

Green Bans Forever: The Public and the Press in the 1970s Sydney Green Ban Movement

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Abstract

The green ban movement of 1971-75 prevented an estimated \$3 billion worth of development on over forty Sydney building projects. The New South Wales Builders Labourers' Federation (BLF) fought alongside local communities to preserve Sydney's historic buildings, bush and parkland, and the rapidly disappearing working-class housing in inner-Sydney. Although dubbed heroes in retrospect, Jack Munday (BLF secretary), Bob Pringle (president), and Joe Owens (treasurer) faced consistent and powerful opposition to green bans from the press. Whereas other historians have afforded the press a positive or ambivalent role in the success of green bans, this paper challenges prior historiography with press and archival material that demonstrates the opposition green bans faced in the media. It can be surmised that because the extension of union power into political and social issues was typically conflated with a growth or abuse of that power, politically-conscious bans – whether black, green, or red – were met with mistrust and apprehension.

Biographical Details

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Introduction

It was a smog-less, sunny day on Victoria Street, Kings Cross, and morale was high. The old houses were adorned with fresh paint, and songs emanated from their terraces onto the streets below. Communists, squatters, students, and wharfies had boarded themselves inside to protect both the houses and themselves from mobsters, police, and Australia's karate champion, in an event now known as 'The battle for Victoria street'.¹ Through gritted teeth and beaming smiles, they sang: 'Where is me house, me little terrace house, it's all gone for profit and for plunder, for the Wreckers of the town just came up and knocked it down, now across the Western Suburbs we must wander'.²

Although not recorded until 1975, the tune – now dubbed 'Green Bans Forever' – was sung in April 1973 when Mick Fowler – musician, seaman, and unionist – returned to Sydney to discover his flat in Potts Point had been boarded up and sold to bigtime developer F. W. Theeman.³ The event was not an isolated one. 'Green bans' erupted in Sydney in 1971 under the newly elected communist leadership of the New South Wales Builders' Labourers' Federation (BLF). Green bans were a new form of industrial action which entailed workers withholding their labour on developments considered harmful to the urban environment and the communities therein. The Munday-Pringle-Owens triumvirate oversaw over forty green bans from 1971 to 1975, halting an estimated \$3 billion worth of development.⁴

Emerging amongst the politically diversifying 'New Left' in 1970s Australia, historians of the BLF typically attribute the creation of green bans to changes within the union.⁵ In their landmark work *Green Bans, Red Union*, Meredith Burgmann and Verity Burgmann attribute green bans to structural changes within the union.⁶ That is, the BLF was emboldened to engage in 'green' industrial action by the rise of the communist leadership, rank-and-file solidarity, and the wave of successful black bans at the turn of the decade. Similarly, McQueen and True have separately argued that green bans resulted from 'transformation *within the union*' and were a natural extension of the BLF's political activities in an era of increasing environmental awareness.⁷ Because communist leadership, democratic processes and rank-and-file cohesion have historically led unions to strike on political issues, internalist arguments attribute green bans to the development of these tenets within the union itself.⁸

While generally apt, the internalist perspective cannot explain why the BLF overshadowed other politically-active, communist-led, and militant unions that were crucial for enforcing green bans like the Waterside Workers' Federation (WWF) and the Federated Engine Drivers and Fire-

¹ Richard Morris, 'Fowler, Jack Radnald (Mick) (1927-1979)', in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol. 14 (Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing, 1996), accessed June 25, 2019, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/fowler-jack-radnald-mick-10229>; *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 4, 1973.

² Builders Labourers Federation, 'Across the Western Suburbs', *Australian Building Construction Employers and Builders Laborers Federation NSW Branch: Award and Information Booklet 2nd Edition*, April 1973, Back Matter.; The Green Ban'd, *Green Bans Forever*, Meredith Burgmann, 1973, audio file.

³ Morris, Fowler, 'Jack Radnald (Mick) (1927-1979)'; *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 4 1973.

⁴ Marion Hardman & Peter Manning, *Green Bans: The Story of an Australian Phenomenon* (East Melbourne: Australian Conservation Foundation, 1976), no page number.

⁵ Greg Mallory, *Uncharted Waters: Social Responsibility in Australian Trade Unions* (QLD: Annerley, 2005): 81.

⁶ Meredith Burgmann and Verity Burgmann, *Green Bans, Red Union: environmental activism and the New South Wales Builders Labourers' Federation* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 1998), 12.

⁹ Humphrey McQueen, *We Built this Country: builders' labourers & their unions, 1787 to the future* (Port Adelaide: Ginninderra Press, 2011), 289; Paul True, *Tales of the BLF... Rolling the Right!* (Parramatta: Militant International Publications, 1995), 1.

⁸ M. J. Saunders, 'The trade unions in Australia and opposition to Vietnam and conscription: 1965-73', *Labour History* 43 (Nov 1982): 66.

men's Association (FEDFA).⁹ The FEDFA not only participated in the bans that made the BLF famous but were instrumental in preventing demolition because they controlled Sydney's bulldozers.¹⁰ Furthermore, the BLF's green bans were not necessarily the first of their kind. The WWF, Master Builders Association (MBA), and Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) pursued ecologically focused 'red bans' and 'blue bans' from the late 1960s but attracted significantly less recognition than the BLF.¹¹ Clearly, something rendered the BLF exceptional, but it was not just the internal makeup of the union. Roddewig, Burgmann and Burgmann have suggested the difference could lie in the BLF's 'manipulation of the news media'.¹² That is, despite the plethora of similarly structured unions that enforced green bans or non-work ecological boycotts, 'it was the BLF [...] which captivated the readers of the Sydney dailies'.¹³ However, 'captivation' did not necessarily mean romanticisation. To Munday, disparaging emphases on violent BLF walk-outs and 'vigilantes' helped intimidate employers and would-be scabs.¹⁴ The relationship between the press and the BLF is thus worthy of consideration, as a means that transmitted their activity to the general public.

In this paper, I will deconstruct the historiographical assertion that the BLF's invention of the symbol of the 'green ban' in 1973 marked a turning point in public reception of the green ban movement. The role of the press in the green bans is poorly understood, which is unusual given the breadth of literature on the relationship between the press and protest movements.¹⁵ When addressed, the press is viewed as having either shaped public opinion to aid the success of green bans, or as having responded to public opinion due to the green bans' success. Burgmann, Milner and Johnstone each argue that the BLF believed that, unlike black bans, environmental and community causes would attract support of the press.¹⁶ On the other hand, Burgmann and Burgmann suggest the press' positive representation of Green Bans emerged gradually as the mounting success of the movement made opposition difficult if not untenable.¹⁷ For all accounts, however, Munday's invention of the 'green ban' symbol was a 'stroke of genius' that distinguished their ecological activism from strikes over wages and conditions, thereby shielding them from anti-union discourses that emphasised the self-interest of the working class. In contrast to accounts that argue green bans received press representation that was 'neutral at worst', this paper argues green bans faced significant press opposition. Though the symbolic import of the 'green ban' is impossible to ignore, it consolidated, rather than altered press perspectives by providing an object to concretely support or oppose the BLF.

⁹ Saunders, 'The trade unions in Australia and opposition to Vietnam and conscription: 1965-73,' 66.; Ashley Lavelle, 'Under Pressure: The Whitlam Labor Opposition and Class Struggle, 1967-72,' *Labour History* 96 (May 2009), 117.

¹⁰ Richard J. Roddewig *Green Bans, the Birth of Australian Environmental politics: A Study in Public Opinion and Participation* (Sydney: Hale and Ironmonger, 1978), 9.

¹¹ McQueen, *We Built This Country*, 290.; Roddewig, *Green Bans, the Birth of Australian Environmental politics: A Study in Public Opinion and Participation* (Sydney: Hale and Ironmonger, 1978), 8.

¹² Roddewig, *Green Bans, the Birth of Australian Environmental politics*, 12; Burgmann and Burgmann, *Green Bans, Red Union*, 174-5.

¹³ Roddewig: *Green Bans, the Birth of Australian Environmental politics*, 11.

¹⁴ Munday, *Green Bans & Beyond*, 60.

¹⁵ Peter Beharell and Greg Philo, eds., *Trade Unions and the Media*, (Hong Kong: Macmillan Press, 1978); Alan Knight, 'Police, Radicals and the Media in the 1971 Springbok Protests,' *Labour History* no 110 (May 2016), 180.; Sean Scalmer, *Dissent events: Protest, The Media and the Political Gimmick in Australia* (Australia: UNSW Press, 2002), 41.

¹⁶ Verity Burgmann & Andrew Milner, 'Ecotopians in Hardhats: The Australian Green Bans Movement,' *Utopian Studies* Vol. 22, No. 1 (2011), 136.; Quintin Johnstone, 'Australian Green Bans: Trade Union Activism Restricting Urban Development,' *The Urban Lawyer* 10, no. 1, (1978): 118.

¹⁷ Verity Burgmann and Meredith Burgmann, 'A rare shift in public thinking: Jack Munday and the New South Wales Builders' Labourers' Federation,' *Labour History* 77, (Nov. 1999): 44-63.

The notion of ‘the press’ that guides this analysis is informed by Herman and Chomsky’s *Manufacturing Consent* and Australian historical writing on press coverage of protest movements. For Chomsky and Herman, the press as a subsection of the media serves to integrate individuals ‘into the institutional structures of the larger society’ by constructing narratives conducive to institutional power through selective ‘context, premises, and general agenda’.¹⁸ To cite an Australian example, Alan Knight has suggested press clippings of the 1971 anti-Apartheid demonstrations rendered protestors as ‘voiceless objects’ oft stereotyped as ‘anarchists or hippies’, while showing deference to government ministers and the police.¹⁹ Additionally, editorial policy enhanced these distortions by restricting individual journalists and editorial submissions.²⁰ I thus concentrate on Fairfax and Murdoch dailies like the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Australian*, whose wide circulation fostered greater influence on public opinion, unlike sympathetic left-wing newspapers like *Tribune*, whose agenda made its political potency immediate yet isolated from the public. As we will see, despite publishing occasional statements of support from sympathetic Labor MPs, the press coverage of green bans emphasised confrontations (particularly with police), fiscal damage, and disruption, that tended to sideline local grievances and reassert the state as the sole legitimate executor of political power.

The Greening of Sydney: When black bans became green

Historians such as Richard Roddewig afford a clear role in the shift from black bans to green bans in publicly legitimating the BLF and its political initiatives.²¹ Because of the green bans, Munday became the ‘most publicised trade-union official of the year’, but this publicity was not always positive.²² To some commentators, conservation was a thinly veiled excuse for wanton disruption and ‘anarchy’.²³ Others criticised the incommensurability of liberal-democratic principles with the ‘authoritarian’ imposition of the perspective of one group like the BLF or the Resident Action Groups (RAGs) who contacted the BLF on behalf of their communities to preserve historic buildings and parkland.²⁴ Yet others saw the ‘green ban’ as a euphemism to trick ‘trendies’ (young, typically university-educated activists), environmentalists and the ‘middle class’ into uncritically supporting the BLF.²⁵ The most cynical of these criticisms, however, was that the BLF was acting in the public interest only incidentally, and was merely using green bans to elevate its public prestige, thus ‘supporting a good cause for the wrong motives.’²⁶ Despite opposition, green bans did find some support, including Gough Whitlam’s Minister for the Environment and Conservation Moss Cass. However, the shift from ‘black bans’ to ‘green bans’ was not the turning point some have claimed it to be, and merely entrenched the press perspective of the BLF’s political activities.

¹⁸ Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (London: Vintage Books, 1994), xv-1.

¹⁹ Knight, ‘Police, Radicals and the Media in the 1971 Springbok Protests’, 180.

²⁰ Roger Stuart, ‘History of the Strike’, *Semper Floreat*, September 1, 1971, cited in Knight, ‘Police, Radicals and the Media in the 1971 Springbok Protests’, 180.

²¹ Roddewig, *Green Bans, the Birth of Australian Environmental politics*, 12.

²² Fred Wells, ‘This year of industrial strife (a look back at the 1973 union scene)’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, December 31, 1973.

²³ Parliament to discuss Industrial ‘Anarchy’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, November 11, 1972.

²⁴ F. W. Theeman, ‘Mr Munday and democracy’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, August 4, 1973; ‘Victim of Anarchy Claim by Developer’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 16, 1973.

²⁵ Graeme Davison, *City Dreamers: The Urban Imagination in Australia* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2016), 5.

²⁶ Brian Hagan, ‘Green bans and omphalology’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, November 15, 1973.

Unlike Burgmann and Burgmann's assertion that the BLF's aggressive methods were the main point of contention, press opposition to the 'green ban' explicitly criticised the BLF's politics and intentions, particularly regarding Munday's notion of 'everyday democracy'.²⁷ To Munday, democracy was not casting 'a ballot paper once every three or four years', but an active 'every day' process of fighting for 'social justice and environmental issues' whenever they arose.²⁸ The concept was heavily criticised in the *Sydney Morning Herald* because green bans did not abide by conventional democratic decision-making processes. That is, critics argued the BLF was not entitled to halt approved projects through direct action but should instead voice their concerns 'democratically' by casting their vote electorally.²⁹ Whether or not the BLF's aims were ideal, 'Munday [was] using conservation as a cover for authoritarianism.'³⁰ Green bans were thus devoid of principle: a mere tool for the BLF to overthrow 'all plans of the Government.'³¹ Too much construction had been halted for the 'host of blanket bans, whether black, green or red' to constitute discerning and legitimate attempts at conservation.³² 'Every day democracy' was instead cast as the use of illegal force for the subversion, rather than the reform, of the organs of democracy.

Because 'green bans' covered various issues from ecology to urban planning, critics had the privilege of cherry-picking causes to suggest the BLF was politically inconsistent. For example, a Terrigal resident wrote to the *Herald* to repudiate green bans on doctors that charged above the federal rate because he failed to see their environmental impact.³³ He was not simply claiming green bans should only cover environmental issues but was instead casting doubt on green bans as a whole by implying they were a cheap disguise for the spurious interests of the BLF. Another critic alleged green bans had nothing to do with progressive politics, conservation, or 'everyday democracy' because their 'wrongness or rightness' were decided entirely by Munday.³⁴ Similarly, another editorial argued the 'green ban' was a 'euphemism' to deceive conservationists.³⁵ Writing to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, a Wollstonecraft resident alleged the proposed Federal Government plan for a new airport would expose 'the true political provocations of... environmental and resident's action groups'.³⁶ Because the area was not 'politically visible', he implied neither conservationists nor the BLF would protest the project if asked to by residents.³⁷ The BLF's conservationism was again construed not as an end pursued in itself but as a guise for dubious and self-interested political intentions.

Despite being depicted as the dupes of the leadership, the union's rank-and-file supported green bans and were joined in their enthusiasm by RAGs, then-journalist Leo Schofield, and a handful of Labor MPs. The democratic foundation of the leadership's policies was demonstrated when 800 builders' labourers voted to demand 'greater control over the buildings which should be constructed', and to 'continue to engage in community action, supporting resident action groups, conservationists and

²⁷ Burgmann and Burgmann, *Green Bans, Red Union*, 248.

²⁸ Jack Munday, 'Green Bans and Urban Environmentalism' in *Protest! Environmental activism in NSW 1968-1998* (Circular Quay: Historic Houses Trust NSW, 1998), 40.

²⁹ 'The Greening of Sydney', *Sydney Morning Herald*, August 5, 1973.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Neville Wentworth, 'Green bans and omphalology', *Sydney Morning Herald*, November 15, 1973.

³⁴ 'Democracy, he calls it', *Sydney Morning Herald*, August 13, 1973.

³⁵ 'The greening of Sydney', *Sydney Morning Herald*, August 6, 1973.

³⁶ David Burton, 'Waiting for a reaction', *Sydney Morning Herald*, September 6, 1973.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

preservationists'.³⁸ Leo Schofield responded to press criticism by stating that the citizens of Sydney, 'the middle classes, as you so ingeniously label us', preferred green bans over standing by '(ergo tacitly condoning) the destruction of almost every worthwhile building'.³⁹ Building industry experts also condoned the \$3 billion worth of green bans for easing 'the crucial shortage in building supplies'.⁴⁰

The Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) also added Munday to its 46-member policy-making council to 'bring conservation back to the people'.⁴¹ The ACF was established in 1965 and dominated by 'establishment', 'Canberra-based scientists' but had declined in importance as radical independent activist groups proliferated in the early 1970s.⁴² To improve its tame-cat, 'establishment' image, the ACF appointed a new council by postal ballot that were to vote on a new executive the following month.⁴³ 17 of the 35 new councillors were 'new guard' reformers like Munday, and they voted as a bloc to expel the old guard.⁴⁴ Ironically, Moss Cass had bid to cut the ACF's annual funding of \$150,000 by \$100,000 and redistribute it amongst more impactful environmental groups like the Total Environment Centre (TEC).⁴⁵ Whitlam, worried about the influence a deduction would have on Garfield Barwick – founder of the ACF and high court judge set to evaluate key government legislation - instead gave Cass an additional \$100,000 to distribute among independent environmentalist groups.⁴⁶ As a result, Cass now had an effective \$250,000 to distribute amongst independent environmentalists. Critics instead missed or ignored the radical restructuring of the ACF, and alleged Munday's new peers would restrict his 'enthusiasm for slapping on a ban at the drop of a hat'.⁴⁷

The 'Politically Visible' Green bans: Kings Cross, Woolloomooloo-Darlinghurst, and the Rocks Apartments

A significant factor that informed press representation of the 'green ban' was the projects to which it was applied. Although some prior bans, like the 1972 ban to prevent Centennial Park becoming a sports stadium, were widely accepted as serving the public interest, the 'green bans' of 1973 affected smaller communities and were comparatively violent; they were therefore less agreeable to Sydney's middle and upper classes. Whereas most Sydneysiders agreed that a stadium in Centennial Park was both unnecessary and harmful to the community, less so could they see the merit in squatting, sabotage and protest to retain working-class housing in inner Sydney areas like Kings Cross, Woolloomooloo and Darlinghurst.⁴⁸ Because the 'green ban' designation denoted the least 'agreeable' and most vigorously defended bans, the term was again thought to be a guise for wanton and 'anarchic' industrial disruption.⁴⁹

The 'Battle for Victoria Street' was a particularly divisive ban because it emblematised the

³⁸ 'Munday wins NSW support', *Sydney Morning Herald*, September 25, 1973.

³⁹ Leo Schofield, 'The greening of Sydney', *Sydney Morning Herald*, August 14, 1973.

⁴⁰ 'Beating the shortage', *Sydney Morning Herald* 7 October 1973.

⁴¹ 'Back to the People', *Sydney Morning Herald*, December 23, 1973.

⁴² Cass, Encel, and O'Donnell, *Moss Cass*, 46; Libby Robin, 'Radical Ecology and Conservation Science: An Australian Perspective', *Environmental History* 4, no. 2, Australia special issue (June 1998): 193.

⁴³ Cass, Encel, and O'Donnell, *Moss Cass*, 49.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 48-9.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 48-9.

⁴⁷ 'Back to the People', *Sydney Morning Herald*, December 23, 1973.

⁴⁸ 'Labourers and Demolition', *Sydney Morning Herald*, January 27, 1972.

⁴⁹ 'Parliament to discuss Industrial 'Anarchy'', *Sydney Morning Herald*, November 11, 1972; 'Jack the Giant Killer', *Sydney Morning Herald*, August 14, 1972.

perceived contradictions of 'everyday democracy'. Kings Cross was banned in April 1972, originally intended to freeze work until the National Trust could develop a plan that would retain the character of the area.⁵⁰ The proposed development by F. W. Theeman involved restoring terraces and building townhouse apartments and a mall in Brougham Street, Woolloomooloo.⁵¹ The ban took on a new character in 1973, when the National Trust supported a \$20 million scheme to redevelop part of Victoria Street, Potts Point.⁵² However, the Victoria Street RAG continued to oppose the scheme because it lacked low-cost rental housing.⁵³ The BLF was thus wedged between two groups it usually supported – 'the resident action groups... and the National Trust' – but refused to lift the ban unless the Woolloomooloo, Darlinghurst and Victoria Street RAGs approved.⁵⁴ Because the National Trust was seen to represent legitimate conservation, the BLF's decision was construed as the ransom of community progress at the behest of a minority interest group (the Victoria Street RAG).⁵⁵ The protection of residents' houses through squatting, occupation and protest fuelled criticisms that a minority interest group was overriding established democratic processes through anarchic means.

In response to the BLF's declaration the ban would continue in spite of the Trust, developer Frank Theeman wrote to the *Sydney Morning Herald* and claimed he was the victim of harassment and 'complete anarchy'.⁵⁶ 'Anarchy' was reductively defined here as the squatting that had begun in three of the terrace houses in early June, but conveniently invoked the 'industrial anarchy' trope that dominated discussion of the BLF.⁵⁷ The RAGs demanded that no attempt be made to evict Victoria Street tenants, that tenants' rights be respected, that Theeman's men guarding the houses be replaced, and that plans for an alternative housing scheme were sketched by the following Wednesday.⁵⁸ Theeman also agreed to make no attempt to evict Mick Fowler, a Victoria Street resident.⁵⁹

As it became evident the RAG's demands would not be readily accepted, the struggle for Victoria Street intensified. To publicise the cascading evictions, the Victoria Street RAG published a newspaper advertisement for the terraces with 'rents in proportion to income' (equal to a quarter), a maximum of \$10 per week.⁶⁰ Miss Mary Jane Townsend, RAG committee member, invited evicted residents to return, including 'unmarried mothers, pensioners and supporters of the action group'.⁶¹ Theeman claimed the advertisement demonstrated the illegal 'machinations of the people behind the movement', and alleged 'everyday democracy' was therefore the 'right of individuals or organisations to change decisions'.⁶² Because 'the community's accepted processes' were being overruled, this was not democracy, but anarchy.⁶³ Less partial headlines included 'Union ban halts \$500m scheme', which gave little attention to the cause of the dispute to instead emphasise the economic consequences.⁶⁴

⁵⁰ F. W. Theeman, 'Mr Munday and democracy', *Sydney Morning Herald*, August 4, 1973.

⁵¹ 'Cheap rents offered in Victoria Street', *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 21, 1973.

⁵² 'Trust Supports \$20m proposal', *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 6, 1973.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ 'Victim of Anarchy Claim by Developer', *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 16, 1973; 'Builder's Union back residents', *Sydney Morning Herald*, April 16, 1973.

⁵⁵ F. W. Theeman, 'Mr Munday and democracy', *Sydney Morning Herald*, August 4, 1973.

⁵⁶ 'Victim of Anarchy Claim by Developer', *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 16, 1973.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ 'Low-rent Housing for Victoria St.', *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 5, 1973.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ 'Cheap rents offered in Victoria Street', *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 21, 1973.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² F. W. Theeman, 'Mr Munday and democracy', *Sydney Morning Herald*, August 4, 1973.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

48 ⁶⁴ 'Union Ban halts \$500m scheme', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, July 4, 1973.



Figure 1. Police arrive at the Battle for Victoria Street. Photograph courtesy of Meredith Burgmann, used with permission.

Despite Theeman's emphasis on the working-class residents of Victoria Street being a tiny minority, the Victoria Street struggle was enmeshed in the inter-community network of RAGs allied with the BLF. RAGs did not consider themselves as fighting for isolated community causes divorced from the social and political context of Sydney writ large. No less than eleven inner city RAGs made a joint appeal to Deputy Premier Sir Charles Cutler to halt evictions in the Woolloomooloo and Leichardt areas.⁶⁵ Similarly, communal meetings on the 'Woolloomooloo, Darlinghurst and Victoria Street' bans were called by not one, but several RAGs.⁶⁶ The issue, then, was not the protection of isolated community interests against an evolving Sydney, but a wider inter-community challenge to the State Government to rethink 'the whole matter of urban development' in favour of the 'people as a whole.'⁶⁷

Urban development would conjoin the issues of working-class housing with conservation when green-banned Rocks apartments on Playfair street were demolished overnight in October 1973.⁶⁸ Banned in November 1971, the Rocks had always been controversial, both for departing from conservation to protect working-class housing and the alleged 'carelessness of [BLF] labourers.'⁶⁹ To prevent further demolition and publicise the issue, unionists, RAG members, students and others occupied the site from 5 am on 25 October.⁷⁰ The occupation lasted about three hours until sixty police armed with tear gas broke through the barricades and ar-

⁶⁵ 'Builders Strike to support residents', *Sydney Morning Herald*, April 3, 1973.

⁶⁶ 'Building Bans Stay', *Sydney Morning Herald*, July 16, 1973.

⁶⁷ 'Builders Strike to support residents', *Sydney Morning Herald*, April 3, 1973.

⁶⁸ '21 arrested in Rocks protest', *Sydney Morning Herald*, October 26, 1973.

⁶⁹ 'Labourers and the Pedestrians', *Sydney Morning Herald*, January 25, 1972.

⁷⁰ 'Police embroiled at the Rocks – 77 Protesters Arrested', *Sydney Morning Herald*, October 25, 1973.

rested seventy-seven people.⁷¹ Protesters resisted by pouring drums of oil on police and through violent struggle, leading three policemen to be hospitalised for minor injuries.⁷² Munday, Owens, and Pringle were among those arrested, and faced charges including 'being on a building site without reasonable cause, assaulting police, resisting arrest, and offensive behaviour'.⁷³

The following rally for the Rocks at Circular Quay was attended by 2,500 unionists, students, RAG members and other members of the public.⁷⁴ 1,500 protestors swept from Pitt Street into Hunter Street, led by a large green ban banner, where uniformed police tried to keep them on the footpaths.⁷⁵ 'Angry scuffles' ensued, several policemen and demonstrators were trampled, and 'many lost hats, shirts, shorts and watches'.⁷⁶ Chanting 'green ban' and 'Askin out' (referring to NSW Premier Robert Askin), heavy traffic jams developed, and radio calls led to the arrival of 200 policemen, as well as scores of police wagons, cars and ambulances.⁷⁷ After a small sedan driven by BLF organiser Viri Pires arrived in Macquarie street, the crowd broke through police ranks. Police tried to remove them, which triggered several scuffles and twenty-one arrests, including Pringle.⁷⁸ One journalist for the *Canberra Times* argued 'the violent incident' proved the BLF was abusing its industrial muscle to enforce a particular view of 'what the building industry is entitled to do'.⁷⁹

Because the Rocks were also defended though squatting, critics highlighted 'anarchy' as the sole issue. According to the *Sydney Morning Herald's* civic reporter and the Sydney Cove Redevelopment Authority there were 107 families squatting in the area at the time of the first rally.⁸⁰ *The Canberra Times* emphasised fiscal costs and reprinted a statement from Munday that bans would continue 'without question'.⁸¹ Frederick Hewitt, the State Minister for Labour and Industry, used the oft-wielded theme of 'industrial anarchy'; he stated, 'Neither Mr Munday nor anyone else is above the law', and applauded the police, who 'behaved magnificently under very great provocation'.⁸² This assertion was supported in the *Canberra Times*, in which one journalist lamented 'the present state of industrial anarchy' overturning 'highly institutionalised society' where issues of conservation should remain in the hands of the State.⁸³

Within a few days, the Federal council of the BLF announced its support of the bans on the Rocks area, Kelly's Bush, all buildings with National Trust classifications and any projects which alienated parklands, but subjected other bans to immediate review.⁸⁴ Against expectations, the council did not order the NSW BLF to lift any bans, but said failure by any branch to follow directions would lead to intervention in the branch's activities. The council also elected to ban all Silver-

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² '77 Arrested', *Papua New Guinea Post-Courier*, 25 October, 1973; 'Police embroiled at the Rocks – 77 Protesters Arrested', *Sydney Morning Herald*, October 25, 1973; 'Police Arrest 77 in Rocks Protest', *The Canberra Times*, 25 October, 1973.

⁷³ 'Police embroiled at the Rocks – 77 Protesters Arrested', *Sydney Morning Herald*, October 25, 1973.

⁷⁴ '21 arrested in Rocks protest', *Sydney Morning Herald*, October 26, 1973.

⁷⁵ '1,500 in Rocks Protest March', *The Canberra Times*, 26 October, 1973.

⁷⁶ '21 arrested in Rocks protest', *Sydney Morning Herald*, October 26, 1973.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ '1,500 in Rocks Protest March', *The Canberra Times*, 26 October, 1973.

⁷⁹ 'Use of Union Muscle', *The Canberra Times*, 29 October, 1973.

⁸⁰ 'Police embroiled at the Rocks – 77 Protesters Arrested', *Sydney Morning Herald*, October 25, 1973.

⁸¹ 'Builders', *The Canberra Times*, 31 October, 1973.

⁸² 'Police embroiled at the Rocks – 77 Protesters Arrested', *Sydney Morning Herald*, October 25, 1973.

⁸³ 'Use of Union Muscle', *The Canberra Times*, 29 October, 1973.

⁸⁴ 'BLF council backs rocks area ban', *Sydney Morning Herald*, October 31, 1973.

ton projects Australia-wide until all labour was withdrawn from the Rocks. Munday also claimed he would walk out of council meetings where green bans were discussed without local residents present.⁸⁵ Outside the Federal Council meeting, over 100 protestors demonstrated in support of green bans.⁸⁶ Minister for Urban and Regional Development Tom Uren offered to chair a meeting of all parties involved at the Rocks and lamented that the NSW government 'did not seem interested in achieving a solution to the long-standing dispute over the future of the Rocks area'.⁸⁷

The MBA lockout: Is Ecology a Working-class issue?

The debate over whether green bans were protecting interest groups against the wider community took on the inverse dimension through challenges by the Master Builders Association (MBA). In 1973, the MBA attempted to have all green bans lifted by barring BLF members from worksites under the pretence that unions should not divert resources away from improving the economic conditions of the working class. While the MBA termed the challenge to green bans a move toward 'workers control', the BLF called the manoeuvre 'an attempt to smash the union'.⁸⁸ The MBA's claims formed a reversal of standard arguments by other critics that the BLF was advancing the interests of minority groups against the wider Sydney community or using green bans to disguise self-interested intentions. Instead, the MBA argued the BLF was advancing community causes to the detriment of the working class they had a duty to represent and should therefore abandon green bans to commit more resources to improving wages and conditions.

The press heightened tensions between the MBA and BLF, although the reductive emphasis on inter-organisational conflict concealed the panoply of public groups that repudiated the MBA demand to 'drop all green bans'.⁸⁹ For example, a headline in the *Australian* emphasised 'inter-union strife' and blamed the 'breakdown of talks between unions and employers' on the 'dispute... between the Master Builders Association and the BLF'.⁹⁰ J. D. Martin, the NSW executive director of the MBA, explained the lockout in much simpler terms, stating that 'jobs would be available if the Builders Labourers' Federation dropped its green bans'.⁹¹ Although a multitude of explanations for the MBA's lockout can be surmised (that range from impartial to sinister), the most straightforward is that their interests were best served by having projects to build on.

Executive director of the MBA John Martin accused the BLF of 'cynically' using the building industry 'for political ends that have little to do with the betterment of working conditions'.⁹² He defined those ends as 'anarchy and the destruction of democratic processes' tantamount to 'industrial blackmail'.⁹³ To Martin, green bans were little more than a communist plot 'to destroy the existing political system'.⁹⁴ Issues would come and go, but green bans would remain

⁸⁵ 'BLF council backs rocks area ban', *Sydney Morning Herald*, October 31, 1973.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ Fred Wells, 'This year of industrial strife (a look back at the 1973 union scene)', *Sydney Morning Herald*, December 31, 1973.

⁸⁹ 'Builders Ease Terms on Lockout', *Australian*, November 5, 1973.

⁹⁰ 'Inter-Union strife over Builders', *Australian*, November 4, 1973.

⁹¹ 'Builders Ease Terms on Lockout', *Australian*, November 5, 1973.

⁹² John Martin, 'The Building Industry Wants a fair deal', *Sydney Morning Herald*, November 11, 1973.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

as a tool to create anarchy. The acting secretary of the state labour council John Ducker also advised the Sydney Cove Redevelopment Authority that he had proposed a conference ‘to solve the problem of the green bans’.⁹⁵ He claimed certain green bans were separate to the current dispute, but neglected to say which, besides mentioning a hypothetical discussion of the Rocks ban.⁹⁶

While it is true the conflict resulted from differences on green bans, numerous other parties had voiced their support for the BLF both in public and in private. Groups in favour of the bans included the Student Union, the Gay Liberation Front, Rozelle Lilyfield Anti-Expressway Committee, WWF, the Seamen’s Union and Marine Stewards’ Union, and a group known as ‘Ecology Action’.⁹⁷ The reasons for support ranged from being anti-scab, to preserving historic or heritage buildings, or, as some bluntly stated, to oppose the ‘psychotic destruction... by Developers and Askin’.⁹⁸ Support culminated in a public rally on October 30, 1973 that involved the tenants’ union and additional RAGs.⁹⁹ Put simply, the press sketch of a 12,000-strong state-wide strike that emphasised inter-union grievances and poor negotiating omitted the cross-section of Sydney’s population that had brought the bans to life in the first place.¹⁰⁰ Doing so characterised green bans as a mere industrial dispute undergone to settle differences between bickering unions and employers’ organisations.

Two other parties that joined the fray were Tom Uren and Justice Aird, who called a compulsory conference in the Commonwealth Arbitration Commission between the MBA and BLF.¹⁰¹ Uren’s major concern was that lifting green bans on private projects would divert crucial labour and resources from numerous community projects already strained by the lock-out.¹⁰² These fears were exacerbated by a Building Workers’ Industrial Union press statement that condemned the BLF’s ‘go it alone’ attitude and demanded they prioritise industrial issues to promote cohesion amongst the union movement.¹⁰³ The statement intensified the inter-union demand for ‘solidarity’ – or more simply, the demand to abandon extra-industrial causes – thereby cementing the government’s fears over ‘the sudden lifting of all green bans’.¹⁰⁴ Near- unprecedented countermeasures were being conceived to steer negotiations in the other direction, such as the threat that the parties responsible for the lockout ‘should pay damages to the Government for work not done’.¹⁰⁵

The government’s proposed measures did not get a chance to be tested. The same day that Uren voiced his concerns, the lock-in was thrown out by Aird at a mandatory arbitration hearing called just two days earlier.¹⁰⁶ Aird’s reasoning was simple: ‘green bans were not industrial issues because they did not involve the question of employer-employee relations.’¹⁰⁷ The support of the arbitration court

⁹⁵ Fred Wells, ‘Labour Council enters building dispute’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, November 3, 1983.

⁹⁶ ‘Builders Labourers Threaten ‘work-in’’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, November 6, 1973.

⁹⁷ Australian Building Construction Employees’ Builders’ Labourers’ Federation, ‘Jack Munday – Green Bans, Resident Action Groups etc. 1973’, MLMSS 4879, Box MLK4261, Item 7, *Australian Building Construction Employees’ and Builders’ Labourers’ Federation. New South Wales Branch Records, 1938-1987*, State Library of NSW, Sydney

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ ‘Inter-Union strife over Builders’, *Australian*, November 4, 1973.

¹⁰¹ ‘Builders Ease Terms on Lockout’, *Australian*, November 5, 1973.

¹⁰² ‘Builders Labourers Threaten ‘work-in’’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, November 6, 1973.

¹⁰³ ‘Builders Labourers to Force Site Open’, *Australia*, November 6, 1973.

¹⁰⁴ ‘Builders Labourers Threaten ‘work-in’’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, November 6, 1973.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ ‘Judge Says, ‘Work, Except for Green Bans’’, *Telegraph*, November 6, 1973.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

not only broke the back of the MBA lockout but bolstered the BLF's legitimacy.¹⁰⁸ The BLF quickly passed a resolution to call on the State Government to re-open and prioritise hospitals, schools, and housing, but reasserted the primacy of RAG demands where lifting green bans were concerned.¹⁰⁹ Developers were quick to object. The *Daily Telegraph* featured a full-page print-out demeaning the decision and 'Anarchy' and loss of 'civil rights' it entailed: 'ANARCY [sic] REIGNS': 'Victoria street, Kings cross, protected by threats of violence from the Builders Labourers Federation (BLF), a so-called "Residents' Action Group" CITIZENS BEWARE!!! You may be next to lose your civil rights!!'¹¹⁰ However, the institutional precedent made textbook accusations of 'anarchy' significantly less convincing.

Conclusion

Despite their largely adversarial role in the history of the BLF, today the press happily overlooks its role in history and praises green bans as having 'protect[ed] Sydney's heritage' or as having 'saved Sydney'.¹¹¹ Rather than police and developers, their sources are now Meredith Burgmann and Bob Brown. They applaud the impression the BLF made on Petra Kelly, the founder of the German Green Party, and highlight contemporary community concerns over unrestrained development.¹¹²

In part, 'contemporary community concerns' have emerged from an intensification of the conditions that the BLF ardently resisted nearly half a century ago. Significant parts of the Rocks are again set to be demolished. Tenants of seventy-nine public housing apartments recently clashed with developers and the State over the future of Sydney icon the Sirius building.¹¹³ The 'prominent' building harkens back to the BLF's defence of Sydney's heritage but also their efforts to 'guarantee affordable housing and community spaces for generations of working-class and union families.'¹¹⁴ The CFMEU green banned the building in September 2016, but the NSW government has held fast, with the last tenant moving out in January 2018.¹¹⁵ The conditions the BLF responded to have only intensified with the passing of time, with only one percent of Sydney's housing now being classified 'affordable'.¹¹⁶ Sydney's social housing wait-list sits at over 60,000, yet the Sirius remains empty as a testament to continued planning failures.¹¹⁷ NSW's then-treasurer, Dominic Perrottet, cynically applauded the demise of the

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ 'Builders Labourers Threaten "work-in"', *Sydney Morning Herald*, November 6, 1973.

¹¹⁰ *Daily Telegraph*, November 8, 1973.

¹¹¹ 'Jack Munday, the BLF and "green bans," Australian Broadcasting Corporation, first broadcast November 19, 1981, <http://education.abc.net.au/home#!/media/521067/jack-munday-the-blf-and-green-bans>; Tim Barlass, "Sydney remains in his debt": City mourns loss of 'visionary' Jack Munday', *Sydney Morning Herald*, March 10, 2021, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/sydney-remains-in-his-debt-city-mourns-loss-of-visionary-jack-munday-20210310-p579gd.html>; 'Guardian of Sydney's heritage was a man ahead of his time', *Sydney Morning Herald*, March 10, 2021, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/guardian-of-sydney-s-heritage-was-a-man-ahead-of-his-time-20210310-p579j4.html>; Lachlan Moffet Gay, 'Green Bans Leader Jack Munday Dies Aged 90', *Australian* March 11, 2020.

¹¹² David Humphries, 'Newsmaker: Green Bans', *Sydney Morning Herald*, March 31, 2012, <https://www.smh.com.au/environment/conservation/newsmaker-green-bans-20120330-1w372.html>.

¹¹³ Dallas Rogers, 'Speaking with: Nicole Cook on union "green bans", housing affordability and the Sirius building', *The Conversation*, January 25, 2017, <https://theconversation.com/speaking-with-nicole-cook-on-union-green-bans-housing-affordability-and-the-sirius-building-71619>.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ 'Sydney's Sirius building to be refurbished after being sold for \$150m', *The Guardian*, June 28, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/jun/28/sydneys-sirius-building-to-be-refurbished-after-being-sold-for-150m>.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Megan Gorrey, 'Four years after sale was announced, Sirius building sits empty', *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 11, 2019, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/four-years-after-sale-was-announced-sirius-building-sits-empty-20190603-p51tyu.html>.

building and, not unlike the press of the 1970s, polemically targeted progressives as the issue at hand.¹¹⁸

Cracks in the Mascot Towers and other related building projects have also reignited doubts about unchecked development. For the past twenty years, an estimated eighty percent of Sydney's residential schemes have been constructed with defects.¹¹⁹ Regardless, statutory warranties have decreased as has access to home building insurance, as successive NSW governments have emphasised acquiring housing stock at the cost of consumer protection.¹²⁰ Additionally, the construction industry has been heavily deregulated, while union membership and density have steadily declined.¹²¹ While green bans and the BLF may be commemorated in plaques, murals and awards, it seems these tokens will soon be the lone reminder of the fight for Sydney's heritage.

The negative coverage the BLF received was not atypical for industrial action. But, contrary to positions that dominate the literature, the shift from 'black' to 'green' did not prompt a re-evaluation of non-work boycotts toward one of positivity and solidarity, but instead intensified criticism in the mainstream press.¹²² A recent study by Peretz and Murray suggests public feeling and trust towards unions is inversely proportional to the power they hold.¹²³ Because the successful extension of union power into political and social issues was typically conflated with a growth or abuse of that power, 'politically-conscious' bans – whether black, green, or red – were met with mistrust and apprehension.

¹¹⁸ Dominic Perrottet, 'Sirius building in The Rocks is "as sexy as a car park"', *Sydney Morning Herald*, August 10, 2016, <https://www.smh.com.au/opinion/sirius-building-in-the-rocks-is-as-sexy-as-a-car-park-says-nsw-minister-dominic-perrottet-20160810-gqp31n.html>.

¹¹⁹ Stephen Goddard, 'Sydney's dirty strata secrets emerge through cracks in Mascot Towers', *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 18, 2019, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/sydney-s-dirty-strata-secrets-emerge-through-cracks-in-mascot-towers-20190617-p51yg7.html>.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Hannah Moore, "'It's the next to go': Apartment block just 150 metres from evacuated Mascot Towers is suffering from "cracks and sinking foundations" – as experts warn thousands of properties across Australia are unsafe', *Daily Mail Australia*, June 26, 2019, <https://www.msn.com/en-au/news/australia/exclusive-its-the-next-to-go-apartment-block-just-150-metres-from-evacuated-mascot-towers-is-suffering-from-cracks-and-sinking-foundations-as-experts-warn-thousands-of-properties-across-australia-are-unsafe/ar-AADpfKI>;
Geoff Gilfillan and Chris McGann, *Trends in union Membership in Australia* (Canberra, Department of Parliamentary Services, 2018), 2, https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp1819/UnionMembership.

¹²² Burgmann and Burgmann, 'A Rare shift in public thinking,' 44; Burgmann and Milner, 'Ecotopians in Hardhats,' 136; Johnstone, 'Australian Green Bans,' 122; Roddewig, *Green Bans, the Birth of Australian Environmental politics*, 12.

¹²³ David Peretz and Georgia Murray, 'Class, Attitudes, and the Climate Crisis', in *Public Opinion, Campaign Politics, and Media Perspectives*, eds. Bridget Griffen-Foley and Sean Scalmer (Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing, 2017), 22.