

It's still right to rebel

Only struggle availeth.

'What's the good news from Canberra?' Jack Munday always wanted to know when we visited him and Judy in their two-up and two-down brick unit in Croyden Park. We welcomed Jack's unintended reprimand as a reminder to look further than the headlines, to see through the parliamentary circus. We could report how retired unionists combined in Vintage Reds to picket worksites and courthouses; and how the AEU's latest EBA required school principals negotiate teaching loads with the Union sub-branches. Jack did not need us to be reminded of the crimes he had spent his life opposing.

Jack never fell into his anecdotage. If he mentioned his glory days it was to recognise much harder workplace activism had been made by forty years of union-smashing from the Grand ALP-LNP Coalition.

From 'Jack the Lad' to 'the sage of Sydney'

Hagiography, as Meredith Bergman calls her co-authored under-researched *Green Bans Red Union* (1998), undervalues Jack Munday's character and his achievements by feeding a cult of personality. Worse still, that approach harms a movement forever in need of learning from our mistakes no less than we need to be inspired from going back over our wins.

Somehow it is always easier to criticise than to self-criticise, and easier to do either than to correct one's faults and weaknesses. On 2 May 1973, for instance, the NSW BLf executive called on its staff and officials to break out of their self-imposed isolation. They had to go back to the Building Trades Group and the Labour Council. A few did – but only for a while.

Despite the many layers in Munday's life that are sketched below, writing his biography would be a breeze compared to one about Gallagher – unless you could bring Balzac back from the grave.

It is far harder to find anyone on the Left in Sydney to criticise Jack about anything than it is to hear a word in support of Gallagher. The obverse applies in Melbourne. The bias runs deeper in Sydney where the assumption,

as Henry Lawson claims, that 'New South Wales is Australia' goes unchallenged. Responses to my *We Built This Country, Builders' Labourers and their Unions* (2011) reminded me that the majority of us want – need? - to have our prejudices confirmed.

So I was taken aback by the chill response to my expectation that a prominent militant from the early 1970s would be going to the event to celebrate Jack's Eightieth. He wasn't. Along with other NSW supporters, this BL had been denied a Federal ticket and so had to go to the Pilbara while he saw Munday swanning around the globe as Mr Green Bans. A woman BL spoke of Comrade Munday's ability to forget decisions made the previous night by CPA members of the Federation.

Interpreting change

Munday's apotheosis into the sage of Sydney does not erase his days as Jack the Lad. What these pages indicate is that at the start, he avoided the error of supposing that changing our world towards communism could be severed from interpreting both the world and our efforts. As the DIAMAT catechism lays it out: Practice: Theory: Practice. Munday stood out in the late 1960s by re-working the theory as he was reconceiving his practice around the jobs.

The times were achanging

Arriving in Sydney from North Queensland in 1951, Jack Munday played League for Parramatta and worked around metal shops. Through union activism and a desire to ban the bomb, he joined the Communist Party in 1955. He shifted jobs and unions to work on heavy equipment at the St Mary's construction site, becoming a delegate for the FEDFA. Jack became a BL in March 1957 when he moved to the construction of a Shell Oil plant at Granville, where he chaired the shop stewards.

His new union was entering an era of internal brawling among the new leadership following the resignation of the stand-over merchant, Fred Thomas, Secretary since 1941. Munday became part of the reform team but ran last in the 1961 elections for organiser. With encouragement from the new Federal Secretary Norm Gallagher, the NSW Executive appointed Munday as an organiser from 7 November 1962. He earned his election in 1964 for his work with demolition crews around the city. After the reform group's Secretary had to stand aside in March 1968, Jack took over and then won a ballot of members.

Jack demonstrated the thoughtfulness that he had brought to organising when he connected the 1967 downturn in Sydney projects to the crisis in the British economy: 'Much of the choice real estate in the heart of Sydney is English-owned.' As a result, new UK investment had dried up. At this stage, he accepted the conventional wisdom about 'development' as a good thing in itself. He called for greater continuity of employment, though not yet for worker-controlled permanency (union-hall hire) or environmental bans.

A willingness to think outside the box showed in his 'Sportsview' column in the *Builders' Labourer*. In April 1967, he challenged two assumptions. The first was that boxing was a sport. He wanted it banned as the 'sickening spectacle of a healthy young man being pummeled around a ring.' As if that subversion of machismo were not enough, he did the almost unthinkable among CPA members by criticising the Soviet Union. He could 'understand the greed of capitalism and its approach to boxing' but not 'why a socialist country encourages such a "sport".'

This independence of mind blossomed in an article during the Spring of 1968, at the time of the upsurges in Paris, Prague and Peking. He contended that union activists needed to recognise that a glorious past did not guarantee future success. Since 1954, only one new worker in three had joined a union: 'That must shake the complacent.' To grow, unions would have to meet the range of working-class needs, including the new concerns of the young. The plight of Aborigines, low-paid women and pensioners would keep economic struggles vital. Under capitalism, however, wage rises could 'not lift the living standards of Australia's poor to the level necessary.' Students and young workers were active 'against repression and routine.' Unions had to catch up:

Unless the unions broaden their horizons and tackle all issues concerning their members from wages and living costs to the type of education needed today – from medical care to housing – from democratic rights to peace – they will invite further criticism from members, young workers, students and others.

Munday had grasped a great and lasting truth: 'unless unionism directs its enormous influence to the very organisation of society it will not continue to be successful even on wages and conditions.'

If Jack's vision was far-sighted, devising strategies and tactics required collective experience. He was not alone in finding it easier to know what to be

against than how to turn those gut reactions into winnable demands on the job and practical politics for communities. He denounced the Warsaw Pact's suppression of "Socialism with a human face" in Czechoslovakia. He rejected racism here, in the US and Southern Africa. He opposed conscription and the war against the Indo-Chinese. His objection to boxing prepared his mind to welcome other challenges to conventional masculinity from the women's movement and gay liberationists.

Munday wrote a long letter to the Communist weekly, *Tribune*, dated 23 June 1969, about the problems of socialist democracy following the invasion of Czechoslovakia. After visiting the USSR in 1969 to study democracy, he noted its absence at the grass roots. He found the excuses about not publishing Pasternak or Solzhenitsyn laughable. Only by telling the truth about existing socialist societies would it be possible for the CPA to win support for socialism in Australia.

His insights criss-crossed the paths of conscientious objectors from 1965, the Gurindji walk-off in 1966 and Black Power from 1968, second-wave feminism from 1969, and Camp Inc. by 1970.

Closer to the BLF was the reorientation of the official labour movement with the emergence of a technocratic labourism from Dunstan, Whitlam as Federal leader from early 1967, and Hawke to the ACTU Presidency in July 1969. Jim Cairns's opposition to White Australia, his participation in street protests over conscription and the war, and his academic expertise in economics offered new directions for the parliamentary left. Meanwhile, the big wins by the Metals early in 1968, and the mass walk-outs after the gaoling of Clarrie O'Shea in May 1969, put paid to the Penal Powers. The imbalance of class forces was tipping our way.

In an article for the *Australian* in 1971, Jack is still seeking how to tie these broadening of horizons into the need for even a half-way decent life:

In this period, the workers generally have paid a price for our 'progress' and relative full employment. The rape of Australia's natural resources; an Australia which is owned and dictated to by powerful financial groupings in Washington, London, Bonn and Tokyo is now an accepted fact of life.

Australians have very little say in the really decisive matters affecting our future. Federal and State governments allow many advantages to foreign investors and owners of our natural wealth. ... Decisions are tailored to suit those who control the wealth – all too often these

people have never been to Australia, are not unduly concerned with the way in which Australia develops, but they are concerned with the quick dollar coming their way.

He is voicing long-standing grievances around the Left against overseas ownership and class exploitation.

What proved novel was how the NSW Branch campaigned for wages and conditions. Gallagher's report to the 1970 Federal Conference underlines that NSW had 'spear-headed the campaign' for margins. In doing so, the branch had initiated a new form of struggle with its vigilantes, which broke from the old trade-union methods:

We did not allow ourselves to be bound by the bosses' rule of fighting. This time we fought the struggle on our own ground and threw aside all the 'sacred cows' of the past. These vigilante groups arose out of the very high level of strike action in New South Wales, and the experience quickly spread to Victoria.

Provocations by the employers 'aroused the workers' feelings to such an extent that they started to destroy the employers' private property'. These actions against corporate property contrast with the violence by the capitalist class, which its agents call law and order, and which could be seen in Vietnam, in conscription, and scabs.

This tit-for-tat spread to environmental protections. As self-styled 'developers' tried to demolish working-class homes and the historic buildings that their forebears had built, the BLs demolished the despoilers' profits by stopping concrete pours.

More environments than one

From 1900, BLs and their unions had imposed what, by 1973, had become known as Green Bans, a term coined by a rank-and-filer. A scatter of actions across seventy years is not the same as consistent campaigning. Green Bans drew contours on a strategic map of social ecology as a class question.

In 1969, the BL Jack Sharrack was already secretary of the Alexander Canal Anti-Pollution Committee when he sought the Federation's support to clean up the twin environments of his workplace and in what remained of nature along the Georges River.

The manifestation in the Seventies got underway with the South Coast Organisation to Oppose Pollution (SCOOP). During 1974, the Victorians stopped logging the Melbourne's water catchment by blacking-listing the

timber. Early in 1970, the Queensland Trades and Labour Council banned oil exploration on the Barrier Reef, which campaigner Judith Wright called 'spectacular and unprecedented.' That decision is why we have a Reef to defend today. Early in 1971, Gallagher spent a few nights in Pentridge over his action to preserve a green space in North Carlton. In the years that followed, the Branch saved the Regent Theatre, the City Baths and the North Melbourne markets and refused to build a car park in the Botanic Gardens.

NSW BLF involvement began late in 1971 in response to a call from residents of a public housing estate at Eastlakes to protect their open area from a grab by Parkes Development. The residents won that dispute after 200 BLs stopped work on the company's inner-city project. Because most labouring was casual, it was almost impossible for a BL to be granted a mortgage. In the light of those circumstances, not even the most timid or right-wing labourer hesitated to down tools if a worker's house were threatened.

The NSW Branch was crucial to the Rocks, the 'Loo and Victoria street but marginal to Kelly's Bush. When Pringle approached the Battlers with an offer of support, they said 'thank you' but stipulated that they did not care to have BLs on their picket-lines because of the media's portrayal of them as violent vigilantes – 'Munday's Marauders', according to the *Smellygraff*.

Will the revolution be televised?

After Branch President Bob Pringle had been convicted for trying to saw through the goal posts before the Springbok game, Munday attacked the "racist judge", whom he accused of changing his ruling because of a national strike. A contempt case followed in October 1972. Gallagher's 1972 *Report* observed that he had 'always had the opinion that Jack's love of Television would get him into serious trouble;' he thought Munday 'foolish for saying it.' We militants 'should not make ourselves "sitting ducks".' Gallagher accepted that if the state had not been able to catch Munday on this matter, its agents would have gone for something else. One could not tie up \$664m. in development and walk away Scot-free.

Not only does the capitalist state hunt down every trick in the Statue book to disorganise militants. The agents of capital inside business are on the lookout for our soft spots to work out how to disable us. That's why we need comrades to protect from the snares. Cold cash, hot sex, hard drinking or the rigged gaming table - it matters not. As Jack said about Gallagher's conviction

for corruption: 'Had Norm wanted money, he could have had millions. Not just \$130,000 in materials. I know, because I know how much they kept offering me.'

Jack's weakness, as his wife Judy told a journalist, was 'ego'. He was not alone there. Instead of black banning him from the media, he was encouraged to become a star turn. Profiles in *Antiques and Art Australia* and by *Vogue* appeared in August 1973.

In mid-1974, he appeared on a Channel 9 current affairs program, 'Federal File' in his role as national president of the Communist Party of Australia. His performance indicated that he was losing touch with the realities of working-class life, not to say the state of global capitalism rocked by the first oil-price shock. He talked about Communists throughout the unions calling a general national strike in October 1974 to win higher wages. The most he could offer by way of argument for this adventurism was to point to Spring Wage offensives in Italy and Japan.

There is no comparing Jack's venal vanities with the betrayals of other Left union officials. If you can hold your nose long enough, think of Martin Ferguson's embrace by the mining bosses. Gallagher's refusal to fall on his sword in 1984-5 is still having its ill-effects. Instead of the Federation's leading the charge against the latter Accords its Branches were focused on keeping him out of the clink. Those years cast a shadow over the effort to defend the Construction Division from the Union Integrity Bill.

Not the Jack and Norm show

Munday stepped down as Branch Secretary on 6 November 1973, though he could return to a different paid position after a year.

Despite sniping and disruptions from both sides, Gallagher had not lost his appreciation for Munday as he told the 1973 Federal Council:

First of all, I oppose Jack Munday standing down as State Secretary and I have told him so. Whilst it is known that I have serious disagreements over which way the Federation should move forward, I have always said and still say that there is room in the Federation for the Gallaghers and the Mundeys.

I have always given credit where credit is due and I would be the first to admit that Jack Munday has made a contribution to the Federation and this should be recognised in the Minutes of Federal Council.

I would like, on behalf of the members, to wish Jack well and where you go, remember, Comrade Munday, that is was the Builders' Labourers who made you and never forget that, because it was their industrial strength that was used to make you the public figure you are.

Gallagher later said that Federal intervention into New South Wales would not have been necessary had Munday stayed. Judy also thinks it could have been avoided. Gallagher knew that if Jack gave his word, he kept it. He did not trust Joe Owens to do the same.

What is for sure is that Jack would never have been as arrogant as Owens was in late January 1974 when he went off to Queensland after agreeing to a time and place for a Federal Management Committee to deal with the latest de-registration move from the NSW Master Builders. Owens had not bothered to tell them that he wouldn't be in town. The block-headedness behind that insult to basic solidarity made some form of intervention inevitable.

Munday stood as a Communist for Senate in May 1974, attracting 11,000 votes, about one for each BL in the State. Even after the pro-Soviets had left the CPA or the SPA, he faced a sizeable opposition to be elected as Federal President in June 1974, winning by forty-five votes to twenty-seven. He resigned eight months later to go on another overseas lecture tour.

Munday did not work as a BL until he got a start at St Vincent's hospital from 1 February: 'He goes to the job,' Judy Munday told the *Australian* (17 April 1974), 'he just doesn't get there very often.' Journalists portrayed him as 'portly', which is not surprising given that he had not done hard yakka for a dozen years, was then in his mid-forties, an age when many BLs have had to retire hurt, or be content with light duties.

By 1981, when the courts enforced Munday's readmission to the BLF, he had lost \$100,000 in wages. He had survived by labouring outside the industry, on unemployment benefits and from fees for writing and speaking.

Green Bans and Beyond came out that year from Angus and Robertson, edited by the journalist extraordinaire, George Munster, from *Nation* and *Nation Review*, who knew more about real estate swindles than the ICAC ever would. The book deserves to be made available as an e-book, but preferably in hard-copy as well.

Jack was back in stride after April 1984 when elected from the Rocks, Gipps Ward, to Sydney Council, where he chaired the planning committee. The forces of destruction had formed the Building Owners and Managers Association in 1966 (now the Property Council) to carry out what they boasted in 1994 was their 'rule bending'. The Greiner government sacked the popularly-elected Sydney City Council in 1987, replacing it with a business-oriented Commission, before redrawing the boundaries to install a property-owners-only Council for the CBD. That deform fed the boom in office building that ran its course into the recession we would not have had to have if Hawke-and Keating had not handed financial regulation over to globalized speculators.

After the CPA dissolved itself in 1991, the Mundeys joined the Greens. Bob Carr has been heard to remark that one of his finest appointments was to put Jack on the NSW Historic Houses Trust. In April 2005, the National Trust bestowed the Energy Australia Award for Lifetime Achievement in environmental protection: 'I realised at the time that what we were doing was really historic. It got the adrenaline pumping ... we were vilified and now we are bloody heroes.'

No joke

The supposed satire in *Utopia* misses the point. Far from the government's being incapable of carrying any scheme to fulfillment, the NSW administration is in overdrive knocking down anything in the way of the profit-takers. That includes public housing at the back of the Rocks. And this current crew is on the rampage without being on the take as in the days of Askin and Lord Mayor Port.

No wonder so many Sydney residents cherish the Green Bans. For what Jack, his union and Party comrades and their supporters in community groups struggled to win the name 'Jack Munday' means more than the life of one individual. At some moments, his passing can seem as if it tolls for the promise of those times. Yet it is also a tocsin of the recurrent prospect of a nuclear exchange which drew Jack towards the Communist Party in 1955. We can also hear the knell reverberating with a summons into battle to uphold our right to protest if we are to exert any sway against the juggernaut of capitalism. It's need to plunder nature and to exploit labour is, a Jack well knew, always levering society towards barbarism.

The lock-down means that the thousands who would have come to Jack's funeral will have to wait for a year or more to gather.

We shall return.

Humphrey McQueen, Canberra, 14 May 2010.

Late in 2004, Victorian CFMEU Secretary John Cummins arranged for me to receive the \$50,000 commission to write a history of builders' labourers and their unions. The CFMEU declined to finance publication. I then provided \$9,000 to Ginninderra Press to publish *Framework of Flesh, Builders' Labourers Battle for Health & Safety* (2010) and *We Built this country* (2011). Years later, I was delighted to get half that sum back from the Copyright Agency for the use of *Framework* in Certificate 4 courses for OH&S trainees. It is not for me to say which of my books is the pick of the crop but *Framework* is the one I am most pleased to have produced if it in any way contributes to saving a life or preventing an injury. The comment about *We Built This Country* that pleases me most came from a merchant seaman: 'You can see it wasn't written by a retired official.'

Both books are now available free of charge from www.surplusvalue.org.au on the principle of CopyLeft.