria Street Resident Action Group, and that was over tactics rather than philosophy. The V.R.A.G. remained prominent in support of the Union to the very end.

The B.L.F. saw the movement as an organic whole, as a thrusting, offensive, people's movement against the prevailing ideology of development at all costs. Mundey in explaining the use of the word "green ban" argued:

It was considered that "green instead of "black" was more truly descriptive of this form of environmental activity because the imposition of a "green ban" had much more positive social and political implication than the more defensive connotation often associated in the public mind, with "black bans". 340

Finally, the green ban movement had a spirit of optimism that defeats analysis. The introduction to the book on the green bans produced by the Australian Conservation Foundation gives some indication of how those who experienced that period felt:

We offer in this publication our tribute to a group that has achieved more for urban conservation in Australia than many a government...We hope it reflects some of the elan and excitement that pervaded this uniquely Australian phenomenon.341

³³⁸ Leonie Sandercock, Cities For Sale, p.211.

³³⁹ Leonie Sandercock, "The B.L.F., Urban Politics and Inequality" in Henry Mayer and Helen Nelson (eds), Australian Politics: A Fourth Reader, p.295. See Jim Gillespie, "Theories of Urbanism: From Chicago to Paris", Intervention, No. 7, October 1976, pp.41-59, for a discussion of class alliance in resident activism.

³⁴⁰ Ann Turner (ed.), Union Power: Jack Mundey v. George Polites, p.22.

³⁴¹ Marion Hardman and Peter Manning, Green Bans: The Story of an Australian Phenomenon, front page.