

THE BUILDERS LABOURERS FEDERATION OF AUSTRALIA

I'm a bricklayer, a member of UCATT, and an anarchist syndicalist. Before I took a course in bricklaying at a training centre about eight years ago I worked at other jobs, and I've been a member of various unions. I want to tell people who may not have heard of it about the BLF of Australia, not because I think it's ideal, but simply because the contrast with most British unions is so striking. (No, that wasn't meant to be a joke). All my information on this union comes from official union publications of the New South Wales section of the union, and I have no doubt there is another side to the story. But the contrast between the journal BUILDERS LABOURER and any British union publication has to be seen to be believed.

The official name of the union is the Australian Building & Construction Employees and Builders Labourers Federation. It was formerly just the BLF, and this is the name by which it is generally known. The union has a federal management committee, but because of the sheer size of Australia it tends to be more or less an autonomous union in each state, with the New South Wales Branch (this doesn't mean a local branch in the British sense) taking a particularly independent line. This article is about the NSW branch.

STYLE OF ORGANISATION

There was an argument on a site in Sydney about toilets, washing facilities, and canteen conditions. At a confrontation between the assembled workers and the site boss, one worker said something. The boss said "I'll talk about that with your secretary." The NSW union secretary, Jack Munday, who was present, replied "you'll talk about it to all of them here; I'm just one of their employees." Can you imagine any British union bureaucrat saying that?

Jack Munday has since become an ordinary worker again under the rule in the NSW union, which he himself proposed at an executive meeting, on limited tenure of office. No person may hold a full time union job for more than six years. After that, he must return to work on the sites for at least one year. While he is an "employee of the members" he receives the same wage as the average member, so the official has the best possible reason for fighting for increases for the union members!

This falls a long way short of the syndicalist ideal of how a union should be run but compared to UCATT, for instance, it sounds like a dream.

Apart from the secretary, NSW has four union organisers appointed for three years, and "in the 1970-73 period some 40 different members served for varying periods as temporary organisers... who have returned to the sites with added experience and maturity to enhance their work in the rank and file."

FEUDS WITH OTHER UNIONS

Organisation of workers in the Australian building industry is more fragmented than in this country. The fact that, despite (or possibly because of) this, the unions are a damn sight more lively than anything in this country, should make us wary of thinking "industrial unions" are a cure-all. I certainly wouldn't want UCATT to have control over all building workers in Britain.

The BLF has had demarcation disputes with the Australian Workers Union as well as an outfit called the Building Workers Industrial Union, and it doesn't get along too well with the numerous craft unions. All this despite strenuous efforts by

the union leadership to appease or come to terms with these outfits. One of the BLF's declared aims is "establishment of one union for the building industry without take-overs or poaching".

YES TO WORKING CLASS UNITY - NO TO AMALGAMATION !

The Builders Labourers Federation has three grades of members on three different rates of pay. It used to be four, but they got the lowest up-graded. Of course, some jobs are more skilled than others, but the whole emphasis of any working class organisation should be to move away from grading, as it only helps to divide the workers and strengthen the bosses.

The BLF doesn't include tradesmen such as brickies, carpenters, and so on. Of course, a brickie likes to feel that he is better than a common labourer, but this is a very narrow and short term way of looking at things. Looking down on your fellow workers keeps the boss where he is - on your back. A genuinely free society could maintain much higher building standards than exist at present without all these arbitrary divisions.

All unions in Australia, including the BLF, are state registered, and have been for a very long time. But there is a move afoot by opponents of the BLF to get it struck off the register, on the theory that this will drive it out of business.

When a union like the BLF has such difficulties, despite efforts by its leaders to get along with more orthodox unions and with the state, it is clear that a working class organisation in which all power was in the hands of the rank and file would be faced with open conflict from the word go.

THE MEMBERS

There are about eleven or twelve thousand members of the BLF in New South Wales.

This is five times what it was a few years ago, before "progressives" won control of the union from a bunch of gangsters who did not hesitate to beat up members who disliked their way of running things. About 70 per cent of the members in NSW are immigrants to Australia.

It should be realised, however, that the yearly turnover of members is high. It used to be 90 per cent - in other words, out of every 10 members at the beginning of a year, only one was still a member at the end of it, though the other 9 might have been replaced by new members. Many workers are members on a particular site and allow their membership to lapse when they leave it. Turnover in the BLF is now down to 50 or 60 per cent, which is still high.

I'm not sure what the turnover percentage is in Britain, but I know it is high in building compared to all other British industries. This is mainly due to the unstable nature of employment in the building industry, with work on some projects reaching completion and new sites starting up. In addition, because of the constantly changing nature of the industry, it tends to attract a much higher proportion, compared with other industries, of people who don't like working at the same place all the time.

WOMEN IN THE BUILDERS LABOURERS FEDERATION

Quote from a union publication, 'Taming the Concrete Jungle' : "wives of NSW builders labourers have been encouraged to take part in union activity - and not in pouring the tea or buttering the scones. Wives were invited to attend and speak at the first NSW branch general meeting after the 1970 strike, to say what they thought about the strike or anything else. About a fifth of the attendance at that meeting were wives. Some brought the kids too." Furthermore, "30 wives of building labourers invaded the

Master Builders' Association Sydney offices.

The same publication adds that "not only may members be invited to bring their wives to meetings; in some cases, they will be invited to bring their husbands. That is because the NSW branch has been recruiting women as members - the first building union in Australia to do so". Most of these women members, who are few in number I must add, are working as "nippers", an Aussie term for a sort of glorified tea-boy and cleaner-up.

But one of them, Denise Bishop, said "We might be nippers now. But don't think this is all we're ever going to be on jobs. We're going to graduate." Denise Bishop was one of a group of women who subsequently became hoist drivers, and she has since been a temporary union organiser. There is, on the front of the Autumn 1973 issue of the 'Builders Labourer', a photo of her, during a union demonstration, being carried off by two large policemen - and fighting them every inch of the way. They don't make union organisers like that in this country!

There have been cases of men stopping work when employers refused to take on women, and even a one woman work-in (backed by the men on the site) which forced a site boss to employ the woman concerned. The union's program includes "recognition of women's right to work in any part of the industry they wish, and assistance to them to develop new skills". All this amounts to quite a small step towards involving the other half of the working class; but it is a step which has yet to be taken in this country.

IMMIGRANTS, ABORIGINES, AND GAYS

About 70 per cent of the NSW membership of the BLF are "new" Australians from Mediterranean countries - Portugal, Spain, France, Italy, Yugoslavia, Greece, Turkey, the Lebanon. Most of them speak little English, so they have difficulty communicating with the "old" Australians and with each other. For some reason, these immigrants are referred to in Australia as "migrants".

The union publishes pamphlets in the migrants' languages, and is pressing for establishment of a migrant education centre at which they could learn about various aspects of Australian society as well as learn English in working hours without loss of pay. The union has one migrant organiser, who speaks Portuguese, Italian, Spanish, French, and English.

The union encourages Aborigines to enter the industry and acquire skills in it. It has one part-Aboriginal organiser.

A male homosexual student was expelled from a residential college at MacQuarie University. The union placed a ban on any of its members working on the university campus until the college authorities had accepted the principle of no sexual discrimination.

These may appear to some as inadequate measures of solidarity with immigrants, aborigines, and gays. But the contrast with UCATT, for instance, is that something is done.

FIGHTING THE BOSSES

Members of the BLF have used some interesting tactics in their struggle with the building industry employers. In one case, workers on a site in Newcastle NSW used nudity as a weapon, much to the embarrassment of the boss and the authorities. These workers had been using jackhammers in an excavation,

getting covered with dust in dry weather and mud in the wet. They demanded showers. When they didn't get them, they rigged up a hose on the steps of City Hall and took a shower there. The spectacle of these laughing, boisterous, naked building workers in such hallowed precincts was enough. They got their showers.

But humour isn't always enough, and the BLF has officially encouraged a tactic which makes British union leaders throw their hands up in horror - sabotage. During industry-wide strikes, teams of vigilantes would go round sites ensuring that no scab work was done. If after a warning they returned to a site and found a newly built wall, for instance, they dealt with it in the most direct way possible - by knocking it down!

This led to a sustained campaign against union "violence" by journalists of the capitalist press who wouldn't know a day's work if it sat up and bit them, but in fact violence is more often used by those on the employers' side. What made the paid propagandists of the established order squeal was not violence against people, but sabotage against property.

SABOTAGE

As well as helping to make strikes for higher wages effective, sabotage has been used to great effect as a means of improving amenities on sites. In one instance, fed up with complaining about the shabby shed which was supposed to be their changing room, workers up-ended the thing and tipped it down the foundations excavation.

Following the success of this operation, a vigilante group was formed to check on amenities on sites. One employer of immigrant labour was warned that he would have to improve conditions on his site. He failed to do so, and a compressor landed upside down at the bottom of the excavations.

One of the BLF's officials, a member of the Aussie Communist Party (which is not quite as bad as the British one, otherwise known as the League of Russian Empire Loyalists) appeared on TV advocating new tactics for workers in other industries; for instance, public transport workers keeping trains and buses running but not collecting fares; or workers in food and clothing factories keeping on working but distributing the goods they produce to pensioners and others in need.

MAKING THE BOSS REDUNDANT

The BLF has maintained continual pressure for more "stopwork meetings" (on full pay) to discuss union business on the sites. Not strike meetings to discuss some particular dispute with the bosses, but normal, regular, everyday meetings. This, if you think about it, is the thin end of a very big wedge indeed. It is a step towards the union's official aim of workers' control.

As well as refusing to recognise the employers' right to fire, BLF members have forced bosses to hire people they didn't want (by means of a work-in by unemployed workers with the threat of action by the other workers in support). Quote from the union journal 'Builders Labourer' "the workers decided that extra hands were needed..."

On one Sydney site employers called the police to deal with "industrial sabotage" in an attempt to scare militants into leaving. It didn't work. Instead, the workers decided that for the next month they would work only

on measures to make the site safe to work at - in other words, no production! Furthermore, they elected their own foreman, safety officer and leading hands. The management were told that each morning they should give the workers a list of the things they wanted done, but that the final decision on what actually got done would be taken by the workers.

After the first month production was actually greater than it would have been with management in command - not that that was the object! "What we were doing was proving that workers could run industry and do it better without a boss telling us what to do."

UNION DEMANDS

The Builders Labourers Federation has won real increases in wages for its members - that is, they are better off despite rising prices. It has won full pay for workers when off through injury. It is demanding long service leave after ten years in the industry - not ten years with a particular employer, of course! It is demanding a reduced working week without loss of pay. But it is also making some demands which seem incompatible with its declared aim of workers' control.

One of these is for a building investigations committee to control development. Now, I haven't the slightest doubt that the Australian building industry, like the British one, badly needs investigating. And, of course, uncontrolled development is a recipe for disaster. But this demand raises two questions. First, who should do the investigating? And secondly, who should control development?

The answer of anybody who is really serious about workers' control to both these questions has to be "the workers should". But the BLF appears to be demanding a body set up by the state and including union "leaders", "business-men", and (un)civil "servants". This is the path of class collaboration and state control.

Another BLF demand is "permanency". This means 52 weeks pay per year for all workers in the building industry, even if they are unemployed for, say, 20 of those 52 weeks. This sounds a good demand, but again the way the union is suggesting to do it contains the seeds of a bureaucracy controlling the workers. They want employment centres for the building industry, which would tell unemployed workers about available jobs and ensure that those who couldn't find work received full pay. They would prefer these centres to be run by the unions, but would accept joint union/boss/state control.

THE ENVIRONMENT

I now come to the subject of the "green bans", the thing for which the BLF is most famous (or notorious) in Australia itself. There have been whole pamphlets written about this subject, so anybody who is really interested can find out more for themselves. I'm just going to explain what the green bans are.

Briefly, a "green ban" is a decision by the BLF that union members should not work on a project which is felt to threaten the quality of people's lives in some way. This applies to both demolition and construction work. These green bans have in some cases been reinforced by other unions deciding on similar action, though the BLF has forced the pace.

A green ban begins with a group of residents in some locality approaching the BLF. The initiative always has to come from local people. No request for a green ban is refused - the BLF say they are not against development as such,

but the ban makes sure that "developers" cannot send the builders in without having taken the time to discuss their plans with local people. If, after full discussion, the local people make it quite clear they don't want the "development", then of course the green ban becomes permanent!

When houses are to be knocked down to make way for an office block or a motorway, a green ban is imposed. When the natural beauty of a piece of countryside is threatened, a green ban is slapped on. Historic buildings are preserved - including a church which the Church authorities wanted knocked down because they would make more money out of an office block....

Middle-class conservationists have found themselves in the embarrassing position of having to seek the aid of militant building workers, the most active conservationists of all! In one case where a whole residential area was threatened the "developers" tried to use non-union labour, backed by hundreds of policemen. A series of pitched battles took place. Three houses were eventually demolished, but it became clear to the "developers" that they would never be able to build on this land. Where the houses had stood, to quote the Builders Labourer, "the workers had decided that there would be a park - forever".

It is estimated that three thousand million dollars' worth of "development" is being held up by green bans.

CONCLUSION

The BLF is not, as I said earlier, my ideal of a union which is completely under the control of the workers, and which is seeking complete workers' control of industry for the benefit of society as a whole. But it is a union which British workers might learn some things from. That is why I have written this, and that is why we in the ASA are distributing it.

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