

# Tales of the BLF ... Rolling the Right!

## The battle of the Builders Labourers rank and File in New South Wales 1951-1964

**By Paul True**

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### Introduction

Nearly a decade after its demise in New South Wales, the Builders Labourers Federation is still the name that springs to mind when people talk about a militant trade union. But it wasn't always the case. In the 1950s the BLF in NSW was the classic 'tame-cat' union. For builders labourers the work was hard, the pay bad, and conditions appalling. Labourers were in every way on the bottom rung on the ladder.

Two decades later the union had soared from obscurity to being the one that Australia's rich and powerful feared and hated the most. Builders labourers had become organised and had developed a very real and growing confidence in themselves.

And their impact spread wider than just the building industry. "Like the BLF" became the byword for militant trade unionism throughout Australia. In addition to that, the BLF won world-wide renown, over its famous Green Bans, without which The Rocks and many other historic and natural parts of Sydney would no longer exist. (Indeed the union's linking up with, and concrete support for, wider community campaigns is a feature that would very much raise the esteem of unions today – particularly amongst young people.)

However, the fact is that without a complete transformation within the union first none of the things that the BLF became famous for would ever have happened. This booklet is about how that transformation took place.

The political backdrop to much of this story is the Cold War. With the almost total disappearance of a real left-wing over the last decade or so, people may find surprising the support and influence that the Communist Party once had amongst ordinary workers. But in the unions, their support and influence was no small thing.

Because of the hold that Stalinism had within the Party, the Communists could at times be as undemocratic and dictatorial as any right-winger. But on the other hand they provided the militant backbone in the trade unions for at least three decades, and can therefore quite justifiably claim their share of credit for many of the gains won by Australian workers.

This booklet makes no pretence at being anything other than a brief overview of a very complex twenty years. There has been difficulty in getting information, with records of much of the period inaccessible or destroyed. It's been a bit like putting together a jigsaw puzzle, and there are still a lot of bits missing.

The story is based upon reports from the time and interviews with participants. Firstly there were interviews with Joe Ferguson, Don McHugh, Jack Munday, Kevin Gledhill, Ron Monaghan and John McNamara. In addition to these there were unrecorded discussions with the late Mick McNamara, Harry Connell, the late Ray O'Shannassy, and other participants in the events described. In particular I am indebted to Jack and Johnny Mac for the very generous loan of their personal scrapbooks, to Joe and Don for their time and patience, and a special thank you to Elaine McNamara for access to Mick's scrapbooks. Thanks also to Denis Kevans for permission to reproduce his great poem 'Worken' In The Rain.

All other quotes are from various leaflets, newspapers, journals and books. The most important of these (and thank you to the authors for allowing me to quote from their work) were Meredith Burgmann's comprehensive manuscript *A New Concept of Unionism – NSWBLF 1970-74*, and Pat Fiske's moving film *Rocking The Foundations*. A full list of sources is included in the back.

None of these people are responsible for the political views expressed and conclusions drawn. I take responsibility for them.

Furthermore, because of records being destroyed and lack of complete information there may be mistakes in here. If so, I take responsibility for them also.

This is not a story of Hollywood heroes but of ordinary workers who decided to stand up for themselves. And by doing so they changed their world and to a degree the world around them as well.

As the saying goes, 'when ordinary people organise together, they are capable of extraordinary things.'

Paul True, August 1995

## **The Thomas Years**

In the 1940s and most of the 1950s the Builders Labourers Federation in New South Wales was run by a character called Fred Thomas. He was a tough guy – a big blustering man, but his aggression was first and foremost directed against opponents within the union, not the employers.

Ron Monaghan, an organiser with the Building Workers Industrial Union at the time recalls, "Fred Thomas used to say, 'Should we have the fight first or should we have the meeting first?'"

"The sort of bloke he was...he went up to the Snowy Mountains Scheme and he joined up all these blokes that shouldn't have even been in the BLF. He had no right joining them up – they were doing AWU work – but he just barged his way in and talked them into joining. But then, before he even got the money back to Sydney, he went and lost it all in a bloody two-up game!"

The building industry in New South Wales had been hit hard by the Great Depression of the 1930s. With the union probably still in disarray from those times, there was a federal intervention in January 1940 into the NSW branch. Federal officials came up from Melbourne, and according to the press, "Their first action was to change the lock on the office door." All the old officials were 'removed' from office. An official from Newcastle was installed as acting secretary, pending a ballot. Following this it seems, Fred Thomas gained control.

Keith Jessop who joined the BLF in 1941 described the situation as he found it. "It wasn't a very active or viable organisation at that particular time. The industry was in a very bad way in relation to amenities, conditions and awards. There was little or no mechanisation in the industry. Brickies and plasterers were looked after by hod carriers, and all the steel reinforcement was bent on the site which was extremely hard work. There was no payment for public holidays, there was no wet weather pay, no annual leave or no sick leave. In all it was a very hard, arduous, dusty and dirty and thankless job as a builders labourer in those days."

There was in fact provision for annual leave in the award and the hod was officially banned in the 1940s, but the reality on site and what was written in the award book often bore very little resemblance to one another.

## The work

Whilst they were all members of the one union, there were many different jobs that came under the classification of “builders labourer”. Greatest in number were the “pick and shovel men” – this was before mechanical digging machines became so widespread. (Incidentally, it was not uncommon for a builders labourer to have to provide his own pick and shovel.)

There were also concretors, steel-fixers, labourers for bricklayers and plasterers, scaffolders, riggers, and dogmen who tied the loads for cranes, then rode those loads up to the top-most levels of multi-storey buildings.

Ron Monaghan, a bricklayer by trade, describes the conditions for hod-carriers at the time. “The hoddy would come onto the job, he’d have his own hod, he’d have his own shovel and many times the larry (a mixing tool). And the prospective employer would examine these, and by jeez they’d have to be spotless!

“You could tell the hoddy in the pub – once you’d been in the building industry you could recognise them – one shoulder was lower than the other. It was carrying the weights that they carried. They were short nuggety blokes, strong as anything.

“...you were only paid for the time that you worked... there was no sick leave, none of these “fancy-dancey things” as the boss used to call them.

“The hoddy not only carried bricks, he had to carry the mortar. In those days also they used a lot of lime mortar, and the first job was to form a sand ring and throw the rock lime in. Many a kid would get home with his socks and shoes up to his knees all white, where he’d tried to jump the lime ring and fell in!”

As for the other trades in the industry, plumbers and electricians each had their own separate unions, whilst the carpenters and bricklayers unions amalgamated in the early 1940s to form the Building Workers Industrial Union – the BWIU.

The Builders Labourers Federation had also been going to be part of the amalgamated union. Indeed in 1941 a general meeting of the union had voted unanimously in favour of the idea. However the leadership pulled out at the last minute. A number of reasons were given, but it was the underlying political divisions that lay at the heart of the situation.

## The dividing lines

A constant theme of the Thomas leadership was that tradesmen were doing labourers work, therefore putting them out of a job, and that the BWIU were actually encouraging this.

Furthermore Thomas declared that tradesmen looked down on the labourers – amongst the more backward tradesmen that was quite true. Thomas also pointed to the fact that labourers had been conscripted during the war, which had not long ended, whereas some carpenters had been exempted from direct military service – another line of division. Thomas emphasised division.

In 1947, there was a campaign to win the 40-hour week. As was the custom at that time, the BWIU took a far more active and militant approach than the BLF. During the campaign the labourers union journal declared, “Members are warned that they must not take part in any stoppages that may be called by the BWIU but must abide by the decisions of their union.”

In fact almost half of the July 1947 issue of the BLF journal was taken up listing employers that the 40-hour week did not apply to! A strange thing to emphasise in the middle of a campaign, but such was the approach of the Thomas leadership. Shop-stewards were told to, “instruct all members on their jobs not to take part in any stop-work meeting...or take part in any shop-committee unless by the sanction of the union.” This meant that united action with

the rest of the workers on a site was effectively impossible without falling foul of the union leadership.

Ron Monaghan recalls, “It was on the Goodyear site. There was a delegate named Abbie Bowman. There was a dispute, and the BLs came out with us. Thomas ordered them back and they didn’t go. So they had a meeting, and Abbie Bowman and the billy boy, I don’t know what he’d done, but anyway they were banned from ever representing the union again.”

## **The politics**

But what really added spice to the situation in the building industry was the political background. Thomas was a right-winger and vehemently anti-Communist – the BWIU was a Communist Party led union.

In June 1945 a delegate named Grace from Darlinghurst was expelled from the BLF after Thomas had charged him with, “collaborating with members of the Building Workers Industrial Union and members of the Communist Party in an attempt to white-ant the Builders Labourers union.”

The union branch meeting declared its, “uncompromising hostility to the principles of the Australian Communist Party”, and that, “any member who attempts or assembles to mingle with members of the Communist Party for the purpose of introducing into this union white-anting tactics” would be dealt with in a similar way.

It was a time of momentous change. In the aftermath of the Second World War, a wave of militancy swept across the industrial landscape. With its powerful position in the unions, the Communist Party was accused in the daily press of attempting to ‘destroy the nation.’ Whilst the CP certainly encouraged industrial action, sometimes even going overboard, the militancy was nonetheless way beyond anything the Communists could have just engineered.

Many building workers had just come back from the war, and quite reasonably felt entitled to ‘their share’ of the new order, having just risked their lives. They had no intention of going back to the conditions of the 1930s, and demanded an improvement in their living standards. After being through a war, the idea of going on strike didn’t exactly terrify them...

But it did terrify the employers. A propaganda war was launched against militants in general, and Communists in particular. This coincided with the onset of the Cold War on a world scale. Thomas became a favourite anti-militant of the capitalist press. Whenever an anti-Communist quote was needed for a newspaper article, Thomas would be trotted out. When the BWIU planned industrial campaigns Thomas would attempt to undermine them, not only on the jobs, but through the pages of the daily press. Wherever militant action occurred, Thomas attempted to subvert it.

In the early 1940s the Master Builders’ Association were openly calling for the deregistration of Communist led unions, or for internal coups to occur within. The Thomas leadership must have been a joy for them.

In November 1945, the Sydney Morning Herald reported Thomas as saying that the upcoming stop-work meeting in the industry “would receive little support” because it was believed to be “Communist-inspired”. The main demand of the meeting was the establishment of ‘pick-up employment centres’ – central places where unemployed building workers could register instead of tramping all over town looking for work. In July of 1946 Thomas was telling the press that many housing projects were being run by “Communist-controlled cells.”

Earlier that year members of the Communist Party were banned from even joining the BLF!

Nobody remembers now exactly how strong the CP presence was in the BLF at this time. To cash in on Cold War fear Thomas probably called everyone who opposed him a Communist.

## Strike

But these were turbulent days. Between 1945 and 1950, 10.2 million days were lost in industrial disputes. The Master Builders Association complained of the “unsatiable demands of unionism”, and that militant unions were “like mad dogs that have tasted blood”.

In such an atmosphere even conservatives like Fred Thomas had to respond to the general mood of the times. Thus in October 1947, the man who opposed strikes found himself leading a four day national strike of builders labourers for a wage increase.

Such action clearly cut across the grain of everything Thomas stood for, but it seemed the ground was moving beneath him. Thomas complained to the press, “We support arbitration but we object to its slow-working machinery.” As a result of the strike a sixteen shilling wage increase was won.

But once that was out of the way, it was back to the important business. Two weeks after the strike, Thomas announced there would be a federal intervention by the union in order to “clean up” the South Australian branch where the Communists had gained a sizeable influence.

But despite the draconian measures taken against them, the Communists clearly had support, even in Thomas’s heartland of New South Wales. The front page of the Sydney Morning Herald of April 7th 1948 contained the following report headlined, “Brawl At Meeting – Union Uproar”.

“Communist members of the Builders Labourers union provoked a series of fights at a meeting of the union held at the Trades Hall last night.

“Four men were ejected during the meeting.

“The most unusual feature of the meeting was the arrival of a double-decker bus from Port Kembla shortly before it started. The bus carried 70 builders labourers from the South Coast.

“It was the first occasion such a delegation had arrived at a meeting of this union.

“As soon as the meeting started the Communists interjected and a brawl developed. When this was settled one of the city members shouted, ‘What’s wrong with you boys from the bush, can’t you take it?’

“This caused another free-for-all fight and business was again held up...

“During his speech to the meeting Mr Thomas was interrupted by two Communist interjectors. He stopped his speech, took out his teeth, and threatened to deal with them if they continued to interrupt.

“‘We voted them out by 350 votes to 79,’ said Mr Thomas after the meeting. ‘This shows how obnoxious Communists are to the great bulk of our rank and file.’”

The political bias of the article stands out like neon, but nonetheless it gives an interesting snapshot of the times.

In the union election that year it was reported that “Communist supporters” had run unsuccessfully for organisers positions. (Union elections in the BLF at that time were held annually.) In March the following year, 1949, the Mirror reported that, “Communists were soundly defeated in the election of Federal officers” of the BLF. The report stated that, “Left-wing supporters contested all the major offices, but the existing office-bearers were returned with substantial majorities.”

It is not known whether these were isolated electoral challenges, or part of an ongoing opposition campaign. Nor is it known whether these were broad opposition tickets or totally Communist Party tickets.

The Communists had gone through a very sectarian period in the late 1920s/early 1930s, where they argued that every other party apart from their own, including the ALP, were essentially fascists -the theory of ‘social-fascism.’

Since then they had generally been at pains to ally themselves with non-Communists in the unions – if anything they were probably guilty of bending too far the other way. Having said that, the mid to late 1940s was another period where there were elements of sectarianism to their activities. What the situation was in the Builders Labourers Federation at that time is not clear.

## **Rank and file groups**

The CP in many ways “wrote the book” on rank and file work in Australian unions, beginning in the 1930s with the Militant Minority Movement, which they set up.

The Great Depression of the early 1930s left the existing union leaderships reeling. At first many union leaders did not even realise what was happening, but when the full extent of the catastrophe became clear, they had no real idea how to deal with the situation. They became demoralised and defeatist.

This in turn led to the meteoric rise of rank and file movements within the unions. They argued that a militant and energetic approach was needed, and that if the current leaders wouldn’t provide it, they would.

Whilst certainly, and often successfully standing in union elections, their activities were far from restricted to assembling a ticket at election times. They were ongoing bodies, with their own journals or newsheets, that campaigned on a permanent basis. And all the groups in the different unions were linked together through an umbrella organisation, the Militant Minority Movement.

Though initially set up by the Communists, the groups were certainly not restricted to Communist Party members. And the impact of these groups on the labour movement generally should not be underestimated. Without question, the Militant Minority Movement played an important part in revitalising the union movement as a whole after the Depression. Furthermore, it was arising from these small groups that the Communist Party developed its enormous support in industry over the coming years. Had they not been under the spell of ‘social-fascist’ ideology, that support could have been multiplied many times over again. But a decade and a half later, as the Cold War intensified, they were under siege.

## **The Thomas style**

As the 1950s began seven senior officials of the South Australian branch of the BLF were expelled, officially for ‘dereliction of duty’, but in reality because they were “Communists or Communist-supporters.”

Then in November of that year, the federal leadership of the union decided to ban Communists from future office in any branch. It was also decided that new members joining the union must declare they were not Communists.

The move had been sponsored by Thomas, who between 1942 and 1950 was not only NSW secretary, but Federal secretary as well. Indeed so obsessed did Thomas become with the Communists that he declared (to the press once again) that he would recommend the BLF withdraw its affiliation from the Australian Labor Party. This was because of Labor leader Evatt’s defence of the Communist Party against Menzies.

But Thomas was a wheeler and dealer, not someone interested in political ideas. Whether he really was so passionate about Communism or whether it was just a fashionable stance for the times is certainly open to question.

But it wasn't just the Communists that Thomas didn't like. A continual tone of annoyance with the ordinary membership of his own union ran through the BLF journal. A column instructing members what to do and what not to do appeared fairly regularly. The first commandment one month was, "Don't pull a stoppage on your job over some grievance, then ring the Union office and ask for an official to go out and straighten matters out." The next month it was, "Don't embarrass your organisers or ask them silly questions when they visit your job."

A section of the membership that Thomas appeared to find particularly annoying were some of the migrant workers. According to the union journal of May 1952, under the sub-heading, "Do Not 'Onnerstan'", it was stated that some "New Australians...want everything for nothing."

"When approached for their union dues they cannot 'speeka da Eenglish', but when they want the assistance of the union they speak better English than the average Aussie."

### **The beginnings of the Rank and File**

Joe Ferguson was a young member of the Communist Party, working as a builders labourer on the Holsworthy army barracks site in 1951. "My first involvement was on the building site. The organiser came round, I joined the union, but I was immediately struck by the difference between the BLF and the BWIU. In relation to how they organised on the job...and the different conditions between the Builders Labourers and the BWIU. Where we worked we might see a Builders Labourers organiser once every six months.

"Basically the BWIU organiser used to call out on the job about once a fortnight, and if he was called to some problem on the job he'd be out there the next day. I seen that the carpenters were better organised than us. I was a socialist at that time, you know, but I had little idea of unionism..."

"Then in the Communist Party, I was a member of the Communist Party at that time, the only militant union in the building industry was the BWIU. The Builders Labourers was a union in name only...the plumbers union was right-wing at that time. The Communist Party wanted to change that position, so they went through their membership and found out people who were members of the builders labourers union, members of the plumbers union and the painters union and they set up these Party Committees. In the builders labourers union they found me, Ray O'Shannassy and a bloke by the name of Tommy Quinn. We set up a fraction in the builders labourers union and we got a leaflet out ...and basically we started to hand it out on the jobs. And gradually we started to build up support.

"We had a lot of opposition from the union, from Thomas... There was one incident with Tom Quinn where he was working on a job out at Guildford. Him and Theo Austin (one of Thomas's organisers) had an argument on the job, developed into a fight, and the blokes just said, 'well you're both the same age, settle it amongst yourselves'. So they fought one another to a draw. The next day Thomas sent some thug to the job...asked for Tommy Quinn...broke his nose, smashed his jaw, beat the shitter out of him. That was Thomas's reaction..."

Union rank and file groups, by their very nature, are up and down sort of affairs, depending on what's happening in the industry. With employment in the building industry being so overwhelmingly casual, the ebb and flow nature of the situation is many times more the case. There must have been some break in continuity from the 1940s, but again no-one can remember the details now. Whatever the story was, a new rank and file group was set up in the early 1950s.

"Basically the Rank and File only consisted of Communist Party members at that time, it took a while to build up..."

“We spoke about issues on the jobs, about the wet weather, (there was no pay for wet weather in those days) about no amenities on the jobs... at that time you used to eat in the storeroom (where all the cement and tools were kept)... things like that. Gradually we started to build up a bit of a following.”

“Because of the reaction from the union, where they bashed Tom Quinn up and other people, there was a bit of a fall off... Basically the Rank and File only consisted of Communist Party members in those times. It took a while to build up.”

According to Joe Ferguson it was about 18 months before they held their first public meeting – at the Railway Institute, right outside Central Station . “I think we had 15 people there, about 5 of them Party members, 10 rank and file members.”

They began to produce a roneod newsletter called the Hoist.

“Initially we used to get a leaflet out once every every 2 or 3 months. Basically we dealt with job issues. To finance the Hoist we used to run a raffle based on the last two numbers of the Lottery ticket.

“We had other people coming in through the Communist Party, Harry Connell and later on Jack Munday.

“We had a lot of obstacles to confront. When you went to a branch meeting, Thomas used to have thugs at the meeting... He used to issue union tickets, give a bloke 2 quid with a union ticket to go to the meeting. And he used to use that to control the meeting.

“There used to be a lot of fights at union meetings. We found that the only way we could speak at union meetings was to nominate our speakers beforehand and sit four or five people round them so they couldn’t be attacked.”

The incident at Goodyear’s referred to earlier, was important in the development of the Rank and File. As Ferguson describes it: “At Goodyear’s at Camelia, Concrete Constructions were doing the job, the blokes went out over wet weather. It was a united issue on the job, everybody went out and they won, partly, the dispute. They’d get paid for 2 hours ... If they sent them home they’d get 2 hours pay. (Previously the workers received nothing except fares if they were ‘rained off’ the job.)

“Thomas wasn’t too happy about the fact that builders labourers and carpenters took action together on the job, and he fined the union delegate... you know, for holding a joint meeting with the BWIU, and going out on strike against the union leadership. And that built up a lot of resentment amongst the workers on the job, led to a questioning of the union leadership for doing those things. The Rank and File started to attract more and more people.”

By 1952 the group was definitely having an effect. The editorial in the April edition of the unions’ journal was headlined “Militant Scabs” with sub-headings like “Members Lose Work”, “Irresponsibles Not Wanted”, “Phoney Militants” and “Stamp Out Traitors”. It went on to speak of, “a small minority of hot-heads and blow-ins”, without mentioning anyone by name.

At the same time, Tom Quinn, Henry Rodgers and Ralph Markwort, “all self-confessed Communists” according to the journal, were engaged in legal proceedings against the union leadership.

Joe Ferguson explains the Rank and File’s approach. “We didn’t stand for elections till 1958. We set up the Rank and File in 1951... We started to build up organisation where we had delegates on the job, blokes giving out the Hoist... we were self-sufficient, the Communist Party used to print our leaflets for us, we just used to take ’em down. They never used to write the material, we used to write them ourselves... Then we used to get out the Hoist once a month, that’s how we became established. We set up a network of delegates.



“The main thing was to get the Hoist round the jobs. Also we used to go and see a lot of blokes on the weekend. The BWIU used to give us the names of delegates who weren’t bad blokes, and we used to go round and see them on the weekend, have a yarn with them. We built up the organisation that way. It was just a lot of patient work”

## **1955 strike**

Following the defeat of the coal-miners strike in 1949, and with the right-wing on the offensive, there was a period of relative quiet on the industrial front. However as wages began to fall behind, there was a resurgence in militant feeling. Eight years after the national strike, and with the ground once again shifting beneath him, Thomas reluctantly opted for strike action once more.

Negotiations had been ongoing for five months with the employer body – the Master Builders Association (MBA) – with no result. With pressure building, Thomas declared there was a shortage of skilled builders labourers, and conditions in the industry were not attractive enough. The union wanted payment for public holidays, a wet weather allowance equal to eight hours pay a week, and weekly hiring instead of hourly hiring.

According to Thomas, weekly hiring would, “ensure that a good class of man entered the industry.” (!)

A general strike of builders labourers began on June 27th 1955. By the next day it was front-page news. From initially having been confined to MBA jobs, instead, “...all building projects in the State employing builders’ labourers were now involved.”

The Sydney Morning Herald carried an interesting report: “The strike... is seriously affecting Central Sydney’s first building boom for 15 years. The boom, now 12 months old, brought an abrupt end to the period during which Sydney’s skyline scarcely altered. Many of the city’s taller buildings were erected during the 1930s, but World War II stopped this activity in 1939. And because of material and labour shortages, there was scarcely any city building for the best part of a decade after the war.”

“White painted timber hoardings may be seen along the pavement of almost every street, and tubular steel scaffolding etches its bleak patterns on the skyline.

“Exploding gelignite, blasting out sandstone foundations, shakes the tiles loose from walls in an adjoining building; the roar of pneumatic drills and the persistent drumming of riveting disturbs the calm of offices.

“Private enterprise is building in the commercial heart of Sydney – from Hunter to Market Street, and from George to Elizabeth... an area once considered to be in ‘economic decline’.

“New materials and techniques have appeared in the present boom. Architects are making far more use of aluminium facades, and builders are using new methods of steel frame construction.

“The rigid framework of the Commonwealth Bank building is not riveted, it is connected by a method of high tensile bolting with a torque spanner... The rigid framework, in the opinion of the architects, would be better able to resist the blast of an atomic explosion.

“‘You see very little-timber scaffolding today,’ says the official of the Department of Labour and Industry, whose task it is to inspect building scaffolds for safety. ‘Pre-war, there was very little else.’”

The strike once again lasted four days. The settlement terms were: Public holiday pay, a weekly wet weather allowance and weekly instead of hourly hiring.

Writing about the strike some years later Rank and Filer Kevin Gledhill described the drawn out Arbitration proceedings that led up to it “The result was nothing for the majority of builders labourers and a FARTHING an hour increase for high grade men.

“This angered us builders labourers so much that we defied the Arbitration Court and went on strike, refusing to work until the Master Builders had granted a wage increase.

“Thousands of builders labourers met at Leichhardt Stadium to hear how the strike was progressing. Then Thomas betrayed us into accepting a gentleman’s agreement with the ‘gentlemen’ Master Builders. There was no written agreement and the builder capitalists refused to pay it a few years later on.”

## **Sydney strike wave**

The builders labourers’ strike was a sign of the times. Post-war trade unionism reached its peak in 1955-6 when 61 per cent of all workers were organised.

At the same time, quarterly wage indexation (where wages were automatically adjusted for inflation every three months) had been abandoned by the Arbitration Commission in 1953. As a result there had been a reduction of about three per cent in the real value of the basic wage.

Tradesmen had been able to maintain living standards through increased payments in their “margins” – payments for skill. But for the labourer this option simply wasn’t open. An editorial in the Sydney Morning Herald the following month declared, “...it must be conceded at once that the conditions of the lowest wage earners is a social consideration of the very first importance.”

As an indication of the prevailing mood, just a week or so later Sydney was engulfed in a strike-wave, which union officials were reported as saying was, “the worst in the history of the Trades Hall.” Bus workers, gas workers, sanitary carters, meat workers, naval dockyard workers, printers and journalists were all on strike, with pay being the major issue. Indeed, the capitalist newspapers – The Sydney Morning Herald, The Daily Telegraph, The Daily Mirror and The Sun, were forced to band together and bring out a joint paper between them, because all their workers were on strike!

“Most of the ...outbreaks have been unofficial, and have been notable for the ineffectiveness of the unions concerned in dealing with their members...

“There is no possible question of the men having been driven to it by intolerable conditions. This is a time of exceptional prosperity...the wage-earner...is enjoying standards of living unhoped for before the war.” (Herald, Telegraph, Sun, Mirror 12.7.55)

Another aspect to the situation that befuddled the employers was the fact that the Communists, the most prominent advocates of strike action, had lost considerable influence in the unions in the early 1950s.

Following the defeat of the 1949 coal-miners strike, and with the onset of the Cold War, they had been ousted in one union after another by the right-wing Industrial Groups, or Groupers as they became known.

This reality produced a temporary but curious twist in the situation. As historian Ian Turner put it, “The Communists had, after 1950, abandoned all-out industrial war, and Group-led unions, concerned to establish their industrial legitimacy, were now just as likely to be involved in more limited industrial actions as were Communist-led unions.”

## Building a base

Meanwhile the Rank and File Committee in the BLF was gathering support. As Joe Ferguson put it, “Basically we really became established in 1956 when the big job started in St Mary’s.”

(This was a huge munitions factory being built in Sydney’s west, consisting of fifty or so separate structures and employing some 4,000 workers.)

“That was a big job. There was a thousand builders labourers on it. There would have been about 20 builders labourers delegates on the job, we had about 15 of them supporting the Rank and File.

“Blokes that had problems, they could always come to the Rank and File Committee and raise their problems there, and we started to support one another...”

“Thomas started to worry around 1956/57.”

But it wasn’t just St Mary’s. The Rank and File were gathering support right across Sydney. Don McHugh describes his experience: “I was working on a big job in Parramatta, David Jones’s (the shopping store) I think it was, on the Parramatta river. And we used to go and collect finance there. We used to run raffles from that job, and we used to run raffles on all the surrounding jobs.

“The MLC building started off over in North Sydney. (It was reported as being the biggest building in the southern hemisphere at the time.) So at the MLC we got support from the wharfies, the seamen and all these that were ex-building workers (who’d) come back in again. So the whole tide changed, the numbers doubled.

“So then when they got to a certain stage Thomas had to go to Newtown and get these blokes that had the white long dustcoats and the hats on them. And come in and say, ‘Fucking say anything and we’ll fix you.’ And they used to open up their coats and show you the butt of their revolvers at the meetings.”

And Rank and File secretary, Harry Connell: ‘The Quay was a pretty focal centre for a whole number of builders’ labourers. I think the AMP was one of the earliest jobs where a real organisation started to be built on the job. The result of this and the goings-on within the union, Thomas with his stooges at the meetings trying to hold back a Rank and File and attempting to victimise delegates brought the blokes at the Quay especially together.

“We met in hotels and talked about the question of developing the Rank and File against the gangster-like leader which then existed as the secretary of the Builders’ Labourers union.

“In this period a number of bashings took place at the meeting by Thomas’s stooges. He would give a quid or a few beers or both to some of the would-be heavies in town to stop the Rank and Filers as they were going to meetings and asking questions about the treasury, the funds and things like that.”

Joe Ferguson gives an overview. “We built up from 2 or 3 people, we built up to the stage that even during the bashings we had 50 per cent of the people there. We built up to the stage where we used to control the branch meetings, but that took a long while to establish. The bashings used to drive people away but at the same time, when an issue arose (on a particular job) we’d get half the job to come to a meeting. But it used to drop off... it ebbed and flowed.”

## Changing times

Some new faces appeared on the scene. Stan Winter came up with the Utah company from Victoria to work on the St Mary’s job. A right-winger, he’d initially been appointed by Thomas as senior delegate on the job. Another new face who turned up on the St Mary’s job

was a young Queenslander who'd originally come down to Sydney to play rugby league for Parramatta and ended up joining the Communist Party – Jack Munday.

On the suggestion of the Party, Munday obtained work as a builders labourer. In 1956, aged 24, he got a job at the Shell Oil Refinery project at Granville, where he became chairman of the shop stewards on the site.

He describes the Rank and File group as it was when he joined. “The intellectual person in the Builders Labourers in my opinion was Joe Ferguson, the best orator was Harry Connell who was the secretary of the Rank and File, and it consisted of about 8 or 10 people at that stage.”

In his book *Green Bans And Beyond*, Munday described the situation as he found it in the industry.

“Conditions, as they were understood in the majority of work places, did not exist. You would come on the job and you were lucky if you found a nail to hang your clothes on. There would be one tap outside the dressing shed, practically no soap, and the first fight was to get hot water. There were no tables and chairs to sit on in the breaks. The toilets would be old pans, often in a filthy condition. The sheds were filled with cement. Nobody was detailed to look after hygiene or other amenities. If workers raised their voices on behalf of these basic decencies, they would often be sacked that same day.

The union resembled some of the worst of its American counterparts. The leaders had black lists of those who opposed them. There were bashings of militant workers and there was collusion with some employers.”

But Thomas's days at the helm were now numbered. Despite the ‘assistance’ of individuals from the Jimmy-Sharman Boxing shows, and the barrow-boys of Newtown, a union leadership based on neglect of its own membership must inevitably run into trouble – no matter how violent its tactics against opponents.

As Joe Ferguson described Thomas's tactical approach, “That was only successful for a while.” In early 1957 Thomas was reported as being ill in hospital. He had taken 6 months leave of absence from the union but was never to return – apparently he later resurfaced as an employers' Industrial Officer.

The machine was crumbling.

## **Days of hope**

The rules of the union had been changed. Annual elections had been replaced by elections every 3 years. However Thomas had thrown it in half way through a term. But even in a union as right-wing as the BLF, meetings of the membership had real power in those days. Rather than just appointing successors as is the case now, if vacancies arose they were filled by elections at the monthly branch meetings. A ballot was held for temporary secretary for the next 18 months.

Organiser ‘Banjo’ Patterson and the new but ambitious Stan Winter stood for the position, with Patterson winning by roughly a 3 to 1 majority. A former commando from the Second World War, Patterson was well regarded throughout the industry. As Joe Ferguson describes him, “not a bad bloke, a knockabout bloke, used to be a thug for Thomas at the branch meetings early in the piece. But he was just an average bloke y'know, he had a bit of respect for the workers. It was also because of the action of the rank and file. The blokes on the jobs were starting to become more militant and Banjo either had to go along with it or oppose it. And Banjo started to go along with it.”

Then much to everyone's surprise. Winter took legal action challenging the ballot. Precisely where Winter was coming from did not become clear until a little further down the track.

For their part, the Rank and File had clearly gotten into a position of some strength and influence in the union by this stage. Indicative of the change was the fact that a Communist, Bert McGill, had become an organiser in the union in March along with Terry Foster, also considered a left-winger. Rank and File Harry Connell and Morrie Lynch (who'd rolled Winter to become senior rep. at St Mary's), were also elected delegates to the building industry unions umbrella body, the Building Trades Group.

As Jack Munday described it, "There was a breath of fresh air and new hope."

Indicative of the change that was occurring was the convening in May 1957 of a building industry delegates meeting, the first of its kind in Sydney. For the first time job delegates representing builders labourers, carpenters, bricklayers, painters, plasterers and plumbers came together.

A safety campaign was launched in the Sydney Metropolitan area where three building workers had been killed in the previous month. The union journal reported that, "Forty jobs were inspected during the month by officials of the various unions—working together. On all the jobs inspected breaches of the Act were found. On some big jobs every provision of the Act was found to be ignored."

The MBA were clearly annoyed at the new attitude of the BLF and as 'punishment' cancelled the "gentleman's agreement" that had been made with Thomas after the 1955 strike. In response a campaign of industrial action was launched by the BLF, linking up with the other building unions who were in pursuit of wage rises. A combined building unions mass meeting was held at Sydney Stadium. Such a thing would have been unheard of in Thomas's day.

The union was threatened with legal action by the employers -the hated Penal Clauses. The employer's propaganda machine was cranked up as well. The union journal in late 1957 reporting, "...the employers called us 'industrial bushrangers' and 'Anarchists'. They raised the 'Communist' bogey, but like some public figures, they found that people are tired of that one."

But the employer's voice was finding an echo within the union as well. Whilst the Left had made gains, the Right were still far from vanquished. The hierarchy of the union contained many remnants of the not-too-distant past.

The tensions were building. In November 1957, referring to the recent wage campaign, Banjo Patterson wrote, "It will be seen that the actions of our members on many projects as far as Lismore in the North, Lithgow and Orange in the West, and Queenbeyan in the South, and a general militant approach to this problem, have been successful in causing the employers and the courts to respond with justice to our claims...When the Master Builders revoked the Agreement, it was said by the unprogressive members of our union that your officers were leading the NSW branch to industrial destruction, but now that statement has blown up in their faces."

In that same month the Right unsuccessfully attempted to have Banjo Patterson, Bert McGill and Terry Foster dismissed. But Patterson and the others were well supported, Patterson writing in the journal, "There has been an upsurge of young militant trade unionists in our Federation that will benefit the whole trade union movement." He probably had no idea how prophetic those words were to be.

Jack Munday describes the activities of the Rank and File at the time: "Harry Connell, Bert McGill and Doug Bayley took me under their wing. Harry gave me unexpected and unwanted

promotion when he talked me into taking his job as secretary of the Rank and File Committee. He and I travelled round the countryside while others concentrated on the city. A feeling of confidence was arising in the union. Job organisation was on the move, demands for higher wages were being formulated, and hundreds of people were attending union meetings.”

And in an interesting foretaste of things to come, the following story appeared on the back page of the Builders Labourers’ Journal of December 1957 . “About 30 members of the Builders Labourers and other unions of the NSW Building Trades Group answered the summons of a woman resident of St. Kilda Flats, East Sydney, and chased off a party of about a dozen who had started to demolish the building on November 22.

“It was stated that the workers were not members of any building union, but were staff hands, car cleaners and others acting under orders from the firm.

“The men, who had been working on Tarjan’s carpark job nearby, were incensed at this destruction of habitable dwellings to erect another carpark by Auto Auctions.”

### **Missing money**

In May 1958 it came to light that from 1947 on, auditors of the union’s finances had reported financial irregularities to the union’s president – on no less than eight occasions! Rumours had long been circulating in the industry. It transpired that around 8,700 pounds was missing from the union’s funds, a lot of money in 1958. However, it was decided not to pursue Thomas over the matter. Some believed that there wasn’t enough proof that he’d taken the money. Furthermore it was felt, even by some in the Rank and File, that with construction being a knockabout sort of industry, there was a danger of Thomas being made into some sort of martyr.

Meanwhile, the elections were looming, and the Right were very keen to talk about Communism. The old line was obviously still capable of having some effect.

As the election drew near, in June 1958, Patterson’s editorial in the journal was headed, “Weld Our Union – Give the Lie to Foul Slanderers”. It began, “The New South Wales Branch Executive is concerned with the rumours circulating that the Branch is under Communist domination, and that after the next election the Communists will be in full control.”

Generally though the mood amongst the Rank and Filers was pretty confident. As Joe Ferguson put it, “We had a core of about 15 or 20 people who used to come all the time, blokes like Morrie Lynch, blokes like Don McHugh. Y’know it wasn’t just restricted to Communist Party members. There was a lot of members of the ALP. It was a broad thing to which anyone could come along, voice their ideas. Some of them had no politics but they seen the need to have a decent union for builders labourers.”

They had built their base to the point where they now felt confident in standing for senior positions. Harry Connell, who had been elected to the union executive earlier in the year, was standing for vice president and another Rank and Filer, Doug Bailey was standing for treasurer.

Ferguson explains: “We decided when we stood in 1958 to support Banjo as secretary of the union. Basically he was doing the job... You’ve got to unite with...the best element.” The general feeling was that the Patterson/Rank and File ticket would walk the election. But it was not to be.

Union elections in those days were conducted by the union itself. Therefore the position of returning officer was enormously important – to either make sure a ballot was clean, or make

sure it wasn't. The right-wing rolled up the numbers to a branch meeting and got their man, an SP bookie, elected as returning officer.

In October the result of the ballot was declared – the right-wing had won by a 2-1 majority. As Ferguson describes it: “We were stuck with two things. They rigged the ballot, we could prove they rigged the ballot, but we adopted the principle at the time (that) to oppose the ballot meant that you'd have a court-controlled ballot. And because the Communist Party didn't agree with court-controlled ballots at that time we never entered a challenge to the election. We decided to carry on and build the Rank and File...”

The Daily Telegraph carried news of a report presented to the November 1958 branch meeting, straight after the election which, “...alleged that a third of the ballot papers in the elections...had been posted back in the last seven days of the ballot.

“According to the report:  
 \* Most of the returned ballot papers had been posted in bulk at one post office.  
 \* A hundred and sixty envelopes containing ballot papers had been posted from Sydney GPO. These carried the postmark ‘September 29 – 4.15 a.m.’  
 \* A hundred and sixty envelopes containing ballot papers had been posted from Wollongong at 6 p.m. on September 30.

“Of one group of 100 ballot papers, all went to one candidate. The papers were all bulk postage – 45 from one post office and the rest in batches containing a dozen or so each.

“A large number of ballot papers had been folded in a certain manner. Scrutineers got so used to this that they could predict the votes before they were opened and counted.

“After hearing this report the meeting declared the ballot improperly conducted. The officers...had left the meeting by the time this resolution was carried.”

With the new leadership contemptuously walking out of the meeting, the pattern of the next few years was set right from the beginning of their time in office.

In another blow to the Left, Terry Foster had “ratted” – swapped sides, made a deal with the right-wing and a year later become Federal secretary of the union.

Banjo Patterson, demoralised, went back to work in the industry and played no further part in the union. As Jack Munday describes it, “When he got beaten in the election he was shocked. He couldn't believe it when I told him the other bloke had won, his mouth dropped open. And he became embittered and dropped out of the struggle and became a foreman or something for one of the big builders, Civil and Civic.”

After years of work it seemed they were now back to square one almost.

## **Down the hill again...**

The new secretary was an old official from the Thomas era – Bill Bodkin. As Don McHugh describes him, “...he was a racehorse owner and the ex-mayor of Newtown. Never worked in the building industry in his life and he was the secretary!”

He was however a man with a long connection to the labour movement. His father had been a foundation member of the ALP as well as the Railway Workers and General Labourers Union. But despite the family pedigree, Bodkin was a woeful union official.

The real power in the union now lay with executive member Jack Wishart, who also had an interesting background. A former solicitor, he had been struck off after serving two and a half years in jail for fraud. Wishart had been a prominent Trotskyist in the late 1930s through to the mid 1940s. Then, like his former comrades Laurie Short and Diamond Jim McClelland amongst others, did a political somersault and joined the other side.

He had disappeared off the political scene in the late 1940s only to reappear as a right-winger, a decade later.

According to a well-known Sydney judge who knew him in the 1940s he was, "...educated, cultivated, hands unsullied by a single day of manual labour."

According to Joe Ferguson: "He played a big part during the 1958 election. They rigged the ballot. Jack Wishart made the statement, 'If I'd known it was that simple I'd have made myself secretary!' He had a lot of connections with the criminal element in New South Wales. He never worked on a building site. He used to work out of the office. After 1958...he became very powerful in the union."

If anything the union became worse than it had been during the Thomas period. This was reflected in the union journal which had page after page devoted to racing, trotting, greyhounds, football, cricket, darts...etc., a reasonable sports paper, but its' coverage of the building industry was hopeless.

The most striking feature of the new leadership was their utter laziness. Increasingly, the men on the jobs were being left to their own devices.

Don McHugh describes the situation under Bodkin: "We had a big blue out on this job at David Jones at Parramatta. Bodkin come out and he says, 'I've spoke to these people', Eastments it was doing the contract, and he says, 'Everything's fixed up'. 'In fact', he says, 'I've got it in writing,' wagging the paper out in front of him. 'You don't have anything to worry about...you should go back to work.'

"So some bloke asked him a question anyway, that he got a bit angry about. So when he got angry he says, 'I'm not stopping here any longer talking to you people. That's it. Go back to work.' And he walked off and threw the paper on the ground. So I picked up the paper and looked at – there was fuck-all on it, just a bit of paper! This is the agreement we were supposed to have."

As the Bodkin regime took the reins there was an enormous feeling of frustration and disappointment amongst builders labourers, and moves to rectify the situation in different ways.

## **A breakaway union**

The riggers and scaffolders, because they often worked on shut-downs in the metal industry were often also members of the Ironworkers Union as well as the BLF. The Ironworkers had previously been a left-wing union but had been captured by the Groupers in the early 1950s. As was alluded to earlier, the Right were not able to instantly wipe out rank and file militancy in the unions they took over – that took time. But they had certainly got a long way by the late '50s.

Therefore the riggers and scaffolders, a notably militant section of the construction industry were faced with joining two trade unions – both of which were felt to be 'weak as piss'...so they decided to start their own organisation.

Thus in February 1959 a meeting of riggers and scaffolders in the Trades Hall decided to form a breakaway union. According to the Right it was all a Communist plot. The Ironworkers' Union journal Labor News had six months earlier declared that, "Loud-mouthed Communists on the Wangi powerhouse job, Newcastle, are peddling a lying story...these characters are trying to kid riggers that they can form a breakaway union from the Ironworkers', Australian Workers' and Builders Labourers Unions – the three leading anti-Communist unions in NSW..."



If this were true then there must have been divided opinions in the Communist Party over the question. Indeed the Builders Labourers Journal reported Joe Ferguson moving a motion at a BLF riggers and scaffolders meeting to oppose any attempt to set up the breakaway.

As he remembers the question: “We couldn’t see any advantage in splitting the militant section away.”

But a lot of riggers and scaffolders disagreed. The new union was registered in June 1959. It had almost 500 members by the time its registration was cancelled some two years later. This followed a court case where a number of unions, including the BLF, successfully argued they already covered riggers, scaffolders and dogmen.

From that point the union faded away. However when you consider that some figures claim the BLF membership at the time was only 2,500, that’s a pretty sizeable proportion. The main struggle however, despite the demoralisation, continued to be waged inside the union.

### **The individual side**

Jack Munday describes the personal effects of the situation: “On the election of the Bodkin group things slid back to what they had been before.

“After working at the Shell construction, I had taken jobs on many small sites – extensions to factories, hospitals, small schools, even cottage work. I became a jack of all trades. On the small sites I couldn’t take much time for rank and file union work; on the bigger jobs this was easier.

“...the union leadership did not want people like me in the industry. We had to be pretty resilient to last. There were all sorts of ways to get rid of us, besides outright sacking. We might get the most arduous or the least congenial work round. To organise at all, we had to be good workers, so as to give the employers no pretext to fall in with the union leadership. We had to get to work on the dot. We had to organise our fellow workers quickly. If we didn’t, we would be on the street again, sacked.

“They were trying times, and there were moments when we wondered whether it was all worth while. But we were young and determined, and the rank and file movement was growing. The meetings of the branch were turbulent. The leadership saw it couldn’t win from within. They used to get people from outside the trade, give them union cards and get them to vote their way at the meetings.

“...I survived because I took jobs at small sites, and those were too scattered for the organisers to visit them all and pick off the militants. One year I had as many as seventeen jobs; as soon as I started work one of the organisers would arrive and point me out to the boss.”

### **Trouble in the Right**

But so bad was the situation becoming that even within the right-wing in the BLF big splits had opened up. Winter had stood on his own as a candidate for one of the organiser’s positions in the election. Then following the election, he challenged the ballot, unsuccessfully in court.

But the split in the Right may have had far wider roots than just the situation inside the union. In the early 1950s the labor movement in Australia was gripped in internal warfare, culminating in the split in the Labor Party in 1954/55.

The Communists had built a base in the unions from the mid 1930s. By 1945, whilst they didn’t have the majority of delegates, they were the dominant influence at the ACTU Congress. As a counterweight to this the ALP decided to set up its own union organisations – the Industrial Groups – in the late 1940s. Contrary to popular understanding, the Groups did

not start out as the right-wing juggernauts they became. Indeed among their early policies were “equal pay for the sexes, abolition of wage-pegging regulations, the opening of the books of big-business, and the nationalisation of industry under worker’s control.”

However as the Cold War gathered pace, the Groups increasingly came under the domination of Bob Santamaria’s secret organisation, the Movement – a right-wing Catholic body, modelled ironically enough on their idea of Communist union methods.

Initially non-Communist union leaders were happy to work with them to ‘fight the Commos’. But as time went by even right-wing union leaders and Labor Party people came under attack from the increasingly rabid Groupers. The Labor Party was ripped apart in the mid 50s, many of the Right split off to form the DLP (except in NSW) and the Groups were effectively banned. But the battle itself was so bitter, that amongst some participants, the bitterness lasts to this day.

One incident of this battle had been over who would be on the ALP’s Senate ticket. Bodkin had lost his spot. These events were still very fresh in everyone’s mind.

By March 1959, only months after the election, the Daily Telegraph was reporting that, “Rival factions have organised ‘strong-arm’ groups for tonight’s meeting of the Australian Builder’s Labourers Federation at Trades Hall.” (According to the report, both these were right-wing factions.)

“One group has been formed to eject Mr Stan Winter from the meeting... The other group has been organised to keep Mr Winter in the meeting – by physical force if necessary.

“The Builder’s Labourers union is probably the most turbulent to use the Trades Hall for meetings. The Trades Hall managers once billed the union for eighty four pounds for broken chairs, some smashed over skulls.

“The union’s last four meetings have ended with the officials declaring the proceedings disorderly and walking out...

“Mr Winter and his supporters have claimed for months that the union is dying. They claim that the membership has fallen from 6,000 to some 2,400 financial members.”

However Joe Ferguson puts a different angle on things: “We made one mistake. We wouldn’t talk to the newspapers at that time—the industrial reporter from the Telegraph, we had no time for him. We were very naive... Winter went and grabbed all the glory.”

Right from the outset it seems, the Bodkin leadership were in trouble. As Joe Ferguson put it, despite ‘winning’ the ballot, “They never had much of an organisation... they still never controlled the jobs, the big jobs. Basically we built up a network... It came to a position where we started to run the jobs with the workers on the job, not the union.”

And Jack Mundey believes the Bodkin victory, “...was a blessing in disguise. Had the Rank and File ticket won, from the Communist point of view and during the Cold War position at the time, I think there would have been a tendency by Patterson to push us off. The anti-Communist side would have come out and we would have had a hard battle. What it was, the other bastard was so bad it united the lot. At the time you didn’t think it was a good thing, but looking back and seeing the development that went on later on, it allowed us all that experience in organising for those 3 years.”

### **Up to the sky**

The advent of large-scale building projects was extremely important in the development of the Rank and File. Large suburban shopping centres, such as at Seven Hills, were being established for the first time. But of more significance were the multi-storey buildings, particularly those around Circular Quay and in North Sydney.

As Munday describes the Rank and File's development, "It built up rather rapidly in the late 50s and early 60s mainly because of the building boom. The height of buildings was 150 feet in 1959. In 1959/60 that height limit was lifted and the sky became the limit."

What this meant was a large number of workers being concentrated together. This made reaching those workers, and organising amongst them, a lot easier than on smaller, dispersed building sites.

The Rank and File had rebuilt to the stage where they were able, for periods, to have their own full-time organisers, paid for out of Rank and File funds.

Increasingly the union leadership were reduced to relying on heavies and a complete disregard of the union rules to maintain their hold. In early 1960 the Rank and File were able to get Bert McGill re-elected as an organiser at a branch meeting. Straight after the meeting the executive met and sacked him.

### **Beginning of the end**

The following month there was a big turn-out at the meeting. As Rank and Filer Don McPhee describes it, "Mick brought about 20 bodgies, that is long-hairs, down from his job and was talking very militant."

"Mick" was in fact Mick McNamara, a 20 year old dogman from Pymont, who'd also been a rock and roll singer at the Sussex Hotel on Friday and Saturday nights. (He played a guitar made for him by his father, did Elvis impressions as part of his act, and actually got paid for it.)

But back to the point, Jack Munday takes up the story: "A group of workers came along from a particular job, unknown to the Rank and File Committee and put up an organiser. We put up Bert McGill and they put up Mick McNamara. Bert McGill beat Mick McNamara and then that night they sacked Bert McGill. Next month, as a tactic, we put up both of them as organisers.

"This group came along and we had a discussion with them when they sacked McGill... Some of those people joined the Rank and File too. And one of them, Jack Williamson, Mick's friend who was the delegate on the job – Mick wasn't even the delegate – he later became the vice-president of the union."

The Bodkin leadership refused to recognise the two new organisers, but they were eventually forced to by a court order. The Rank and File was clearly on the march again.

The leadership made life as difficult as possible for the two organisers, moving them around. In McGill's case this was done at least once as a result of a complaint from the employers organisation, the MBA, to the union leadership about McGill's "attitude".

As Opera House delegate Eddie Gordon put it in the film *Rocking The Foundations*: "The thin end of the wedge was we got a couple of organisers. Positions for organisers were vacant and we all went down there and we steamrollered them in, you know. So we had two on the inside and from then on we used to get a lot of information. The two organisers we put in, one was a Labor Party bloke, the other was Communist Party – we drew forces from the two of them and we built up this Rank and File. And eventually we had a great number of men to go to the meetings."

Indeed the branch meetings now were standing room only affairs with never less than 200 workers in attendance. However, the meetings themselves had descended into farce. Bodkin was inevitably drunk and irrespective of the numbers in attendance, Sheean, the chairman, would rule that his supporters had won the vote whenever one was taken. When a division was called for, the meeting would dissolve into uproar and the whole meeting would be over in 15 minutes.

Jack Munday continues: “Sheean the president, and Bodkin, the secretary, would rule it out of order and walk from the meeting. And by this time we were getting hundreds of people to the meetings. Say big power stations north and south they’d bring busloads up. And ourselves, I was living in Guildford, McHugh – Blacktown, Joe Ferguson – Liverpool... And from our own areas we were bringing people all the way in for 8 o’clock meetings, and after a number of these disruptions a lot of the workers ‘d say, ‘Ay what’s the bloody good of going in there. Gotta go all the way in, gotta hang around till 8 o’clock’...(of course the pubs closed at 6)...and then they just stop the meeting.’

“So we were having difficulty holding our own members... So we hit upon the idea of stopping them going out of the meetings, myself and Phil Markwell. It wasn’t actually a decision, it was a spontaneous thing, we were young and pretty fit at the time. We picked them up as they came down the aisle, the main hall of Trades Hall, carried them and sat them back in the chairs, and said ‘You stay there till 10 o’clock.’

“With that a bit of a fracas broke out...”

### **Trades Hall erupts**

The union was once again on the front page. According to the Sydney Morning Herald: “Five carloads of police were called to the Sydney Trades Hall last night to break up a stormy meeting of the Builders’ Labourers Union.

“The meeting lasted about two hours and was attended by 200 members, but no business was transacted because the meeting was in uproar from the beginning.

“The chairman, Mr W Sheean, said after the meeting that some members would be expelled from the union because of their conduct.

“Union officials had called the meeting to endorse the selection of New South Wales delegates to the Federal Council which will meet later this year.

“The uproar began when Mr Sheean refused to accept a point of order that the meeting was unconstitutional and irregular.

“The Federal secretary, Mr T Foster, who was present by invitation, began to speak but could not make himself heard above the noise.

Other executive members were given a similar reception by men in the body of the hall.

“Mr Sheean, who was howled down, finally closed the meeting.

“Mr Sheean then tried to leave the building, but men blocked the doorway and he was forced back on to the platform.

“‘You will not leave the hall until you hold a division,’ a man shouted.

“Some young members charged the platform and pushed Mr Sheean into the chair.

“Others in the audience stormed onto the platform and a fight between officials and members developed.

“Blows were swung wildly and many punches exchanged.

“Two or three of the contestants fell from the platform into the arms of their supporters.

“Members hurled abuse at one another and there was pandemonium when uniformed and plainclothes police entered the hall.”

As Jack Munday records it: “The 21 Division of the NSW Police Force arrived. I got on the platform and addressed them: ‘You people are unionists too. The rules of the union are clear. We are here to ensure they are carried out. The officials want to prevent this by walking out.’

“The police sat down at the bottom of the platform steps. The officials could not leave before the meeting ended at ten. It proved to be the turning point which led to the defeat of the

president and the secretary. The incident proved to the workers that they had the power to effect a change.

“The next day we organised a stoppage. A thousand workers marched through Sydney towards the old Trades Hall in Goulburn Street. As we rounded the corner from George Street into Goulburn Street, the president and the secretary of the Builders Labourers emerged from the General Bourke Hotel. They moved in front of us briskly, pursued by an angry procession. At the Trades Hall we held a meeting which overflowed into the street, and formally commenced a campaign for the defeat of the leaders and their henchmen.”

With the wind changing, Foster had swung back over to the Left a little. Sheean had him charged with assault following the Trades Hall meeting. The charge was dismissed. Meanwhile a far more significant round of court battles concerning the union was also taking place.

The Bodkin leadership’s complete disregard for abiding by the rules of the union had caught up with them. A resulting court case brought by a right-winger the previous September, brought into the spotlight the shambles the union had become.

In summing up, the presiding judge declared, “This trade union is so much moribund, if not already defunct, and its affairs have become so chaotic...the question arises whether the union should be allowed to retain its registration as an industrial union.”

This was reported in the Daily Mirror whereupon Wishart whose name had been mentioned in the article, promptly sued the paper for libel. On a different matter Wishart summonsed Foster to court over the union rules. And on it went. From the late 1950’s until the mid 1960s a court-room extravaganza unfolded from the battle within the union, with John Kerr, Lionel Murphy, Fred Patterson, Ted Hill and Neville Wran among the many lawyers involved.

The Santamaria paper News Weekly which had begun taking an increasing interest in the goings-on of the BLF, commented on the case between Foster and Wishart: “The case emphasises how chaotic the position in the NSW branch of the Federation has become. The situation is so bad that the union’s State registration is in jeopardy. Unless it is cleaned up, the Communist Party will undoubtedly take over.”

The same paper five months earlier had carried a report titled “Communist cells in Builders labourers”. It began, “So-called rank and file committees in Newcastle and Sydney could be regarded as Communist Cells,” the NSW State secretary of the Builders Labourers Federation, Mr W F Bodkin said last week. He said that such committees consisted of small groups of people who sought disruption in the union to achieve their own ends.” Despite divisions within the Right, they instinctively drew together to fight the Communists. However as 1961 unravelled, Bodkin and his crew found themselves increasingly politically isolated.

## **The Right on the rocks**

With elections due at the end of the year, the leadership duly called a meeting to elect a returning officer and two scrutineers. They then put an advert in the paper saying the meeting was cancelled. Then, they went ahead and had the meeting with only their own supporters in attendance, which obviously meant ‘their people’ would be elected as returning officer and scrutineers.

A legal inquiry was launched into the affair. It took three days and its result must have severely damaged what little remaining chance the leadership had of remaining in office. The judge found that NSW branch president W Sheean, and branch secretary W F Bodkin were “...thoroughly untrustworthy persons. I believe they were prepared to flout the views of

union members for their own purposes and in order to retain official positions and to assume dictatorial control of the affairs of the organisation.”

With the ‘legal basis’ of the branch itself revealed as being dubious, the judge effectively sacked eight officials of the union, including Bodkin, Sheean and Wishart and ordered the Commonwealth Industrial Registrar to take over the elections. The case was widely reported in daily press.

The situation had become a debacle for the right-wing. The leadership were so rotten, corrupt and inept, that the forces of reaction were now completely washing their hands of them. They had become openly concerned, evidenced by the increasing attention paid to the branch by Santamaria’s News Weekly.

It described the upcoming ballot as, “A vital election”, and declared, “The how-to-vote card which right wingers seem likely to back”, was “...one advocating a clean sweep of present officers”. This was Stan Winter’s ticket. (At some point, Winter had actually been appointed as an organiser by the Bodkin leadership, but he was then sacked at the next branch meeting.) Winter’s relationship with the Santamaria forces had up to now been not entirely clear. By the end of 1961 he was, to some degree at least, ‘their man’.

## Unity tickets

The legal profusion continued with an inquiry into irregularities initiated even before the opening of the ballot. It was pointed out during the proceedings that there had been 9 major court cases on similar disputes in the union in the past 4 years.

A hot issue in the 1950s and early 1960s were the ‘unity tickets’ – these were tickets in union elections where Communists and Labor Party members stood on the same team. As a result of Cold War pressure unity tickets were banned by the ALP in 1956, and at one point the Sunday Telegraph reported that, “The Pope has banned Australian Roman Catholics from voting for candidates who join with Communists in union unity tickets.” Banjo Patterson had in fact been expelled from the ALP in 1958 for standing on a unity ticket in the BLF elections.

According to Eddie Gordon: “...with the elections we put a joint ticket up actually. It was against Labor Party policy but there was a couple of Communists on the ticket, couple of ordinary blokes, just people that were worried about what was going on, just honest people who didn’t like the violence and all that. Anyhow we formed a pretty good coalition there and eventually we wiped them out. Got rid of them. Took ten years or so but.”

The election basically boiled down to a three-way contest between the Rank and File, a group around Terry Foster, and a group around Stan Winter. Bodkin and the incumbents stood a ticket also, but they had become so discredited there was very little chance they’d be returned.

Winter had a personal following, and there was of course the ideologically committed right-wing vote, but the big majority of builders labourers fell outside those two camps. In order, they felt, to maximise their chances of attracting this vote, the Rank and File did a deal with Foster’s group. There were still to be two separate tickets but there would be candidates who featured on both of them.

As a result, Vince Henneberry from Foster’s group and Mick McNamara were chosen to stand for president and secretary on the Rank and File ticket. Exactly where Mick McNamara stood in all of this is a matter of some disagreement – some say he was part of Foster’s group, others that he was with the Rank and File.

News Weekly had reported some months previous that, “...the Communist Party is hopeful of having one of its members, Mr Munday, elected as State secretary.” And Munday was

indeed by this stage considered the leading figure of the Rank and File. However, with some disagreement being registered, it was felt that Munday being a Communist would lessen their chances of victory.

For his part Foster was playing up the 'Communist threat' for all it was worth, including going to the press.

Meredith Burgmann describes the campaign: "With a 'broad left' Rank and File team chosen, the election campaign started in earnest. It soon became obvious that the Bodkin leadership was quite at a loss in the credit squeeze conditions of 1961. Although the squeeze did not hit the Sydney building industry as badly as it did other cities (because of its size), it created unstable conditions that the old guard was unable to deal with by their usual strategies. They were not getting around the job sites. (Rank and Filer) Don Crotty believes they were probably at a disadvantage because none of them had ever worked on multi-storey buildings whereas the majority of the Rank and Filers had.

"Intimidation no longer worked as effectively as it had. Workers began actively opposing the Bodkin team at job meetings. Bob Pringle relates: 'I was on a building site when Harry Connell came and spoke about the election. I always remember Harry... there he was on his Pat Malone (alone)...a little bloke in shorts and a briefcase. He was confronted by these two guys – big heavy types – probably Bodkin and Foster. All the blokes were on Harry's side.'"

## Rolling the Right

At the end of November the result was announced. According to News Weekly: "The four main tickets in the BLF election drew block votes roughly as follows: T Foster's 379, W F Bodkin's 187, S A Winter's 322, and the Communist's 396."

Later figures gave McNamara 720 votes and Bodkin 187. After 10 years work the Rank and File had won power in the union, capturing 17 of the 21 positions up for election.

Whilst there was great elation at their victory, the fact was that they were inheriting the wreckage of an organisation. It was thousands of pounds in debt, the office staff all quit when the Rank and File took office, and they were a pretty inexperienced crew to be leading a union.

Mick McNamara had been elected organiser on his 21st birthday in April 1960. 19 months later he was elected secretary of the union – the youngest union secretary in Australian history.

He describes the situation: "I found the affairs of the union in bad shape, and it was pretty hard to hold a rank-and-file meeting without brawls breaking out. I'll never forget the first time I stood up in front of one of those meetings and tried to talk commonsense to the members. I was terribly nervous and stuttered for some minutes. Then, suddenly, I was cool and calm and the men began to listen to me. I experienced an enormous sense of relief. I knew that despite my youth they were prepared to give me a go. That was all I wanted."

Though only 22, McNamara had already spent seven years in the industry, firstly on the pick and shovel and later as a dogman. He had already become a union delegate by the age of 16 .

## Broke

The first problem confronting the new leadership was that the union had only 9 pounds in the bank, and 15 thousand pounds worth of debts! In a marvellous testimony to their faith in the new leadership, many members paid in their union fees before they were actually due. The new officials however still went without wages for many weeks.

Major building construction was booming in most parts of the State. There were new city office blocks, power stations and vast housing projects being built.

Builders labourers in NSW were by now paid some 15 per cent less than BL's in Victoria. Following the union's first ever State delegates conference in February 1962, a campaign was launched for a 25 shilling per week wage increase. The BWIU had just successfully completed a campaign for the same amount. The Master Builders then granted the increase to the conservative carpenters union, the ASC&J so members wouldn't be attracted to the BWIU.

But they refused to pay the increase to the builders labourers. Jack Munday commented, "It is evident that the Master Builders fear the vigorous, militant change in our union and will do everything in their power to discredit the union."

### **The pressure begins**

The inevitable pressures of capitalist society on a left-wing union were being exerted from the outset. As always they were reflected within. Vince Henneberry, who'd been elected as president as part of the Left was teaming up with the Right. Foster too had blown back over to the Right again, and was rolled as Federal secretary by a young Victorian organiser, Norm Gallagher, another Communist Party member.

Foster, Henneberry, and their supporters now began to team up with Stan Winter and his supporters. The right-wing was becoming more and more unified.

At the same time, as a result of the election tickets, expulsions from the ALP took place. Terry Foster, who was an ALP member, had lain charges in the Party against Rank and Filers Dick Prendergast, Les Robinson, and Bob Davidson for association with Communists in the ballot.

The Labor Left were disgusted, their newspaper Socialist and Industrial Labor commenting: "Mr Foster had gone-on record on many occasions, signed statements by the union objecting to political interference in union ballots, now turned a somersault and himself took up the Grouper tactics of so-called 'unity tickets'."

Mick McNamara and Morrie Lynch were also cited by the Labor Party hierarchy.

### **Action on the job**

The Arbitration Commission too, was not pleased at the arrival of a union leadership that did not recognise its 'all-powerfulness', and that openly advocated direct industrial action.

In October 1962 the Commission imposed what amounted to wage cuts and a reduction of conditions on builders labourers. According to Mick McNamara it was, "...considered in trade union circles to be one of the worst awards brought down in post-war years".

In the new award, multi-storey allowances, fares and travelling allowances, and 'special rates' to cover such things as especially dirty work, were paid to all other building workers but denied to builders labourers.

A leaflet at the time pointed out that: "The accumulation of these losses means that many builders labourers are, in fact, receiving less than they got under the old award."

The new leadership decided to fight. The right-wing forces denounced them for not going to court, calling their approach, "...a typical Communist Party inspired policy of avoiding Courts at all costs."

Early the following year strikes were reported in the press. According to one report, "Master Builders Association industrial officer Mr L.R. Ball told Mr Webb (an Arbitration Commissioner) that 80 labourers on the project walked off the job at 1.30 pm on Monday in the middle of a concrete pour."

A year earlier Ball had complained that he had "helped" the previous BLF leadership "in many ways" but that he was no longer prepared to "assist" labourers any longer if they took



industrial action to lift their wages. With wages only a little over 16 pounds a week, BL's were a little sceptical about the 'assistance' they'd been getting from the MBA. According to another press report, "There have been 39 disputes in the metropolitan area in the last seven days involving members of the Builders Labourers Federation."

"The campaign has been the finest in the history of our union in NSW. Over 150 jobs have taken differing form of action in the last six months...", Mick McNamara wrote in April 1963.

Health and safety was also a big issue. In the modern day building industry there are two dogmen to each crane; one on the ground who slings the load to be lifted, and directs the driver up with it, and one on the top who takes over and lands the load.

In the sixties there was only one dogman. They would have to ride the load from the ground up to whatever height the building may go up to – a spectacular but highly dangerous practice. In 1961 nine dogmen were killed, and the new leadership began a campaign for the abolition of "riding the hook". (This practice was banned in 1971 but was not completely eliminated until the early 1980s.)

There were not only the more glaring dangers of the construction industry to contend with, but things such as the cleanliness of protective gear. Things that may sound trivial but if left unattended could have tragic consequences.

In August 1962 it was reported, "Fred Stanbury was required to wear gum boots to perform his work on the extensions of the South Sydney Leagues Club. The wearing of these gum boots set up skin poisoning which, within a few days, had seriously affected his kidneys. He died after a few weeks illness."

Labourers demonstrated in Martin Place over the sacking of union delegates by American construction company Perini's. The demonstration had been marched to by builders labourers working on the two big Perini jobs under construction at the time – the State Office Block and the Redfern Mail Exchange. A strike following the sacking of State Office Block job delegate John McNamara led to the union, for the first time in its history being fined under the infamous penal clauses of the Arbitration Act.

On the Opera House site, two dogmen were sacked for 'failing to work enough overtime'. The union was once again fined 500 pounds under the penal clauses. Hoist called for, "...the project to be taken off Hornibrook and completed by the Government." (At this time it was not only Communist Party but also ACTU and ALP policy that Governmental bodies do their own building on a day labour basis.)

The union also became active in broader political issues such as the struggle for Aboriginal rights and for nuclear disarmament.

As far as the Rank and File Committee was concerned, its role altered significantly. From an oppositional grouping, it became an active base of support for the new leadership. However, the problem of maintaining the momentum arises. As Jack Munday describes it: "The contradiction which has plagued the Rank and File set in... why should workers go to yet another meeting when in fact they had expression for their views at branch meetings?"

The essential point though is that genuine leadership should not be afraid of the rank and file. As Munday put it, writing in the union journal some years later, "Regardless of how sincere and democratic a leadership may be, unless the delegates and active rank-and-file members are participating in the making of decisions, the life of the union cannot be as rich as it should be."

However it did seem that having deposed the Right from leadership of the union, they were having trouble maintaining attendance at the branch meetings as well.

“Haven’t seen the old stalwarts at the last few general meetings, Snowy Fraser, Sorrowful, Barney and Allen, to name just a few. Just because you have a sturdy and progressive leadership we would like to see your smiling faces once in a while.”, wrote executive member Jack Stephenson in October 1962.

By early the following year, with a wages campaign set in motion, there were over 180 in attendance. Also, for the first time it seems, posters were stuck on building site awnings and stickers produced to popularise the campaign.

Bye elections for vacant official positions were all now going to Rank and Filers – Arch Harding became president, Don McHugh beat Winter to become vice president, and younger Rank and Filers, Les Robinson and John McNamara were elected to the executive.

## The Groupers

Then in March 1964, a right-wing newsletter called *The Guardian*, aimed at BLF members suddenly appeared on building sites. The Groupers had clearly decided to try and properly organise this time. The following month another issue came out, and in July, a third. Hoist pointed out, “With the triennial elections only six months away, it is significant that a news sheet attacking the Union and the leadership has suddenly appeared on building jobs.”

The anti-Communist theme, standard fare of all Grouper publications, became ever more feverish with each successive edition of *The Guardian*. The third issue proclaimed, “Members cannot be blamed for assuming that the Union is now controlled by Reds, when they realise that a number of the officials admit that they are either members or supporters of the Communist Party.”

In the second issue of the newsletter Winter felt compelled to protest that, “The Guardian is not associated with any previous administrators of the union.” However Bodkin, having disappeared from the scene after his defeat in 1961, had reappeared at Winter group meetings in the run-up to the 1964 election. By the time of the ballot however, Bodkin ran on his own. The vast bulk of his group, people like ‘pugilist’ Billy Stanley, had defected to Winter.

With his faction in tatters, the brains behind the old Bodkin leadership, Jack Wishart, was increasingly operating as a loose cannon – not for the first time in his life either. (As a result of a silly speech in the Domain, Wishart had managed to get the Australian Trotskyists declared illegal during the Second World War – an act of stupidity that his former comrades were still shaking their heads about 50 years later.)

But for the Rank and File, now the chief component of the union’s leadership, it was approaching judgement day, and the question posed, what had they achieved?

Without doubt, the union had been transformed from one of the least active to one of the most active in the State. When the Rank and File team took office at the end of 1961 there were only 29 job delegates in NSW. By December 1963 there were over 130. In addition, delegates conferences were held, something unheard of in the days of the right-wing.

Arising from this it had been possible to launch a large-scale wages campaign resulting in increases in the basic rate between 10 and 18 per cent, along with increases in allowances such as wet and dirt money, both of which were doubled, and multi-storey money which was trebled. A paid picnic day was also won.

On the wider political front, the union had thrown its weight into the cause of Aboriginal rights. The State secretary of the Aboriginal Advancement League, Monty Maloney, was in fact a well known builders labourer. The union had also helped with the launch of a newspaper *The Aboriginal Worker*, with Ray Peckham, another aboriginal member of the union, being one of the founders.

Aside from the domestic issues of the day, the union also began to raise its' voice on international issues as well. Indeed the Right felt this was a good point for them to attack on, obviously calculating that narrow self-interest would strike a chord amongst builders labourers. The first issue of *The Guardian* declared there had been "too many campaigns", that had "nothing to do with the functions of the trade unions". These were said to include: "Ban the atom bomb, ban the H-bomb, hands off New Guinea, hands off Indonesia, hands off Cuba..." and so on.

## 1964 ballot

From having been a pretty obscure event 3 years earlier, the 1964 BLF ballot reverberated throughout the whole labour movement. In the movement generally, unity tickets were still a hot issue. There had been expulsions of BLF officials from the ALP. In another building industry union, the FEDFA, there had also been expulsions resulting from a unity ticket in their recent election. These included the president of the union.

As the Builders Labourers ballot approached, the press began to take a keen interest. The *Bulletin* magazine in mid-August 1964 wrote: "A number of Communists hold office in the union... Of seven paid organisers, J Munday... and B McGill are Communists. Two others, D McHugh and D Prendergast have been expelled from the ALP, McHugh for standing as a Communist in a municipal election and Prendergast for standing on a unity ticket. Winter and T Austin are ALP members and the seventh, C Smith, is non-party but generally supports a Left line. The Federation's president, A Harding is a well-known Communist.

"This grouping of officials poses a dilemma for McNamara. If he runs an ALP ticket he alienates the Communists and he is left without their support. If, on the other hand, he runs on a unity ticket, as expected, he will most certainly be charged; and the mood of the NSW Executive being what it is, his expulsion would be more than likely."

The press not unexpectedly, and with varying degrees of subtlety, backed Winter. They called his ticket "the ALP ticket". Despite him being a left-winger the press view of McNamara, when he'd first been elected was, generally speaking, pretty 'benevolent' – probably because he was so young, a novelty. By the end of 1964 however, the press benevolence to McNamara was over.

There were still splits amongst the Right within the union, but in essence it boiled down to a straight Left vs. Right encounter. As the *Bulletin* put it, "One odd aspect of this election is that opposition to Winter's ALP ticket... has brought about a united front of Moscow and Peking oriented Communists as well as of left-wing ALP members."

## Cracks within the Communists

Throughout the world the Communist movement had been torn apart. The governments of China and the Soviet Union, each representing a horribly deformed view of 'socialism', were now at each others throats. The collapse of Stalinism, whilst it took another quarter of a century to mature, was, historically speaking, well underway. Pro-Soviet and pro-Chinese cracks within the Australian Communist movement were beginning to open up. But for the present, the cracks had not grown too wide.

In September the *Australian* pointed out that, "At present, communists hold 10 of the 21 positions in the union..."

Right on the eve of the ballot McNamara, and union treasurer Morrie Lynch, both Labor Party members, had unity ticket charges laid against them by one of Winter's men. To get around the unity ticket problem, the ALP members of the Rank and File issued a fake how-to-vote ticket where none of the Communist Rank and Filers were listed. At the same time,

there was a genuine Rank and File how-to-vote. This caused some unease but it was felt that most blokes would understand what was being done and the reasons for it.

But the ante was about to be upped in a big way. The ballot threatened to unleash a nationwide faction fight inside the ALP itself, and a game of brinkmanship was set in train. It began when Winter got the general secretary of the NSW ALP, W R Colbourne to write him a letter which basically implied that he (Winter) had ALP endorsement in the election.

Federal Labor Party policy was, officially, that the Party should not interfere in union ballots. Yet this was precisely what the NSW leadership of the Party were doing – in pretty undisguised fashion.

But ‘breaking the rules’ was only the superficial reason for the furore. The real heart of the dispute was the factional power struggle within the ALP.

As the Sun Herald put it: “The left-wingers are satisfied that the right-wing controllers of the NSW Labor machine are planning a big blitz on the Communist-controlled and influenced unions, their aim being to replace left-wing and Communist officials with right-wing ALP members.

“Observers believe that if this happens the left-wingers who control the Federal ALP executive, a superior body, will issue a hands-off-the-unions ultimatum to the NSW party leaders.

“If they ignore the warning the Federal executive will then consider a proposal to take over the NSW Labor Party and reconstitute it along more militant lines.”

It was also revealed that Winter’s news-sheet, The Guardian, had in fact been printed by E J Cunningham, who was the president of NSW Young Labor.

The controversy raged, but less than a fortnight later the Right were stunned into silence. A glance at the headlines in the Sydney dailies on October 7th immediately told the story; Sydney Morning Herald – “Union Rebuffs State ALP”, Daily Mirror – “Union ballot blow to NSW Labor chiefs”, The Telegraph – “Easy Win In Union Election”.

The Rank and File ticket had convincingly won, with McNamara defeating Winter for the secretary’s position by 833 votes to 489. The margins for the other positions were similar with the exception of Bodkin who received just 35 votes standing for president. Winter also lost his position as an organiser, the contest for that spot won by Jack Munday who had previously been only a temporary organiser.

The Rank and File were jubilant, and there were major repercussions both within and outside of the union. According to the Daily Mirror, the result, “...will embarrass right-wing party officers of the NSW branch of the ALP.” It went on to say that the, “...ballot result is the worst reverse the NSW leaders have had with the left-wing. Ironically, the ballot was in a union with only 9000 members, one third of which are financial.”

In the wake of their defeat, and under threat of Federal intervention, the NSW Right were forced to postpone their plans to openly interfere in union elections. Tribune had declared that, “The last comparable onslaught against the trade unions was during the period of the ALP Industrial Groups.”

## Setting the pace

But it was within the union itself, and the building industry it serviced, where the consequences were most profound. Though it was a process that took years to mature, the foundations for the BLF overtaking the BWIU in becoming the ‘cutting edge’ within the building industry unions were now in place.

Whilst a growing radicalisation was occurring within the BLF, a growing conservatism was taking place within the hierarchy of the BWIU. The tradesmen's union had been deregistered for 14 years, from 1948 until 1962 – an Australian 'record'.

With all the other building unions controlled by the right-wing (including the scab union the ASC&J, which had been specifically set up to try and 'bodysnatch' the BWIU's members), a feeling and fear of isolation gradually built up within the BWIU leadership. The decay of the Left internationally and the long crisis of Stalinism that reached terminal proportions in the late 1980s reinforced this trend. But the roots of that leadership's degeneration lie in this period, though again, it took many more years to fully mature. There is a sad irony in this, because their help was crucial in turning the situation in the BLF around.

But for the Builders Labourers their heyday was just beginning. The years of dedication and sacrifice of the Rank and Filers were now rewarded – not in the sense of getting paid union positions – but of finally being in the position to build a decent union for the workers on the job. As Don McHugh said at the time, "...the elections reflected 10 years of struggle to improve the wages and conditions of building workers."

From this point the right-wing in the union faded from the picture, and in the elections of 1967 the leadership were re-elected unopposed. The following year Jack Munday took over as secretary from Mick McNamara, and the rest, as they say, is history.

1964 leadership – Top, standing: Dick Prendergast; Jack Stephenson; Joe Ferguson; Les Robinson; John McNamara; Charlie Smith; Jack Munday. Bottom, sitting: Theo Austin; Morrie Lynch; Mick McNamara; Arch Harding; Bert McGill.

## Conclusion

Despite Thomas's anti-Communist crusade, it's fair enough to say that during the 1940s and '50s, the BLF in NSW was a pretty low-profile union. Had anyone suggested in the 1950's that that same union would, only a decade and a half later, become a beacon for the whole Australian trade union movement, they would have been laughed at.

Yet that's exactly what did happen. And the groundwork for making it happen was the building of the Rank and File Committee over those long and difficult years. The subsequent development of the BLF did not automatically flow from the foundations laid by the Rank and File Committee, but it was made possible.

Their story is noteworthy from a number of different angles. Firstly, because of its casual nature, the building industry is not the easiest to organise from a trade union point of view. What's more, when the Rank and File Committee started, there were just 3 people – not just 3 'normal' people either – but 3 Communists, in a violently anti-Communist situation. What they, and those that joined with them did, required the ability to see beyond the 'here and now'. And perhaps more than anything, it required an enormous amount of heart.

But this booklet is not intended to be simply of admiration or historical interest. The point, for trade unionists of the current generation, is that even the worst situations can be turned around. Rotten leaderships can be changed – and that's not some abstract political theory, or something that happens in far away places. For building workers in NSW in particular, the events described here happened in our industry... in our main city...and not all that long ago.

## The differences

But along with the similarities, it's also important to recognise the differences. The events described here all took place in a period of almost constant economic upswing – the post-war boom. 'Full employment' was the order of the day. The scale of unemployment that has once

again become the norm in recent years was not a factor. Even a leadership as right-wing as Fred Thomas's had an overtime ban in place.

The phrase that's often repeated is that, 'if you lost your job, you could pick up another one down the road.' The situation today is of course very different.

This is a significant problem but it's not insurmountable. For rank and file activists nowadays it means operating in a lot more 'underground' sort of way, certainly until the point where a real body of strength has been developed.

## **Present-day Left**

The influence of the Communist Party, from a number of different angles, also constitutes a major difference. During the period covered they were the force on the left-wing of Australian politics. The left-wing of the Labor Party, from the 1920s to the 1980s, almost always tail-ended the Communist Party, particularly in terms of ideas. What this meant was that within the Rank and File itself, there was a good level of unity.

Nowadays there are a number of different groups on the left of the political spectrum and unfortunately sectarianism is rampant. As most of these groups are university based, there is no real problem along these lines in the building industry. But in other industries, particularly the so-called 'white collar' ones, it's a different story sadly.

The Communists, with a party membership numbering in the thousands, recognised the need to build movements with a wider base than just their own people. Yet widespread amongst most of the contemporary groups, whose membership is only a fraction of what the Communists had, is the idea that if their particular group can't control something, then they'll do their best to destroy it. This infantile approach does not help the current situation one iota. The Labor Left incidentally, are just as guilty of this as anyone. The upshot is a pack of little cliques prancing round and turning their noses up at each other, whilst the working class is taking a belting.

This is not an argument for the 'unity at all costs and unity equals whatever I say' approach of some union leaders, but it is an argument for having a sense of proportion. Everyone pays lip service to the idea of 'working with other people', it's about time it was put into practice.

## **'Election machines'**

But what poses just as much of a danger, and initially emanated almost exclusively 'from the Labor Party 'school of theory', is the idea that you don't need rank and file groups at all. This boils down to the 'election-machine' mentality. In essence it's really just a transferral of the ALP approach to the Party, into the unions.

The last decade and a half has seen the collapse of left wing culture, and left-wing methods in the labour movement generally, and its replacement with a non-participatory void, where the role of the rank and file is reduced to that of dogsbodys at election time.

What the Communist Party had that is missing today, was a political authority that derived from an unequalled body of experience in the trade union movement. And flowing from that came a method of work, and its acceptance as the best method, by workers who weren't members of the Communist Party. (Incidentally, that was implicitly acknowledged when Santamaria's Movement modelled itself on the way the Communists operated.)

Things that would be as elementary as ABC to Communist union activists, would probably be like blinding revelations to some of today's unionists. An enormous wealth of trade union experience has been lost to the current generation. Unfortunately almost the only thing that

present generation union leaders seemed to have retained from the Communist heritage is a Stalinist attitude to union democracy.

## **Taking care**

Another crucial difference is that employers and union leaderships are a bit more sophisticated nowadays. For the employers part, blacklisting in the computer age is a very simple affair. This factor reinforces the point of the need to operate in an 'underground' way. At the same time it's important not to get too paranoid about such things. It basically boils down to an understanding of who and what you're dealing with, and then just using your common sense.

## **Leaders roll over**

As far as union leaders are concerned, what has changed between the 1950s and the 1990s has a lot more to do with political questions than it does with advances in technology. And politically speaking, there has been quite a bizarre turnaround from situation described in this booklet.

It's interesting to contrast the approach of the Left in the 1940s, '50s and '60s, and the 'Left' nowadays. In the building industry, those familiar with the arguments that have been put forward by the union leadership in recent years, may find it interesting that those same arguments were put forward in the '40s, '50s and '60s too...but then they were being put forward by the right-wing!

In fact what emerges very clearly is that the Left now are putting forward the very same arguments they used to fight against. And it's not just a question of the odd point here or there – it's the whole approach to trade unionism, and the basic political view that approach stems from.

To put it as simply as possible, the left-wing always believed that because any increase in wages meant a decrease in profits, there was an inevitable class conflict in capitalist society. In contrast, the right-wing believed that bosses and workers should all get together like one-big-happy-family. The so-called 'mainstream Left' have, to all intents and purposes, now adopted the basic philosophy of the old right-wing.

Perhaps they'd be a bit rough round the edges, but politically speaking, Thomas and Bodkin would not be too far out of place in the 'mainstream Left' of the 1990s.

## **Points for today**

There are, in my opinion, a number of general points that emerge from the Rank and File story that are applicable to activists trying to change any union.

Firstly, there are no short cuts in rank and file work. From the time the 3 Communist builders labourers set up the Rank and File Committee to the time when they were able to win the leadership of the union was a period of ten years. Anybody who thinks they can just waltz into a union and change it overnight, should save themselves the heartbreak and get another 'hobby'.

Secondly, winning the 1961 election was not a startling, out-of-the-blue occurrence. It was more a confirmation of the support that they had patiently built up over the years. Their approach stands in diametrical contrast to the 'election machine' idea that is so widespread nowadays it's almost become conventional wisdom. Thirdly, the Rank and File experience shows the importance of publications, and not simply for putting the group's message across. Through having to raise finance to produce the Hoist and a job network to distribute it, the newsheet acted as a vital organisational vehicle for the group itself.

Fourthly, the Rank and File experience is a good illustration of the ebbs and flows in such work (and in politics generally). After years of work, the election of McGill in 1957, and the hope of the Banjo Patterson period, then the terrible disappointment of the Bodkin period... etc. What it boils down to is that disappointment and setbacks are things that go with the territory.

Fifthly, a rank and file group is not necessarily an opposition group to a union leadership. As was the situation in the Banjo Patterson period, when the leadership of the union is 'doing the right thing' then a rank and file group can work with them.

Then there's the situation that existed after 1961, a different state of affairs again, where the Rank and File Committee itself was the major component in the union leadership. But the winning of power in a union, in and of itself, is no reason to dissolve a rank and file group. However the form of a rank and file group entirely depends on circumstances. Probably the greatest advance that occurred under the leadership of the Rank and File Committee in the early 1960s, was the democratisation of the Builders Labourers Federation – the structures and decision making processes of the union itself.

Under a good leadership with regular delegates and activists meetings, the rank and file group could be changed into an 'official' body of the union or whatever – it's a secondary question. The point is that no matter how good a leadership is, or may think it is, without an active base of support it is only a matter of time before that leadership runs into trouble—of one sort or another.

As was the case with the Builders Labourers, and as will be the case with any union leadership that comes into power in capitalist society, particularly a militant leadership, the pressure is on from Day One.

Indeed the better a job the leadership is doing, the greater the pressure will be. Likewise, the more active the membership, the greater will be the union's capacity to resist that pressure. That is the point.

Sixthly, 'red-baiting' can be overcome. Surely the Builders Labourers Federation was the classic example of this. In the 1950s the BLF was the epitome of an anti-Communist union – one generation later it was the "jewel in the crown" for the Communist Party!

And it was not like the workers didn't know they were voting for Communists – for 20 years they'd been told about it. As was the case in many other unions, the Communists had won support for being amongst the best of the fighters for the workers – their politics (in the sense of being an 'electoral drawback') was of secondary importance.

(Sadly, in another of history's ironic twists some of the worst 'red-baiters' in recent years have been former Communists trying to earn a bit of 'respectability' in their old age.)

The Communists were the heart of the BLF Rank and File from beginning to end. Without them it's highly questionable that the union would ever have come out of obscurity, let alone achieve what it did. An important factor in that process was the relatively high level of politicisation amongst activists within the union, and once again that was largely due to the influence of the Communists.

The tragedy was, that the influence of what had been the Communist Party, as it ripped apart into warring organisations, began turning into its opposite – from positive to negative. The subsequent history of the BLF in NSW is beyond the scope of this booklet, but the internal war that later developed in the union, the Gallagher force's destruction of the Munday/Owens branch, and the Clancy/McDonald destruction of the Gallagher/Black branch were all directly connected to the lines of division in the Communist movement.

But I believe the most important point to emerge is that even the most difficult of situations can be overcome, providing there are people who have a clear idea of what they're doing,



who are prepared to ‘make their own luck’, and don’t drop their bundle with every setback. And the Builders Labourers is such a stark example, with its transformation from one of the worst unions possible to one of the best.

And of all the great things the BLF subsequently achieved, perhaps the most priceless thing of all was on a human level – the dignity and confidence it gave to its own members. In the Thomas years it was common for builders labourers to be referred to as ‘shit labourers’ – by the 1970s they had become “BLs” -the toast of the worker’s movement.

### For the new generation

Whilst many people are today writing off the trade-unions, the obituaries are a little premature – the unions are far from dead. But having said that, they are in urgent need of revitalisation.

A dozen years of Kelty/Crean/Ferguson ‘new-age’ unionism with all its glossy brochure, “21st Century”, mobile-phone, “win-win situation”, corporate yuppie gobbledegook has been a disaster. Sadly most of those in a position to have done something, were either so demoralised by the 1980s that they gave it all away, or, a thousand times worse, they went along with the whole rotten thing.

But there’s a new generation of activists surfacing, who, while they may not have the ‘socialist consciousness’ of previous generations, at the same time are not psychologically weighed down by the defeats and betrayals of the last 20 years.

The crisis within the unions has led to a search for ideas, and whilst the worst of the new generation parrot the gibberish of Kelty and Ferguson (which is really just traditional right-wing unionism camouflaged by this new-speak uni-babble), the best of the young activists are looking in other directions for inspiration.

If those activists can take from the Communists their strength and militancy in defending workers’ rights, if they take the Communists’ aspirations for a fairer and more decent society, and if they avoid the methods of Stalinism... then the regeneration of the labour movement will be in good hands.

### Worken’ In The Rain

(A poem dedicated to Harry Connell)

by Denis Kevans

Harry, they’re worken’ in the rain,  
 Harry, mate, they’re worken’ in the rain,  
 Down in George St., mate, loading  
 Slippery, slithery, beams of steel, in George St., mate,  
 In Sydney, in 1992, worken’ in the rain,  
 Geez, you pushed the rickshaws down there,  
 The ones with the big metal wheels, wheelen’ concrete,  
 When you come back from the war....  
 “Which war, son? Merriwa, Wee-waa, or Goorianawa?  
 I was in a war from the day I was born.  
 In Paddo Women’s Hospital,  
 Eight kids in two rooms in Paddo....”  
 Harry, they’re worken’ in the rain,  
 I’m standen’ in the rain, looken’ at your name,  
 Harry, Harry, come back and tell ’em,  
 I can hear you now.... “We want a new union consciousness,

A new thrust, a new emphasis,  
Green bans (my italics).....”

Harry, you told me about Niu Guini, and how  
The enemy kept calling out in Australian slang:  
“Over here, Blue! Over here, Curl! Over here, Snow!  
And you called out: “Over here, Adolph  
And bring Tojo wiv yu!”

But, Harry, today the enemy uses Australian slang,  
I mean the Corporations, and the Billionaires,  
In the media, you know for ‘virtual reality’,  
And for ‘manufacturing dissent’, and the Aussie  
Can he see through it any more, can he?

Harry, remember when the boss asked Mick  
What the award was? “What’s the award?”  
And Mick said: “\$193.40” and they paid it for 3 months,  
What was it? “\$143.40”.

Harry, they’re worken’ in the rain.  
Remember Mick and Donny with the spirit level  
On the scaffolding, and Mick claiming height  
Money on the ground floor, and got it.  
“That’s no height,” says the ‘Rain Rat’,  
“You can’t get height money for that!”

“What about the three basements underneath us,  
You bloody Dubbo!” And they paid it!

Harry, they’re worken’ in the rain.  
Harry, remember Dirty Dirt and Clean Dirt.  
“Now there’s dirty dirt, and clean dirt,  
And all our dirt is clean dirt, so you  
Can’t claim dirt money on this job.”  
But we got it.

Harry, mate, come back, they’re worken’  
In the rain. Harry, with your trout-freckled skin,  
And your gnarled half-back’s body, more bends  
And bumps than bush furniture. Harry, come back,  
Come back and tell ’em. Harry,  
They’re worken’ in the rain.....

## **Bibliography**

For ease of reading this booklet has not been cluttered up with references. The sources of Information were the Interviews listed in the Introduction and the following publications:

### **Union Publications**

*Builders Labourers Journal, The New South Wales Builders Labourer* – journals of the Builders Labourers Federation

*Hoist* – journal of the Builders Labourers Rank and File Committee

Various leaflets from the Builders Labourers Federation

*The Guardian* – news-sheet of the Stan Winter group

*Building Worker* – journal of the Building Workers Industrial Union

*Labor News* – journal of the Federated Ironworkers Association

### **Capitalist Newspapers**

*Sydney Morning Herald, Daily Telegraph, The Mirror, The Sun, The Australian*

### **Political Newspapers**

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*News Weekly* – NCC (Santamaria right-wing)

*Socialist and Industrial Labor* – ALP left-wing

*The Socialist* – Labor Socialist Group (Trotskyist)

### **University theses**

‘A New Concept of Unionism: The New South Wales Builders Labourers Federation 1970-74’ – Meredith Burgmann

### **Other Publications**

*The Bulletin* – right-wing weekly magazine

*Construction* – journal of the Master Builder’s Association

*Quadrant* – right-wing magazine

### **Books**

*Green Bans and beyond* – Jack Munday

*In union is strength* – Ian Turner

*The split* – Robert Murray

### **Films**

*Rocking The Foundations* – Pat Fiske