



# Unconventional Labour: Environmental Justice and Working-class Ecology in the New South Wales Green Bans

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**ABSTRACT** *The New South Wales union movement embraced the principles of heritage and conservationism in the 1970s through the imposing of “green bans” – a strategy wherein union members refused to work on construction projects that were a threat to the state’s natural or built environment. Led by radicals like Builders Labourers’ Federation leader Jack Munday, the green bans were seen in several sectors as a departure from the traditional “Old Left” priorities of securing workers’ wages and conditions. Rather than a hard shift towards radicalism, this article proposes that the green bans were instead reflective of an already existing conservationist tradition in the New South Wales union movement. This reinterpretation is predicated on a content analysis of extant historical material such as contemporaneous news articles, personal memoirs, transcripts of political speeches and archival documents related to the policing of left-wing activism in the 1960s and 1970s. The results show that an existing tradition of engagement with a broad spectrum of social issues in the New South Wales union movement predates the emergence of the New Left, including the commitment to environmental justice principles that underpinned the green bans.*

**KEYWORDS** working-class ecology; environmental justice; trade union; green ban; gentrification; New Left; Australia

## Introduction

The late 1960s and early 1970s were a transformative time in Australian politics, as they were around the world. The predominantly conservative social values of the post-war era began to give way to a new model for political engagement, predicated on more existential concepts related to anti-imperialism and new social movements instead of the established binaries of Marxism and bourgeois capitalism. While responsible for energising a new generation of social activists, this shift in the ideological landscape caused a

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ISSN: 1911-4788



profound schism in the Australian left. On one end of this divide was the Old Left, made up largely of trade unions which remained acutely focused on the conventional socialist mission to improve conditions for workers. On the other was the New Left, a broader church of leftist activists campaigning on a diverse cross-section of areas from environmental conservation to civil rights for all (Hamilton, 2016; Marcuse, 2014).

The green bans reflect a moment of convergence in which the Old and New Left in New South Wales found common ground in their activist agendas. An action popularised by the Builders Labourers' Federation (BLF) under Communist Party leaders Bob Pringle and Jack Munday, the green bans were a policy in which trade unions like the BLF could order its members to stop work on building projects that threatened the natural environment or, importantly, the historical built environment in areas of Sydney like The Rocks and Hunters Hill (Burgmann & Burgmann, 1998). The willingness to go on strike in protest of such issues seemingly signalled a shift to the New Left from the trade unions that, historically, had focused more on matters of wages and conditions than social justice issues like heritage and conservation. While the departure from an exclusive focus on traditional labour issues seemed like a divisive point for the Old and New Left, this article shows that in New South Wales the green bans were in keeping with a tendency towards radicalism that long existed in the city's leftist community – long predating the emergence of the New Left on the global stage (see Lockwood, 1982; Wreckers again, 1957). As this article outlines, the New Left was less a “new” concept than a continuation of a proud tradition of activism that extended beyond traditional union-led campaigning, and focused more on galvanising the strength of the trade unions in support of various ancillary social justice concerns. This article describes how, in New South Wales, a broader social justice agenda (notably environmental justice and conservation) was driven by proponents of social justice causes working from within Old Left organisations such as the trade unions and the local Communist Party (Barca, 2014; Coombes, 1996; Soja, 2010).

This article sets out to problematise the traditional conflation of the trade union movement with an Old Left that is only concerned with labour rights, to the exclusion of other, intersectional social justice issues (Barca, 2014; Stevis et al., 2018). The green bans have often been explained as a product of New Left influence on the unions (including in hagiographic work by those at the forefront of the movement) (see Burgmann, 2000, 2008). However, historical evidence suggests a different reality: New South Wales unions were already steeped in a radical tradition of social justice campaigning. The reframing of activism in the New South Wales Old Left is informed by a range of existing material outlining its campaign strategy, before and during the green bans era. The case for the New South Wales unions being as concerned with wider social justice issues before the New Left's arrival as after is informed here by a content analysis of source material such as

contemporaneous news accounts, political speeches and materials, personal memoirs of those involved in the leftist movement and, in some cases, archival documentation related to the policing of the unions and other leftist groups during the period in question. Eric Monkkonen (2002) describes the study of such source material as inherently “opaque” and subject to the innumerable variables associated with the context in which it was produced (p. 45). As such, the historical material used in this article has been periodised and contextualised using what Theda Skocpol (1984) notably characterises as “sociology’s historical imagination” – an interpretive process that seeks to examine social phenomena in the sociocultural environment in which it occurred, rather than undertaking an evaluation that is effectively anachronistic. Paradoxically, it is this historical analysis that offers the greatest opportunity for contemporary social justice campaigners to draw on the lessons of the green bans by providing a context-sensitive assessment of the tradition of social (and environmental) justice activism that predates the arrival of the New Left.

I do this by first turning to the existing literature on the New South Wales green bans, then moving into a broader discussion of the intersection between trade unionism and political activism in Australia. From here, I adopt a historical perspective to show that social justice (including environmental justice) was firmly on the unions’ agenda prior to the arrival of the New Left in the mid-to-late 1960s. Further, I examine the New Left’s arrival as connected to the existing tradition of social justice campaigning in New South Wales, embodied in the prominent green bans movement that took centre stage in the early 1970s.

### **Green Bans in New South Wales**

That the 1970s New South Wales union movement participated in green bans was a significant moment for Australian left-wing activism and, as such, prompted extensive analysis in the years that followed. Consequently, there is a diversity of academic and popular literature on the subject that documents this period. Most of this material, however, is concerned more with recounting the narrative of activism in the green bans era than explaining its emergence in the context of the Old/New Left divisions in the Australian left, or as an extension of existing patterns of social justice campaigning in New South Wales. It is this gap that my analysis addresses. My intention is not to revisit the details of the green bans, which are already well understood, but rather to take a wider perspective on the campaign and position it in its appropriate historical context. In doing so, the paper reframes our understanding of the extent to which the New Left influenced the conservation campaign carried out by the trade unions, and also emphasises potential opportunities for collaboration with trade unions on environmental justice issues (Burgmann, 2000; Sparrow, 2004). Even so, the existing

literature on the campaign (and the period around it) provides useful information essential to constructing a more complete appreciation of the events in question.

Perhaps the most comprehensive coverage of this era comes from Meredith and Verity Burgmann in *Green Bans, Red Union: Environmental Activism and the New South Wales Builders Labourers' Federation* (1998). With unprecedented access to the BLF archives, Burgmann and Burgmann were able to construct the most comprehensive account of the green bans to date. Their research suggests that, "the interaction between New Left ideology and NSWBLF practice was, in the context of Sydney in the early 1970s, a two-way process since the Sydney New Left was affected by its experience with the union" (Burgmann & Burgmann, 1998, p. 126). As the book explains, this two-way process operated such that Sydney's New Left demonstrated to organisations like the BLF that its belief in egalitarianism coexisted soundly with union values, whereas the trade unions showed far-left comrades how their resources and experience with collective action could assist the New Left in conducting effective protest campaigns.

The Burgmanns' position on the influential role played by the BLF in incorporating shared New Left values is further discussed in James Colman's biography of BLF leader Jack Munday (2016). In an endnote, Meredith Burgmann writes that, "to those of us involved in Resident Action Groups and BLF Support Groups at the time, Jack [Munday] and the other BLF leaders inspired in us a sense of hope, an absolute belief that we could change the world ... or at least our community" (2016, p. 300). Burgmann goes on to note that, "the rise of the New Left and the de-Stalinisation of the Australian Communist Party" in the green bans era was responsible for liberating the left-wing activist community in Sydney and, ultimately, changed the nature of union activism in Australia (Burgmann in Colman, 2016, p. 300-301). In this respect, the green bans reflected a leftist movement that was once again free to acknowledge that environmentalism and conservation had always been central to Marxism (Soja, 2010; Stevis et al., 2018). Indeed, Friedrich Engels himself wrote as early as 1876 that, "after the mighty advances ... in the present century, we are more than ever in a position to realise, and hence to control, also the more remote natural consequences of at least our day-to-day production activities" (Engels, 1951, p. 83).

Jeff Sparrow supports Engels' view on workers' potential to address issues beyond the traditional paradigm of economic conflict, asserting that "the most important aspect of a class analysis is identifying the working-class as not simply a victim of environmental problems but a force capable of overcoming them" (2004, p. 5). This realisation of labour's ability to influence issues usually reserved for the New Left is highly apparent in the green bans, which Kay Anderson and Jane Jacobs (1999) construct as "the birth of modern environmental politics in Australia" and note "have been canonised as examples of class-based urban social movements" (p. 1018). As

they rightly point out, the green bans are an interesting focus for analysis of how left-wing activism evolved in Australia in this period, a profound moment when “the uniquely Australian ‘Larrikin Left’ flexed its political muscle in nonworkplace arenas” (Anderson & Jacobs, 1999, p. 1018).

### **Trade Unionism, Politics and Activism: An Australian Context**

The trade union movement in Australia has been the subject of much commentary in the socio-political movements literature. In their study of the country’s unions, Mark Bray and Jacques Rouillard categorise the Australian trade union movement as “autonomous ... unlike the vast majority of union movements around the world, autonomous unions [like those in Australia] are dominated by neither the state nor political parties” (1996, p. 198). Stephen Deery and Helen De Cieri identify a range of variables influencing union membership in Australia, including gender, industry, family history and the mobility of the workforce (1991, pp. 60-61). Notably for this study, their research found that, “employees who favoured the redistribution of income and wealth in society had a significantly higher probability of union membership” (Deery & De Cieri, 1991, p. 69). What emerges is a scenario in which workers supportive of social collectivism (in this case, social welfare) are more likely to join a union and, thus, are already primed to become subscribers to the organisation’s broader position on other collectivist social justice issues like environmental protection, which are removed from the economic issues that led them to join in the first place.

Despite sharing similar socio-political aims, not all Australian unions have historically engaged in activism in the same way. Although all trade unions campaign for workers’ rights in some capacity, the extent of political mobilisation in any particular union is often down to the historical and sociocultural conditions that affect it. Maurizio Atzeni (2009) argues that labour mobilisation is the product of workers “becom[ing] conscious of how ‘unjust’ a certain situation is ... once collectively they can share and strengthen the same perceptions” (p. 12). In Atzeni’s view, mobilisation is not the result of a stalwart union membership being ordered to take action by an activist leadership, but instead the result of shared grievances that provide the groundwork for collective action. Atzeni’s position is somewhat at odds with John Kelly’s theory of mobilisation (1998), which argues for the centrality of directive guidance to collective action. The competing premises of Kelly and Atzeni’s theories on mobilisation are important to the story of the green bans in New South Wales. Whereas the influence of charismatic leaders like Jack Mundey and Mick Fowler cannot be denied, leadership alone cannot account for the willingness of union members to participate in actions like green bans, through which they fought for causes like heritage and conservation rather than typical union concerns like working conditions or pay rises. There were direct benefits to the green bans for workers: many

of the heritage areas targeted for “protection” in Sydney were traditional working-class areas, where the possibility of gentrification and development posed a tangible threat to “price out” existing residents, a large proportion of whom were affiliated with trade unions (Barca, 2014; Marcuse, 2009).

The green bans thus reflected an urgent call to action for local union workers, predicated on the very real risk that unrestrained development would eventually leave them homeless. Further, the scale of gentrification threatened to deprive all urban residents (including union members) of access to (a) heritage sites and (b) green space, already in limited supply in a city like Sydney. The “right to the city” is central to spatial (and environmental) justice in the urban environment and, as Peter Marcuse (2009) and Edward Soja (2010) assert, can act as a “glue that binds” radical thinkers and campaigners, in spite of ideological differences that may exist in other areas. Here, the common cause binding unions and New Left oriented activists is manifested in the forces of gentrification, a process that Soja characterises “as a force behind the displacement of preexisting poor populations” (p. 216) and “another form of spatial colonization, less overtly dominated by the state but not entirely different from the blunt institutional expressions of territorial power” in apartheid South Africa or occupied Palestine (p. 43). The conceptualisation of gentrification as a form of colonisation and territorial control goes some way toward explaining New Left interest in “the cause.” Whereas working-class union members fought for environmental justice for primarily practical reasons, for the New Left gentrification represented yet another case of the elite contributing to the oppression of a subaltern population – in this instance, working-class urban residents.

Environmentalism is not solely the philosophical domain of the New Left, however. In their introduction to a special issue of *Globalizations* on environmental labour studies, Stevis et al. (2018) assert that ecological conservation is, in fact, central to the Marxist concepts that guide the trade union movement. This centrality is particularly true in relation to gentrification. As Stevis et al. contend, “while nature is privately appropriated and exploited by Capital, workers’ organisations tend to construct nature as labour’s other, a place to enjoy or a place to be protected from destruction” (2018, p. 439). In the same special issue, Barca and Leonardi (2018) build on this foundation to conceptualise a “*working-class ecology* ... the place where working-class communities live and work, being typically affected by environmental injustice” (p. 487; emphasis in original). Barca and Leonardi go on to develop a topology of labour organisations (including, but not limited to, rank-and-file unions) in relation to their position on environmental justice and commitment to combatting environmental injustices that negatively impact the working-class ecology of local regions and memberships. Importantly, Barca and Leonardi’s concept of working-class ecology is *not* inherently linked to the macro-issues of climate change, but instead the immediate physical environment workers inhabit. It is

this element that makes their construction of working-class ecology most relevant to the green bans, carried out in a period before these macro-environmental issues came to the fore, and in pursuit of immediate defence of their environment from gentrification. A later article by Barca (2014) refers to this as the “intersection of work and nature” and argues in favour of an interpretive framework that “incorporates analysis of the landscape as evidence of past human labour” (p. 3). Doing so blurs the lines between the natural world and the built environment, allowing for greater incorporation of heritage protection actions into the broader discussion of environmental labour activism. I adopt Barca’s conceptualisation of environmental labour in my analysis: here, labour and environmental activism are treated as ideologically-aligned movements that are “socially engaged ... with utopian aims to expose unequal power relations, and promote new social or environmental orders” (Bailey & Gwyther, 2010, p. 1). In this sense, while seemingly motivated by distinct driving factors, the “utopian aims” of equity (and opposition to destructive Capital) are shared by both trade unionists and environmental activists, offering a broad conceptual foundation for trade union green bans in 1970s New South Wales.

### **Setting the Scene for Green Bans in New South Wales, before 1968**

Even before World War II, the New South Wales trade union movement reflected on the experience of campaigning on the type of broad social justice issues that, later, were central to the green bans of the 1970s. Key members of the Communist Party and union movement were openly advocating for social change outside of the conventional wheelhouse of labour rights. The “new social movements” ushered in by the New Left in the 1960s were (in reality) already a focus for many activists in New South Wales, where there was a lengthy history of using organised labour to pursue causes outside its conventional remit. Wright was not the only unionist in this era who saw great potential in using the apparatus of the trade unions to influence government policy outside of labour rights. In the period immediately after World War II, the Japanese withdrawal from Indonesia resulted in a territorial dispute in which Indonesia sought to assert its independence from previous colonial rulers, The Netherlands. In solidarity with the Indonesian campaign for self-governance, the Sydney branch of the Waterside Workers’ Federation (WWF) announced a “black ban” on Dutch ships from 23 September 1945, refusing to work on Dutch vessels until Indonesian independence was recognised (Sydney boycott, 1945). The Labour Council confirmed the boycott and it soon extended to other unions like the Seaman’s Union of Australia and the Federated Ship Painters and Dockers Union (Lockwood, 1982). The ban on Dutch ships lasted four years until 1949, when the Dutch forfeited their claim to Indonesia. The so-called “Black Armada boycott” was not an aberrant example of union political activism in the era: at a “peace

conference” held in Sydney on 12 June 1950, representatives from the largest New South Wales unions agreed to industrial action designed to combat a range of issues from nuclear proliferation to imperialist policy in South-East Asia. Jim Healy, federal secretary of the WWF, noted at the conference that it was the unions’ position that, “peace is today, war is tomorrow, unless we stop it” (Peace council, 1950). The post-war union movement was highly concerned with political acts that were seen as a threat to peace and, more importantly, saw an opportunity for union members to be active in disrupting the ability of governments to pursue these policies, both at home and abroad. Although the concept of the New Left was still in its infancy in Europe and had yet to truly arrive in Australia, the foundational, anti-imperialist principles of this philosophy were already being established in the Australian left on the docks and worksites of New South Wales.

Although the idea of formal green bans has been popularly credited to Jack Munday and his colleagues in the BLF in the early 1970s, union action to prevent developments similar to the green bans had been taking place in Sydney for more than 10 years before properly entering the cultural and political zeitgeist with the struggle to protect The Rocks. In May 1957, car sales company Auto Auctions sought to demolish a block of flats in the inner-city suburb Woolloomooloo and put in its place a car yard (Homes before profits, 1957). The efforts to protect the building were led by alderman Thomas Wright, who campaigned for council to acquire the building in an effort to prevent Auto Auctions demolishing it and displacing residents (Wreckers again, 1957). Demolition began at the St. Kilda apartments before the council could take possession of the property, but was stopped when the Building Workers’ Industrial Union (BWIU) agreed not to participate in “dwellings being demolished in a time of great housing shortage” (City council moves, 1957, p. 12). Even so, Auto Auctions persisted in its attempts to demolish the building, continuing to send a non-union crew to destroy the property. In one instance in November 1957, 30 members of the building unions working on a nearby property were forced to chase a demolition crew employed by Auto Auctions away from the property, saying that “if the wreckers return, so will they [the union workers]” to prevent the destruction of the building (New policy needed, 1957, p. 10). Though the unions managed to prevent the demolition of the St. Kilda apartments, the combined efforts of the state ALP, Labour Council, trade unions and residents’ action groups failed to pressure the state government to give discretionary powers to prevent demolitions to city councils in New South Wales (Demolitions are still on, 1957).

The BWIU decision to stand against redevelopment is an important precursor to the local focus of the green bans more than a decade later. In their respective analyses, both Nugent (2011) and Uzzell and Rathzel (2013) note that the history of environmentalism in the union movement is one that has evolved over time from a reactive, local focus on micro-issues (such as

redevelopment plans, as in the Auto Auctions case) to more global, proactive campaigning on macro-issues (like climate change). As Nugent (2011) makes clear, it is often the localisation of environmental and conservation issues that prompts trade union members – not natural environmental ideologues – to participate in industrial action. In the Auto Auctions case, the conservation campaign was constructed as an effort to prevent the destruction of housing during a time of shortage, something that unquestionably impacted members. A similar argument would later be made in regard to the gentrification issue that lay at the centre of the 1970s green bans, albeit with a New Left influence that allowed that campaign to be seen as both a reactive, local and proactive, ideological affair (Barca & Leonardi, 2018; Soja, 2010).

### **The New Left Arrives – Radicalism Reignited**

In the post-war era, a rift began to form in the global leftist movement between traditional labour-oriented Marxists and a new breed of progressive who believed the left needed to turn its focus to a broader range of social issues affecting the proletariat, from feminism and civil rights to disarmament and an end to global imperialism. Proponents of this New Left like Herbert Marcuse believed that stabilisation in the economic system meant that the working classes were no longer incited to revolt in the way Marx described and, thus, the next stage of human liberation was to overcome the “one-dimensional” state of spiritual and intellectual poverty brought on by the triumph of capitalism (Marcuse, 1964). Like Marcuse, economic prosperity was cited by other New Left theorists like John Saville as the root cause of the stagnation of socialism, and “the most important single reason for the miserable performance of the Left ... [and] its intellectual collapse in the face of full employment and the welfare state” (1959, p. 10). By the dawn of the 1960s, even eminent sociologist C. Wright Mills was calling for a reconstruction of leftist opposition: in his “Letter to the New Left” (1960), Mills argued for a political left that continued to fight against oppression in all its forms, regardless of the fact that the Old Left Marxist movement had essentially “won” its fight for improved wages and conditions in most industrialised countries by this point. Despite Mills’ call to arms, the arguments made by New Left philosophers about the need for the left to expand the scope of its struggle to other oppressed groups had already taken hold in the Old Left of New South Wales politics, notably reflected in the decades-long tradition of taking industrial action to support various social and political causes in the state’s trade union movement.

The New Left’s influence on the Australian protest movement began in earnest with the elevation of Laurie Aarons as general secretary of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) after the retirement of Old Left traditionalist Lance Sharkey in 1965 (Symon, 2005). The CPA had experienced a split in its membership the year before, driven by overseas

tensions between the Soviet Union and China. When the CPA threw its support behind the Soviet Union, prominent Australian communists like the BLF's Norm Gallagher and WWF's Ted Bull broke away to form the Communist Party of Australia (Marxist-Leninist), arguing that in supporting the Soviets the CPA had abandoned the basic tenets of Marxism-Leninism that united all communist movements around the world (Knight, 1998). Sharkey was a veteran leader of the CPA, installed in the role by the Soviet government in 1930, and, as such, remained stalwartly committed to the Soviet Union. At the time, Aarons led the pro-Soviet faction and, in turn, he was well-placed to replace Sharkey the following year. Aarons' initial support for the Soviet Union changed significantly after he became leader of the CPA: while initially an ardent advocate of Nikita Khrushchev's liberalisation policies, he ultimately became a vocal critic of Brezhnevian imperialism in the late 1960s (Wells, 1970). Aarons's leadership of the CPA coincided with the election of CPA member Jack Munday as secretary of the New South Wales branch of the BLF in 1968, around the same time that Aarons began to adopt a more progressive, New Left position on the CPA's role in modern political advocacy (Burgmann & Burgmann, 1998; Wells, 1970). Munday, a former professional rugby league player, was a long-time member of the CPA with a history of demonstrating on New Left issues like nuclear disarmament and the Vietnam War. He was arrested for defying police orders at an anti-war protest in 1964, only two years before becoming the Sydney district president of Aarons' CPA, with his rise providing further indication of the ideological shift taking place in the party (at least in Sydney) during this period (Colman, 2016).

The 1968 rebellion against Soviet occupation in Czechoslovakia has often been cited as a turning point in Aarons' ideological evolution, marking his final rejection of Soviet imperialism. However, there is archival evidence to suggest that Aarons was closely involved with some of Australia's most radical New Left protesters even before coming out in favour of the CPA shifting further away from Old Left, pro-Soviet principles. Surveillance conducted by the Special Branch in Queensland, a neighbouring state, identified Aarons as having attended a meeting of the Society for Democratic Action (SDA) at the group's headquarters on 27 March 1967. Led by radical student organisers like Brian Laver and Mitch Thompson, the SDA modelled itself on the New Left contingent of the American Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), which later evolved into "the Weathermen" or "Weather Underground" and became notorious for militant, often violent, activism (Miller, 1994). At the time of Aarons' visit to SDA House, the protest group was in the midst of a campaign against the Queensland government's restrictions on public protest. In a report to Police Commissioner Frank Bischof several months later on 6 July 1967, Special Branch chief Leo de Lange wrote that, "there appears to be little doubt, that all this has emanated as a result of the actions of Aarons and Gifford [Charles Evan Gifford,

Queensland CPA president]” (Leo de Lange to Frank Bischof, report, 6 July, 1967). Although Laver denied that “Laurie Aarons gave [the SDA] our instructions early this year,” there is little doubt that Laver’s radicals provided a model that Aarons and his allies in the CPA sought to emulate (John Herse & Les Hogan to Frank Bischof, report, 9 July, 1967). The shift toward New Left ideology in the CPA did not occur in a vacuum: shaking off the authoritarian control of the pro-Soviet faction in the late 1960s, Aarons and his supporters (including Munday) only sought to reassert a tradition of campaigning on a social justice platform that had, only a decade earlier, been a central aspect of Old Left activism in New South Wales.

### **The Green Bans as an Embodiment of New Left Politics in the Sydney Unions**

The CPA’s adoption of New Left ideas in the late 1960s preceded the decision of the BLF and other unions to begin participating in green bans in mid-1970. The origins of the Sydney green bans lie in a decision made at a meeting of the BLF executive on 12 May 1970, at which a committee including Munday and state president Bob Pringle agreed to “a new concept of unionism” that recognised the right of workers to ensure their labour was not used in ways to which they were ideologically opposed (Burgmann & Burgmann, 1999, p. 48). Since the early 1960s, the BLF had become increasingly concerned with town planning issues, particularly the boom in office block development that resulted in residential neighbourhoods being demolished and local populations being displaced. Akin to union activists like Thomas Wright who sought to prevent the demolition of the St. Kilda apartment block in 1957, Munday saw it as his union’s responsibility to “not just become robots directed by developer-builders who value the dollar at the expense of the environment” (Thomas, 1973, p. 56). Despite this characterisation of Munday’s position, the green bans were (as noted) not just an ideological response to the intellectualised prospect of ecological destruction or loss of urban heritage. As Nugent (2011) notes, blue-collar workers are often in a position in which they are the first to feel the impacts of poor environmental management. While Nugent was speaking here in a contemporary context about the loss of jobs due to climate change, his observation was true during the gentrification period of 1970s Sydney: the same inner-city neighbourhoods targeted for “renewal” were home to working-class union members who would be forced out or “priced out” as a result of development (Barca & Leonardi, 2018). As such, the ideological rhetoric underpinning the BLF’s commitment to green bans was intrinsically intertwined with a key concern of its proletariat membership: prime real estate in central Sydney that was being targeted for development was largely home to working-class families who would be priced out of the area under a policy of gentrification (Soja, 2010).

The first formal green ban was issued by the BLF in 1971, after a residents' action group from Hunters Hill approach the union for its aid in protecting a patch of bushland on the Sydney Harbour foreshore that was set to be developed into luxury housing (Burgmann & Burgmann, 1998). When the developers announced it would use non-union labour instead, like Auto Auctions had more than a decade before, a group of BLF workers on another of the company's building projects declared they would walk off the job "even if there is the loss of one tree" at the Hunters Hill site (Mundey, 1988, p. 177). Backed into a corner by the BLF, the developers relented, and the bushland was successfully saved. The green bans continued for much of the early 1970s, focusing on protecting both the natural environment (as in Hunters Hill) and the built environment, particularly the inner-city neighbourhoods occupied by the working classes. Famously, Mundey's BLF is credited with having prevented the destruction of Sydney's historic district The Rocks through a ban lasting from November 1971 until the end of the green bans era in 1975 (Burgmann & Burgmann, 1998; Colman, 2016). The BLF announced the ban would not be lifted until a development plan was agreed to by residents, and when such a plan was eventually agreed to after years of negotiation, it included provisions preventing high-rise buildings being constructed in the area. Nowhere was the collaboration between organised labour and the New Left intelligentsia more evident, however, than in the fight to save Victoria Street.

From the late 1960s on, property in Kings Cross was being bought by developers like Frank Theeman, who sought to capitalise on the growing popularity of the city's entertainment district (Burgmann, 2000; Rees, 2004). Kings Cross, an area both demographically working-class *and* characteristically bohemian, was home to many in Sydney's activist community, including prominent intellectuals and activists Roelof Smilde and Wendy Bacon (Rees, 2004). While this group was dominated by libertarians more closely associated with the New Left, in the green bans this group found an easy point of convergence with the Old Left unions, and the two worked together to enforce a green ban on Victoria Street. Members of both groups were active in the Victoria Street Action Group (VSAG), including Seaman's Union and CPA activist Mick Fowler, who upon finding his rental property on Victoria Street sold to Theeman's developers in April 1973, staged a sit-in with the support of both the residents' group and his fellow unionists (*The fight to prevent*, 1973). Fowler's sit-in lasted three years, and was a rallying point for anti-developer activism in Victoria Street. Ultimately, Theeman employed a collective of hired standover men and police officers to forcibly evict as many as 80 squatters (but not Fowler) from the properties he owned in Victoria Street. As part of the evictions of 3 January 1974, Theeman's squad also destroyed residents' houses and made them uninhabitable, removing wiring and other living essentials to prevent squatters from returning (Burgmann, 2008; Rees, 2004). Theeman's act

triggered even stronger opposition from the BLF and other unions adhering to the ban, who committed to continuing the fight to prevent “the human costs of the alliance of political power and profiteers ... [despite] the use of thugs as scab labour” (Burgmann & Burgmann, 1998, p. 212).

Even after the disappearance and presumed murder of VSAG organiser Juanita Nielsen in July 1975, residents’ action groups and several unions continued to frustrate Theeman’s efforts to redevelop Victoria Street (Burgmann, 2008; Rees, 2004). However, they did so without the support of Munday and the BLF. The green ban on Victoria Street was, ultimately, the driving factor in the BLF national committee’s move to remove Munday and the rest of the New South Wales BLF executive from their leadership positions in October 1974. Norm Gallagher, the federal secretary of the BLF, was a founding member of CPA breakaway group the Communist Party of Australia (Marxist-Leninist) in 1964, and thus was already at odds with the Aarons faction to which Munday was associated (Moore, 2013). Beyond this, Gallagher was also grappling with the deregistration of the federal BLF due to political and financial challenges the union was facing on a national level. The deregistration of the federal union was used by the developer-friendly Master Builders’ Association (MBA) to pressure Gallagher to stop Munday and the green bans.

The MBA offered Gallagher its support for re-registration on the proviso that the federal executive took control of the New South Wales branch from Munday, who was costing developers significant money through his green bans (Cook & Goodall, 2013; Moore, 2013). Gallagher agreed, denying union tickets to Munday, Pringle and their allies and fundamentally forcing them from the BLF. In their absence, Gallagher took control of the New South Wales branch and almost immediately lifted the green ban on Victoria Street. Members of the VSAG assert that Gallagher was seen in Kings Cross meeting with developer Frank Theeman around the time the ban was lifted, suggesting that Theeman himself was behind the MBA’s corrupt overture to Gallagher and the federal executive (Rees, 2004). In any case, Gallagher’s takeover of the New South Wales BLF effectively brought an end to the green ban era in Sydney. Shortly thereafter in 1976, Aarons resigned as national secretary of the CPA, loosening the New Left’s grip on yet another Old Left institution (Aarons, 2010).

## **Conclusion**

After his death in May 2020, Jack Munday was (rightly) lauded as an urban leader who led campaigns that fundamentally saved Sydney’s natural and built environment. His pursuit of the green bans in the early 1970s was revolutionary, using the structures of organised labour to mobilise active support for typically New Left causes. Munday and the NSWBLF were not without their detractors in the Old Left trade union movement, however,

ultimately resulting in the BLF federal executive intervening to strip them of their positions in the mid-1970s and bring an end to the green bans. On the surface, these actions seem to be a recalibration of Australian unionism, returning it to its foundational values: giving a voice to working-class labour and campaigning to improve wages and working conditions.

Usually, the Old and New Left are constructed in binary terms. This conceptualisation promotes a narrative common in international contexts (yet not entirely relevant to the Australian context) that casts trade unions as archetypal agents of a normative Marxist labour movement. From this perspective, the green bans represent an aberration in which unions were influenced by (among other factors) a New Left ideology then popular around the world. My analysis demonstrates that this representation is misleading. While the green bans were unquestionably driven by influential advocates of the New Left like Aarons and Munday, these men derived much of their influence from participating in ordinary Old Left bastions like trade unions and the CPA. Their participation in Old Left political movements predates the rise of the New Left and so, as I have argued, the New Left was less an influence on Aarons and Munday than a useful framework for furthering their existing social justice agenda centred around a working-class ecology (Barca & Leonardi, 2018) that was typified by public campaigns grounded in environmentalism and conserving the built environment.

Rather than being influenced by a New Left school of thought emanating from international thinkers like Marcuse and Mills in the 1960s, Aarons and Munday were instead continuing an existing *local* tradition of social justice campaigning in the New South Wales labour movement (Barca & Leonardi, 2018; Burgmann & Burgmann, 1998). Union campaigning on a social justice platform, which would later become intrinsically connected to New Leftism, was evident even before World War II. Unions' anti-imperial boycott of Dutch vessels in the late 1940s offers evidence that New Left influence on unions in the late 1960s and early 1970s was not simply a case of locals taking up an international political trend, but instead continued a pre-existing strain of activism in the New South Wales Old Left that had a history of supporting social justice causes of all kinds. Even the green bans themselves were not an entirely new concept: from at least 1957 the state's unions had been advocating for the protection of the natural and built environment, employing industrial action as a tool to pressure developers and the state to review its urban planning policies.

This is not to say that Munday, Aarons and their allies do not deserve credit for the innovative green bans policy. Instead, my analysis reframes their actions as reflecting (or even celebrating) the unique character of social justice campaigning within the Old Left in mid-century New South Wales, rather than as a subversion of that activism. The success of the green bans as a proactive environmental campaign by the unions was, at least in part, the result of the personal stakes trade union members had in the gentrification of

inner-city Sydney. Munday and his allies were able to sell the green bans as not just part of an abstract ideological agenda, as the New Left constructed it, but also as a necessary action to combat the impact of rampant neoliberalism on union members who risked being forced out by developers like Frank Theeman (Nugent, 2011; Soja, 2010). Environmental labour theorists typically acknowledge that environmentalism in the union movement is a response to neoliberalism and macro-environmental threats to working-class jobs like climate change (Nugent, 2011; Uzzell & Rathzel, 2013). My analysis suggests that environmentalism existed long before the global implications of macro-issues like climate change became apparent – and even before the ideological influence of the New Left on unions in the late 1960s.

Instead, environmental activism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century New South Wales labour movement occurred largely as a response to local issues, a reaction both to the potential displacement of workers and (somewhat presciently) a proactive strike against the neoliberal threat posed by a gentrified inner-city (Burgmann, 2000; Nugent, 2011; Soja, 2010). The BLF green bans represent what Uzzell and Rathzel (2013) assert is the case of “a local union ... [being] much more tied to the immediate, everyday interests of their members” (p. 10). In the current struggle to achieve a balance between a trade union’s mandate to protect workers’ rights (and jobs) and support intersectional social justice causes like environmental and heritage protection, the green bans stand as a prime example of how campaigns for environmental justice in the union movement can be characterised (and, importantly, pitched to members) in local terms, rather than in a more ambiguous, mediated way. While the BLF’s green bans were influenced by Munday’s affiliation with the New Left-inspired, Aarons-led CPA, the green bans were successful because of two primary factors: the direct impact on workers and, further, the existing tradition of localised heritage protection and campaigning for social justice causes in the state’s labour community. For contemporary practitioners, this insight reasserts the importance of framing environmental justice causes as local concerns to obtain the collective support of union members, rather than solely focusing on the common tendency in the modern neoliberal world to pitch such campaigns as global issues with critical macroeconomic implications. The case of the New South Wales unions and the green bans shows that local resonance and tradition is far more persuasive to obtaining workers’ investment in environmental justice campaigns than crafting an ideological call to arms in the style of the New Left or, indeed, many eco-campaigners operating in the current era of global activism.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to acknowledge the support of the editorial team and anonymous reviewers from *Studies in Social Justice* who offered suggestions that provided an important theoretical dimension to this article. Many thanks also

to the staff of the Queensland State Archives who provided essential research support for the initial project that would eventually evolve into this project.

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