

India Anderson, 'Whose Green Bans? The Builders' Labourers' Federation, the Trade Union Movement and Green Bans in Queensland in the 1970s'

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Introduction

The New South Wales Builders' Labourers' Federation (BLF) was renowned nationally from 1971 onwards for its extensive 'green ban' movement that redefined the very nature of trade unionism as a force for environmental and societal justice.¹ The term 'green ban' refers to any work bans implemented by unions based on environmental, heritage or community based concerns. Though playing a prominent role in the initial implementation of such bans as early as 1969, the position of the Queensland branch of the BLF was complicated due to its executive's political disenchantment with the Jack Munday-led New South Wales branch. This led to other unions championing the movement in Queensland, the most prominent of which was the state branch of the Building Workers' Industrial Union (BWIU). In effect, the nature of unionism in Queensland, and therefore the role of the BLF, depended largely upon the political standing of its southern counterparts. Counter-intuitively, however, the New South Wales BLF tended to align itself mainly with the BWIU rather than its Queensland contemporaries. This paper will analyse the implementation and concentration of green bans in the early 1970s, investigating the ideological process by which the BWIU and Queensland BLF enacted these interdictions.

Trade Unionism in the Queensland Construction Industry and the BLF

The years predating the green bans in many ways paved the way for such a movement in Queensland. From the late 1950s onwards the Queensland economy, and the local construction industry, was invigorated by emerging coal projects and mineral resource extraction in northern Queensland.² This was succeeded by significant expansion in the central business district of Brisbane coupled with the construction of high-rise buildings in

¹Meredith Burgmann and Verity Burgmann, 'A Rare Shift in Public Thinking': Jack Munday and the New South Wales Builders Labourers' Federation', *Labour History*, vol. 77, 1999: 44.

² Humphrey McQueen, *Frameworks of Flesh* (Port Adelaide, SA: Ginninderra Press, 2009), 184; Chris Forrester and Ashlea Tighe, *Queensland Builders' Labourers' Federation: Our History 1910 to 1920* (Brisbane: Australian Building Construction Employee's and Builders' Labourers' Federation Queensland Branch, 2010), 54.

what had become known as the 'Gold Coast'.³ Such projects and development would see the Queensland Building Trades Group (QBTG), made up of unions in the construction industry including the Queensland BLF and the BWIU among others, gaining a high degree of standing and influence.⁴ This was to be challenged by the rise to power of 'authoritarian'



Figure 1 – A Queensland BLF Float promoting the Referendum during the May Day Parade of 1969. Source: Labour Day Builders' Labourers' Federation Float. CD1 Bolder12 Labour Day 67 BLF. Fryer Library.

Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen in 1968, eventually severely limiting the extent to which these unions could implement the bans.⁵ This paper ends its investigation in the mid-1970s, as the effective destruction of the New South Wales BLF by Federal Secretary Norman Gallagher in late 1974 ended the 'role model' for the bans, with Queensland's movement having all but halted by the end of that

year.⁶ Although the Fraser Island green ban in 1975 spearheaded by the Queensland BLF did garner state-wide attention, the movement failed to realise the success of previous efforts.⁷

The BLF in Queensland had been a relatively left-wing union prior to the 1950s when its right faction began to take hold.⁸ Following this, a trend emerged that would see the BLF only put forward progressive motions if they reflected the stance of the Queensland Trades

³ McQueen, *Frameworks of Flesh*, 184; Forrester, *Queensland Builders' Labourers' Federation*, 54; Humphrey McQueen, "A Century of the Queensland BLF", *The Queensland Journal of Labour History* 11 (September 2010), 27.

⁴ The Queensland Building Trades Group, "Building Workers! Here are Some Facts regarding your 27/6 and 17/6 per week Wage Increase Claim", 1956. EPHJO Overstuffed Box, Trade Union Ephemera, John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland; Forrester, *Queensland Builders' Labourers' Federation*, 54.

⁵ "Queensland Bill Will Curb Unions", *The Age*, 8 March 1974; Simon Fry, John Shields and Brandon Ellem, "Chapter 6: The Industrial and Political Role of the Trades and Labour Council of Queensland Since 1922: A Reassessment", eds. Brandon Shellem, Ray Markey and John Shields, *Peak Unions in Australia Origins, Purpose, Power, Agency* (Annandale: Federation Press, 2004), 105.

⁶ Greg Mallory, *Uncharted Waters: Social Responsibility in Australian Trade Unions* (Brisbane: Greg Mallory, 2005), 146.; Bob Carnegie and Martin Thomas, "How to Build a Trade Union", *Workers Liberty*, 4 March 2005 <www.workersliberty.org/node/3805>.

⁷ Richard J Roddewig, *Green Bans: The Birth of Australian Environmental Politics: a Study in Public Opinion and Participation* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger Pty, LTD, 1978), 141.

⁸ McQueen, "A Century of the Queensland BLF", 27.

and Labour Council (TLC) and other similarly aligned right-wing unions.⁹ The executive minutes of the BLF's Queensland branch detailed support for nuclear disarmament, Indigenous rights and the anti-Vietnam War movement, motions which were uncontroversial among the trade union movement in the state, and as such were unanimously carried by the executive.¹⁰ This is opposed to its New South Wales counterparts who, under Munday throughout the 1970s, held a more progressive stance, instead supporting women's liberation, migrant issues and queer rights, ideals traditionally reserved for the radical left among the movement.¹¹ It is important to note that the Queensland branch exercised a degree of power during the Great Barrier Reef ban, which predated the NSW branch's movement, with the Queensland BLF State Secretary, Alfred James Delaney, speaking in a proposal to the Queensland TLC for the ban in 1969.¹² However, the period leading up to the first green ban on the Barrier Reef in early 1970 saw tensions emerge within the Queensland BLF, as historian Humphrey McQueen noted: "although the Queenslanders still leant to the Right inside the Labor Party, and went to arbitration more often than they took direct action, that mix had become more fluid".¹³

Brisbane and the Green Bans

Although the green ban movement was formally instigated in 1971 when the New South Wales branch of the BLF implemented its first green ban to preserve Kelly's Bush in Parramatta, Queensland experienced a lull following the Barrier Reef episode with no further major bans until 1973.¹⁴ This formalisation was followed by a flurry of activity in New South Wales, with the branch's actions eliciting both support and scepticism among

⁹ Humphrey McQueen, *We Built This Country: Builders' Labourers and their Unions, 1787 to the Future* (Canberra: Ginninderra Press, 2011), 258.

¹⁰ *The Minutes of the General Meeting Held in The Union Rooms 697 Ann Street, Valley on Tuesday 28/08/1962 at 8PM*. BLF. Fryer Library, Builders' Labourers' Federation Box 7 of 8, UQFL166 (870514); *The Minutes of the General Meeting held in Union Rooms 697 Ann Street, Valley at 8pm on the 6/4/65*. BLF. Fryer Library, Builders' Labourers' Federation Box 8 of 8, UQF166.

¹¹ Meredith Burgmann and Verity Burgmann, *Green Bans, Red Union: Environmental Activism and the New South Wales Builders Labourers' Federation* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1998), 109, 141, 164.

¹² McQueen, *We Built This Country*, 290.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 258.

¹⁴ Dan Jakopovich, "Green Unionism in Theory & Practice", *Anarcho-Syndicalist Review*, Winter 2008, Vol 48/49: 39-40; Australian Building Construction Employee's and Builders' Labourers' Federation, *Civilising the Industry: A Reflection on the Role of the Builders' Labourers' Federation in Australian Industry and Society* (Melbourne: Builders' Labourers' Federation, 1985), 10.

the broader community, and most damagingly anger from the Federal Executive.¹⁵

Encouraged by the New South Wales BLF, the Queensland green ban movement was revitalised, with the years 1973 and 1974 marked by action centred in Brisbane that would preserve key heritage buildings and environmental spaces, as well as protect community interests. The bans gave a newfound primacy to the construction unions in conserving these spaces. As then State Secretary of the Queensland BLF, Vince Dobinson, noted, “sometimes the greenies wouldn’t even turn up.”¹⁶

The first major green ban site contained three historic buildings on George Street in Brisbane: the Mansions (1890), the Queensland Club (1884) and the Bellevue Hotel (1886).¹⁷ The state government purchased the Bellevue Hotel in 1973 for \$660 000 and protest emerged amid concerns that demolition was imminent.¹⁸ Union involvement in the Bellevue Hotel campaign was initiated by the Building Workers’ Industrial Union. State Secretary of the BWIU, Hugh Hamilton, authorised a demolition ban on the site in 1973, with a public meeting attended by 80 people held on site on November 7 that year.¹⁹ Whilst the Queensland BLF joined the BWIU-led campaign, they would never lead it.²⁰ The Country/National Party member for Murrumba, Des Frawley, declared that communist influences within the BWIU and other conservationist movements “seized the opportunity to cause disruption” throughout the campaign.²¹ Following the BWIU's involvement in the Bellevue protest, *the Bulletin* reported that,

Brisbane members of the Building Workers Industrial Union have lagged behind their Sydney counterparts in conservation matters. No Jack Munday had emerged to ginger the boys into 'green ban' action. But this all changed last week, and the union

¹⁵John Tully, "Green Bans and the BLF: the Labour Movement and Urban Ecology", *IV Online Magazine*, March 2004, Vol. Iv357. <<http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article94#nb23>>.

¹⁶Vince Dobinson, interviewed by Chris Salisbury and India Anderson, January 28, 2014, *Queensland Speaks*, www.queenslandspeaks.com.au/vince-dobinson.

¹⁷Australian Building Construction Employees, *Civilising the Industry*, 10.

¹⁸“Matters of Public Interest”, Queensland Parliamentary Debates, Wednesday 17 November 1976, Queensland Parliamentary Debates [Hansard], 1701; Brian Simpson and Cheryl Simpson, *From Heritage to Terrorism: Regulating Tourism in an Age of Uncertainty* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2011), 61-62.

¹⁹“Matters of Public Interest”, Queensland Parliamentary Debates, 1701.

²⁰Australian Building Construction Employees, *Civilising the Industry*, 10.

²¹Ibid.

has chosen a highly suitable subject for its first protests, Brisbane's historic Bellevue Hotel.²²

Though relatively small in scale compared to the New South Wales movement, Queensland green bans expanded during this period, with the BWIU enforcing such bans at Cooloola, on the Gold Coast and against sandmining on Fraser Island by 1974.²³ Further bans by the BWIU included the A.M.P. building site following that company's reluctance to assist people after

the 1974 Brisbane floods, and the threat of destruction of Her Majesty's theatre following the company's acquisition of that property.²⁴

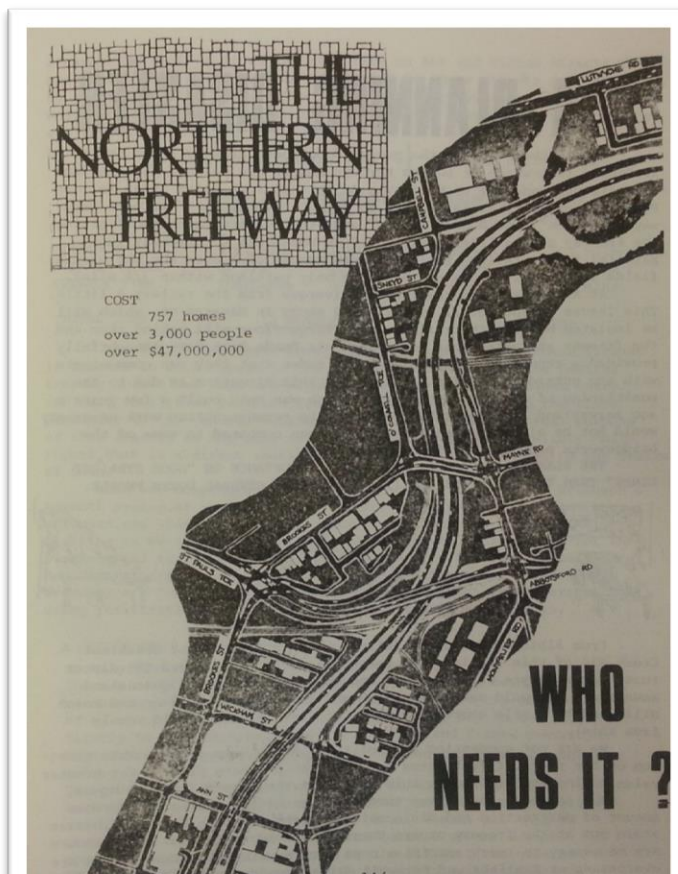


Figure 2 – Source: *The Brisbane Freeway Protest and Compensation Committee, "Go Back You Are Going the Wrong Way", 1974, 14. P388.4 GO, John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland.*

Northern Freeway Ban

Among the most successful major green bans implemented in this period was the interdiction placed on the Northern Freeway proposal, which was planned to intersect Bowen Hills and Windsor in Brisbane's northern suburbs. Anti-freeway lobbies, including the Brisbane Freeway Protest and Compensation Committee established in September 1973,

claimed that elderly, working class and

economically disadvantaged groups would be badly affected by the Freeway and that it would further aggravate the housing crisis in Brisbane.²⁵ As the Freeway Protest group

²² J. Haynes and J.F. Archibald, "Brisbane Members", *The Bulletin*, Vol 95, Part 4, 1973.

²³ Building Workers Industrial Union, *Greenbans – Who's Business?*. 4 April 1974. FVF91 B9.17, Fryer Library.

²⁴ *Ibid.*; David Latta, *Lost Glories: A Memorial to Forgotten Australian Buildings* (North Ryde, N.S.W: Angus and Robertson, 1986), 30.; "Queensland Bill Will Curb Unions", *The Age*, 8 March 1974; "Insurers Consider Image-Booster", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 April 1974.

²⁵ Patrick Francis Laurence Mullins, "The Struggle Against Brisbane's Freeways, 1966 to 1974: An Australian Case Study of Urban Development, Residential Life and Urban Politics" (PhD Thesis, University of Queensland,

began to gain greater traction in the community, many unions added their voice to the struggle, resulting in a large campaign from 1973 to 1974.²⁶ Squatters were evicted from adjoining properties but freeway plans were eventually scrapped.²⁷

Acting as President of the QBTG, Vince Dobinson authorised a pamphlet confirming the demolition ban:

The Building Trades Group of Unions has placed a demolition ban on every house in the way of the Northern Freeway. This ban will remain until such time as this group of unions is satisfied that the State Government will adequately compensate and rehouse the residents concerned. The ban has been imposed to prevent the State Government from continuing its brutal and inhuman policy towards people in houses in the way of the Freeway.²⁸

The most active member of the QBTG in the Northern Freeway green ban was again the state branch of the BWIU. This was reinforced when Secretary of the Brisbane Freeway Protest and Compensation Committee, Tom O'Brien, in a speech to the TLC in 1974, stated that the BWIU had been a "major support", and openly thanked Hugh Hamilton among other members of the union who had "shown such keen support for our work" and contributed \$100 towards the committee fund.²⁹ Evidently, the BWIU played a major role during the implementation of these bans, with the BLF largely assisting through the QBTG.

Tensions in the BLF

The prominence of the BWIU in the green ban campaigns can be understood when analysing the context surrounding the BLF's Queensland branch during this period. The actions of the New South Wales BLF in this time had led to a stand-off between it and the

1979), 313-315; The Brisbane Freeway Protest and Compensation Committee, "Go Back You Are Going the Wrong Way" 1974, 48. P388.4 GO, John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland.

²⁶Tim Briedis, "A Map of the World That Includes Utopia: The Self-Management Group and the Brisbane Libertarians" (Honours Thesis, University of Sydney, 2010), 90.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸V Dobinson, President and T.W. Chard, Hon. Secretary, Queensland Building Trades Group, "Queensland Building Trades Group: Demolition Ban", Pamphlet, EPHJO. John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland.

²⁹Tom O'Brien, "Talk by Tom O'Brien, Secretary, Brisbane Freeway Protest and Compensation Committee to the Trades and Labour Council", 26 September 1973. VF388.122 OBR, John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland.

Federal office led by Secretary Norm Gallagher.³⁰ The Queensland branch, which had long been a conservative ally of the Federal office, officially supported attempts to discipline the New South Wales branch, which Dobinson perceived as a disruption to the aims of the Federation.³¹ As led by Dobinson, the BLF had become a far less militant group in Queensland, and although it greatly contributed to the green ban movement the branch was unwilling to “rock the foundations”, as the New South Wales branch was determined to do.³² This was not without internal opposition, however, as Vince Englart and his contemporaries within the Queensland branch sought to become more active in implementing and supporting more radical bans in Brisbane. Englart had long been an active branch member, and was in fact the sole contributor of the aforementioned progressive motions that were unanimously passed by the executive. Despite their differences in political persuasion, Dobinson remembered Englart as “a good bloke ... very bright.”³³

Throughout the green ban period, Englart and other militant members of the branch outlined their demands for action in *On Site*, a newsheet established for the rank and file members of the Queensland BLF.³⁴ Though the newsheet’s supporters were dismissed at the time by Dobinson as “communists” of little importance, they identified an important commitment to the green ban cause, declaring in December 1974 that “we are often employed to pull down houses (in a housing shortage) or destroy parklands or historic buildings ... the boss has the say-so and knows where the profit is.”³⁵ However, the rank and file simultaneously remained preoccupied with rallying for permanency in their construction positions, an issue that remained more pressing than the Union’s social campaigns.³⁶ The battle between ‘communists’ and ‘non-communists’ was evidently a major issue for the branch, with Dobinson stating that “all they [communists] wanted to do was upset and destroy things.”³⁷ However, Dobinson notes that such militants were an unorganised

³⁰ Mallory, *Uncharted Waters*, 146.

³¹ Rank and File Committee of the Builders’ Labourers’ Union, *On Site: Newsheet of the Rank and File Committee of the Builders’ Labourers’ Union*, 2 December 1974, 2. Trade Union Ephemera, Box 3, SVF331.881.013, John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland.

³² Pat Fiske and Graham Pitts, Video Recording, *Rocking the foundation* (Sydney: Bower Bird Films, 1985); McQueen, “A Century of the BLF”, 29-30.

³³ Vince Dobinson, *Queensland Speaks*, www.queenslandspeaks.com.au/vince-dobinson.

³⁴ Rank and File Committee of the Builders’ Labourers’ Union, *On Site*, p 2.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

³⁷ Vince Dobinson, *Queensland Speaks*, www.queenslandspeaks.com.au/vince-dobinson.

minority, who often remained unwilling to support one another due to internal conflict.³⁸ Regardless, the internal difficulties faced by the BLF, combined with Dobinson's intent to discipline the NSW branch, contributed to the Union's comparative lack of prominence in the green ban movement in Queensland.

A Militant BWIU

Due to their similar goals and political persuasions, the BWIU became a closer ally of the NSW BLF as led by Jack Munday, with Hugh Hamilton openly praising the branch in a flyer titled "Greenbans: Who's Business?" in 1974.³⁹ The publication outlined various green bans that the Queensland BWIU were engaged with at that time.⁴⁰ Furthermore, Hamilton, an active communist, presented a paper on radical action in the industry to a BWIU delegates' convention, where he declared:

The union's [BWIU] activities in the anti-Freeway campaign and the green bans placed on the Bellevue Hotel, the Mansions and other buildings in Brisbane have received widespread support from other unions and amongst the community.⁴¹

Evidently, whereas the Queensland branch of the BLF had been restricted by the actions of the New South Wales branch, the BWIU had in fact been invigorated in the absence of any federal office restraints or looming threats of intervention. The actions of the BWIU would eventually lead Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen to exclaim that "green bans, black bans and the like are the communist fist in the Labor glove."⁴² It is curious to note that whereas the New South Wales BWIU had disagreed with that state's BLF allowing community groups to dictate the terms of a ban, the Queensland branch had similarly given primacy to conservationist groups.⁴³ This can be attributed to similarities in ideology, with the strong communist influences within the Queensland BWIU and the New South Wales BLF forging

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Building Workers Industrial Union, *Greenbans – Who's Business?*, Fryer Library.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ H.R. Hamilton, "Inflation Economic Crisis Australia Needs: Radical Socialist Alternatives", Report to the B.W.I.U, Eleventh State Delegates Convention, July 4-6, 1974, Trades Hall, Brisbane. Trade Union Ephemera, EPHJO, Box 3, John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland.

⁴² "Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act & c., Bill, Legislative Assembly, Thursday 7 March 1974. Queensland Parliamentary Debates [Hansard], 2752.

⁴³ Glenn Mitchell, "Parting Company: 1972 – 1982". *On Strong Foundations: The BWIU and Industrial Relations in the Australian Construction Industry 1942 – 1992* (Sydney: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1996), 230.

an environment that fostered critical analysis of the effects of their work on the community.⁴⁴ Hamilton was noteworthy for his dedication to political education camps at Caloundra, attended by university students and trade workers alike. Plumbers' Union organiser George Britten recalled that "from political issues to safety issues, we made good use of those people from the uni."⁴⁵ In essence, the BWIU's primacy in the green ban movement can be attributed to their long-held political commitment in regards to critiquing the conditions of their labour and being active in the domain of social justice.

Conclusion

The green ban movement was led in Queensland by the BWIU, with the BLF assisting in the bans under Dobinson. The BLF's relative lack of ambition throughout the bans was due to the overwhelming political tension within the Union at a Federal level, with the state branch not wanting to elicit negative attention from Gallagher. Furthermore, this tension was evident at a state level, with the Queensland branch's militant members preoccupied with internal struggles for greater democracy and permanency on the job. As such, the Queensland BWIU became allied to the New South Wales BLF, both of them linked by communist ideology that informed their methods throughout the green ban movement. As such, the movement saw the concentration of many bans across this state, though predominantly in the urban centres of the southeast corner, and garnered considerable support and achieved relative success. Ultimately, the green ban movement as led by the BWIU and assisted by the BLF was affected largely by Queensland's political climate, which in effect changed the very nature of union relations and left an indelible mark on Queensland's trade union movement.

⁴⁴ Jack Munday, *Green Bans & Beyond* (Angus & Robertson, 1981), 144.

⁴⁵ George Britten, Interviewed by Louise Ryan and Danielle Miller, January 17, 2013, *Queensland Speaks*, www.queenslandspeaks.com.au/george-britten.

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