

## CHAPTER 3

The 1970 Margins Strike

The Builders Labourers' Margins strike of May-June 1971 was not only the most significant happening for the Union during the year but it is also regarded by most builders labourers as the event which heralded the emergence of a new style of union. It also became the subject of disagreement between warring factions in the C.P.A. and this was to gain it added significance.

The general conditions which brought about the background necessary to produce such a remarkable strike are dealt with in Chapter 10 but the more specific reasons can be discussed under three headings; the non-enforcement of penal power sanctions; the militancy of the Union in that particular period; and the issue itself, that is, the gap between labourers' and tradesmen's wages in a rapidly changing industry.

The Clarrie O'Shea Penal Powers victory of May 1969 cleared the way for militant action and industry-wide strikes for the first time since the 1950s. One of the most significant features of the five weeks Margins strike, its length, was directly attributable to this situation.

Speaking about the strike shortly afterwards, Munday argued:

I think tactics in strikes, particularly since 1949, have been so tailored as to give a high priority to the penal powers threat, and thus the need to 'get them back to work' to avoid fines. The general idea among officials was to try to win strikes quickly, and failing that, to beat a retreat and make the best of it. With the removal of some of the teeth from the penal powers in May 1969, longer strikes including general strikes are likely to become the order of the day...<sup>1</sup>

Bud Cook believes that a strike of such length "had never happened in the building industry since 1890 - the eight hour day struggle".<sup>2</sup>

Munday felt that another aspect of the penal powers was that "struggles have been fragmented. For example, there has been no combined strike of workers in the building industry since 1957". The penal powers also had, according to Munday, increasingly embroiled union activity in arbitration and no real perspective was put forward for knocking over the whole arbitration and penal powers treadmill. He believed that unionists, including the "left" had fallen victim to "arbitration-mindedness under the influence of the penal powers" and that May 1969 was "decisive in cracking the sense of frustration which was

<sup>1</sup> Jack Munday, "Towards New Union Militancy", Australian Left Review, No. 26, August-September 1970, p.5.

<sup>2</sup> Interview: Bud Cook, 5 March 1978.

becoming universal among workers".<sup>3</sup>

The Union's tactics during the Margins strike, while not specifically designed to confront the arbitration system, certainly did so as a by-product of the struggle.

In November 1969 Munday had called for "a co-ordinated national wages campaign outside the Arbitration Court apparatus".<sup>4</sup> In March 1970 he spoke to the Branch on "what should be done to by-pass arbitration and resort to collective bargaining". He also reported that the M.B.A. had promised that if they (the Union) took the Margins issue to court "there would be something in it for us". However he added "on past performances it would only be peanuts unless there was activity on the jobs".<sup>5</sup> Activity on the jobs remained at a high level and the M.B.A. "threatened to go for de-registration of the Union if these disputes continued".<sup>6</sup> However the M.B.A. kept refusing to meet the Union "until we proved we could quieten down and control our own membership".<sup>7</sup> Martin and Glover from the Master Builders argued that the leadership could not claim to represent the membership until it could demonstrate control over job-site activity. "That was the purpose of the exercise".<sup>8</sup> At the compulsory conference on 15 May 1970 H.R. Watson, Senior Commonwealth Arbitration Commissioner for the building industry, stated: "It is a great pity the Master Builders' Association of N.S.W. did not negotiate".<sup>9</sup>

By this stage job-site activity was at fever pitch<sup>10</sup> and "fires were breaking out all over Sydney".<sup>11</sup> As early as February Munday had reported that there was "more strike and job action than before".<sup>12</sup> In March, Munday wrote in the Branch journal under the heading "Campaign gathers momentum in all states" that:

So widespread is the movement in support of the Federation's claims that the officials and job delegates have been working really hard

3 Jack Munday, "Towards New Union Militancy", Australian Left Review, No. 26, August-September 1970, pp.2-5.

4 The Builders' Labourer, December 1969, p.39.

5 Minutes: General Meeting, 3 March 1970.

6 Ibid. For a more detailed discussion of the disputes see chapter 4.

7 Interview: Jack Munday, 30 March 1978.

8 Interview: Bob Pringle, 8 March 1978.

9 Quoted in The Builders' Labourer, July 1970, p.27.

10 The Executive Minutes (January-May 1970) record on average two or three sites in dispute each week.

11 Bob Pringle, Lecture, Macquarie University, October 1975. Some students misunderstood this phrase to mean that arson was being perpetrated on a grand scale.

12 Minutes: Executive Meeting, 17 February 1970.



to keep up with the demands of the workers on the jobs.<sup>13</sup> Disputes often occurred over other issues but were readily channelled into the \$6 Margins claim. The organisers agreed to channel job stoppages towards the Margins dispute.<sup>14</sup> Munday continually stressed the importance of the issue and said that "workers generally should take action on as many jobs as possible".<sup>15</sup> Disputes occurred almost daily with important victories being recorded over Fischers, Chillmans, Concrete Constructions, Marrs and Maros. In the words of the journal: "She's on all over the place".<sup>16</sup>

Not only were the members often in dispute but the type of activity undertaken, and the style of the struggle was changing. An entirely different mood permeated the industry. Munday reported to Federal Conference that: "Strike action is 'in', and in all states we should break with agreements that tie us hand and foot and by word or deed obstructing our right to strike".<sup>17</sup>

The N.S.W. labourers believed that the improvement in the construction-on-site award had been the result of militant activity in N.S.W.<sup>18</sup> but that the maximum gain had not been achieved.<sup>19</sup> Consequently they felt that the climate was right, with the industry booming, the defeat of the penal powers "and the left swing in the general elections" to make further advances.<sup>20</sup> At the 24 hour stop work meeting in March "declarations from the floor of the meeting reflected the militant mood". As one member said, "...if we don't get what we demand, then we'll all go out together, and the sooner the better".<sup>21</sup> Ralph Kelly recalls that "when the employers told us to go to arbitration, we were starting to feel strong enough, that we could pull them on without the courts".<sup>22</sup>

The underlying situation of harsh conditions and a "general paucity

13 The Builders' Labourer, March 1970, p.1.

14 Minutes: Executive Meeting, 24 February 1970.

15 Minutes: General Meeting, 3 March 1970.

16 The Builders' Labourer, March 1970, p.21. The building industry was more often in dispute during 1970 than other comparable industries. Geoff Anderson, op.cit., p.37, cites the figures: 89 stoppages in the building industry, 13 by railway workers, 29 by road and air transport workers and 24 in the printing industry.

17 "N.S.W. Report to the Federal Council", The Builders' Labourer, December 1969, p.39.

18 The Builders' Labourer, December 1969, p.3.

19 Ibid., p.39.

20 Ibid., p.41.

21 Tribune, 25 March 1970, p.10.

22 Interview: Ralph Kelly, 13 December 1977.

of amenities" and the instability and insecurity of the industry<sup>23</sup> were still important in contributing to this new militancy; but there was now an ideological dimension. Munday himself believed that this heightened militancy was inspired by "a combination of international developments and purely national and local issues". He mentioned France, Italy and Japan and that:

Some of the initiatives of the Black Power movement in the United States have impressed. The activities of students in many countries including Australia have also made an impact and been appreciated by advanced workers.<sup>24</sup>

He pointed to "the struggles in France in 1968 and the varied reports on them, and the C.P.A. pre-Congress and Congress [1970] discussions and decisions" as personally encouraging him towards "the style of offensive strike developed in our struggle",<sup>25</sup>

Sabotage activity began to be carried out and sometimes even reported. The journal records:

A bit of excitement was the picket line which jammed the entrance to the hoist when the budding executive type decided to load material on his own. He will not do it again.<sup>26</sup>

Tony O'Beirne, a young militant in Newcastle, recalls his frustration at hearing about the Sydney activities second hand:

We'd grab onto tactics as soon as we heard about them...breaking concrete pours...we said "that's just the most fantastic thing that's ever happened, why didn't we think of that?"<sup>27</sup>

Munday summarises:

We were raising issues that hadn't been raised anywhere else in the Federation...We were pushing things up to the employers. We as a Union had changed, not the objective conditions.<sup>28</sup>

One indication that the Union had indeed changed was that, even in the heat of industrial dispute over wages, both the leadership and the most active militants continued to raise political issues. "We will no longer accept low wages while employers, investors and developers in the industry are making record profits." They declared that they would consider putting a ban on any projects for new petrol stations if the oil companies put up the price of petrol.<sup>29</sup> Even more

<sup>23</sup> The Builders' Labourer, July 1970, p.1.

<sup>24</sup> Jack Munday, "Towards New Union Militancy", Australian Left Review, No. 26, August-September 1970, p.2.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p.4.

<sup>26</sup> The Builders' Labourer, March 1970, p.9.

<sup>27</sup> Interview: Tony O'Beirne, 2 March 1978.

<sup>28</sup> Interview: Jack Munday, 30 March 1978.

<sup>29</sup> Tribune, 25 March 1970, p.10.



significant was the Union's enthusiastic effort in support of the Vietnam moratorium movement. When the Executive discussed calling on the membership to participate in the Moratorium less than a week before the strike began, there was no hesitation by any Executive member, although they all acknowledged the difficulties involved. They even organised to have officials address meetings of members on the subject.<sup>30</sup>

Another way in which the Union had changed, was through changes in the members' relation to the tradesmen in the industry.<sup>31</sup> The builders' labourer who had always been considered the second class worker in the building industry was beginning, by 1970, to consider himself no longer so. The virtual elimination of the lowest grouping of the pay scale had helped to achieve this and it is significant that the groupings were still considered an important aspect of the Margins battle.<sup>32</sup> Munday wrote: "The aim is especially to ensure that the lower paid workers improve their position relatively".<sup>33</sup>

Munday argued that heightened militancy was contributed to by "the harshness of the treatment of the lower paid worker in this first phase of the scientific and technological revolution, where he has fared much worse than any others".<sup>34</sup> In fact, in terms of gaining strategic muscle through new processes and new skills, the builders labourers gained, particularly in reference to the tradesmen. The use of glass, aluminium, pre-formed concrete, pre-fabricated sections and new methods of placing concrete on site (cranes, pumps etc.) was increasing in commercial and cottage construction. Little wood was being used in buildings, so the number of versatile tradesmen employed, especially carpenters, was decreasing rapidly with most of those remaining being form workers for concrete.<sup>35</sup> The B.L.F. argued that "because of the versatility of the work performed by our members, and because of the key part we play in construction" that the widening gap between tradesmen's and labourers' wages must be reduced.<sup>36</sup>

Not only were the pre-conditions present for an assault on the traditional margin which operated between tradesmen and labourers in the

30 Minutes: Executive Meeting, 28 April 1970.

31 The changing relationship between the labourers and tradesmen is discussed in chapter 10.

32 Minutes: Special Executive Meeting, 20 April 1970.

33 Jack Munday, "Towards New Union Militancy", Australian Left Review, No. 26, August-September 1970, p.4.

34 Ibid., p.3.

35 Ibid.

36 The Builders' Labourer, December 1969, p.3.

building industry, but the margin had actually increased as a result of the metal trades Margins struggle of 1967-68. Small wonder that in an editorial headed: "Demand for the 70s - Narrow the Gap", Munday argued that the "very big job" of 1970 would be to campaign for labourers in the top categories such as riggers, drainers, dogmen, scaffolders, hoist drivers and powder monkeys to be paid the same wage as tradesmen, and all other labourers one dollar less.<sup>37</sup> Aware, no doubt, that reduction of traditional margins is always a sensitive issue he emphasised, "we must win the support of the tradesmen, with whom we work closely if we are to be successful".<sup>38</sup>

Clancy, State Secretary of the B.W.I.U., spoke at the March stop work meeting. He told the meeting that employers sought to create divisions between workers and that "the disparity in wages between tradesmen and labourers had increased since 1947".<sup>39</sup> It is not clear whether he supported the B.L.F. claim for a reduced margin or whether he simply believed the traditional relativity should be restored.<sup>40</sup>

The B.L.F. demands themselves were not absolutely clear. The leadership spoke in terms of falling behind "in the past several years in contrast to the Tradesmen";<sup>41</sup> and yet the actual claim which precipitated the strike was for \$6 which effectively would replace the old relativity of roughly 75% with an astonishing 90%.

The delicacy of the situation with regard to the traditional relativities enjoyed by the tradesmen was increased by a lack of consultation on both sides. Communication between the two unions, which had been deteriorating since 1968, appears to have been virtually non-existent by this stage. Hogan warned that when the Branch decided on a figure for their margin claim, it "...should be wary, due to the fact that we may find ourselves striking a figure well below the tradesmen's margin claim and would find ourselves falling further behind than ever before".<sup>42</sup> The fact that neither union was certain about what the

37 The Builders' Labourer, December 1969, p.3. The N.S.W. delegation to the Union's 1969 Federal Conference put forward this proposition.

38 Ibid.

39 Tribune, 25 March 1970, p.10. E.H. Phelps-Brown, The Economics of Labour points out that a builder and his assistant enjoyed the same relativity for 500 years in Britain c.1400-1900.

40 The Tribune report does not make the distinction clear. As Clancy was still a member of the C.P.A. at the time, any difference with the B.L.F. would have been minimised in Tribune's coverage.

41 Bud Cook, Minutes: General Meeting, 3 February 1970.

42 Minutes: General Meeting, 3 February 1970.



others' exact demands were, did not disguise the fact that the real importance of changed relativities was not just the monetary amount but the change in status that was implied. Munday summed it up when he spoke of the need for real industrial unionism, "...free from craft hangovers and with the laborers being accepted as a real force in the industry, not just as assistants".<sup>43</sup> [my emphasis]

Clancy for his part was not in a good position to resist the labourers' attack on relativities. A skilful negotiator who had maintained a reasonable wage for his members by emphasis on traditional forms of industrial activity and insistence on the skilled nature of their work, he was simply not equipped to handle the new conditions.<sup>44</sup> The high level of organisation which the labourers needed for their innovative forms of industrial activity had never been necessary for the B.W.I.U.'s less itinerant, and more union-conscious membership. The difference of style was to become more obvious as the B.L.F. became increasingly militant.

In an interview with Australian Left Review in August 1970,<sup>45</sup> Munday consciously broke with his past associates, such as Clancy, when he spoke of the way traditional industrial activity had operated against the workers' interests:

...when a group of workers was involved in a struggle (and I could give many examples), after a few days or a week an array of union officials ranging from extreme right to extreme left would turn up and urge them, in different ways, to do the same thing - return to work to avoid the penal powers being slapped on the whole union or body of unions involved. The "left" officials usually justified this as being "in the interests of the class as a whole" as against those of the few score or few hundred workers actually involved. This may have been true in some periods and instances, but it became a habit and an excuse. There was too much readiness to settle rather than set out to win disputes.<sup>46</sup>

He also attacked "left" union officials when speaking of the problems created among militant workers by the "arbitration mindedness that developed":

Most militant workers have been critical for years of the general passivity displayed in strikes, and the failure of communists and others on the left to really force the issues...These workers found

43 Jack Munday, "Towards New Union Militancy", Australian Left Review, No. 26, August-September 1970, p.4.

44 This point was also made by Rod Madgwick (Interview: 21 December 1977) who had observed Clancy in action in industrial courts.

45 This interview became somewhat notorious. The views expressed in it were consistently cited by conservative politicians, employers etc. as proof of Munday's dangerous political philosophy. See later chapters.

46 Jack Munday, "Towards New Union Militancy", Australian Left Review, No. 26, August-September 1970, p.3.

it difficult to differentiate who was who, who was left, right or centre when all urged return to work when it came to the prospect of a longer strike.<sup>47</sup>

Clancy's reaction to the B.L.F.'s tactics in the Margins strike puts him squarely amongst those to whom Munday referred.

There was even a suggestion from some members of the C.P.A. that the entire strike "was an Aarons plot" to demonstrate part implementation of the recent Congress decisions and "embarrass" the "opposition" in the C.P.A.<sup>48</sup> Angus McIntyre subscribes to a refined version of this view when he writes of "the desire of the C.P.A....to establish the superiority of its industrial strategy" and Clancy's rejection of "the go-it-alone confrontation style implicit in the new C.P.A. strategy".<sup>49</sup> As the B.L.F. records show, the campaign to raise the labourers' wages had been decided upon well before the C.P.A. Congress had taken place. In December 1969 Munday both wrote in the journal<sup>50</sup> and discussed with the Executive<sup>51</sup> the future strategy:

1970 will be a year of campaign to improve the wages and conditions of our members. The penal powers struggle and the left swing in the general elections show that more Australians oppose the reactionary government...and want a change.<sup>52</sup>

What McIntyre fails to comprehend is that the left of the C.P.A. and the B.L.F. were being influenced by the same forces. The winds of change hinted at in the above passage were blowing throughout the Australian Left. It was not that Munday and the Aarons faction had set out to embarrass old style unionists such as Clancy, it was simply that Clancy had not felt the wind at all.

Another major reason for the wages campaign being launched at that time was because Part II of their award was due to expire in 1970. The exigencies of the bourgeois courts and not the intricacies of revolutionary theorising helped govern the Union's timetable. Munday acknowledged that the Margins campaign would be a "very big job"<sup>53</sup> and Joe Owens spoke of "setting out with a conscious policy to clear up wages and conditions".<sup>54</sup>

The following narrative illustrates the industrial imperatives

47 Ibid., pp.4-5.

48 Ibid., p.7.

49 Angus McIntyre, Jack Munday, Unpublished Manuscript, n.d., 48pp., typed.

50 The Builders' Labourer, December 1969, pp.3, 39 & 41.

51 Minutes: Executive Meeting, 9 December 1969.

52 The Builders' Labourer, December 1969, p.41.

53 The Builders' Labourer, December 1969, p.3.

54 Interview: Joe Owens, 24 January 1978.



which governed the Union's activities. Political sectarianism had little influence.

In January and February 1970 there was activity around a National Stoppage<sup>55</sup> on the Margins issue which was to take place on 18 March. Job-site activity began to be channeled into the demand for \$6,<sup>56</sup> which was how the Margins demands translated into money terms. Sometimes stoppages which began over another issue ended up being part of the Margins struggle.<sup>57</sup> Leaflets and posters were distributed<sup>58</sup> and job delegates meetings were organised,<sup>59</sup> the leadership continually emphasising the importance of the struggle.<sup>60</sup> At one stage Munday even warned of the dangers of sectional disputes taking away "some of the value of action around the Margins campaign".<sup>61</sup> The National Stoppage was a success although Munday reported on "weaknesses in the fact that there were very few stoppages in the suburbs". Gallagher however was impressed and congratulated the Branch on their part in the campaign.<sup>62</sup>

Munday moved that a further stoppage be held<sup>63</sup> and that a letter be sent to the B.T.G. pointing out the Union's position on the Margins case.<sup>64</sup> At the Special Executive Meeting on 20 April he reported that an offer had been made by the employers which the Federation had rejected.<sup>65</sup> The Executive discussed in detail plans to police the next stoppage and the organisation of stop work meetings in the non-metropolitan areas.<sup>66</sup> The Executive decided that the recommendation to the 4th May Stoppage should be to stop work and meet again at the end of the week to let the workers know what had transpired at the Conferences with employers. Ironically, Munday sounded a warning about having a strike of an indefinite nature.<sup>67</sup> After some discussion the Executive eventually decided that no dispensations on an individual basis would be

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55 Minutes: Executive Meetings, 27 January, 12 February and 24 February; Special Executive Meeting, 3 February; and General Meeting, 3 February 1970.

56 Minutes: Executive Meetings, 12 February, 3 March and 10 March 1970.

57 Minutes: Executive Meeting, 24 February 1970.

58 Minutes: Executive Meetings, 3 and 10 March 1970.

59 Minutes: Executive Meetings, 27 January and 10 March 1970.

60 Minutes: Executive Meeting, 24 February and General Meeting, 3 March 1970.

61 Minutes: General Meeting, 3 March 1970.

62 Minutes: Executive Meeting, 24 March 1970.

63 Ibid.

64 Minutes: Executive Meeting, 7 April 1970.

65 Minutes: Special Executive Meeting, 20 April 1970.

66 Ibid.

67 Minutes: Executive Meeting, 28 April 1970.

allowed to any employer until "the campaign has been successfully concluded".<sup>68</sup>

The 4 May stoppage took place as planned except that the Canberra sub-branch "voted to accept over-award payments and not press with the Margins". Wollongong and Goulburn however had successful meetings and voted overwhelmingly in support of the strike.<sup>69</sup>

The original decision not to allow individual dispensations to employers was reversed at this stage after some members of the rank and file argued that there would be nobody left to support the strike financially. They argued that "...we should join up the non-unionists instead of kicking them off the job".<sup>70</sup> Bob Pringle also believed it was good tactics to encourage divisions amongst the employers.<sup>71</sup>

Employers who agreed to pay the Margins claim and promised that all their workers would be financial unionists could bring their accounts books into the Union office to be inspected and then sign an agreement with the Union. These employers could then keep their job-sites working. This dispensation technique also relieved pressure on the tradesmen. Ball from the M.B.A. had threatened in the State Industrial Commission to stand down all tradesmen as from 6 May. Although the B.T.G. had pledged full support for the labourers' Margins campaign,<sup>72</sup> the B.L.F. realised that the tradesmen's support would be qualified by the extent to which their own membership suffered.

The State Court had also directed the officials "to do all in their power to get workers back to work". The Executive did not even discuss the directive. The Sydney mass meeting had been enthusiastic and Munday commented that "a very positive aspect of the struggle was the number of activists who participated". Most of the officials reported successful stoppages in their areas although Forskitt had some trouble in Wollongong and Brian Hogan reported that some P.W.D. workers felt that dispensation agreements were unfair because their employer (the P.W.D.) would never be able to sign one. Lynch commented that in his area rank and file labourers were already checking up on whether job-sites had joined the strike.<sup>73</sup>

There is no inkling in the Executive's discussion of the first days

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68 Ibid.

69 Minutes: Executive Meeting, 5 May 1970. For more details on why Canberra took this attitude see chapter 4.

70 Interview: Bud Cook, 5 March 1978.

71 Interview: Bob Pringle, 8 March 1978.

72 Minutes: Executive Meeting, 5 May 1970.

73 Ibid.



of the strike that they realised what was to come. As Tom Hogan recalls: "It started off exactly the same as any other strike...out the gate... Six dollars was the big thing that we wanted to win".<sup>74</sup> Rank and filer Ralph Kelly remembers the atmosphere: "We felt we could go on strike for a week and knock 'em over...that was the spirit into which we moved that first week...We didn't know what was in store".<sup>75</sup> Bob Pringle argues that the previous one-day stoppages which had produced occasional acts of confrontation with scabs had built up an atmosphere where,

...we had the view that we'd probably only need to go about a fortnight and unfortunately that was our mentality because we didn't try to get dough in for the first fortnight.<sup>76</sup>

By the second week of the strike however, the realisation that the nature of the stoppage had changed, was becoming clear. Munday argued: "Our strike should show [a] new conception of unionism".<sup>77</sup> The mass meeting on 8 May "showed a good fighting spirit" and Newcastle, Wollongong and Goulburn also "remained firm".<sup>78</sup> Munday describes the second week of the strike as the crunch, "when tradesmen were beginning to be stood down and there was a move for conferences and a 'responsible' approach of settlement through negotiations".<sup>79</sup>

The B.T.G. met the M.B.A. on 11 May. The B.T.G. adopted a tactic that Bud Cook claims Munday instigated which was to "take up their own grievances"<sup>80</sup> when threatened with stand downs. Clancy opened by saying that if Builders Labourers claims were not met, other Building Trades would pursue accident pay.<sup>81</sup> The B.L.F. asked for a "money amounts agreement but it wasn't forthcoming". The M.B.A. gave no guarantee other than to go to the national conference to be held in Adelaide the following week.<sup>82</sup> Munday considered the Executive could make either of two recommendations to the Branch meeting:

One was to stop till next Friday, so as to get the results of [the] Adelaide conference. The other was to return to work pending the

74 Interview: Tom Hogan, 28 October 1977.

75 Interview: Ralph Kelly, 13 December 1977.

76 Interview: Bob Pringle, 8 March 1978. Pringle was eventually taken off the vigilante squad to be in charge of raising strike funds.

77 Minutes: Executive Meeting, 12 May 1970.

78 Ibid.

79 Jack Munday: "Towards New Union Militancy", Australian Left Review, No. 26, August-September 1970, p.6.

80 Interview: Bud Cook, 30 March 1978.

81 Minutes: Executive Meeting, 12 May 1970.

82 Minutes: General Meeting, 12 May 1970. Munday reported (Minutes: Executive Meeting, 12 May 1970), "Our propositions for \$4.90 and 70c follow-the-job were rebuffed..."

Adelaide conference...He favoured the former course despite its dangers. He considered the dangers as secondary because the main centre, the city, could withhold any attempts at strike breaking. If a resumption occurred prior to [the] conference the same pitch would be hard to regain. He believed that to get the second stoppage would be much harder. He said that at this stage we didn't have enough to offer the Rank and File to justify a resumption [of work].<sup>83</sup>

In presenting the recommendation to the Branch meeting Munday reported that "on meeting the M.B.A. today it was evident they had been hurt". The meeting carried the recommendation to stay on strike with no recorded dissent. Reservations were expressed however about the amount of support the Branch was receiving from other unions and from the Federal body.<sup>84</sup>

The B.L.F.'s position with regard to the B.T.G. had been tentative from the start. There is even dispute within the B.L.F. about whether the B.T.G. supported the Margins claim at all.<sup>85</sup>

The situation was indeed delicate. The worsening political climate within the C.P.A. had reduced B.W.I.U.-B.L.F. relations to a stage where "despite the fact that Clancy and Munday had offices next door to each other there wasn't any discussion between the two unions."<sup>86</sup> Two further complicating factors were the issues of craft consciousness and of tradesmen being stood down.

The controversial nature of the Margins demand was a stumbling block in the labourers' bid for the tradesmen's support. They tried however. A leaflet issued during the strike announced: "We do not begrudge the tradesmen their money. If anything, in our opinion they are grossly underpaid for their skill..."<sup>87</sup> But it also pointed out that the increasing skill of the labourer could not be underestimated.

As for tradesmen being thrown out of work during the dispute, opinions again differ. Bud Cook agrees that "a lot of tradesmen were stood down but it never happened without B.Ls explaining the issue and asking for support".<sup>88</sup> Munday complained that "we couldn't get them

83 Minutes: Executive Meeting, 12 May 1970.

84 Minutes: General Meeting, 12 May 1970.

85 Tom Hogan, (Interviewed by Pat Fiske 1980) claimed "none of the other eight unions supported our claim for the extra money". Jack Munday, ("Interview with Jack Munday", Australian Left Review, No. 32, September 1971, p.13) argued: "Not only did the tradesmen's officials not agree [to 100% to 90%] but they failed to put forward any alternative relativity". Yet B.L.F. Document, An Urgent Call from Builders' Laborers to All Workers! 1971 claimed: "In 1970 the leaders of the N.S.W. building tradesmen's unions supported our claim".

86 Interview: Joe Owens, 4 April 1978.

87 Cited in Pete Thomas, Taming the Concrete Jungle, p.17.

88 Interview: Bud Cook, 30 March 1978.



involved" and alleged that "often employers carried the tradesmen in order to turn them against us".<sup>89</sup> Ralph Kelly remembers seeing tradesmen "who were out of work because of the strike, waiting to see the result of our stop work meeting".<sup>90</sup> Joe Owens conceded that "some rank and file carpenters supported us and some [B.W.I.U.] union officials even went out on jobs with us".<sup>91</sup> Jack Healey for one was reported as being "of excellent assistance"<sup>92</sup> in the first days of the strike.

On the issue of industrial support, the B.W.I.U. only claims that they "organised their membership to refuse to do builders labourers work or to work with scabs".<sup>93</sup> This is a fairly typical union reaction to any stoppage and certainly does not imply any great enthusiasm or support for the labourers' cause. Joe Owens may have been justified in his belief that "we got more support from the A.W.U. and the T.W.U. than we did from the B.W.I.U.".<sup>94</sup> Certainly the transport workers and later the A.W.U. played a valuable supporting role. The T.W.U. had been approached for support before the strike began.<sup>95</sup> They were asked to ban concrete deliveries to building sites because it is B.L.F. work to pour concrete from the trucks. On the second day of the stoppage Munday reported that the "transport workers have co-operated in an excellent way".<sup>96</sup> By the second week Munday reported that "stopping concrete pours has been a real key to [the] dispute".<sup>97</sup> In recognition that the concrete drivers were losing work he announced with some relief that the sixty employers who had signed the agreement "were mainly concreters and [this] would assist the transport union".<sup>98</sup> Brian Hogan also added that he believed that concrete drivers would see that plenty of work would be available at the end of the dispute.<sup>99</sup>

By the second week the T.W.U. was put under pressure from the employers to pour concrete. They continued to pledge support for the B.L.F. but criticised the fact that "sand, bricks etc. [were] getting through".<sup>100</sup> This was not entirely a problem which could be solved by

89 Interview: Jack Munday, 30 March 1978.

90 Interview: Ralph Kelly, 13 December 1977.

91 Interview: Joe Owens, 24 January 1978.

92 Ron Donoghue, Minutes: Executive Meeting, 5 May 1970. Healey was the only B.W.I.U. official who remained with the C.P.A. after the formation of the S.P.A.

93 The Building Industry Branch of the S.P.A., Six Turbulent Years, p.49.

94 Interview: Joe Owens, 24 January 1978.

95 Minutes: Executive Meeting, 28 April 1970.

96 Minutes: Executive Meeting, 5 May 1970.

97 Minutes: Executive Meeting, 12 May 1970.

98 Minutes: General Meeting, 12 May 1970.

99 Minutes: Executive Meeting, 12 May 1970.

100 Minutes: General Meeting, 12 May 1970.

the B.L.F. In fact, at this stage the strike was quite solid, particularly in the C.B.D. where most concreting work occurred and Munday had reported that "picketing has been good".<sup>101</sup>

The problem was that another important union dispute was taking place which was to significantly affect the B.L.F. The A.W.U. was in the throes of a legal battle which came to a head in the second week of the labourers' strike. Lou McKay whose Better Deal Committee had won control of the N.S.W. A.W.U. in October 1969 dismissed the (even then) elderly right-wing Charlie Oliver as state Secretary in January 1970. However a full bench of the Commonwealth Industrial Court reinstated Oliver as Secretary in May 1970.<sup>102</sup> Digby Young, a concrete batcher, who was leader of the A.W.U. concrete committee at the time recalls that McKay, even though he had won election as a "reform" candidate had "decided to scab on the labourers". When Oliver retained office he reversed the decision and "had the concrete cut off to all building sites still working".<sup>103</sup> This greatly helped both the T.W.U. and the B.L.F.

The second issue that concerned members at the 12 May meeting was support from interstate. Owens felt that "not enough pressure had been placed on interstate builders and we should call for more support". Ron Donoghue put forward that "as other states would benefit perhaps they could give financial support" and Munday commented that "other states could have done more". There was also a general suspicion that the other states would accept interim payments.<sup>104</sup>

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101 Minutes: Executive Meeting, 12 May 1970.

102 The Australian, 16 December 1971.

103 Interview: Digby Young, 1 March 1979. Young's analysis is supported by comments made at the May Branch meeting (Minutes: General Meeting, 12 May 1970). This incident had an interesting follow-up. Ten years later, in an article about the B.L.F.-A.W.U. demarcation disputes in the Hunter Valley (National Times, 30 November 1980) Ross Greenwood claimed that "power struggles in the B.L.F. between Jack Munday and Norm Gallagher in the early seventies led to the N.S.W. B.L.F. missing out on work in the country areas". This drew an indignant response from Munday who claimed that "one of the many differences between N. Gallagher and myself was our approach to demarcation". After pointing out that demarcation disputes were divisive he added "we enjoyed a harmonious relationship with Charlie Oliver and the N.S.W. A.W.U. despite differing political and ideological views. In fact during the big strikes in 70 and 71...Charlie Oliver was most co-operative and assisted the N.S.W. B.L.F." (National Times, 7 December 1980). When I mentioned this letter to Oliver (Conversation, 11 December 1980) he beamed and confessed he was "thrilled at Jack's letter". He proffered the information that "Jack was a good little bloke, you didn't need it in writing, he did what he said he would".

104 Minutes: Executive Meeting, 12 May 1970.



The Adelaide conference with the M.B.A. did nothing to allay the N.S.W. Branch's suspicions about either the intentions of the employers or the degree of support from other Branches. The M.B.A. offered from one dollar to two dollars interim payment which was to be final for skilled labourers "and a brisk work value case on riggers and scaffolders be heard". Munday reported that the offer was rejected and added "...an attempt was being made to really put screws on Builders Labourers". His report on the attitudes of the other B.L.F. branches was equally bleak. Delaney had expressed the opinion that more financial assistance should be given to N.S.W. and Gallagher thought Victoria should use guerilla tactics. However Munday's opinion was that "more direct action [should] be taken by other states". He therefore recommended that the N.S.W. Executive instruct Gallagher to call for a general stoppage of all builders labourers. Theo Austin moved that the F.M.C. be asked to call a national stoppage from 25 May "round the Federations claims" and this was carried.<sup>105</sup>

The response to this motion was poor. The F.M.C. called for a national stoppage but Tasmania and Western Australia only went out for 24 hours and South Australia, which pleaded special circumstances,<sup>106</sup> and Queensland did not respond at all. Gallagher "was upset over the decision of the Queensland Branch" and commented that there was:

...an un-evenness in the Federation's campaign for a new Federal award and that in his opinion the campaign needed to be speeded up to help relieve the pressure in N.S.W., where the members in that State were entering the fifth week of being on strike and these members had to be fully supported. He felt that there was not enough being done by the other Branches.

Gallagher reported that he had requested the Victorian Branch to call a four day stoppage to apply more pressure to the employers in Victoria.<sup>107</sup>

Bobby Baker, a N.S.W. rank and filer, attended the Victorian meeting at the Fitzroy Town Hall. He recalled that the Victorian members were encouraged by accounts of the N.S.W. strike and moved "to do exactly the same thing".<sup>108</sup>

Munday criticised the F.M.C. "for allowing the truce period to drag on" and argued that there should have been more co-ordination in relation to the campaign. He called on the Branches to "speed up the

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<sup>105</sup> Minutes: Executive Meeting, 20 May 1970.

<sup>106</sup> A cement strike had forced builders labourers out of work for four weeks.

<sup>107</sup> Minutes: Federal Management Committee, 1 June 1970, p.2.

<sup>108</sup> Interview: Bobby Baker, 16 May 1980.

campaign and to assist the N.S.W. members financially<sup>109</sup> as the strike was entering the fifth week".<sup>110</sup>

Given that the only significant support came from Victoria and even then only in the final days of the struggle, Munday's comments in the Branch Journal were diplomatic to say the least:

Though all States of the Federation were not involved sufficiently, it was our first national campaign and as we learn the necessary lessons it will auger well for future national action by our Federation. N.S.W. bore the brunt of the campaign and we thank the other States for their moral and financial support.<sup>111</sup>

Munday's comments in this issue of the journal are significant in more ways than one. Not only was he excessively mild in his criticism of the Federal body, but he was also remarkably restrained in his treatment of the B.W.I.U. and the B.T.G.:

Thanks to the B.W.I.U. who contributed over \$1300 (112) to our campaign and assisted in many other ways during the strike. Other building unions all contributed financially and morally and to them all we say 'thanks'. Their display of unity will assist the whole B.T.G.<sup>113</sup>

These comments about the Federal body and the B.W.I.U. should not be seen as an accurate reflection of the N.S.W. Branch's feelings at the time. Rather they should be regarded as attempts to foster solidarity amongst building workers and to avoid public sectarian debate which the leadership felt would only push the labourers further into the semi-isolation which their militant tactics had produced. However, it is revealing that, although the B.W.I.U. were dutifully thanked, it was the T.W.U. which received most of the kudos. Munday wrote:

What splendid support we received from the Transport Workers' Union. Their leaders Ted McBeattie and Geoff Martin and the Ready Mix Concrete section of the union deserves special mention.<sup>114</sup>

Joe Owens waxed almost lyrical:

Our special thanks to the Transport Workers Union for their help, especially the concrete truck drivers who would not deliver concrete

109 Gallagher reported that a national collection list had been sent out and that "it was the responsibility of every branch to contribute to the Fund". Minutes: Federal Management Committee, 1 June 1970, p.2.

110 Minutes: Federal Management Committee, 1 June 1970, p.3.

111 The Builders' Labourer, July 1970, pp.3 and 5.

112 Altogether over \$16,000 was contributed to the Fighting Fund. Ibid., p.1

113 The Builders Labourer, July 1970, p.5. Eight years later Munday was not so charitable. When questioned about the claim in Six Turbulent Years, pp.48-9 that "substantial financial support was given" he remarked "they only gave one or two thousand dollars and they had to give this because they were a 'militant' union". Interview: Jack Munday, 3 April 1978.

114 Ibid., p.5.



to scab outfits during the dispute. The majority of these drivers are buying their own trucks, and are in severe financial difficulties because of the support they so whole-heartedly gave us in the strike. Through the columns of this journal we publicly state our sincere thanks. We say further that, in any dispute of your own which may arise in the future, call upon us for both moral and financial support. Thanks again and good luck.<sup>115</sup>

Owens, in a significant gesture omits all reference to the other building unions. Munday was always more into mending fences than was Owens.

It is interesting that the only other unions to receive special thanks were the maritime unions; interesting because these unions were (and still are) controlled by that element within the C.P.A. which broke away in 1971 to form the S.P.A. Relations with Clancy had obviously deteriorated faster than those with the union leaders not associated with the building industry. Munday wrote:

In their open hearted, traditional manner seamen and wharfies opened their pockets generously. Our thanks to them and their leaders and to all maritime unions.<sup>116</sup>

and later "...our special thanks to the wharfies and the seamen who, despite troubled times of their own, gave so generously during the five weeks of our blue".<sup>117</sup>

Other unions listed as having contributed to the strike fund included most of the traditional "left" unions such as the Sheet Metal Workers, the Boilermakers, the Painters and Dockers, the Fire Brigade Union, the Miscellaneous Workers Union, and "officers of the Teachers' Federation". An intriguing addition to the list is the conservative Liquor Trades Union. Within the building industry financial support came from the Painters Union and the Tile Layers Union, both closely associated with the B.W.I.U., and from the extreme right-wing Plumbers and Gasfitters Union. Tom Anthes from the A.S.C. & J. was listed as an individual donor.<sup>118</sup> The list reveals a fairly typical smattering of support that would be expected for any "left" union struggle of that period. The only divergence from the norm was that there was slightly less support from the building trades than would have occurred in the sixties. This lack of support stemmed from the B.L.F.'s original deep seated differences with the B.W.I.U. but was exacerbated by two further

<sup>115</sup> Joe Owens, "Some Highlights of a Strike that Made History", The Builders' Labourer, July 1970, p.21.

<sup>116</sup> Jack Munday, "Rattling the Employers", The Builders Labourer, July 1970, p.5.

<sup>117</sup> The Builders' Labourer, July 1970, p.35.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid. I have retained the use of the unions' short titles as listed.

incidents during the strike. The first and most serious was the B.W.I.U. leadership's reaction to the vigilantes' tactics<sup>119</sup> and the second was the B.W.I.U.'s attempt to bring about a return to work.

The tradesmen's lack of enthusiasm for the struggle had become obvious by the third week of the strike. At the 20 May Executive meeting Munday "expressed concern at luke-warm support from other Building Trades". Austin thought that "the reason for the Labour Council not moving into the dispute was caused mainly by tradesmens' unions not fully supporting our struggle". Maurie Lynch agreed with this, commenting that "lack of activity of other unions accounted for non-involvement of labor council".<sup>120</sup>

During this third week, Munday and Pringle met with "a group of Communist Party B.W.I.U. officials"<sup>121</sup> and Clancy advised the B.L.F. to return to work. This was an incident that remained indelibly imprinted in the minds of the leadership. All officials when questioned about the strike mentioned this event. Tom Hogan recalled that "...half way through, Clancy came to us and declared we'd lost the strike".<sup>122</sup> Joe Owens added:

He told us to pack it in...we knew the men wouldn't like it so we went on...it was the beginning of the real break with the B.W.I.U. We no longer looked on them as our ideological mentors.<sup>123</sup>

Munday referred to Clancy as "recommending we go back to work at a key time in the struggle" and claimed "he was embarrassed by our militancy".<sup>124</sup>

Bob Pringle gives perhaps the most revealing account of the event. He was not in the C.P.A., did not know Clancy as well as Munday did and had felt for some time that Munday was unduly embittered toward the B.W.I.U. He described how this consultation with Clancy changed his view. After a particularly difficult meeting with the M.B.A. and in the middle of the hardest fought strike in bluiding industry history, he and Munday visited Clancy:

There he was, sitting behind his desk, twiddling with his paper-weight...criticising our actions and quoting from Sharkey's book about generalling a strike. That was the end of it for me.<sup>125</sup>

The points made by Clancy were no doubt similar to those made later by the S.P.A. building branch when commenting upon vigilante actions:

<sup>119</sup> Discussed later in this chapter.

<sup>120</sup> Minutes: Executive Meeting, 20 May 1970.

<sup>121</sup> Interview: Joe Owens, 24 January 1978.

<sup>122</sup> Tom Hogan: Interviewed by Pat Fiske 1979.

<sup>123</sup> Interview: Joe Owens, 4 April 1978.

<sup>124</sup> Interview: Jack Munday, 3 April 1978.

<sup>125</sup> Interview: Bob Pringle, 8 March 1978.



The B.L.F. leaders had failed to realise that it was not the few thousand dollars worth of demolished building or brickwork etc., that worried the building bosses, but rather, the loss of millions of dollars in production and profits through the collective power of workers in strike struggle.

Above all they failed to observe the basic issue that workers and their unions must try to maintain tactics and forms of struggle that win and not repel public support.<sup>126</sup>

This argument echoes closely Sharkey's view that:

A dangerous heritage of anarcho-syndicalism is a tendency in time of strikes to rely upon the actions of individuals and small groups to deal with strike-breakers, substituting this for mass action by all of the strikers against the strike breakers. There is also still a need to combat the anarcho-syndicalist tendency towards "sabotage".<sup>127</sup>

Of course, the S.P.A. version sets up a false frame of reference. The B.L.F. vigilantes did not demolish building sites to "worry the building bosses" but to stop scab labour, and in this they were successful. It was not a tactic designed to ensure mass participation or public support but a specific response to a specific situation.

However what is more important is that Clancy was wrong in his analysis of the struggle and his advice to return to work proves this.

The labourers had been in a delicate position since the Conference with the M.B.A. on 11 May.

At this stage there was little preparedness by the Master Builders to concede anything substantial. But when the laborers disappointed their expectations for return, based on previous experience and... pressures within the union movement, [my emphasis], they got a big shock.<sup>128</sup>

The fact that the B.L.F. had been able to withstand pressure from out-of-work tradesmen probably was a surprise for the M.B.A. but "they got an even bigger one from the vigilante groups and so they had to change their tune". Munday believed that the M.B.A. "...would have succumbed earlier...had it not been for pressure from governments and other groups and employers more powerful than the Master Builders".<sup>129</sup> The fact that many<sup>130</sup> individual employers did "succumb earlier" by signing the dispensation agreement adds credence to Munday's assertions. He also believed that the individual agreements were having the effect

<sup>126</sup> Building Industry Branch of the Socialist Party of Australia, Six Turbulent Years, p.25.

<sup>127</sup> L.L. Sharkey, The Trade Unions, p.24. A more detailed analysis of B.W.I.U. industrial philosophy can be found in chapter 10.

<sup>128</sup> Jack Munday, "Towards New Union Militancy", Australian Left Review, August-September 1970, p.6.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Over 60 in the 1st week. Minutes: General Meeting, 12 May 1970.

of "splitting the employers in N.S.W."<sup>131</sup>

Not only were the employers split by Union tactics, they were eventually out-run. In the fifth week of the strike, on 8 June, the labourers returned to work. Resumption took place after private discussion with employers produced an agreement which provided immediate interim increases ranging from \$1.75 to \$2.50 with an immediate brief work value case to be conducted for riggers, scaffolders and concrete finishers. "Private assessments" indicated that the interim amounts would constitute "approximately half of the final margin content increase".<sup>132</sup> The expected national increases from this formula were expected to be "\$6.30 for riggers and \$5.80 for most of the others".<sup>133</sup> An increase in "follow the job" allowance was promised and the new Award was to date from 1 July.<sup>134</sup>

This was everything that the Union had demanded, and in the rigger's case, slightly more. Ever wary of both the boss and the courts the F.M.C. declared: "If private assessments are not fulfilled, all builders labourers will immediately strike throughout Australia".<sup>135</sup>

The N.S.W. Executive also discussed the possibility of a sell-out. Munday

...mentioned disconcerting articles in Construction the M.B.A. journal particularly statements by Premier Askin. He mentioned Askin's whispered reports of arbitration winning out shortly. He warned that this could mean a double cross by M.B.A. and arbitration courts. If this happened...an even larger and more united strike would occur.<sup>136</sup>

This arrangement to defer for a few months the entire increase is a common industrial procedure and was seen by the membership as merely a "face saver" for the M.B.A.<sup>137</sup> Yet this interim agreement drew from Ray Rocher, a later industrial officer for the M.B.A., and himself deeply involved in the strike, the charge that Munday had been offered the same "deal" at the beginning of the strike as he accepted at the end:

...an...issue resolved at the end of five weeks was resolved on the same basis of five or six weeks before...Yet at the end of it, despite the fact that we made it known that he had gone back on the same deal that was offered to him earlier, he was still seen as a champion of the cause. Yet in fact he cost them a lot of money but he was able, because of his own personality, to convince people that he had done the right thing. He had led them right and they were good fellows for following him. Just an amazing personality.<sup>138</sup>

131 Minutes: Federal Management Committee, 1 June 1970, p.3.

132 Ibid.

133 Tribune, 17 June 1970, p.10.

134 Minutes: Federal Management Committee, 1 June 1970, p.7.

135 Ibid.

136 Minutes: General Meeting, 9 June 1970.

137 Interview: Ralph Kelly, 13 December 1977.

138 Ray Rocher: Interviewed by Pat Fiske 1980.



There is no support in the record for this claim. In fact the eventual result was that the Union's expectations were substantially fulfilled. The work value case was begun immediately<sup>139</sup> but dragged on under Commissioner Watson for slightly longer than expected.<sup>140</sup> The eventual decision almost eliminated the differential in pay between the highest paid labourer (the rigger) and the tradesman.<sup>141</sup> This rise in status for the labourer was to have a profound psychological and industrial effect. The F.M.C. congratulated

all members for their sterling militant action in this historic national wages campaign...[which] elevates the A.B.L.F. to a new height as a united, progressive Union always prepared to fight in the interests of our members and the working class generally.<sup>142</sup>

However an aspect of the strike that was almost as important as the final result in the development of the Union's militancy, was the extent to which the membership involved itself in decision making and militant activity. Munday later commented on the rank and file participation:

It surprised many experienced union leaders that in a casual industry such as ours we could maintain the involvement of so many in a five week strike. In fact the tendency was for attendances at mass meetings to increase. The vigilante groups had their main development in the fourth and fifth weeks of the dispute. The decisions of numerous mass meetings in Sydney, Newcastle, Wollongong and Goulburn were either unanimous or overwhelmingly in favor of continued action.<sup>143</sup>

He estimated meeting attendances as 1200 in the fifth week in Sydney and "the best ever" in Newcastle and Wollongong.<sup>144</sup>

The Sydney Morning Herald reports support Munday's claims. The estimated attendance figures for the mass meetings were 1200 on 8 May,<sup>145</sup> 2000 on 10 May,<sup>146</sup> 1500 on 13 May,<sup>147</sup> 800 on 29 May<sup>148</sup> and 800 on 6 June.<sup>149</sup> These figures are remarkable for a Union that only had a membership of  $2\frac{1}{2}$  thousand at the time.

One of the reasons for this mass participation was the effort that the leadership put into communicating with the members. Before, during

139 On 10 June (Minutes: General Meeting, 9 June 1970).

140 Tribune, 22 July 1970, p.2.

141 (1970) 133 C.A.R. 552.

142 Minutes: Federal Management Committee, 1 June 1970, p.7.

143 Jack Munday, "Towards New Union Militancy", Australian Left Review, No. 26, August-September 1970, p.6.

144 Ibid., p.2.

145 Sydney Morning Herald, 9 May 1970.

146 Sydney Morning Herald, 11 May 1970.

147 Sydney Morning Herald, 14 May 1970.

148 Sydney Morning Herald, 30 May 1970.

149 Sydney Morning Herald, 7 June 1970.

and after the strike, the officials produced fifteen leaflets and circulars<sup>150</sup> about the Margins claim and the progress of the strike. Most of these were sent to all builders labourers although a few went just to job delegates.

But it was not just attendance at the mass meetings that was significant, it was the number of rank and filers who were actively involved, not only in vigilante activity but in a decision making capacity between the mass meetings. Munday calculated that 250 or more were engaged in constant activity.<sup>151</sup>

From the very beginning the Executive organised "activists' meetings"<sup>152</sup> but these soon took on a life of their own. They were held virtually every morning and became the informal policy making body during the strike:

Those people actively involved in the strike were making the decisions between general meetings...they were binding on the Executive and the only way they could be cancelled was by a general meeting decision.<sup>153</sup>

One of the rank and filers involved in these meetings was Mick Curtin. He recalls that one of their important tasks was to decide what recommendations the Executive would make to each mass meeting. "All the vigilantes were invited in order to work out recommendations. There were about 120 of us...we'd have a cup of coffee and a biscuit and a discussion...There were only minor differences."<sup>154</sup> Bud Cook agrees with this; "...no decisions came from the top level. Everything was kicked around and argued and finally a general consensus decision was made by everybody...It worked out very good...the blokes were very happy about the whole scene".<sup>155</sup> Munday saw these developments as important: "The openness and involvement was something very different".<sup>156</sup>

A good indication of the way in which power was being de-centralised by this process was the number of different names that were quoted in the media as spokesmen for the Union. "It wasn't just Jack... organisers, rank and filers, everybody used to answer phones and so on.

150 N.S.W. B.L.F. Circulars, 16 February, 26 March; 7, 17, 28 April; 7 September 1970. Leaflets, 18 March; 25 May, 5 June 1970. Recommendations 27 April; 8, 13, 22, 29 May; 5 June 1970.

151 Jack Munday, "Towards New Union Militancy", Australian Left Review, No. 26, August-September 1970, p.2.

152 Minutes: Executive Meeting, 5 May 1970. Old-style official M. Lynch objected to these meetings and thought "that the rank and file should be here only as observers".

153 Interview: Bud Cook, 5 March 1978.

154 Interview: Mick Curtin, 29 February 1976.

155 Interview: Bud Cook, 5 March 1978.

156 Interview: Jack Munday, 13 August 1975.



Because we had meetings every morning you'd find different blokes being cited in the press every day."<sup>157</sup>

This same unrestricted policy was applied to media attendance at the mass meetings. Unlike many other unions, the B.L.F. never excluded the media, "...we had nothing to hide. We got bad and good reports but it was an open policy".<sup>158</sup>

However, the final meeting of the strike presented a difficult problem. The Commission had agreed to the \$6 rise to be paid from 1st July but only if the labourers returned to work. This private agreement could not be made known publicly before resumption took place. The Executive, who did not want to mislead the membership, were placed in a sensitive situation. They recommended to the mass meeting that the press be excluded:

Fred Wells [from the Sydney Morning Herald] put on an act. We agreed with a policy of openness from the platform. We were in hot water. Eventually we showed real skill and told the press the situation. We let them in and they kept their side of the bargain [not to print details of the private agreement]. We got good press that day.<sup>159</sup>

Although the recommendation to return to work was a sensitive one, and "we felt it could go either way" the outcome of the meeting was an overwhelming vote in favour of the Executive recommendation "with only about three people getting up against it".

The "tense scene" had been exacerbated by press reports about vigilante actions and "blatant attacks from outside and inside the trade union movement".<sup>160</sup> The Union journal explained:

The Sydney Morning Herald in two editorials urged rank and file members to reject the leadership. The Daily Telegraph true to form indulged in its usual Red smear tactics in an attempt to divide us.

The combined efforts of the dailies and some radio and T.V. stations chalked up a miserable failure in their efforts to disrupt our unity.<sup>161</sup>

The journal was not exaggerating. One Sydney Morning Herald editorial expatiated:

...Mr Munday, a leading member of the Communist Party, seems to be out to make a name for himself and his party in an extreme and adventurist manner. His union followers should consider where he is leading them before it is too late.<sup>162</sup>

Munday later commented about this editorial that there were "also older trade union leaders, including some on the 'left', who expressed the

<sup>157</sup> Interview: Bob Pringle, 8 March 1978.

<sup>158</sup> Interview: Jack Munday, 3 April 1978.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Interview: Mick Curtin, 29 February 1976.

<sup>161</sup> The Builders' Labourer, July 1970, p.3.

<sup>162</sup> Sydney Morning Herald, 29 May 1970.

same sentiment".<sup>163</sup>

In the light of these attempts to isolate the leaders from the rank and file, it says much for the Union's democratic practices that no apparent disenchantment took place. In fact certain areas of the membership were more active than the officials had expected. For instance the migrant members "who we felt would be fairly quiet"<sup>164</sup> "played a magnificent role"<sup>165</sup> and the P.W.D. workers, also a somewhat stable area of the industry "were widely involved".<sup>166</sup>

Munday believed that one reason why "as each day went by the members solidarity was becoming stronger" was that "there had been a very big change in relation to the workers' attitude to the Penal Powers".<sup>167</sup> Also he felt that the particularly stubborn stand taken by the employers strengthened the solidarity of the workers. He wrote that the strike "was triggered off by a refusal of the Master Builders' Association to even sit down and negotiate".<sup>168</sup> He admitted:

We played it up well...promoted that part. We made ourselves out to be the reasonable ones. We took advantage of their stubbornness and their failure to even sit down and talk. It became so obvious.<sup>169</sup>

However the most important contributing factor to solidarity between the leadership and the rank and file was the officials' own actions. They were already receiving only the same wage as the members on the job<sup>170</sup> but during the strike they added to their egalitarian philosophy by resolving "that officials' wages be stopped whilst the strike is on".<sup>171</sup> Not one official dissented from this decision, despite

163 Jack Munday, "Towards New Union Militancy", Australian Left Review, No. 26, August-September 1970, p.5.

164 Interview: Jack Munday, 13 August 1975.

165 Interview: Mick Curtin, 29 February 1976. As mentioned previously, it was difficult to gather specific information on migrant participation but all the labourers interviewed claimed that migrant participation was good.

166 Interview: Joe Owens, 4 April 1978.

167 Minutes: Federal Management Committee, 1 June 1970, p.3.

168 Correspondence: J. Munday to J.D. Martin, Executive Director, M.B.A., 26 August 1971.

169 Interview: Jack Munday, 3 April 1978. Ralph Kelly (Interview, 13 December 1977) claims that just prior to the 4 May stopwork meeting "employers inserted notes in our paypackets saying how much it grieved them to see our wives etc. starving and that we should attend the next strike meeting and vote according to our conscience". He added dryly "Thousands did attend and roared their approval".

170 The Builders' Labourer, July 1970, p.3. Most union officials receive a loading on their members' award wages of up to 25% or are paid extra for early morning or evening commitments.

171 Minutes: Executive Meeting, 20 May 1970. No wages during industry strikes became established Union policy from then on.



the fact that they were all working harder than ever. Munday believes that the resolution "helped a lot"<sup>172</sup> and was one of the factors which brought about the situation where "builders labourers demonstrated their confidence in their elected leaders, while newspapers, employers and the police were telling us what to do".<sup>173</sup> He also reported to the Executive that "a new high had been reached in co-operation of officials and Rank and File".<sup>174</sup>

Munday capitalised upon the strike situation to pound home in the journal a few points of democratic policy:

It is an undeniable fact that the union leadership and the members are as one. Quite unlike many bureaucratic union leaderships it is our main aim to develop this position even further...The leadership aims for "total involvement" in decision making by the membership. We are opposed to "top" decision making without reference to the membership...

How many other unions, particularly the Right-wing led unions, really try to involve their members in industrial action and real decision making...

As we are a relatively small union...imagine for a moment what struggles could be waged by the bigger unions with their greater resources, if they really involved their membership as we did in direct confrontation with the wealthy employers.<sup>175</sup>

This was a theme that the leadership, particularly Munday and Pringle, were to propound continually during the next five years. All were convinced that the 1970 strike and the methods of collective decision making that evolved had changed the Union dramatically.

Munday was effusive in his thanks "to all our courageous members who have shown how they can fight to improve their living conditions"<sup>176</sup> and "to all delegates and rank and filers for the wonderful struggle the Union conducted".<sup>177</sup>

At the June Branch meeting immediately following the resumption of work, he dwelt again on the Union's solidarity:

The spirit through the whole five weeks, and since, answers those who say that in these days of hire-purchase it's not possible to have a long strike. It's shown that if people believe in something, they'll accept whatever sacrifice comes to them in fighting for it.<sup>178</sup>

172 Interview: Jack Munday, 13 August 1975.

173 The Builders' Labourer, July 1970, p.3.

174 Minutes: Executive Meeting, 16 June 1970.

175 Jack Munday, "Our Strike Proves they Fear Workers' Action Most", The Builders' Labourer, July 1970, p.3.

176 The Builders' Labourer, July 1970, p.5.

177 Ibid., p.13. He also thanked supporters ("you good people") "Your letters, your sympathies and your donations went a long way to helping us win our blue". Ibid., p.21.

178 Pete Thomas, "Brothers, sisters and the kids when the B.L.F. meets", Tribune, 17 June 1970, p.10.

In reporting the Branch meeting, Pete Thomas observed "...the thing that stood out was that, after five weeks on the grass, their militant morale was as high as ever".<sup>179</sup>

As if to emphasise the Union's radical departure from "normal" union activity the wives of the striking labourers were invited to the Branch meeting. President Bob Pringle welcomed them to "this historic meeting" and they proceeded to involve themselves in the business of the Branch. Doris Jobling moved a protest motion against the Education Minister who had claimed that the strike could delay completion of school buildings for up to six months. Other women asked that finance raising be undertaken at an earlier stage in future strikes, a deficiency which officials admitted had occurred.<sup>180</sup> Women composed about a fifth of the meeting and even small children were there.<sup>181</sup> Munday later admitted "...we should have done this [call the wives together] at the beginning".<sup>182</sup>

Further evidence of participation and solidarity were the successful street demonstrations "in which our members held the streets against the attempts of the police to move them onto the footpaths". This was, according to Munday "another blow for the view that the streets are for the use of people and not just for commercial activity and military parades and that kind of 'law and order'".<sup>183</sup> While such language was common among young students and "new left" intellectuals of the period, it was most uncommon, in fact non-existent, among other blue-collar union Secretaries. This emphasised again the changing nature of the Union and its leadership.

However the most radical acts of solidarity and most obvious manifestations of membership participation arose out of the activities of the (now famous) vigilantes.

The first point to make about the vigilante activity of the 1970 strike is that there were very good reasons why that sort of tactic developed. That the reasons were strategic rather than ideological is a factor which many later critics have overlooked. Certainly the

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> Minutes: General Meeting, 9 June 1970.

<sup>181</sup> Pete Thomas, "Brothers, sisters and the kids when the B.L.F. meets", Tribune, 17 June 1970, p.10. Another significant feature of the meeting was a unanimous resolution declaring disgust at the actions of construction workers in the U.S. for attacking anti-Vietnam demonstrators.. Minutes: General Meeting, 9 June 1970.

<sup>182</sup> Jack Munday, "Towards New Union Militancy", Australian Left Review, No. 26, August-September 1970, p.8.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid., p.2.



ideological climate within the Union was ripe for it, but as Tom Hogan points out "...the Vigilantes was a bit like Topsy - it just grew".<sup>184</sup>

The issue of "scabbery" in the industry had not previously been such a clearly identifiable threat to industrial activity: "Scabbing had never been a significant element in the past because strikes were, through the sheer economics of the penal clauses, short lived affairs".<sup>185</sup> In a long drawn out stoppage, strike breaking became more likely to occur and also more of a direct threat to the success of the strike. Pringle believes that it was really "the first time since 1959 that scabbing became an issue"<sup>186</sup> and Owens adds that in the 1970 strike the M.B.A. "used scabbing as a deliberate policy to smash the strike".<sup>187</sup>

Another complicating factor was the haphazard nature of the building industry. Not only was it widespread geographically but it was also very unorganised.<sup>188</sup> It was controlled by many diverse groupings or simply not controlled at all. Among the workers there was considerable non-unionism, particularly in the outer suburbs, and the employers were not organised into one cohesive body either. Although the M.B.A. was the most significant employer organisation in the industry there were many individual builders who were not members, and there were also craft groupings such as the Paviers Association who disagreed with the M.B.A. about the conduct of the strike.<sup>189</sup>

So, as the strike dragged on, as well as the organised strike-breaking of the M.B.A., the smaller builders who were much harder to monitor also began starting up jobs that had been closed down by pickets in the first few days. As Pringle puts it "...they started sneaking back to work".<sup>190</sup> This was obviously easiest in the suburbs and that was where most "scab" activity took place. Members travelling in on trains and buses to mass meetings would report jobs working.<sup>191</sup>

It became obvious by the end of the second week that strike-breaking activity was not being effectively curtailed.<sup>192</sup> It also became obvious

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184 Tom Hogan: Interviewed by Pat Fiske 1980.

185 Paul Gardiner, "The Rise of Jack Munday's Trendy Union - with Clarrie O'Shea's Help", Australian Financial Review, 8 June 1973.

186 Interview: Bob Pringle, 8 March 1978.

187 Interview: Joe Owens, 24 January 1978. He gave as the reason why the M.B.A. tried so hard to break the strike "they saw we'd be driven back to the B.W.I.U. and to the accepted norms...the employers knew the differences that existed".

188 Mick McNamara: Interviewed by Pat Fiske 1976.

189 Minutes: Special Executive Meeting, 20 September 1971.

190 Interview: Bob Pringle, 8 March 1978.

191 Tom Hogan: Interviewed by Pat Fiske 1979.

192 Minutes: Executive Meeting, 20 May 1970.

that unless it was, the strike would be broken. Pringle and Munday discussed the issue, and decided that "the men's dissatisfaction with the number of jobs that were working"<sup>193</sup> was so great that drastic measures were required.

Another problem that required urgent redressive measures concerned the support the Union was receiving from the T.W.U. The concrete drivers criticised the fact that the B.L.F. seemed unable to stop labourers from working when the T.W.U. members had put themselves out of work to support the strike.<sup>194</sup>

Munday also believed that the Union had a moral obligation to protect their members' jobs:

The decisions of numerous mass meetings in Sydney, Newcastle, Wollongong and Goulburn were either unanimous or overwhelmingly in favor of continued action. These demonstrations of determination obliged us to stop the small number of tradesmen and non-unionists from performing our work.<sup>195</sup>

So the need to take effective action against the strike breakers became paramount but the actual tactics to be employed were not yet defined. Munday indicated both the urgency of the problem and his own indecision about an appropriate response at the 20 May Executive meeting. He argued that "next week more efforts must be made to stop scab labour from working" and that "keeping jobs stopped [was]...of prime importance". However, despite urging that "careful consideration should be given...to tactics"<sup>196</sup> he gave no indication of what tactics he thought should be employed. On the other hand Brian Hogan left little doubt about what he felt should occur. The Executive Minutes record:

Bro. B. Hogan...was in two minds whether intimidation should be used before or after Friday's mass meeting...He himself favoured this type of action whether before or after Friday.<sup>197</sup>

When discussing other methods open to them, Munday dismissed "occupations" and "work ins" as inappropriate to the industry.

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193 Interview: Jack Munday, 13 August 1975. Bud Cook remembers rank and filers complaining "What's the good of going on strike if blokes do our job". (Interview: Bud Cook, 5 March 1978)

194 Interview: Bob Pringle, 8 March 1978 and Minutes: Executive Meeting, 9 June 1970.

195 Jack Munday, "Towards New Union Militancy", Australian Left Review, No. 26, August-September 1970, p.6.

196 Minutes: Executive Meeting, 20 May 1970.

197 Ibid. Hogan had agreed that new tactics "should now be looked at" but had also commented that "tactics used so far had been very successful".



There seems little point in the occupation of empty shells and still less of continuing building activity during a strike.<sup>198</sup>

Another strategy, the picket line, was largely ineffectual. Because of the length of the strike and the scattered nature of the industry, effective picket lines could only be maintained on large jobs, or in easily accessible areas. In the suburbs, the large number of small jobs made picketting an unrealistic tactic.<sup>199</sup> A refinement of the picket line had also been tried. This was the "flying gang picket" which was essentially a small mobile picket line moving from job to job. This tactic had been reasonably successful in "getting blokes off jobs. But after you've locked the gates and left, what happens next?"<sup>200</sup> Often, deliberate strike-breaking happened next. As Tom Hogan explained:

In the very first few days of the strike it was noticeable that some jobs particularly in the outer suburbs were still working. This caused quite a deal of agitation and so organisers with one or two rank and filers would go out and try to descab the job and to explain the issues. It was successful for a few days. And then some builders started to get more organised and put large groupings of scab labour onto sites and two or three people had no chance of shifting them. It was deliberately done.<sup>201</sup>

When the need to stop jobs working was raised at a stop-work meeting, ...the leadership said that a handful of officials are not going to stop it - rank and file participation is the only thing that's going to do it. Sixty or so rank and filers stayed back after the meeting, not to "vigilante" but to go round and talk. We were pretty naive...we went out in twos...the hard line scabs around just ran over the top of us.<sup>202</sup>

All labourers interviewed agreed that only small numbers had been used in the first weeks "there weren't big gangs at that time".<sup>203</sup> "We went out in car loads, two or three people..."<sup>204</sup> Another feature of this activity was that these groups worked "always with an official in charge of the party".<sup>205</sup>

As organised resistance grew, the small groups began to feel threatened. The rank and file activists could see that small groups

198 Jack Munday, "Towards New Union Militancy", Australian Left Review, No. 26, August-September 1970, p.2.

199 Joe Owens explained "the tradition was that once scabs had got through the picket lines, they worked, but we couldn't cop that because if they'd worked, we'd have been ruined". Interview: Joe Owens, 24 January 1978.

200 Interview: Bud Cook, 5 March 1978.

201 Tom Hogan: Interviewed by Pat Fiske 1979.

202 Interview: Tom Hogan, 28 October 1977.

203 Interview: Bob Pringle, 8 March 1978.

204 Interview: Ralph Kelly, 13 December 1977.

205 Tom Hogan: Interviewed by Pat Fiske 1979.

were no longer effective:

One morning a meeting of about 50 of us took place...we said "bugger it - we are not going to get intimidated anymore, we're going out together" and I suppose that morning was the real birth of the vigilantes.<sup>206</sup>

However, even then, vigilante tactics were not discussed or decided upon. Every participant in this strike has their own first memory of vigilante activity and often their own version of how "vigilantes" first came into being. These stories are not self-aggrandisement or the product of faulty memories, they are actually a very good indication of the ad hoc nature of the vigilante movement. Some of the incidents described to me were obviously unrelated and each participant probably did believe they were the first to take such action.

Certainly most strike-breakers ceased working when a large force of strikers descended on a site, "...in most cases they'd stop when they saw about twenty cars pull up, twenty car doors slam".<sup>207</sup> But, how could the strikers ascertain that work did not resume once the force had left? Also, the length of the strike and the M.B.A.'s stiff resistance meant that "...sometimes the men wouldn't stop. They'd insist on working as 'scab' labour".<sup>208</sup> In these circumstances, the only tactic left for the strikers was to make employment of scab labour an uneconomic proposition for employers. As Munday argued: "We did not set out on a wanton destruction rampage, but attacked only buildings where employers were attempting to use scab labor to break the strike".<sup>209</sup> The numerous stories told about the birth of the vigilantes echo these sentiments. The B.Ls saw the action they took as a simple necessity, "...there was nothing else to do but take direct action and stop their jobs".<sup>210</sup>

The disparity between stories can also be explained by the fact that the vigilante movement had such an inchoate development that each participant saw different incidents as significant. For Joe Owens, a conversation in the Criterion Hotel was a critical factor. A group of activists were discussing how to deal with scabbing and

...someone suggested an occupation...There was hesitancy amongst all of us(211)...How did one occupy a building site?" Someone suggested sitting on top of poles. Ralph Kelly was there...

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

<sup>209</sup> Jack Munday, "Towards New Union Militancy", Australian Left Review, No. 26, August-September 1970, p.6.

<sup>210</sup> Interview: Mick Ross, 20 July 1977.

<sup>211</sup> Interview: Joe Owens, 4 April 1978.



Shortly afterwards Ralph was arrested for squatting on a hoist somewhere in Camden. He rang up and said "the coppers are coming back in half an hour - what will I do?" I answered, "How the Hell should I know?" It was all new ground.<sup>212</sup>

Ralph Kelly was not the only vigilante to be seized with the desire to sit on things. The July issue of the journal featured a large photograph on the front cover, with a suitable caption: "Our two 'pole sitters' Dick Keenan and 'Little Steve' occupy the job and stop the scabs from working while Tony Thomas below puts our case to an attentive member of the constabulary".<sup>213</sup>

For Bob Pringle, the vigilante movement began on a site at the University of N.S.W.:

We had stopped the job the week before...we came back and it was working again. There were only three of us, me, Vince [Ashton] and Mick Curtin. We tipped two barrows of mud [concrete] onto the rubbish heap and unloaded a hoist...that was the first action.<sup>214</sup>

Mick Ross described "the first vigilante 'turn out'" as occurring when:

One of our blokes went to a site in Balmain early in the morning on his own and they attacked him. He came into the Sussex and we all went out in a strong body. We told the boss to pull the crane down...eventually the coppers were called...<sup>215</sup>

Tom Hogan also saw this incident as crucial. "We had been physically set upon. The strike completely changed character one hour after that car had left."<sup>216</sup>

For Mick McNamara the first vigilante action was the famous Shirley Street seige.<sup>217</sup> Mick Curtin believes the beginning was "the dirty dozen" which included himself, Charlie Cutford, the Hogans, Joe Owens, Darcy Duggan<sup>218</sup> and Bob Pringle.<sup>219</sup> Bobby Baker considered the first actual confrontations took place "with brickies on the small jobs in the suburbs...they were the biggest trouble".<sup>220</sup>

Bud Cook believes the birth of the "vigilantes" was when Tom and Brian Hogan "went out and couldn't get the blokes off the job. Tommy said, 'those walls shouldn't be built, they're still green...push them over'. Vigilantes had not been used before". Cook remembers Munday's

212 Interview: Joe Owens, 24 January 1978.

213 The Builders' Labourer, July 1970, front cover.

214 Interview: Bob Pringle, 8 March 1978.

215 Interview: Mick Ross, 29 July 1977.

216 Interview: Tom Hogan, 28 October 1977.

217 Mick McNamara: Interviewed by Pat Fiske 1976.

218 Not the famous "crim". However the similarity of name was never a drawback. He always polled particularly well in union elections.

219 Interview: Mick Curtin, 29 February 1976.

220 Interview: Bobby Baker, 16 May 1980.

reaction to the press reports of this action:

Jack came racing in, newspaper in hand, saying "This is bad for us Bud, you've got to keep the public on side". I argued, "how can blokes defend their jobs?" Jack generally copped that line and a meeting was called. Jack's first approach was "we've got to tone it down a bit...we've got to use a bit of that action but tone it down". The blokes came in with their own argument. They didn't need anyone to argue for them. They said "how else can we guarantee our jobs?"<sup>221</sup>

This total acceptance of the need for sabotage was also prevalent among the membership generally. When activists were asked whether their tactics alienated other members their answers were all similar: "The other rank and filers didn't disagree...in fact mass meetings started to grow".<sup>222</sup> "There was no argument at all - they fully agreed with it."<sup>223</sup> "There was no opposition to destruction of property...the unity was very good - much better than the 1971 strike."<sup>224</sup> "There was very little feeling against 'vigilante violence'...only from those not involved in the strike."<sup>225</sup>

Tom Hogan agreed that "rank and filers did not worry about men pushing over walls" but that the two old-time officials Lynch and Austin "felt that this had gone too far...they stood for protection of private property".<sup>226</sup> Austin in fact argued at the 20 May Executive meeting that "roving gangs could have [a] bad effect on officials in future...He preferred smaller crews visiting jobs in [the] normal manner. He himself would refuse to be involved in this activity."<sup>227</sup>

Munday believed that vigilante action helped unify the striking workers:

Most militant workers had been critical for years about the general passivity displayed by unions during strikes and the failure of leaders to really take part with the members in forcing issues.

Our strike by breaking with the past and really going into action, won wide support among thousands of workers.<sup>228</sup>

Evidence to support this view lies in the increased meeting attendances and the large number of rank and filers who became vigilantes.

Ralph Kelly believed that the political atmosphere of the time was crucial to the way builders labourers reacted to the vigilantes:

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221 Interview: Bud Cook, 5 March 1978.

222 Interview: Tom Hogan, 28 October 1977.

223 Interview: Mick Curtin, 29 February 1976.

224 Interview: Mick Ross, 29 July 1977.

225 Interview: Darcy Duggan, 12 July 1977.

226 Interview: Tom Hogan, 28 October 1977.

227 Minutes: Executive Meeting, 20 May 1970.

228 J.B. Munday, "Australia: Progress and Difficulties of the Trade Union Movement", World Federation of Trade Unions Journal, October 1971, p.31.



...you must remember all this took place during...Vietnam and the Australian people were reacting and demonstrating in a wholly political way. B.Ls were looking at their T.V. screens and newspapers and seeing people in their thousands committing acts of disobedience. They were...standing up to the police and defying police. And not only were the authorities powerless to stop it, this massive action went on and on...The militancy and some of the actions of the B.Ls during the 1970 strike came as a direct result of the collective experience of the Australian people.<sup>229</sup>

Mundey confirmed this view:

I believe a combination of international developments and purely national and local issues influenced leaders and rank and file. Many workers have been impressed by the aggressive forms of strike and militant activity in overseas countries.<sup>230</sup>

Another feature of vigilante activity that was symptomatic of the period, was its democratic nature. "They didn't have great leaders to instruct them" wrote Joe Owens. "...every day they met and formed their methods of action for the day."<sup>231</sup> Tom Hogan endorsed these sentiments:

...at this stage one wouldn't know who was union official and who was rank and file...if the union official walked fast enough he'd get in front and do the talking...<sup>232</sup>

These daily meetings of vigilantes made decisions that were regarded as policy until the next general meeting. The original decision to go out on to jobs en masse had been made subject to endorsement at the next mass meeting which of course assented. An important proviso to this decision was that no physical attacks were to be made on people. Bud Cook believes:

Everybody agreed with that. I think there was only one dissension. It was Dick Keenan.<sup>(233)</sup> He thought we should give them a hiding. We argued that that would defeat the purpose which was retribution against the builder.<sup>234</sup>

Or, as Joe Owens put it:

Destruction of property was better than getting into physical confrontation with fools who allowed themselves to be used as scabs.

Though most blokes would have had no compunction about giving a scab a bat over the head with a lump of four by two, we knew that public opinion would be against us. There was not one incident of anyone being biffed except one of our pickets.<sup>235</sup>

<sup>229</sup> Ralph Kelly: Interviewed by Pat Fiske 1979.

<sup>230</sup> Jack Mundey, "Towards New Union Militancy", Australian Left Review, No. 26, August-September 1970, p.2.

<sup>231</sup> Joe Owens, "The Vigilantes", The Builders' Labourer, July 1970, p.37.

<sup>232</sup> Tom Hogan: Interviewed by Pat Fiske 1979.

<sup>233</sup> Keenan became progressively oppositionist and worked for Gallagher during Federal Intervention.

<sup>234</sup> Interview: Bud Cook, 5 March 1978.

<sup>235</sup> Interview: Joe Owens, 24 January 1978.

No activist could recall any incident, either in this strike or later where a labourer had attacked an employer or strike breaker.<sup>236</sup> Despite such restraint, the employers, the State Government and the media continually accused the vigilantes of violence against individuals. As Munday recalled:

Repeatedly I challenged both Askin and Allan [Police Commissioner] to produce one individual that had been bashed up by the strikers - they failed. It was almost a nightly occurrence - I was on the box saying ..."just bring me one", and they couldn't bring one.<sup>237</sup>

Press reports at the time failed to nominate any specific incident and made no distinction between violence to persons and violence to property. Later accusations about violence towards people totally confused legitimate industrial activity with the notorious Trades Hall Brawl of 1971.<sup>238</sup> In fact the only documentary evidence of wrongdoing from either side appeared in the post-strike edition of the Union journal. Correspondence from Meriton Properties Ltd was published without comment:

This is to confirm that we apologise for the behaviour of one of our people at the above site [26-30 Price St, Ryde] on 2nd June...<sup>239</sup>

There appears to have been only one major confrontation between strikers and strike-breakers and this occurred on a site in the western suburbs where an old mansion was being renovated. One of the vigilantes involved was Peter Barton:

The mansion was apparently owned by top gambling people, fairly heavy characters. About 50 vigilantes rushed on to the site and these characters [the gamblers] produced shotguns, rifles and tomahawks and about 50 vigilantes rushed out of the job-site.<sup>240</sup>

This incident was remembered by the media but not with a great deal of accuracy. In 1971, when Munday was questioned about the incident on Monday Conference, The Australian industrial roundsman, Neal Swancott, commented: "There was an occasion last year in which a shotgun was wielded by a person from one side or the other...where pick handles were thrown around..." Munday replied that the shotgun was produced by

236 Most labourers used phrases such as "the policy was pretty principled" and gave the impression that refraining from hitting scabs was an act of great restraint. D.W. Rawson ("Political Violence in Australia - Part II", Dissent, No. 23, Spring 1968, p.39) makes the point that the Communist Party "has been sometimes the origin and more often the object of political violence".

237 Passing Show, 10 October 1978, p.11.

238 Which was caused by the opposition Maoist element and was disapproved of by the leadership. See chapter 5.

239 Builders' Labourer, July 1970, p.33.

240 Interview: Peter Barton, 5 March 1978.



the employer and the pickhandle by a "scab".<sup>241</sup> However continual denials had little effect on the media.

The Union was only intent upon denying violence against people. They were unrepentant about general vigilante activities. Despite claims by Geoff Anderson that Munday was originally apologetic about vigilante action this was not so.<sup>242</sup> On 19 May the Union paid \$596 for a half-page advertisement in the Mirror which clearly spelt out their intentions:

...if employers are provocative enough to use non-union labour during the strike, those employers must face the consequences.

In such cases the correct word is RETRIBUTION NOT VIOLENCE.<sup>243</sup>

As Munday commented: "We needn't have bothered paying the money to publicise our cause. The ad. was on page 48 and the next day we were on page one".<sup>244</sup>

Not only were the media reports sensationalised but the employers and the Government made equally exaggerated statements. Les Ball from the M.B.A. claimed that the B.L.F.'s actions were reminiscent of the gangster activities of U.S. trade unions in the past.<sup>245</sup> Askin said his government would not tolerate lawlessness, rioting and bloodshed in the streets and would stand firmly behind the police.<sup>246</sup> The President of the Employers' Federation said the vigilantes' behaviour was "completely foreign to the concept of law and order which is a characteristic of democratic Australia".<sup>247</sup> Such chauvinism was also apparent in the Sydney Morning Herald editorial which railed against such "ugly and decidedly un-Australian"<sup>248</sup> tactics.

241 Monday Conference, A.B.C., September 1971.

242 Geoff Anderson, op.cit., p.51. Anderson's claims were based on Munday's statement in reply to Commissioner Watson's suggestion that the B.L.F. was condoning violence: "I am surprised you suggest that I would. Of course I don't. I reject any accusation that our members are engaged in violence." (Reported in The Australian, 16 May 1970) One does not have to accuse Munday of casuistry to properly understand this interchange. Munday was simply referring to what he perceived as violence and these perceptions were not those of Commissioner Watson.

243 Daily Mirror, 19 May 1970. Munday also wrote in the World Federation of Trade Unions Journal (October 1971, p.31) "...the work performed by scabs was smashed...We stated that employers who used scabs on a job must bear the full consequences of their actions. Physical violence was not part of the campaign..."

244 Interview: Jack Munday, 13 August 1975.

245 Sydney Morning Herald, 16 May 1970.

246 Sydney Morning Herald, 29 May 1970.

247 C.H. Monk, President, (Report to Annual Meeting of Employers' Federation). Reported in Sydney Morning Herald, 7 November 1970.

248 Sydney Morning Herald, 28 May 1970.

Headlines which in later years were to become all too familiar made their appearance for the first time. A banner headline, "Building Strike, Violence Goes On"<sup>249</sup> described a mass meeting decision to stay on strike; a march by 100 labourers on the M.B.A. offices was labelled "Strike Emergency, Riot in City";<sup>250</sup> and an occupation at Crows Nest became "Riot Squad Out: \$10,000 Damage in Rampage".<sup>251</sup>

The membership remained unperturbed by these media reports. Munday estimated that about four hundred men were actively involved in vigilante activity and although Anderson believes this figure is "probably inflated"<sup>252</sup> he does concede that the number of vigilante raids increased<sup>253</sup> rather than decreased as the strike wore on. When estimating numbers in such situations it is wise to heed Tom Hogan's words:

Three months after the strike there had been five thousand vigilantes. No one was game to not be a vigilante. Today I presume there were 25,000 vigilantes - that's how popular that movement was.<sup>254</sup>

The movement's obvious popularity was apparent in the post strike edition of the Union journal where vigilante actions were recorded as "highlights"<sup>255</sup> and sabotage incidents openly boasted about.<sup>256</sup> One incident which received specific attention was the "Siege of Shirley Street". The home-units site in Crows Nest had continued working despite repeated warnings. The manager of the building company involved, Plunkett Homes Construction Co., Ray Rocher, later became Executive Director of the M.B.A. His description of the "seige" is a little different to that of the vigilantes:

We were taken over by a group of vigilantes otherwise known as the "goon squad" who sought for me to sign an agreement...so it could be bandied around the sites. Obviously, because of my position here [at the M.B.A.] and the fact that I wouldn't succumb to that sort of pressure I wouldn't sign the document. We couldn't have them arrested for trespassing that day because the police advised us that the hoardings weren't up and we weren't in an enclosed site. We put up the hoardings, locked the job and made it safe. On Thursday I received a phone call, about 5.30 a.m. that the labourers had

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249 Sydney Morning Herald, 30 May 1970.

250 Sun, 27 May 1970.

251 Daily Mirror, 28 May 1970.

252 Geoff Anderson, op.cit., p.53.

253 Ibid.

254 Interview: Tom Hogan, 28 October 1977.

255 Joe Owens, "Some Highlights of a Strike that Made History", Builders' Labourer, July 1970, pp.21, 23, 25, 27 & 48.

256 Ibid.



taken possession again. I arrived at the site at six and immediately requested that the police lay charges. Police didn't react and said they would get reinforcements...About seven we started seeing wheelbarrows, bags of cement and windows being hurled out of the upper floors of the building. There were about 50 police at North Sydney Police Station waiting to receive instructions from the Premier and the Police Minister. The vigilantes left at about ten and five minutes after they left the site the whole 50 or 60 police arrived so clearly there had been a tip-off. They did about \$15,000 of physical damage in just two or three hours but the cost to the company was about \$30,000 in holding charges and so on.<sup>257</sup>

The vigilantes' descriptions differ from Rocher's in emphasis rather than detail. Joe Owens claimed the incident was "hilarious":

The mob went in at four in the morning and jumped over the fence - landed on the guard dogs and the guard dogs pissed off. I don't know who got the biggest fright, the guard dogs or the pickets.

It was a new scene we didn't know what we were going to do so we just propped [stayed]. We barricaded the stairs...the coppers didn't know what to do either. We rang up the office to tell Munday what we were doing and more men arrived.<sup>258</sup>

Mick Curtin described his own involvement in an incident which many later believed to be apocryphal:

I finished up having the boss's lunch. I really enjoyed his sandwiches. I rang up the police and told them not to worry, that everything was under control and that I was having the boss's lunch at the moment and enjoying it.<sup>259</sup>

From this occasion sprang the (now famous) B.L.F. adage "Never eat the boss's lunch unless you occupy the site and find it on his desk".<sup>260</sup>

The men also utilised a tactic which later became quite common.

The Mirror reported:

The vigilantes, calling themselves Munday's Raiders...set up a small amplifier which they called Pirate Radio 2BLF. The strikers asked Crows Nest residents to report any building sites where scab labour was being used. They broadcast bulletins on conditions in the building and reports on the causes and course of the builders' laborers strike.<sup>261</sup>

The effect of the strike was immense. Probably most significantly it magnified the split with the B.W.I.U. Munday commented on this aspect in another interview with Australian Left Review: "...conservative tradesmen's leaders threw up their hands in horror at the 'terrible

257 Ray Rocher: Interviewed by Pat Fiske 1980.

258 Interview: Joe Owens, 24 January 1978.

259 Interview: Mick Curtin, 29 February 1976.

260 An expression I often heard during debates among B.L.F. officials about the difficulties of remaining outside the "club" in which the B.L.F. considered most union officials and employers to be involved.

261 Daily Mirror, 28 May 1970.

crime' of a few scab-built walls being pushed over".<sup>262</sup>

That the actions of the vigilantes caused consternation among C.P.A. members is undoubted. Laurie Aarons, who did not oppose the vigilantes himself admits that there were people in the Party who did:

Of course this was before the split and that was the reason. It became worse because of these very great differences in the Party. It was seized on as an illustration, not as how the B.Ls and Munday were committing anarchist errors but how the leadership of the Party was encouraging and even misleading these people into anarchist errors.<sup>263</sup>

Although the impending Party split exaggerated the S.P.A. group's criticisms, later publications of that group show that they do not believe in destruction of scab-built erections during strikes. It was a genuine ideological cleavage. In 1972 a statement put out by the S.P.A. under the names of P. Clancy, Chairman, and P. Symon, General Secretary, asserted:

Those who still argue that smashing down walls and other wrecking activity are "useful strike tactics" should consider whether there is such a thing as advocating only a "certain amount of violence"? Today there is surely enough experience to provide a clear warning on where this leads...

Dealing with strike breakers by destruction of building or property erected by scabs or threats of violence at job sites by so-called vigilante groups is no more than a reversion to old, futile practices that have been previously discarded in the labour movement...

In short, the most effective way of dealing with the persistent strike breaker is to draw upon the organised strength of the trade union movement as a whole.<sup>264</sup>

Such differences in outlook could not be accommodated. Many labourers saw the break with the B.W.I.U. as a positive effect of the strike.

Peter Barton, longtime C.P.A. member claimed:

The break with the B.W.I.U. did our Union the world of good. The Clancys and the McDonalds were bogging us down. It didn't damage our relationship with the thinking tradesman on the job. If we hadn't split, we'd have been swallowed.<sup>265</sup>

The other major effect of the strike was on the labourers themselves. An excerpt from the November Executive Minutes sums up the general feeling in the Union: "Bro. Cook...was critical of saying that things were not possible, and said that since the dispute in May it

262 "Interview with Jack Munday", Australian Left Review, No. 32, September 1971, p.8.

263 Interview: Laurie Aarons, 28 December 1977.

264 Socialist Party of Australia, Ultra Leftism: How it Harms the Worker, n.d. (1972?), 6pp. roneod. Authorised by P. Clancy, Chairman and P. Symon, General Secretary. Pp.2-3.

265 Interview: Peter Barton, 5 March 1978.



proved that all things were possible."<sup>266</sup> Many labourers reported feelings of "elation" or of having "had the cobwebs blown away".<sup>267</sup>

Mundey remarked on this aspect in his post-strike journal editorial:

In such a scattered and fragmented industry, the capacity of our union to wage such a sustained struggle surprised many people and because of the strength and the lessons of our action the industry can never be the same again.<sup>268</sup>

Tom Hogan believed that "never again as a union can we go back to the old style".<sup>269</sup> Joe Owens claimed that it was the break with "the old idea that a union was a series of officers with strict authoritarian control over the membership" that was the really dramatic change. This came about because of the autonomy of the vigilante groups when "pickets very largely had to make decisions on their own".<sup>270</sup> Mundey agreed that the strike "brought about a qualitative change...the membership started to become self acting...It was a very aggressive strike. It was not a go-home stay-home strike."<sup>271</sup> Rank and filer Ralph Kelly saw the process of the vigilantes' learning to use switchboards, typewriters and maps in their co-ordination efforts as particularly important.<sup>272</sup>

Many of the experienced vigilantes later became job delegates or even temporary organisers and this influx of enthusiastic and able militants greatly improved the Union's organisation.<sup>273</sup> New names regularly appear in the Branch Meeting Minutes in the months following the strike.<sup>274</sup> Financial unionism improved dramatically after an initial period of "lag".<sup>275</sup>

The vigilante activities prompted the Union to undertake similar action in other campaigns;<sup>276</sup> with similarly successful results:

Following the success of the strike new demands were made on employers and there was a drive made for greatly improved conditions and amenities...Our drive has met with unprecedented

266 Minutes: Executive Meeting, 17 November 1970.

267 Interview: Mick Curtin, 29 February 1976.

268 Jack Mundey, "Great Strike Proved Our Fighting Ability", Builders' Labourer, July 1970, p.1.

269 Tom Hogan: Interviewed by Pat Fiske, 1980.

270 Interview: Joe Owens, 24 January 1978.

271 Interview: Jack Mundey, 13 August 1975.

272 Interview: Ralph Kelly, 13 December 1977.

273 "Improved Organisation Flows From the Strike", Builders' Labourer, July 1970, p.7.

274 Especially Minutes: Special General Meeting, 25 August 1970; and General Meeting, 1 September 1970.

275 Minutes: General Meeting, 2 March 1971. Mundey reported that \$25,000 more had been raised in 1970 than in the previous year, and that the percentage of financial members was the highest ever.

276 See chapter 4.

success...but what is more important is that completely new methods of struggle were adopted during and after the strike.<sup>277</sup>

Decisions made by the leadership during the strike, such as refusing to be paid, gained them considerable respect: "Jack's stocks soared enormously amongst the rank and file, even those who had previously not been supporters".<sup>278</sup>

Finally the actual margins gain itself was of great significance. The 90%-100% formula was consolidated and maintained during the following years, never once dropping behind despite the pressures of the green ban period.

Although the strike produced a number of favourable effects for the Union it also marked the beginnings of the ruling class offensive. Munday showed some awareness of the effects on the employers when he wrote shortly after the strike that the vigilantes' actions, "set a standard of aggressive strike activity" that could lead to workers' control: "This would really rattle the employing class".<sup>279</sup>

The employers can no longer do "behind the door" deals with the A.B.L.F. They have a far too healthy respect for our fighting capacity even to try it.<sup>280</sup>

He concluded that the strike had made "a very deep impression on the employing class, who incurred a loss of over \$60 million during the dispute".<sup>281</sup>

One of the first intimations of the extent of the ruling class backlash came when Askin declared that part of the new Summary Offences Act was inspired by the B.L.F. margins strike.<sup>282</sup> Mick McNamara also believed that "following the strike, police came up with new training equipment, and so on especially to get the B.Ls".<sup>283</sup>

Certainly by the end of Intervention, Munday could trace the origins of the onslaught back to the strike. In his final speech to the membership he claimed:

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277 J.B. Munday, "Australia: Progress and Difficulties of the Trade Union Movement", World Federation of Trade Unions Journal, October 1971, p.31.

278 Interview: Ralph Kelly, 13 December 1977.

279 Builders' Labourer, July 1970, p.5.

280 Ibid., p.11.

281 Jack Munday, "Great Strike Proved Our Fighting Ability", Builders' Labourer, July 1970, p.1.

282 "Interview with Jack Munday", Australian Left Review, No. 32, September 1971, p.11.

283 Mick McNamara: Interviewed by Pat Fiske 1976.



Over the past number of years, particularly since the big strike in 1970, the Master Builders and successive State Governments have used everything they know to try and smash this Union.<sup>284</sup>

The point was that, just like the members, the employers had become aware that the B.L.F. was now "a different sort of union".

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<sup>284</sup> Jack Munday, Speech, 24 March 1975.



**BENIER**



"... More violent than a locomotive, more destructive than a speeding bullet ... it's ... a builder's labourer?"