

Green Bans, Red Unions: Environmental Activism and the New South Wales Builders Labourer's Federation, By Meredith and Verity Burgmann, UNSW PRESS

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A key principle governing the dynamics of revolutionary upsurges and movements is that if they fail to expand and sweep away their conservative opponents, they become marginalised and are later on crushed by their antagonists.

The isolation and failure to extensively expand and radiate is an important explanation of the crushing, by encircling capitalism, of the Paris Commune in 1871, the Kronstadt Commune in Russia of 1921, and the Spanish Revolution of 1936-39 with its associated collectivisations of industry: the epicentres of the revolutionary waves. Here in Australia, the NSW BLF in the late 1960s and early 1970s, with its green bans and direct democracy, also fits into this pattern.

In the book under review, the authors throw abundant light on the diverse aspects of the revolutionary direction taken by the NSW BLF in these years.

Syndicalist Resurgence

The authors characterise the NSW BLF as a form of social movement unionism, and easily refute the New Social Movement theorists' crude slander that unions are inevitably integrated into the capitalist establishment and represent narrowly corporate interests associated with negotiating the terms of workers' exploitation in the workplace and the pursuit of immediate on-the-job issues.

The authors locate the NSW BLF within the syndicalist tradition and spotlight the various syndicalist type features it manifested - direct democracy involving union decision-making by enthusiastic mass meetings and "activist" meetings to which all BLF members could attend drawing up motions/recommendations from mass meetings binding on the branch executive; limited tenure of office for branch officials; forms of direct action such as sabotage and the disregarding of interventions in industrial disputes by Governments, Industrial Courts, political parties, etc.

The most spectacular manifestation of direct action was the "vigilante movement" which comprised most BLF members and was supported by the branch officials. This "movement" specialised in the defence of BLF industrial action and engaged in forms of sabotage, particularly the destruction of work performed on sites by scabs.

"Workers' Control!"

The most dramatic syndicalist dimension of the BLF practice was its pursuit of workers' control. This involved "work-ins", in which workers would elect their own foreman and would self-manage the work process - control the pace of work, length of rest breaks, etc. The most important and large scale work-in occurred on the Opera House, and inspired workers on other sites to follow suit. "Green Bans", which intersected with work-ins, involved the BLF's banning of projects and developments which were opposed by local residents/communities on environmental and social grounds.

The first such ban was imposed to preserve Kelly's Bush on Sydney's North Shore in June 1971. Subsequently, bans were imposed on a range of major projects. The refusal to work on The Rocks Development, Victoria St., and others eventually tied up billions of dollars worth of projects

and severely annoyed (to say the least) building industry employers and the NSW Govt.

A Green Ban Too Far?

An error which mars the authors' investigation of the green bans is their superficial discussion of the green ban imposed on the construction of a shopping plaza in Wyong on the NSW Central Coast in 1974. The green ban stemmed from a successful work-in and involved the workers at the site favouring the construction of a hospital in place of the shopping plaza. According to the authors, an apparent open-church so-called "community meeting" was held to consider the imposition of the green ban and the workers' proposal. Surprisingly the meeting decided in favour of the shopping plaza. Jack Munday has argued that in this instance BLF members had "gone too far" in initiating a green ban and had disregarded the consumerist desires of the local community. The authors fail to mention that in fact this meeting was infiltrated by the shopping plaza development real estate agents and their families who orchestrated the outcome of the meeting. (1) This fact certainly raises the question of the representative role of such meetings and even the validity of such abstract concepts as "community" where there is a lack of established local community organisations based on direct democratic principles. The authors rightly emphasize the importance of the successful outcome of the "Margins Strike" during May-June 1970 to the later advanced actions and new-style approaches of the union and its members. It played a seminal role in raising morale and building self confidence - the psychological foundations of revolutionary unionism. The raising of morale remains a critical objective of contemporary syndicalist workplace activism.

Site Committees & Industrial Unionism

In regard to the syndicalist character of the NSW BLF, a major gap in its practice was the lack of emphasis upon industrial unionism - ie the uniting of all workers in the same industry and site in the one union. An important step toward building syndicalist industrial unionism in the building and construction industry would involve the establishment and widespread generalisation of "site committees", and their federating together. These bodies would hold regular meetings of delegates of all unions on the site, would function in association with combined unions' mass meetings, and would play a key role in the exchange of information and the co-ordination of united direct action. According to BLF activists very few of these vital bodies existed and then only on some of the larger sites in NSW, at the time of the Gallagher/employer offensive against the NSW BLF. The authors ignore this entire crucial issue.

Another problem regarding the authors' conception of syndicalism consists in the notion that some BLF activists who were also Communist Party of Australia (CPA) members allegedly disregarded the serious study of the economic writings of Karl Marx, and this fact supposedly reflects the "anti-intellectualism" of syndicalism. However, the whole history of the syndicalist and anarchist movements has heavily emphasised workers' self education and the cultivation of "intellectual culture" as integral to successful workers' control and self-management of industries. The early syndicalists and anarchists in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were keen publishers, popularisers, and students of Marxist economic theory. Regular study groups and lectures on such subjects were an

important feature of Wobbly and other syndicalist union halls and centres.

"The New Left"

An important backdrop to the syndicalist/radical direction taken by the NSW BLF sketched by the authors was the emergence of the "New Left" (particularly amongst students) whose conceptions were heavily influenced by syndicalist concepts - self-management/autogestation, direct democracy, etc., and the convergence of these with the de-Stalinisation/splitting of the Communist Party. The authors make the interesting point that many of the BLF were inspired to join the CPA due to their radicalisation through on-the-job actions and BLF membership, and pushed the party further to the left, taking on many syndicalist dimensions. Encouraging this leftward shift in the 1960s and 70s was the departure of hardline Stalinists and Maoists associated with the Socialist Party of Australia and Communist Party (Marxist Leninist) leaderships as well as those associated with the more "orthodox" CPA union bosses. The CPA leadership, worried about being outflanked by various New Left formations, also steered the party on a "New Left" course. This was manifested in the party's support of the new course taken by the NSW BLF and implementing conferences on "Workers' Control" and "Centres for Workers' Control" in the early 1970s. The first such conference in Newcastle had a strong attendance from workers in a range of industries. When it became obvious to the CPA leadership that it was losing control of these conferences to their New Left rivals and genuine revolutionaries, the conferences were closed down. (2) The New Left CPA orientation infected wide sections of the party including Laurie Carmichael, AMWU boss. In the late 70s he was even talking about the eventual "withering away" of the union hierarchy in the AMWU and was supportive of the Link Group, a collection of anarchist and Marxist New Left activists that was assisting in establishing horizontal linkages between metal union members in factories in the Western Suburbs of Sydney but was menaced by Stalinist AMWU organisers. (3) Carmichael, later became the notorious architect of the ALP and ACTU Accord and a staunch supporter of ultra centralised "corporate" unionism! The authors outline the fierce rivalries between the leaderships of the fractured communist movement, together with the hostility of orthodox unionism to the syndicalist orientation of the NSW BLF, and the direct collaboration between the building industry bosses and the Vic. BLF branch leadership, particularly Norm Gallagher, also a prominent member of the Communist Party Marxist Leninist, which contributed to the NSW BLF's smashing in the mid 1970's. This attack involved the formation of an employer-approved and Gallagher-controlled Federal BLF branch in NSW and the blacklisting and mass sacking of NSW BLF branch ticket holders. The authors lacking any perspective for the development of syndicalist industrial unionism take the simplistic view that the only alternative for the NSW BLF to avoid destruction from this array of forces was to slide back into orthodox reformist unionism. There was, however, an alternative approach - the generalisation of syndicalism throughout building and other industries, leading to the emergence of a confederation of revolutionary industrial unions. The proliferation and federation of grass-roots combined union structures such as site committees, whose development appears to have been neglected by the NSW BLF activists, would be crucial to a syndicalist upsurge, and for defence against the Gallagher and Master Builders' Association offensive. Contributing to this path not being taken was the absence of an organised syndicalist "union-building movement" in NSW. A strategy which

syndicalists could have adopted with the assistance of BLF officials and activists was the interviewing of grass roots building workers for a regular industrial paper. (particularly important given the sporadic or non-existent union journals) aimed at assisting the organisational preconditions for the growth of site committees. The authors who lack any experience as grass roots industrial activists fail to grasp the important role such a publication could play in furthering and generalising the syndicalist project.

Victorian BLF Insurgency

The progress of the NSW BLF rank and file syndicalist movement inspired the appearance of similar movements in other branches of the union. The insurgency in the Victorian branch is particularly important as the Maoist Federal BLF leadership launched its onslaught against the NSW branch from Victoria, particularly via the recruiting of workers to establish the Gallagher-controlled federal branch in NSW.

This insurgency attracted the involvement of a number of Melbourne anarchists, together with other militants. It was rapidly extinguished by the Gallagher regime which unleashed goon squads against the militants who were driven off the job. (4) Again the authors have nothing to say about: this insurgency, which had it been successful would have saved the NSW BLF's bacon and played a key role in generalising the syndicalist movement throughout the building and construction industry. A syndicalist union-building organisation, had it existed at this time, would have been invaluable in supporting such an insurgency and assisting in "appropriate" defensive measures.

In conclusion, the authors throw much light on the character of this unique syndicalist movement, and effectively demolish the New Social Movement theorists' writing off of the revolutionary potential of the labour movement and its supposed "narrowness". Lacking appropriate industrial experience and the limitations of their scholarship, the authors fail to adequately account for the defeat of the NSW BLF syndicalist insurgency.

By Mark McGuire

Notes

(1) Recollections of Michael Matteson, member of the Sydney Worker' Control Centre who attended the Wyong Community Meeting and observed its developer infiltration and orchestration.

(2) See Tom O'Lincoln's "Into the Mainstream" A History of the Communist Party of Australia(C.P.A.) for a discussion of the splits in the C.P.A. in its twilight years and support for workers control by certain sections.

(3) Recollections of Michael Matteson who was also a member of the Sydney Link Group.

(4) See "Anarchists in the B.L.F. in the 1970's" in Rebel Worker Vol.15 No.9(141) which discusses the rank and file opposition to the Gallagher regime in the Victorian B.L.F.