

# **The builders Labourers Federation: *Never Powerless.***

## **Lessons for the 21st Century**

### **Introduction.**

Brian Boyd

It has been a perennial problem for the union movement to pass on to new generations of workers how their working conditions and wages were achieved. Many an activist unionist has bemoaned how younger workers take for granted the conditions they enjoy, or worse, believe it all comes from the “good heartedness” of the boss.

The industrial and political impact of the BLF, especially between WW2 and the early 1980's, is a story that should be told as a contribution to informing workers of the 21st century how key established working conditions were won through much struggle, over long campaigns.

The BLF one out, but often in concert with other building unions, deserves due recognition for the establishment of many entitlements which we expect today, and which are outlined by Norm Wallace below.

Many gains initiated in the nation's building industry would often transfer into other industries. The history of the struggles of the BLF, are rich in lessons for today's union movement. As we go forward into the second decade of the 21st Century, we see unions under pressure as always by the ‘powers that be’.

The BLF under the leadership of Paddy Malone and Norm Gallagher saw the practice of ‘putting politics in command’ as a guiding principle for the union. It was no secret these two BLF leaders were communists. They responded to the needs of the union's membership from a ***working-class point of view.***

In turn, they responded to the various issues raised by the wider community with a ***united front*** approach, when that was possible. Gallagher would lend a sympathetic ear for example to the conservation causes of protecting heritage buildings. Around Melbourne BLF ‘Green Bans’ would be crucial in saving from the wreckers ball a number of Melbourne's icons; these are referred to by Dave Kerin in his piece below on the Green Bans.

Gallagher would argue it was important for the militant BLF to have good relationships with the community. The union's enemies, he pointed out regularly, would always try to isolate the BLF from the public in order to try to weaken its contributions to both the rank and file and around wider social issues.

All of this suggests there is much worth in recording the narrative surviving from the days of the Builders Labourers federation. The fight to defend workers' rights remains the key task of Australia's union movement. A wider appreciation of the story of the BLF can contribute a positive input in this regard.

Such a story is characterised by struggle, by wins and losses, resulting finally in improved wages, working conditions and conservation.

The political and industrial conflicts the BLF had with employers and governments contain many lessons. The BLF saga is a history that has yet to be fully recorded, never mind given some practical analysis.

The role of Norm Gallagher as a senior figure in these four decades of the building industry deserves some wider and deeper considerations as well. The conservative, capitalist media has given a biased, one sided view of the BLF and Gallagher over the years.

When the BLF was deregistered in 1986 and again finally in 1991, with the various States based branches of the union eventually merging in various ways with the CFMEU, the historical contribution of the BLF tended to be overlooked, as the years went by.

The BLF was definitely an industry leader in pushing for proper wage rates and working conditions on the nation's building sites. Achieving a fair rate for a builders labourer, in comparison to the rates established by the traditional industry tradesmen like carpenters, painters, plumbers, electricians, boilermakers and the like, was a BLF 'cause celebre' for years. Norm Gallagher insisted this was a key focus of the union; that is, a builders labourer is not a second class citizen in the industry.

When the BLF began covering the crew of the tower cranes, as they became widely used, it Tower cranes were a big technological advancement for the construction industry as the nation developed and built more diverse infrastructure.

Scaffolders and riggers were also given 'special status'. Enhanced wage rates were fought for. Of course steel fixers and concreters were crucial contributors to the construction process. They too deserved their own wage bracket.

The progressive left politics of the BLF demanded that even the basic builders labourer was skilled at the end of the day and his or her rate was respectfully linked to the hierarchy of wages fought for over the years. These were printed in their thousands and distributed on a regular basis to every BLF member, organisers and shop stewards. A BLF wages sheet was often used as a recruiting tool on the smaller, less organised sites, where more often than not it was the builders labourers who were getting ripped off.

Wider collective industry or site agreements for all building workers were regularly instituted by the BLF. Construction work associated with the 1956 Melbourne Olympic Games saw the establishment of the industry's first Building Industry Agreement (BIA). The concept took off in the proceeding years.

Leaders like Paddy Malone and Norm Gallagher took many social and political issues to the rank and file for their consideration. As communists they encouraged BLF members to take on issues like the injustices inflicted on Aborigines, the US war in Vietnam and the Apartheid system in South Africa.

When conservative governments tried to destroy the original Medibank (now the Medicare system), thousands of builders labourers joined with other unionists and community groups and took to the streets in protest. Yes, the BLF story is worth telling and passing on. **However, this is not the end of the bigger story of Australian building workers and their unions.**