
OBITUARY

VALE JACK MUNDEY A HERO OF THE AUSTRALIAN LEFT

Meredith Burgmann

Jack Munday was a significant figure in the history of world environmentalism and a giant in the story of the Australian labour movement. His leadership of the NSW Builders Labourers' Federation (BLF) in the 1960s and 1970s showed what a truly progressive union could look like. The mainstream media have concentrated on his leadership of the Green Bans and the way in which he, with Joe Owens and Bob Pringle and the rank and file men and women of the BLF, saved the face of Sydney. These are indeed great successes but it was also the way in which he changed the union which we as the Left should contemplate.

John Bernard (Jack) Munday was born in Malanda, northern Queensland, in 1929. He came down from the Atherton Tablelands in the 1950s to play rugby league for Parramatta. Failing to make the cut, he ended up 'on the tools' as a building worker. Confronted with a corrupt and complacent union leadership, Jack fought hard to democratise and radicalise the union, joining the Communist Party along the way in 1957. He became Secretary of the BLF in 1968.

Many of the truly democratic practices that he introduced to the union were borne out of this long struggle for control. He fought for the meaningful involvement of all members in union activities, including the large and diverse migrant cohort; he introduced 'limited tenure of office'; tied organisers' pay to the industry award and instituted the practice whereby officials did not get paid during industry strikes.

Having grown up amidst the rainforests of North Queensland, Jack was an environmentalist before that term was even used. But what Jack brought

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to the struggle was his view that workers should campaign around the social responsibility of labour. He believed that workers should think about the sort of work they do and the environment in which they live and work. Jack was a man of immense personal charm and a razor sharp intellect. He loved an argument and rarely met his match. His articulate advocacy of progressive causes was a huge plus for the union movement generally. The media hated what he was doing but loved having him turn up to explain what was happening – a perfect ‘talking head’.

The Green Bans were developed by the BLF and a much smaller union, the FEDFA, between 1971 and 1974. They were originally simply called black bans but were later, in a stroke of brilliance, dubbed ‘green’ bans by Jack. There were eventually 54 Green Bans and they held up \$5 billion worth of building activity (in 1970s dollar terms).

It is not exaggerating to say that the NSW BLF is responsible for the shape of Sydney as we now know it.

The late sixties had seen a massive building boom in Sydney caused by unregulated ‘hot money’ overseas investment and the activities of the corrupt and pro-development Askin government. At the time there was no heritage or environmental protection legislation in NSW. Voices against rapacious over-development were few. There was a poorly funded National Trust, and an even weaker Royal Australian Planning Institute. The mainstream media was relentlessly pro-development. At the height of the confrontations the *Sydney Morning Herald* published 5 editorials in 12 days attacking the union.

However, a demographic change became important in the Green Ban story. This was the rise of inner city resident activism. The progressive middle class had started to move into the inner city, which is where most of the pressure from developers was occurring. And these activists were desperate for help in their stark situations. The story of how a bunch of middle-class ‘matrons’, the Battlers for Kelly’s Bush, reached out to the communist-led union as a last resort, is an enduring narrative. It was there at Hunters Hill, in 1971, that the first ‘green ban’ was placed on the last remaining natural bushland to be saved on Sydney harbour.

Resident Action Groups were formed - first in Paddington and Glebe, quickly followed by other suburbs – Woolloomooloo, the Rocks, Surry Hills and the very militant Victoria Street, Kings Cross, where some activists were squatting (and where I was arrested).

The BLF leadership always insisted that every ban had to occur at the request of the residents, and had to have the community involved. This involved endless discussion between the union leadership and the concerned residents. It was what Jack referred to as 'the enlightened middle class and the enlightened working class coming together' to work for a better living environment.

Every proposed ban had to be agreed to by a general meeting of the union. Almost all bans ended up being physically protected and many labourers and residents were arrested and even gaoled for this stoic defiance. This physical defence of the bans is what distinguished the real Green Bans era from its later and paler manifestations.

One of the aims of the Green Bans was to protect the right of the working class to live in the inner city. The bans saved the Rocks and Woolloomooloo from being turned into a forest of high rise 'executive suites'; they saved Glebe from being split into three islands by two major expressways; saved Centennial Park from being turned into a giant sporting complex; saved Victoria Street, Kings Cross from destruction; saved Surry Hills from excessive high rise; saved Ultimo from an expressway and saved the Opera House fig trees from becoming a car park. Individual buildings saved by green bans include the State Theatre, the Pitt St Congregational Church, and the Colonial Mutual, National Mutual and ANZ bank buildings in Martin Place.

Jack always understood that, on the whole, the bans could only halt development in order to allow time for political solutions. He developed excellent working relationships with NSW Premier Neville Wran and Federal Urban Affairs Minister Tom Uren. These friendships particularly helped in government intervention to save Glebe and Woolloomooloo and the building of The Sirius for social housing in the Rocks.

The union's Green Bans quickly became known around the world. 'Green Ban Committees' were formed by unions in Britain. Jack Munday was invited to lecture in Europe and North America and, in 1976, he addressed the first United Nations Conference on the Built Environment.

The NSW BLF was smashed in March 1975 by a combination of federal BLF intervention that was financed by the Master Builders Association, NSW police action, NSW State government harassment and opposition from almost all other unions.

So much of what happened to the BLF can be explained by the politics of the Left at that time. The leadership and many of the activists were a fairly

non-sectarian mixture of Aarons-line independent CPA members, Left ALP activists and non-aligned socialists, anarcho-syndicalists and even Trotskyists. However, the various splits in the Communist Party led to open hostility from the Maoist Federal leadership of the BLF under Norm Gallagher and less overt but probably more damaging opposition from the pro-Moscow Pat Clancy leadership of the building tradesmen's union, the BWIU.

At the final mass meeting of the BLF in 1975, only two unions were there in support of the Munday/Owens/Pringle leadership - the ever reliable FEDFA and the Teachers Federation. It was not until Joe Owens' funeral in 2012 that then Unions NSW Secretary, Mark Lennon, apologised to the old BLF members in the room for the Labor Council's hostile attitude to Jack's leadership and the Green Bans.

However, what the BLF did have was the enthusiastic support of the general left. It was not enough to save them but it created a sense of solidarity. Old anti-Vietnam and anti-Apartheid activists, land rights supporters, women's groups and even the LGBTIQ community flocked to their charismatic presence. All groups had received great support from Jack and the other BLF leaders. Examples were Jack's prosecution for supporting draft resisters; Bob Pringle cutting down the goalposts before a Springbok match as part of an anti-apartheid demonstration; the union's ban on Sydney University in support of women's studies courses and the first 'pink' ban on Macquarie University in solidarity with expelled gay student Jeremy Fisher.

Perhaps their most committed supporters were the young black activists of Redfern who managed to get a union ban on demolition of 'the Block' which eventuated in a Whitlam government hand-over of the land to the community. This action was often referred to as Australia's first successful land rights claim.

After Jack voluntarily left the union leadership (believing in limited tenure of office), he remained active in environmental and urban planning issues. He was elected to the City of Sydney Council and was briefly Chair of its Planning Committee. He was active in the National Trust and was made a life member of the Australian Conservation Foundation. In 1995, Bob Carr appointed him Chair of the Historic Houses Trust (now Sydney Living Museums). The National Trust campaigned for Jack Munday Place in the Rocks to be named after him. He was made an AO and was voted one of Australia's National Living Treasures. He was awarded Honorary PhDs

from the University of Western Sydney and the University of NSW. He once said to me in mock sympathy ‘only one PhD?’ He did love to provoke.

After the tragic death of his first wife Stephanie from a cerebral haemorrhage, Jack married Judy Wilcox in the 1960s. Further tragedy occurred when his son Michael died in a car accident at the age of 22. Judy has been his partner in life and politics for over fifty years. She was an important activist in her own right, becoming President of the Communist Party (1979-1982) in its exciting independent-line period.

Jack Munday and the men and women of the BLF did indeed save a city and every day all of us benefit from that.

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