MARK A. HASKELL*

Green Bans: Worker Control and the Urban Environment

AUSTRALIAN TRADE UNIONS have long made effective use of the "black ban," that is, the tactic of boycotting employers and others in order to improve wages or working conditions or to implement political goals. During the Indonesian struggle for independence shortly after World War II, longshoremen placed bans on shipments to and from the Netherlands. More recently arms shipments to South Vietnam were boycotted and an Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) black ban was imposed on French shipping to protest nuclear weapons testing in the South Pacific.

In 1971, the black ban was transposed into the "green ban" when the New South Wales branch of the Builder's Labourers Federation (BLF) agreed to boycott a construction project in Hunter's hill, an upper-middle class area on the Paramatta River, an arm of Sydney Harbor. In September 1970, residents of that area had organized to oppose the construction of 25 luxury homes in Kelly's Bush, an eight-acre bushland tract which had been preserved in its natural state. The tract had been zoned as "residential" just one year earlier despite widespread community opposition. After unsuccessful attempts to interest the state in purchasing the land for recreational purposes, the newly organized group, the "Battlers for Kelly's Bush," approached the New South Wales BLF to request that they not work on the construction site. Construction was halted and, despite the subsequent demise of the New South Wales branch in 1975, this green ban remains in force.[1]

Thus emerged an unlikely collaboration between community groups struggling against drastic neighborhood changes and traditionally job oriented trade unionists — a merger which has often been labeled "unique"

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[1]Marion Hardman and Peter Manning, Green Bans (East Melbourne: Australia Conservation Foundation, 1975), unpaged.

and may, in fact, have been the product of a special set of circumstances. On the other hand, the green bans do have the possibility of becoming an example for others. This paper is an attempt to analyze this movement for the purpose of providing an explanation for its appearance at a particular time and place.[2] Part of that explanation may lie in the nature of the union which was most heavily involved, i.e., in the characteristics of its leaders, its members, and the way in which the union's affairs were managed. Hence, the line of questioning will focus on the New South Wales BLF—i.e. why *this* union adopted *this* unconventional tactic to achieve *this* unconventional goal.

Nature of the Green Bans

In the four years following 1971, green bans were responsible for the modification, postponement, or cancellation of over 40 construction projects valued at over $4 billion Australian dollars,[3] almost all in the Sydney metropolitan area. They succeeded in slowing a construction boom which in little more than a decade had almost completely transformed the face of Sydney. What Hugh Stretton has described as "that magic meeting place where new flats and old terraces, parks and gaunt dockland warehouses, the great bridge and the great ships, and the opera sails crowd close enough to touch hands around the city skyscrapers"[4] had been almost completely transformed. Only the old working class districts around the edge of the business district remained to be filled with high-rise office and luxury apartment complexes, with bridges, freeways, and parking garages to serve those who could afford the rising prices of land, construction, and skyrocketing rents. On the city's periphery, the old green belts had been almost obliterated as the rising demand for low-income housing put increasing pressure on land in the burgeoning southern and western suburbs where most of Sydney's low to middle income residents lived. As Stretton put it, the poor were sent "further out west to allow more of their masters to work at Circular Quay."[5]

This real estate boom was aided, according to Leonie Sandercook, a student of Australian city planning, by the successful long-term efforts

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[2]The research for the article was undertaken when the author was Senior Fulbright-Hays Lecturer in the Department of Politics, University of New England, Armidale, New South Wales, under sponsorship of the Australian-American Educational Foundation.

[3]Over five billion U.S. dollars at the official exchange rate during the 1971-1975 period.

[4]Hugh Stretton, *Ideas for Australian Cities* (Melbourne: Georgian House, 1971), p. 257.

[5]*Ibid.*, p. 263. Circular Quay is the landing place of Sydney's ferries which provide pleasant and easy access to the affluent suburbs on the northern shore of the harbor. A major downtown train terminal is located there, and it is a short walk from the Opera House, the Botanical Gardens, and The Rocks. In short, an extraordinarily convenient and attractive place to work.

of property owners in "preventing encroachments on their 'property rights' by planning regulations and legislation."[6] Thus, prior to World War II, "even the mildest forms of city planning legislation" had continuously been defeated in the New South Wales Legislative Council, as well as in other state parliaments. After the war, more land-use plans and policies saw the light of day, but these were continuously manipulated and weakened by property owners in the pursuit of speculative profits. Political pressure and occasional corruption were, according to Sandercock, enough to invalidate the goals of the legislation. And as the boom proceeded, more and more community groups perceived themselves as having been denied meaningful avenues of expression about their future.

Thus the green bans achieved significant successes. In the city itself, the bans saved the Rocks, the historic heart of Sydney, from the encroaching central business district. Other inner-city districts, Wooloomooloo, Ultimo, and Glebe, where workers live in nineteenth-century iron-laced terrace houses, did suffer some demolition. However, the bans succeeded in halting it and in saving 16,000 homes. And in Centennial Park, a high income district of well-preserved nineteenth- and early twentieth-century homes, large areas of green space were saved from another proposed public project. The future of planned offices and expressways also became problematic and is now subject to negotiation.

Why the Bans?

In the United States, the building trades unions probably represent the most conservative part of the labor movement and are often opponents of the environmental movement. With minor exceptions, the rest of the trade union movement is also conservative with respect to social goals and tends to focus on traditional concerns.

In a recent exploration of Australian union power, David Marr reached similar conclusions, stating that "Australian unions are (minus a few exceptions) wedded to capitalism.... There is little enthusiasm...for even the most minor rejigging of the system. The idea of extending their influence, their power, through worker participation in management...finds little rank-and-file support."[7] While this is an accurate characterization of an essentially pragmatic movement, it conceals deep divisions within it which have no counterpart in the United States. At one end of the spectrum is the

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[6]Leonie Sandercock, "Capitalism and the Environment: The Failure of Success," in E. L. Wheelwright and Ken Buckley, eds. *Essays in the Political Economy of Australian Capitalism*, vol. 1 (Sydney: Australian and New Zealand Book Company, 1975), pp. 163-164.
[7]David Marr, "Union Power – How Big a Muscle?" *The Bulletin*, November 8, 1975, p. 36.

communist led faction which includes the largest single union, the Amalga-
mated Metal Workers Union (AMWU), while at the other end are the
conservative, Catholic-influenced unions. Both groups are highly political;
the left-wing unions consider themselves to be "vehicles of social protest"
with "no limit to their legitimate concerns," while the right-wing has a
"relatively coherent ideological position centered on anti-Communism."[8]
In the center, moderates seek to hold the fragile coalition together by
attempting to reconcile the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU)
policies with those of the Australian Labor Party (ALP) with which it is
closely identified.[9]

There is a three-way split in the Communist movement itself, with each
group contending for leadership among leftists, as well as for overall leader-
ship of the trade union movement. The Communist Party of Australia (CPA)
is least dogmatic and since the mid-fifties has taken independent positions
on international questions. The Peking-oriented Communist Party (Marxist-
Leninist) (CP-ML) was formed in 1964 when its founders broke away from
the CPA as a result of the Soviet-Chinese split. A final split occurred as
the result of CPA criticism of Eastern European authoritarianism and
bureaucracy. In 1968 and 1969, CPA endorsed the reforms initiated by
the Czechoslovak Communist Party under Dubcek and condemned the
Soviet intervention which followed. As a result, in 1971, a dissenting
minority formed the Moscow-oriented Socialist Party of Australia (SPA),
which now has the largest representation among trade union leaders. Other
points of dispute were attitudes toward social reform, the development of
the class struggle, and perspectives regarding a viable revolutionary strategy
for Australia.[10]

Within the Builders' Labourers Federation, the New South Wales leaders,
Jack Mundey, Jack Owens, and Bob Pringle were young and militant CPA
loyalists, while the Secretary of the Federal Branch (Norm Gallagher) was
an official of the Peking-oriented CP-ML. The CP-ML leaders also have
been anxious to establish a reputation for militancy; hence political rivalry
was a most likely cause for adoption of the green bans.[11]

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[8]Ross M. Martin, *Trade Unions in Australia* (Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin Books, 1975), pp. 12, 92.

[9]Bob Hawke, ACTU president since 1969, was elected ALP president in 1973. He is often spoken
of as a future ALP parliamentary leader, particularly since the election debacle in December 1975
when the ALP lost more than 30 seats in the House of Representatives.

[10]Martin, *op. cit.*, pp. 18-19.

[11]The New South Wales branch had the freedom it did as a result of the fact that state and local
branches of Australian unions often act independently of the federal parent bodies; in some cases, this
independence approaches autonomy. When that situation occurs, the functions of the federal branch
may be limited to representing state, district, or local branches in federal arbitration cases and in inter-
state disputes and negotiations. Such was essentially the case in the BLF, particularly after the ideological
breach had occurred.

The green bans represent more than environmental issues taking hold in the trade union movement. For the leadership of the New South Wales branch, their principal aim is to develop a revolutionary consciousness among workers in a society where the current revolutionary potential is nil. Thus these bans were only a single element, albeit an important one, in a strategy designed "to develop mass challenges to the capitalist system." Above all, these challenges were based on the principle that "those affected by decisions must control the making of them," and on the idea that the "exclusion of the bulk of the community from decisive decision making process" should be ended. The bans were fully consistent with CPA ideology which urges that unions go beyond economic matters, that they "involve their rank-and-file membership in campaigns on all issues that affect workers and their families." Even administrative reforms, such as limited tenure for union officers, are seen as developing this potential since "only through developing the confidence of workers themselves to take collective action in pursuit of demands will revolutionary consciousness grow."[12]

Acting in accordance with this philosophy, the New South Wales BLF had taken an active role in social and civil liberties issues. Beyond this, the union had proposed in 1972 a scheme whereby homes for lower income families, health facilities, and community projects were to be given priority over further commercial construction. Internally, the union had provided limited tenure for officers, had granted decision-making power on the most significant union issues to the membership, and had provided for complete access of members to financial records. It had also provided that union officials would go off the payroll in the event of a general work stoppage.

Although a large portion of the members were unskilled, non-British migrants—mainly Italian, Greek, and Yugoslav—many with a poor command of English, membership participation was high. Approximately 30 per cent of the membership turned out at elections and many meetings approached that level, drawing two to three thousand members. Because of the language problems, interpreters were present at all meetings to facilitate rank-and-file participation.[13]

This adherence to principles of participatory democracy was often perceived as inefficient and anarchistic. Hardman and Manning comment that "the union office misran itself along incredibly democratic lines, people wandering in and out of officials' offices, phones constantly interrupting huddled conversations, no one seeming to be 'in charge'."[14] Even a very

[12]Mark Taft, "Communism in Australia," in Henry Mayer and Helen Nelson, eds., *Australian Politics, A Third Reader* (Melbourne: Cheshire Publishing Party, Ltd., 1973), pp. 450-451.

[13]Hardman and Manning, *op. cit.*

[14]*Ibid.*

sympathetic CPA observer noted that in the NSW branch there existed "A contempt for organization and leadership. No need for organization, no need for leaders, do your own thing—the ultrademocracy of spontaneism was in evidence, especially in the last two years."[15] The problem of how to combine rank-and-file participation with effective leadership and organization remains an unresolved problem for the trade union movement everywhere.

No doubt the political agenda of the NSW branch was set by its leaders and apparently fully accepted by its membership. However, there were other factors present which were necessary conditions for rank-and-file acceptance of the green bans. First, the leadership did not neglect traditional goals and did succeed in achieving substantial wage increases through most of the 1970-1975 period. Second, in the early years when almost all of the bans were initiated, unemployment was at a low level.

In 1970, unemployment was low in the entire economy and in the building industry with each having jobless rates of 1.4 per cent. Despite a surge in 1972, the 1973 rates were only 1.7 per cent for construction and 1.9 per cent overall. But by the fourth quarter of 1974 unemployment had risen rapidly to 3.6 per cent in construction and to 3.4 per cent overall. During 1975, there was another substantial increase and by the end of that year the unemployment rate was 5.1 per cent in the building industry and 4.6 per cent for the entire work force.[16] It is a reasonable conclusion that the green bans could not have been sustained through a period of high unemployment, even in the absence of the forces arrayed against them.

Finally, a heavy turnover of membership each year made it easier for the leaders to influence the rank and file than if membership had been stable. Conversely, the turnover made it difficult for any potential opposition to organize and develop.

Resistance to the Bans

Whether the green bans had broad community and working class support is an open question. The unconventionality of the tactic and the orientation of its communist leadership, as well as the vast financial interests involved, were certainly barriers to massive public acceptance. On the other hand, the growing environmental ethic, as well as community solidarity in areas where the green bans were imposed, generated widespread support among many ordinary Australians.

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[15]Charlie Gifford, "New Dimensions in Unionism," *Australian Left Review,* XLVII (July, 1975), 19.
[16]Australian Bureau of Statistics (Canberra).

The most active opponents were the Liberal (i.e., conservative) New South Wales government, the Master Builders Association, the mass media, and employers in general. Even the trade union movement did not provide positive and active support. For the ALP, and therefore for the dominant center group in the ACTU, green bans were a mixed blessing. On the one hand, they were compatible with the new Labor government's emphasis on social and environmental concerns. On the other, they constituted road-blocks to its economic goals of full employment and growth. Although some unions other than the NSW BLF did support particular bans, for the most part the union movement was uninvolved.

Most significantly, within the building industry itself, the SPA dominated Building Workers International Union (BWIU) refused to cooperate with the green ban movement. The BWIU decision was based in part on the ideological split among the communist-dominated unions, and the subsequent actions of the Federal branch against the NSW branch cannot be separated from that split. Consequently, just as these political and ideological differences were important in the adoption of the bans, they can also be viewed as significant elements in the destruction of the NSW branch and the weakening of the green bans movement.

Although all of the opposition was contributory, the most important element in the final defeat of the NSW branch was the successful effort of the Master Builders Association in June 1974 to have the entire Builder Labourers Federation deregistered—i.e., removed from the list of unions eligible to appeal to the Australian Conciliation and Arbitration Commission in the event of unresolved labor disputes. The petition was based on the charge that the green bans violated the Federation's charter.

Subsequently, in October 1974, after losing an electoral contest for control of the NSW branch, the Federal officials applied for reregistration without the NSW branch and simultaneously set up a Federal branch in New South Wales to take over union affairs in that state. This act was justified on the following three grounds: (1) that the green bans had been applied in a wholesale and unreasonable manner, (2) that there had been financial mismanagement, and (3) that the NSW branch's independent course had contributed to dissension and disunity in the federation. The Federal branch attempted to remove green bans as an issue, stating that "Green bans are the policy of the whole Federation...," adding that the real issue was the "adventurism and irresponsibility of the NSW branches (sic)...leadership."[17]

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[17]*National U.*, March 10, 1975, pp. 5, 6.

The proximate cause of the NSW branch dissolution was an agreement between the federal branch and the Master Builders Association to provide preference in employment to Federal branch members. *De facto* preference had earlier led to losses of between 2,000 and 3,000 members, but the employment preference agreement was an act against which there was no adequate defense. On March 24, 1975, the NSW branch leadership recommended to a membership meeting that members join the federal branch and continue to fight for their policies within that union. The alternative was an immediate lockout of NSW branch members as a result of the preference-of-employment agreement.[18]

The fate of the green bans in the new union remained uncertain, but they were certainly less secure than before. Despite the statements of federal officials that the bans were the policy of the entire Federation, it is clear that they viewed them much differently than did the NSW leaders, indicating that all bans would be reviewed individually, with the union membership deciding whether or not to retain them. This made it clear that the viewpoints of community groups were of little or no importance and that employment considerations would be dominant.

Later, the position of the federal leadership was made even more clear. By the end of April 1975, Gallagher, NSW secretary of the Federal BLF, had stated that only two reasons were acceptable as justifications for a ban — historical value and a request by the National Trust. Even these were subject to an additional qualification — "that the National Trust rally 'adequate' public support within two months." He went on to state that the union would begin to review the remaining 40 bans in light of these new criteria. He reiterated that the views of resident action groups were of little importance. In the past he said, "these groups have deprived our members of their jobs. We will make our own decisions in the future."[19]

Positive support for the bans had to be left to a new group, "Friends of the Green Ban Movement," which was to link up unionists, community action groups, and conservationists on a national basis to maintain and extend green bans. If anything, the collapse of the New South Wales BLF gave an impetus to the militancy of Sydney's inner-city resident action groups. In May of 1975, they declared the green bans to be resident bans and began to urge other unions to honor them. Since then, success has been mixed, but the concept given life in 1970 remains and continues to give pause to the development spree that characterized Sydney in the sixties.

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[18]*The Australian*, March 24, 1975.
[19]*Ibid.*, April 22, 1975.

Accomplishments and Limitations

What have the green bans accomplished? Aside from the neighborhoods, landmarks, and green spaces which are now safe from commercial depredation, are there other lasting achievements? Has the planning process been changed? Has the trade union movement been influenced to consider the social implications of the work that unionists do?

There has been no shortage of praise. Although the New South Wales government had done its best to break the movement, an important member of it, Sir John Fuller, granted that it had been one of the main forces bringing about "a more active public involvement in problems affecting local planning and environment."[20] An editorial in *The Australian* stated that "every green ban...brought the issue of the quality of life squarely back to the public arena," and that "bans were an inevitable result of official attitudes which regarded people as irrelevant factors to development."[21] Hardman and Manning concur in those views, agreeing that Australian planning "has been revolutionized by the combination of resident action and worker power...planning journals, official reports, consultant briefs, academics' papers all reek now of the 'planning is people' syndrome."[22]

Comments like these provide the answer to the charge that the NSW BLF might have been imposing its own preferences on society. There is little question that under the political and economic circumstances of the day, community groups and individuals lacked adequate input into the decision-making processes which determined the fate of Sydney's neighborhoods. The NSW branch was scrupulous in the application of the principle that no ban would be undertaken that did not have the clear support of the community involved. The green ban movement was thus the logical extension of community organization and action which has become legitimized in other parts of the world, especially in the United States, when governments become or are perceived as unresponsive to the reasonable needs and desires of urban communities.

Without underestimating the significance of the movement, it is still necessary to cast a skeptical eye on the claimed accomplishments. At the very least, one can question whether enough time has passed to permit the conclusion that Australia has seen a permanent change in the planning process. Given the lack of support from other unions, and the skepticism on the part of the public in regard to the union's real motives, it is even possible to conclude that the green bans were a transient phenomenon without

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[20]Hardman and Manning, *op. cit.*
[21]*The Australian*, March 25, 1975.
[22]Hardman and Manning, *op. cit.*

lasting effects on the planning process in Australia. But since the bans may also be viewed as a particular manifestation of the movement for worker participation and control which is viable and growing, they do have the possibility of adoption by unions in countries where such a tactic would not be too far in advance of community norms and have strong public support.

Green bans have also been criticized on a more fundamental level: namely that all environmental achievements benefit the middle class at the expense of low income groups. Sandercock, for example, states that in the environmental movement there is "never a mention of protecting the inner-suburbs *for the poor;* just of the need to protect the inner suburbs."[23] Thus, renovated neighborhoods become magnets for the middle class fleeing the suburbs or seeking locations for offices and stores. In a market system, those who possess the necessary funds can drive out those who do not.

Socialists would agree that under capitalism there is no remedy for the inequality which pervades and sustains it. No doubt the leaders of the New South Wales BLF held this view. Given their long-run objectives of constructing a socialist system in Australia, the coalition can be viewed, in part, as a device for raising middle class consciousness about how the social system operates and in whose interest it does so. Certainly the activists of Hunter's Hill and Centennial Park learned much about the responsiveness of public officials and about the system they manage. "We're very cynical now about politicians, very cynical," stated some of the Hunter's Hill leadership.[24] Whether cynicism constitutes radicalism is questionable, though perhaps it is a small first step.

Sandercock emphasizes that her criticism should not be interpreted as a criticism of the BLF strategy or of the green bans themselves. These, she says, did provide "an invaluable breathing space, temporarily at least halting the carnage of development."[25] It is how wisely this breathing space is used which will allow a final judgment of the 1970-1975 green ban movement in Australia. But even if that judgment is negative, much will remain. In the neighborhoods and landmarks that have been preserved, the people of Sydney possess permanent reminders of that crusade.

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[23]Leonie Sandercock, "Green Bans: People, Power and Politics," *Habitat,* II (June, 1974), 18.
[24]Hardman and Manning, *op. cit.*
[25]Sandercock, "Green Bans...," p. 18.