

CHAPTER 2

The Old Concept of Unionism¹

(i) The Fight for Control 1951-61

The N.S.W. B.L.F. was formed in the 1970s and registered under the Trade Union Act of 1881, as the Australian Builders' Laborers' Federation, N.S.W. Branch.

During the late 1940s and 1950s the Union came under the control of a right-wing gangster element originally headed by Fred Thomas as State Secretary and Jack Williams as Federal Secretary.

In 1951 a Rank and File Committee was formed to oppose the Thomas leadership. This group was encouraged by the C.P.A., and many of the group's leading activists, including Jack Munday were members of the Communist Party. Fellow Communist, Pat Clancy, Secretary of the B.W.I.U., provided advice and support.

The expansion of the building industry in the post war period and the concentration of development in the Quay area of the city provided excellent opportunities for the Rank and File Committee to organise. They produced a regular newsheet, Hoist, and began attending the Union's monthly Branch meetings in large numbers. Under this sort of pressure, Thomas abruptly left the Union in the mid fifties, burning the Minutes books and allegedly taking the Union's funds with him.

"Banjo" Patterson, who had worked with Thomas became acting Secretary and, according to Munday, moved to the left allowing for "an important breakthrough period".

Although the Rank and File approached the 1958 Branch elections with high hopes, the rump of the Thomas forces arranged for an S.P. bookmaker from Newtown, W.F. (Bill) Bodkin to nominate for Secretary. In an election which the Rank and File claimed was rigged, Bodkin romped

¹ All the evidence for section (i) of this chapter is contained in Appendix A. The evidence for section (ii) is contained in Appendices B and C. The justification for such lengthy appendices is that, although not part of the period under analysis in this thesis, some knowledge of the Union's history between 1950 and 1970 is essential for a proper understanding of what happened in the seventies. Much of the Union's style and philosophy is prefigured in the fight against the gangsters and the period of consolidation. Particularly important is that information contained in Appendix C. One can only really comprehend the complex relationship between the Federal and State bodies of the Union with a reasonable knowledge of their immediate history.

home.

The Bodkin regime soon became even more notorious than the Thomas leadership. Allegations of physical intimidation, corruption, excessive secrecy and ballot-rigging were regularly levelled against the Bodkin leadership.

The Rank and File Committee gained hundreds of supporters in this period. Often they would "have the numbers" at monthly Branch meetings, only to have their majority decisions ignored. Eventually, in February 1960, two members of the Rank and File Committee, Bert McGill and Mick McNamara, were elected as temporary organisers at a Branch meeting. The Executive refused to accept them as organisers, so the Rank and File took the matter to the Commonwealth Industrial Court. The Court ordered the Executive to accept the Branch decision and recognise McNamara and McGill as organisers. This was the beginning of the end for Bodkin.

Violence erupted in January 1961 when a General meeting was called to endorse three delegates to the Union's Federal Conference. It was attended by 200 members and it was obvious that the Rank and File had a clear majority. Federal Secretary Terry Foster was angrily received when he addressed the meeting. State President Sheean closed the meeting and the Executive tried to leave the building. Five carloads of police were called to the scene. Munday remembered:

Bodkin kept descending the stairs and I kept picking him up, carrying him back and sitting him in his seat...It was the first democratic meeting ever held in the Builders Labourers...we kept them [the Bodkin group] sitting in their seats 'til 10 o'clock with the 21 Division down below...it was the first time we hit the headlines.

The Rank and File Committee organised enthusiastically during 1961 for the triennial Branch election due in November. They held a pre-selection meeting and then came to an agreement with some independent "centre" groups so that the final Rank and File/Centre ticket represented a broad range of opposition forces. Mick McNamara, a left-A.L.P. member, was the coalition's nomination for Secretary.

Stan Winter, an anti-Bodkin right-winger had applied for a court controlled ballot so even ballot-rigging as a way out was eliminated for the Bodkin "rump". In the election the entire Bodkin team was defeated. The Rank and File/Centre ticket was successful except for three positions which were won by independent right-wingers. One of the three defeated Rank and File candidates was Jack Munday:

Even though I travelled furthest and had been most active I got beaten. I think it was because I was a known Communist.

(ii) Consolidation 1961-1969

The Rank and File team took "office" in November 1961 to discover no office staff, few administrative records, burnt Minutes books and a bank account of £9 with debts totalling £15,000. With no capital investment or ownership of property, the Union had only its membership dues as income. Much of the history of the 1960s is the story of the Executive's uphill fight to repair the B.L.F.'s financial position. With minor fluctuations their struggle was successful and by the late 1960s the Branch was on a much sounder footing.

Mick McNamara, at 21 Australia's youngest union Secretary, relied heavily on Jack Munday for advice and support. Munday was elected temporary City organiser in 1962 and became a major force in the Union. The C.P.A.—'left A.L.P.' alliance within the Union which had been forged during the fifties remained remarkably successful. For the 1964 election the Rank and File team (as the leadership still called itself) included both C.P.A. and A.L.P. members. The Communist Party encouraged this "broad front" but the right-wing N.S.W. Branch of the A.L.P. under W. Colbourne and C. Oliver opposed it. Colbourne "endorsed" right-wing A.L.P. member Stan Winter who was standing against fellow A.L.P. member McNamara as Secretary. This act drew the fire of the Federal body of the A.L.P. who believed that A.L.P. policy was not to endorse union tickets in such situations. The internecine A.L.P. dispute blew into mammoth proportions but had little effect on the B.L.F. Although McNamara and another A.L.P. member were cited on unity ticket charges, the membership disregarded the media sensationalism and voted overwhelmingly again for the Rank and File ticket. The three right-wingers who had been a disruptive element at Executive meetings were defeated and among the newcomers on the Executive was Jack Munday.

Included in the Rank and File ticket at the 1964 elections were Joe Ferguson, Les Robinson and Johnny McNamara, Mick's brother. These three were becoming increasingly identified with the C.P.A. (M-L) which was in the process of formation. Consequently, with the final split in the C.P.A. this group moved into opposition against the McNamara-Munday leadership. They contested by-elections for various casual vacancies without success and eventually, dispirited by their poor showing, they stopped attending Executive meetings.

The 1967 Branch election was a non event. The Rank and File held an uncontroversial pre-selection and nominated the only team of candidates. Bob Pringle, Tom Hogan and Bud Cook were elected to the

Executive for the first time.

In 1968, Mick McNamara resigned the secretaryship "on health grounds" and Jack Munday was elected Secretary. Bob Pringle became President in 1969 and with Joe Owens elected as temporary organiser the group which constituted the leadership in the seventies began to emerge.

However, even at this stage there was little to distinguish the Union from the traditional "left" unions of the period. Munday's acceptance speech when he was elected Secretary stressed the need to tighten up administrative procedures and eliminate unfinancial unionism. The unorthodox political activity of later years was not apparent. What was beginning to materialise though was the open democratic structure of decision-making; the emphasis on rank and file participation; and the militant industrial stance which was to distinguish the Union in the early seventies.

Industrially, the Union had made great gains, considerably increasing the wages of all labourers and especially those on the top scales such as riggers. A concerted "Civilize the Industry" campaign had greatly improved amenities and safety conditions and the Union was also prominent in the fight against penal sanctions, both State and Federal.

These hard won gains of the sixties were to stand the leadership in good stead. The loyalty of members who could remember the "bad old days" was immense and long lasting.

At the Federal level the position was not so optimistic. In 1961 when the Left won office in N.S.W. the Federal body had also changed leadership. Norm Gallagher from Victoria became General Secretary when the incumbent, Foster, was ruled ineligible to stand on a technicality. Although, in the first few years, there was some goodwill shown towards N.S.W. by the Federal body, eventually the Sino-Soviet dispute interfered with this fraternalism. Gallagher and the Victorian Secretary, Paddy Malone, joined the C.P.A. (M-L), and hostility towards the N.S.W. Branch increased. Apart from ideological differences, Gallagher was intent on building up the power of the Federal body and N.S.W. was the only state which did not willingly comply with his plans.

There were three major areas of dispute during the period. The first was Gallagher's continual criticism of the N.S.W. Branch's financial position and the second was Gallagher's disapproval of the N.S.W. Branch's close relationship with the B.W.I.U. In 1965 when the

N.S.W. B.L.F. and the B.W.I.U. discussed "association" with a view to later amalgamation, in line with B.L.F. policy of one union in the building industry, Gallagher refused to allow the "association" to proceed. This issue simmered until the late sixties when the invasion of Czechoslovakia and the consequent straining of relations between the two N.S.W. unions, rendered the whole question irrelevant. The third problem which aggravated the mutual hostility between the State and Federal bodies was Gallagher's support for the right-wing South Australian Secretary Thorp as President of the Federation. When Thorp eventually decamped leaving the S.A. Branch's affairs in disarray, Gallagher insisted on sending his "Maoist" supporter from N.S.W., Les Robinson, into South Australia as pro-tem Secretary. The N.S.W. Branch suggested that experienced organiser Dick Prendergast should be sent instead. Gallagher had his way and Robinson became South Australian Secretary and a loyal Gallagher ally for the next ten years. The whole affair created tremendous bitterness both at the State and Federal level and was only to have its final denouement in 1975 when Robinson returned to Sydney as the Gallagher-installed Secretary of N.S.W.