

# Blue Bans

## How Unions Saved The Great Barrier Reef

Alison Stewart

### Introduction

The trade unions...held the key, and if they stood firm, the door would be closed on drilling, perhaps for ever.<sup>1</sup>

This is a quote from renowned Australian poet-activist Judith Wright in her book *The Coral Battleground*.

She was describing the precedent-setting industrial action by Queensland unions in 1970 which halted the push to drill for oil on the Great Barrier Reef.

Alongside a determined campaign waged by environmental activists, union black bans endorsed by the Queensland Trades and Labor Council paved the way for protection of the Reef as a marine national park and its World Heritage listing.

These black bans foreshadowed the much more famous 'green bans' of the NSW Builders Labourers Federation.

It is a remarkable and under-appreciated episode from Queensland labour history, demonstrating the power of workers and their willingness to take

industrial action on a key environmental issue—with striking lessons for today.

### Setting the Scene

Up until the second half of the twentieth Century, the Great Barrier Reef was mostly viewed by society and governments through the lens of its resources and economic potential.

The 1960s however began to see growing concern within the community about environmental damage to the Great Barrier Reef, for example, from unregulated coral and shell collectors.

This was on a background of increasing disquiet about the impact of human activity on the environment in general, internationally and in Australia, symbolised by the impact of Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring*, which documented the environmental harm caused by the indiscriminate use of pesticides.

In Queensland, people were beginning to speak out about the burning and felling of rainforests in the state's north and the prospect of sandmin-

ing at Cooloola, fearing that areas of environmental value would be lost forever.

But while groups had campaigned in the past to protect elements of the natural world from human induced destruction, environmental activism as a social movement was still in its infancy as was the science of ecology.

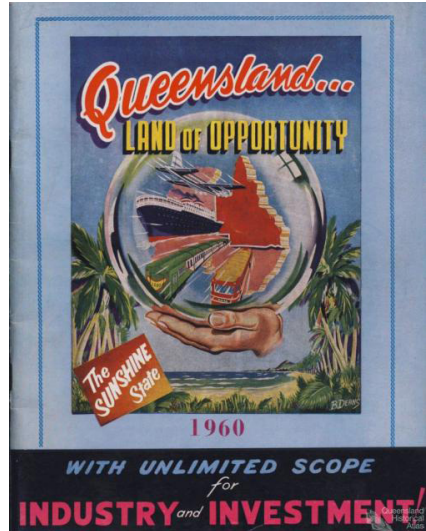
Research conducted on the Great Barrier Reef was largely centred on taxonomy—the identification and classification of species—and, in large measure, on the geology of the reef.

Scientific bodies and scientists were generally conservative and not opposed to development as such. Natural resources could and should be exploited, just in a ‘controlled’ way.

In 1956, for example, University of Queensland and Great Barrier Reef Committee geologist Dorothy Hill compiled a report for the mining industrialist Maurice Mawby entitled, *The Geology of the Great Barrier Reef in Relation to Oil Potential*.

While there had been regulations implemented regarding the Reef, these protection efforts were mainly local and species-specific.

The Country Party, in coalition with the Liberals, governed Queensland from 1957 to 1983 (they governed alone—renamed the National Party



*The Sunshine State, 1960. Brochure produced by the Premier's Department and Department of Labour and Industry, 1960. Collection of the Centre for the Government of Queensland*  
[www.qhatlas.com.au/photograph/sunshine-state-1960](http://www.qhatlas.com.au/photograph/sunshine-state-1960)

in 1974—until 1989). Led from 1968 by Premier Johannes Bjelke-Petersen these governments saw the Reef, as well as many other significant natural environments, as ‘resources’ to be exploited in the interests of ‘progress’ and ‘development’.

In Judith Wright’s words, the Queensland government “was wide open to every proposal for development, mining, industry and settlement.”<sup>2</sup>

It was in this context that the Wilderness Preservation Society of

Queensland (WPSQ) was established in 1963, a grassroots campaigning organisation which came to argue for “preservation” of the natural environment and not just “conservation”.

Judith Wright was a founding member of the WPSQ and one of its key activists. Her book *The Coral Battleground* is a fascinating blow-by-blow insider’s account of the campaign to save the Reef.

I have relied on her book, alongside a newly released book, *Saving the Reef* by Rohan Lloyd—a detailed historical examination of settler society attitudes towards the Reef and of the environmental campaign—to gain an overview of these events.<sup>3</sup>

Concern for the future of the Reef ramped up significantly in 1967 when an application was made to mine Ellison Reef, on the Great Barrier Reef off the coast of Innisfail, for limestone, a product utilised by the sugar cane industry. The application was advertised in the local newspaper, the *Cairns Post*.

John Busst, an artist and environmentalist who lived in Bingil Bay near Innisfail, organised to oppose the application in the court.

John was passionate about the reef. He had taken up the idea of making the Great Barrier Reef a national marine park to honour the memory of his friend, former prime minister Harold

Holt, who had been a keen recreational scuba diver.

Ellison Reef was claimed by the state government and mining proponents as being “dead” and therefore mining it would not be detrimental. Even the University of Queensland argued this was the case when Busst approached them for support. They replied to him that:

It appears that the portion of the reef known as Ellison Reef ... is dead and in consequence exploitation would not endanger living coral. In view of this, the University would not oppose the granting of the lease.<sup>4</sup>

To build the case against mining on Ellison Reef, Busst recruited volunteer scientists to survey the reef which was found to be very much alive with 88 species of live coral, 60 species of molluscs and 190 species of fish identified.

The mining warden accepted the environmentalists’ arguments and recommended that the application be rejected.

Defeating the application to mine on Ellison Reef was seen as being incredibly important. Rohan Lloyd writes that Busst approached the application as a vital test case. He felt strongly that if the limestone mine had gone ahead, it would have opened the door to other mining and development ap-



*Ellison Reef (Google maps)*

plications on the reef.

As well, the campaign to oppose the application had generated widespread publicity about the dangers threatening the Reef.

Soon after, it became known that permits to explore for oil on the Great Barrier Reef had been quietly issued by the Queensland government. Unlike mining, these applications were not required to be advertised. John Busst only found out about them incidentally when reading a company prospectus.

The Queensland government initially refused to publish the details but when they did in 1969, almost the entire 2000-kilometre length of the Great Barrier Reef had been carved up. Only a small section of the Reef off Cairns had not been included.

When the leases went to tender, forty

oil companies vied for drilling rights in the Gulf of Papua and off the Queensland Coast.

Ultimately six firms were awarded the rights to oil exploration including a company, Exoil in which newly installed National Party premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen had significant personal shareholdings.

The WPSQ campaign to save the reef was launched.

The WPSQ joined forces with a group of university scientists and students who had established the Queensland Littoral Society (QLS)—now known as the Australian Marine Conservation Society—in 1965.

The WPSQ and QLS were tireless in building opposition to drilling through letters to the papers, lobbying politicians, trying to facilitate vital research into the ecology of the

reef, organising petitions and opinion polls.

The first ever bumper stickers in Australia were “Save the Barrier Reef” and they were incredibly popular: 15,000 were eventually sold. When Judith Wright landed in Perth after an overseas trip in 1968, she “saw a car in one of the streets with a striking red sticker on its window; SAVE THE BARRIER REEF, it read.”<sup>5</sup>

Public opinion was swinging increasingly in favour of protecting the reef—in Queensland and across Australia.

In August 1969, the QLS organised a petition asking the state government to prevent any drilling on the reef unless adequate detailed plans had been made to deal with any oil spillages rapidly and in a manner which would not harm aquatic life. It quickly got 13,000 signatures—an incredible number for the time.

The environmentalists also looked at legal options as there was a question mark over whether the state government had the right to issue permits for oil drilling and exploration given

that offshore regions were meant to be under the control of the federal government.

More broadly, there was now a growing comprehension of the ecology of the Reef: that it must be treated as one ecological whole. The enormous size of the reef was pivotal in generating the incredible diversity of life. It could not be carved up without downstream consequences. So-called “dead” reefs were essential to the cycle of life on the reef.

This challenged the concept put forward by the government, the oil and mining industry, and conservative scientific bodies who argued that sections of the reef could be developed without harming others. There could be ‘controlled exploitation’.

Into this mix was thrown concern about an outbreak of Crown of Thorns starfish. Starfish numbers had grown to plague proportions on some sections of the reef and coral was being destroyed. Scientists were uncertain as to the cause but there was speculation that some form of human action had led to a breakdown in the



*Save the Barrier Reef car bumper sticker*

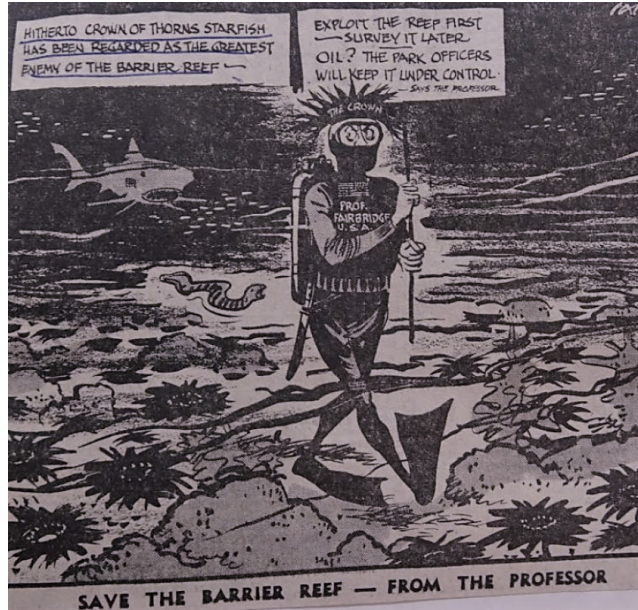
ecology (such as the collection of shells containing animals which predated the starfish, or pollution of coastal waters by insecticides).

The Crown of Thorns crisis added to the concern about how throwing one element of the ecology of the reef out could have downstream effects that could threaten the entire reef. Increasingly, the science was saying the reef must be preserved as a whole.

Strengthening this resolve was a series of terrible accidents involving offshore oil and gas rigs and tankers.

The *Torrey Canyon* disaster in which an oil super tanker ran aground off England's south-western coast in 1967 was the world's first major oil tanker disaster. One hundred thousand tonnes of crude oil leaked into the surrounding sea causing a major environmental disaster and contaminating 20 000 birds.

The oil slick eventually reached a size of fifty-six kilometres and thirty-two kilometres wide. The only way the au-



*A US geologist suggested the Reef could be drilled for oil and was subsequently lampooned in the media - here by cartoonist Ian Gall in the Courier Mail April 30 1969*

thorities could deal with the issue was to bomb the wreck. Closer to home, there had been a gas blow-out from an Esso BHP well in Bass Strait. Then in January 1968, there was a monumental offshore oil leak at Santa Barbara in California.

According to Judith Wright:

The papers were full of the awestricken accounts of the damage. There were full-page photographs of dead and dying sea-birds, oiled seals and dead fish washed ashore, of blackened beaches, slimy rocks and volunteer workers struggling to clean

up the beaches as more and more oil came ashore on every wave.<sup>6</sup>

The leak continued for months and was unable to be stopped. Detergents were used to try and break up the oil, but these were found to be both ineffective and toxic in themselves.

These accidents undermined the assurances given by the state government that oil spillages and leaks would be rare, limited in nature, would not damage the Reef, and could be dealt with. Public opinion swung strongly against allowing similar dangers to the Great Barrier Reef.

Despite the growing concern about the dangers of offshore drilling for oil demonstrated so acutely by these disasters, the Bjelke-Peterson government was intransigent.

Bjelke-Peterson was adamant that drilling on the Great Barrier Reef should proceed. The government kept stating that “every precaution” would be taken to prevent such a disaster here. But while Joh and the Country Party - Liberal Party coalition repeatedly assured the public the reef would be protected, behind the scenes exploratory surveying and drilling were already taking place without any for-



*The stern section of the Torrey Canyon awash following break-up. The RAF and Royal Navy used bombs, kerosene and napalm to try to burn up the leaking oil.*

image c/o [www.axfordsabode.org.uk/torreyc13.htm](http://www.axfordsabode.org.uk/torreyc13.htm)

mal protective measures in place.

Liberal Prime Minister John Gorton had expressed reservations about drilling and the federal government made moves to broaden its authority over the resources of the Reef.

But Gorton's government was deeply divided and did not proceed with legal action as the Commonwealth to

claim jurisdiction of the Reef because it did not want to impinge on states' rights.

Then came the bombshell. In September 1969, the Queensland government announced that drilling by a joint venture between oil giant Ampol and oil exploration company Japex would commence in Repulse Bay off Mackay in October 1969.

Japex had already begun preliminary work: equipment was being assembled in Mackay.

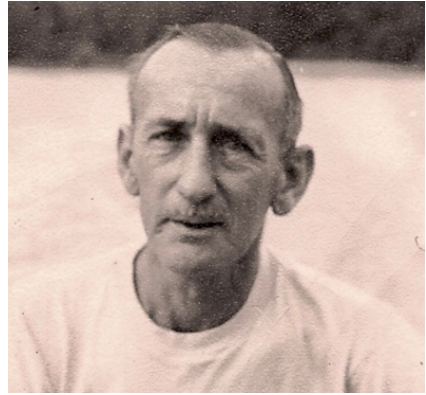
There was an outpouring of public opposition. Rohan Lloyd writes that:

On September 18, the Premier's Department became inundated with telegrams from the public deploring the government for allowing drilling to go ahead.<sup>7</sup>

The commencement date was subsequently postponed to February 1970 due to delays in the fit-out of the *Navigator*, the oil rig hired by Japex to perform the drilling.

The *Navigator* was an ex-US navy cargo ship which was being modified at the Texas port of Orange to become a state-of-the-art mobile oil rig. It then had a forty-five-day journey to sail to Brisbane.

With the embarkation of the *Navigator* imminent, the most decisive ele-



*John Busst*

ment in the campaign to oppose oil drilling on the Great Barrier Reef came into play—industrial action by the unions.

### **The Unions Move**

QWPS activist John Busst was an incredibly energetic activist and well-connected, and he had been lobbying anybody and everybody to oppose the drilling—including Labor leaders and the unions.

On September 5 1969, Busst wrote to federal opposition leader Gough Whitlam and asked if “the appropriate unions would care to take strike action against Ampol—after all the Reef is the workers’ playground!”<sup>8</sup>

His efforts began to bear fruit.

On 16 September, the Commonwealth secretary of the Amalgamated



Engineering Union wrote to Bjelke-Petersen:

If Ampol-Japex persists, in the face of public opinion and drills in Repulse Bay, a voluntary Australia-wide boycott on all Ampol-Japex products will be called for, and a similar boycott on any other oil or mining company endangering the future of the Great Barrier Reef.”<sup>9</sup>

As Judith Wright recounts:

He [Busst] helped to draw up a submission for an Innisfail member of the Amalgamated Engineering Union to present to the ACTU Conference. This was to be published in the union journal; and the AEU had endorsed the campaign to prohibit mining or oil-drilling on the Great Barrier Reef. Mr Bob Hawke had given the submission his own attention; copies were to be sent to the Prime Minister and the Premier.<sup>10</sup>

According to Wright, the submission concluded:

It is therefore resolved:

That a total ban on all mining on the reef be immediately declared.

That an independent scientific and judicial commission be set up to determine the future of the GBR with the power to co-opt all such international scientific assistance as thought

necessary.

That the Commonwealth Government be requested to issue an originating summons to the High Court to determine the constitutional issue involved.

That a writ be issued against the Queensland Government to prevent its proceeding with the decision to allow Ampol-Japex to drill in Repulse Bay

That a public opinion poll on mining on the reef be conducted at every major centre on the Queensland coast before the general elections.

That the Barrier Reef be declared a National Marine reserve for the benefit and relaxation of the Australian public, in no way despoiled by the activities of mining companies.

That a voluntary Australia-wide boycott be called for on any oil or mining company endangering the future of the Great Barrier Reef by mining operations.”<sup>11</sup>

This resolution was incredibly significant. While it was not yet ACTU policy, the AEU had endorsed the campaign to save the Reef and a union black ban to stop mining and drilling, and it was one of the most important unions involved in the mining industry at the time.

Judith Wright understood the precedent that could be set:

Our hopes for a final decision on a union ban were rising. But it seemed too much to expect. We would not know for sure whether it would be implemented until the second week in January. And if it were, it would be the first time, not only in Australian history but as far as we knew in world history, when the trades unions had taken a step that went so far outside their traditional boundaries of interest.<sup>12</sup>

Eddie Hegerl from the Queensland Littoral Society had previously addressed the Trades and Labor Council of Queensland Congress in 1968, calling for the Reef's protection. His address was received "with acclamation":

The President pointed out that if Mr Hegerl's organisation supplied the material, Council would do its best to keep unions acquainted with the developments of this very progressive policy.<sup>13</sup>

In 1969, the Queensland Trade Union Congress went on to pass a resolution "Barrier Reef Protection":

That Congress is concerned at the attempts by the Government to minimise the danger associated with off-shore drilling, particularly drilling within the vicinity of the Great Barrier Reef.

The Great Barrier Reef is ac-



*Judith Wright*

knowledged as one of the outstanding tourist attractions of the world, and Congress is completely opposed to endangering this great asset by off-shore drilling.

Congress gives full support to the conservationists and their supporters who are in complete opposition to the drilling of oil wells in and around the Barrier Reef in view of the number of blowouts that have occurred in off-shore drilling around Australia and other countries which have fouled beaches and killed off land and fish life.

That Congress request the Federal Government to immediately make sufficient funds available to protect the Great Barrier Reef from the ravages of the Crown of Thorns starfish as the reef must be protected.

Congress calls on the Federal

Government to declare the Barrier Reef as a National Park and Reserve and assume full responsibility for its preservation.

Further we call on the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party to raise the question of the Barrier Reef at the recommencement of Parliament.<sup>14</sup>

Then on January 6 1970, environmental activists woke to see headlines splashed across all the major papers: Unions Likely To Ban Work on Coast Drill.<sup>15</sup>

The Transport Workers Union had decided to recommend to the Queensland Trades and Labor Council that it convene a meeting of all TLC affiliated unions to consider a total ban on drilling.

In a letter dated January 6 1970, secretary of the Queensland branch of the TWU, Arch Bevis, wrote:

As a result of discussions held at the Queensland Branch Committee of Management of the Transport Workers' Union on the question of protection of the Great Barrier Reef in line with policy formed by the Queensland Trade Union Congress, 1969, the following resolution was carried unanimously:-

That the Transport Workers Union take up with the Queensland Trades & Labour

Council the question of protection of the Great Barrier Reef against the drilling of oil by calling a Meeting of all affiliated Unions with a view to implementing a form of ban on any oil drilling companies on the Great Barrier Reef to see that no drilling for oil take place.

Hoping that the Trades & Labour Council will place this matter before affiliated Unions as soon as possible.<sup>16</sup>

The main unions likely to be involved included the Transport Workers Union, the storemen and packers' union, the boilermakers' union, the AEU and the ironworkers' association. The TWU said that unions may also look to the ACTU to approach unions internationally to ban the *Navigator*.

Following the TWU's committee of management meeting, Arch Bevis told the media that the Barrier Reef was one of the wonders of the world:

But neither the State nor Federal Governments has done anything positive to protect this Australian heritage.

It would be too late to oppose drilling for oil on the reef after a blow-out. We want to oppose it before it starts.<sup>17</sup>

Mr Bevis, *The Courier Mail* reported, said members of his union's branch management committee did not want

a repetition of the Santa Barbara blow-out in the United States, which did irreparable damage to the coastline.<sup>18</sup>

The black ban was backed by left-wing Labor Senator, staunch unionist, and member of the cross-party Save The Reef Committee, George Georges who sent a telegram to Ampol and Japex on January 5 reported widely in the newspapers:

Public opinion is Australia is strongly against drilling in Great Barrier Reef areas...Failure of state and federal governments to act to protect the reef had necessitated direct action.

Therefore, before the *Navigator* leaves for Australia, I warn those in control that I intend to launch a campaign to declare the vessel black and to withhold services of labour and essential goods for its operation.

George Georges told the media that he did not take this stand lightly:

I did it because all other efforts have proved useless, despite the fact that 90 percent of people are against drilling on or near the reef.

Even with members of the government parties opposed to drilling, we are getting nowhere. Now we will take some more militant action.<sup>19</sup>

As *The Australian* reported:

He [Georges] said trade unions were ready to join him in the fight to stop the drilling.

The Transport Workers Union would organise to impose the black ban and most other unions had carried motions condemning the drilling proposals.

His move would be the start of widespread union action.<sup>20</sup>

Doug Sherrington, a Queensland Labor State member, in the same article applauded the stand taken by Senator Georges.

Anything that will save the reef will have my whole-hearted support, particularly if it comes from the trade union movement.

The situation as far as the reef is concerned, demands drastic measures.

Future generations will owe much gratitude to the trade union movement if by implementing the black ban it prods officialdom into direct action.<sup>21</sup>

The call for a black ban was big news not only in Queensland but across Australia and even internationally and had an almost immediate impact.

Environmentalists were ecstatic and relieved. Despite all the campaigning to build public support, the lobbying of politicians, the development of a scientific case, the approaches to the

Commonwealth government to intervene, it was union threats of a black ban that proved to be decisive.

As campaigner John Busst put it, “It has taken us two and a half years to find the weapon. This is it.”<sup>22</sup>

The QTLC agreed to call a special meeting of its affiliated unions and its dispute committee to discuss the issue given its importance.

“It seems now that only the Trade Union Movement is capable of saving the reef. Every Union and every Unionist has an obligation to posterity to do just that,” wrote Secretary Fred Whitby in a letter to all affiliated unions. “I appeal therefore to all affiliated unions to ensure that they are represented at this meeting.”<sup>23</sup>

With the QTLC special meeting looming, Ampol recommended to Japex on January 13 1970 that it defer the start to oil drilling operations and offered \$5000 towards the cost of holding an inquiry.<sup>24</sup>

The threat of industrial action was key to their decision as outlined in a telegram Ampol sent to Japex: “In view of grave fears expressed by sections of the community that drilling constitutes a threat to the Great Barrier Reef, it is our opinion now that industrial action will prevent the drilling of this off-shore well by you, when the rig arrives on site.”<sup>25</sup>

TWU Secretary Arch Bevis greeted Ampol’s “belated interest” in the reef with scepticism and questioned the effectiveness of a committee of inquiry saying,

Far too often committees go on but are not allowed to implement their recommendations. Committees have a habit of being hand-picked personnel who don’t have any teeth.<sup>26</sup>

On January 16, newspapers reported that the Australian Federated Union of Locomotive Enginemen State Council had decided to support the TWU’s resolution:

The union’s state division manager (Mr FE Doyle) said yesterday his council’s decision meant that Queensland railway engine crews would refuse to haul any goods or materials in any way related to Reef oil drilling.

We believe people would not support the State Government’s action in exposing the reef to danger. On the contrary, they would support what the unions are trying to do.<sup>27</sup>

The special meeting of the QTLC took place on January 21 1970 and as expected a total black ban by all affiliated unions on oil drilling on the Great Barrier Reef was endorsed.

As Judith Wright says in *The Coral Battleground*, “We were saved by the

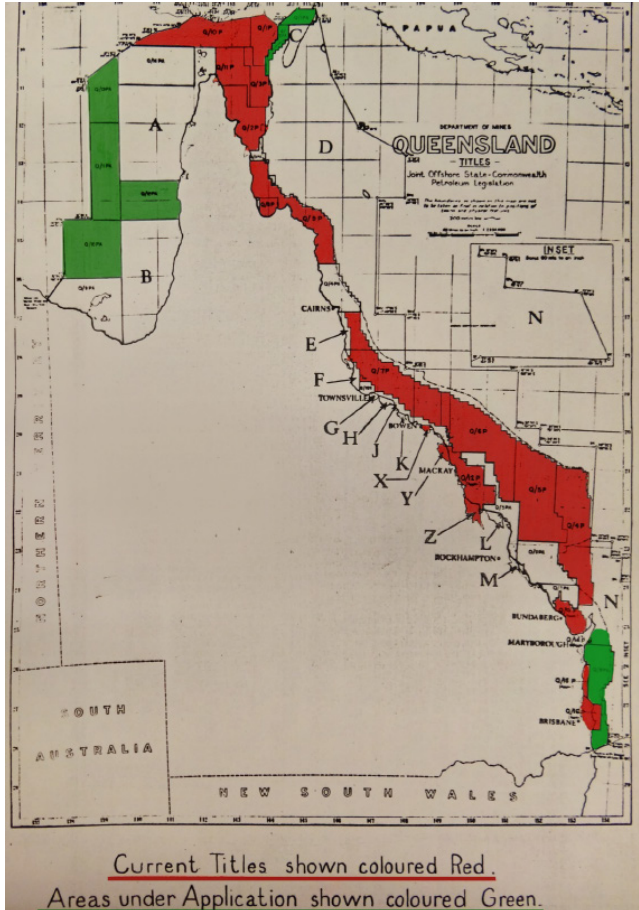
bell.” The union black ban on the Mackay drilling was “spectacular and unprecedented”.<sup>28</sup>

The QTLC received massive public support for its stance. Encouraging and congratulatory letters flowed in as well as donations for the cause.

Even *The Australian’s* editorials were in favour of the union bans. On 7 January 1970, it said that the public had been forced to take direct action: “The black ban proposed by Senator Georges to abort drilling plans will have an unprecedented measure of public support and will probably succeed. It deserves to.”<sup>29</sup>

The Queensland branch of the Postal Telecommunications Technicians’ Union wrote to the TLC on February 13 1970 to inform it that the branch had passed two resolutions  
That the Queensland Branch support Senator G Georges,

the Transport Workers Union and other Queensland Unions on the action taken by them to prevent Private or Public Companies oil drilling on or about the Barrier Reef.  
That the Queensland Branch be



*Map showing areas held under petroleum exploration titles off-shore and areas off-shore which were under application in 1970. c/o Appendix D in Statement of AW Norrie, NLA, MS 3990. Exhibits of the Royal Commission, 2/3 (ii), Exhibit 80. Modified by Coreen Wessels*

authorised by Federal Council to use Industrial Action if necessary against public or private companies or government instrumentalities who attempt to drill for oil on or about the Great Barrier Reef.<sup>30</sup>

The Federated Miscellaneous Workers' Union of Australia also sent its support:

Dear Fred [Whitby],

At a recent State Council meeting of the above Union, discussion revolved around the question of the Save the Barrier Reef Campaign, and I advise that the following resolution was carried:

That the Trades and Labour Council and Unions concerned be congratulated in their stand in the preservation of the Barrier Reef and the complete ban on Companies interested in drilling for oil in this region.

Best wishes

Yours fraternally

H Mellor

Branch Secretary<sup>31</sup>

Both federal and state opposition Labor Party leaders (Gough Whitlam and Ed Casey) had come out in opposition to drilling on the reef and called for national park protection.

The Queensland government admitted that there was nothing that they could do about a union back ban.

Queensland Minister for Mines and Energy Ron Camm, whose electorate was the Whitsundays where the drilling was to take place, said:

If the trades unions want to deprive the people of Mackay of the money that these drillers would pay for their supplies, they can go ahead.

These people are simply standing in the way of progress, and they want Queensland to be the only state without off-shore exploration.<sup>32</sup>

He was well aware of the power that the unions had.

When Ampol called for Japex to defer drilling, Camm responded,

If the company concerned declines to go ahead with the project, that is its responsibility. I realise that it could not continue with this threat emanating from Senator Georges and the unions.<sup>33</sup>

The Queensland government was impotent in the face of the black bans.

Unions in general were on the offensive. In the previous year, draconian anti-union laws embodied in the Penal Powers had been smashed when more than a million workers struck to free the Victorian tramways union secretary Clarrie O'Shea jailed for refusing to pay fines incurred under the laws.

The opposition to drilling and the outpouring of support for the unions' stand put Prime Minister John Gorton under pressure to act. The Commonwealth government decided to shut down drilling in the Gulf of Papua which was under its control at the time.

It then proposed that a committee of inquiry be established, jointly convened by the federal and Queensland government, into the issue of drilling on the reef.

The Queensland government refused to concede and was adamant that drilling should proceed.

But as Rohan Lloyd writes in *Saving The Reef*, "The black ban...provided the necessary political capital for the Commonwealth to intervene and leverage a general postponement of all oil drilling on the Reef."<sup>34</sup>

Prime Minister Gorton wrote to Bjelke-Petersen that:

The proposal before us now is that drilling be suspended on or near the Reef pending a truly joint Commonwealth/State inquiry which will report to both our governments and which will make public its reports.<sup>35</sup>

All but one of the six oil companies awarded permits agreed to suspend operations while the inquiry took place.

Japex did not. It had already spent a lot of money in preparation and the rig was now on its way from the United States. Japex wanted Ampol to reimburse it for expenses.

On January 25 1970, it was reported that the Repulse Bay project was likely to be abandoned. By February 14 Japex announced that it would defer drilling in Repulse Bay. The contract with the *Navigator* was terminated.

Just six weeks from the announcement made by the TWU calling for union bans, the drilling operation in Repulse Bay was dead in the water. And all other operations had been halted.

Busst celebrated the black ban with Judith Wright, declaring:

The submission I wrote some time ago for the A.C.T.U eventually stirred things up, as did my hasty dash to Townsville to see Whitlam, to ask him to put a ban on the rig. It has taken us 2 ½ years to bend this weapon—this is it, and the screws can be tightened still further, if the government inquiry is not over and above board <sup>36</sup>

On January 29, the composition of the inquiry—subsequently upgraded to a Royal Commission—had been announced. It was as Arch Bevis from the TWU had predicted. Its members were indeed hand-picked to give



drilling for oil on the Reef a favourable hearing.

The inquiry would be headed by a three-person committee: a judge, a marine biologist, and a petroleum engineer.

Rohan Lloyd reveals that Bjelk-Petersen vetoed candidates proposed by the Commonwealth because he felt they would not be sympathetic to the Queensland government's position.

The Commonwealth had put forward Mr AD Acuff as the engineer. But he was considered unacceptable by the Queensland government because of his participation in the inquiry into the Santa Barbara oil spill and in the subsequent rewriting of the US's offshore drilling regulations.

"I feel that in Mr Acuff there is a person who would come to the Committee with at least some pre-determined views which would be detrimental to our position," Bjelke-Petersen told Cabinet.<sup>37</sup>

No environmental scientist or organisation was represented. There was no funding for independent scientists to be brought in as witnesses. It was only ongoing campaigning and publicity that forced the Commonwealth government's hand in this regard.

The *Navigator* eventually arrived in Brisbane on March 11 to wait for a new assignment.

The unions maintained a very watchful eye and restated their commitment to banning any activity connected to drilling.

In May 1970, the Seamens Union state branch wanted written assurances that the *Navigator* was not to be used to drill for oil anywhere near the Reef until the inquiry was completed.

The union's state secretary J Steel said that until such an assurance was received, a black ban placed on the ship would remain in force. Otherwise, the union could prevent the rig sailing by Brisbane tug crews refusing it service.<sup>38</sup>

And they indeed received a written assurance!

Dear Sir,

RE: D.V. Navigator

This will confirm my telephone assurance on behalf of the owners, Zapata (Aust) Pty. Ltd. Regarding this Oil Drilling Vessel. Following the cancellation of the original contract, there is no intention for this vessel to operate in the Barrier Reef waters.<sup>39</sup>

The unions continued to remain wary of accepting the outcomes of the Royal Commission. Fred Whitby, the general secretary of the QTLC told the *New York Times* in September 1970, "The decision of the commission won't alter our attitude a bit."



The article continued:

He thus indicated that the unions would continue to immobilise any oil operations in the vicinity of the reef by boycotts as long as the labor leaders considered that there is an element of risk in the drilling.

Protection of the reef “is probably the most popular decision we have ever taken,” Mr Whitby remarked.<sup>40</sup>

The Royal Commission took several years to hear all the evidence and bring down its findings. When it did in November 1974, the three commissioners were split between one who argued that all drilling should be postponed until research had been conducted and two others who felt that drilling could go ahead “with stringent conditions.”

As Judith Wright notes,

it seemed to us that the Commissioners had too much accepted the view that their terms of reference were to state where and how the Reef could be drilled—not whether it should be protected from drilling.<sup>41</sup>

The Queensland government made it clear in any case that it would ignore any finding made by the Royal Commission to stop drilling. It was not only politically committed to exploitation of natural resources for the development of Queensland capitalism; its members had very close ties to mining interests. Half the state cabinet held substantial shares in mining companies which had dealings with the government.

It remained unmoved by oil spills that even directly affected the state: off

Townsville and near the Torres Strait.

While the Royal Commission was undertaking its hearings, Gough Whitlam's Labor team was swept to power in 1972. Labor had gone to the election with the promise to protect the Reef by making it a national park.

In 1973, the Whitlam government enacted legislation to claim federal jurisdiction over off-shore regions and associated resources below the low-water mark. But this was challenged by the Senate which removed the sections regarding the mining code.

The states went berserk. They launched an appeal in the High Court against the legislation. In fact, they did not wait for the High Court's ruling and, ignoring Whitlam's legislation, decided to unilaterally renew offshore drilling permits without consulting the federal government.

The only state that did not do this was Queensland.

Whitlam did not wait for the High Court finding either. In mid-1975, he brought in Labor's promised legislation, enabling the declaration of a marine national park covering the Great Barrier Reef and the setting up of an authority, the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, to advise the government on its management.

But then Whitlam was dismissed by

the Governor General and Labor lost the ensuing election. Malcolm Fraser became prime minister.

### After Whitlam

It was not the Royal Commission's findings which resulted in protection of the reef. Even Whitlam's legislation, while a huge step forward, may not have protected the reef from further exploitation.

While the High Court eventually found against the states and ruled that the Commonwealth had jurisdiction beyond the low-water mark, Fraser was open to relinquishing Commonwealth rights.

As late as 1979, there was speculation about the potential for drilling and mining on the reef. Federal and state government ministers were meeting to discuss a joint program of 'development'. This meeting was expected to consider "guidelines to define areas where exploratory oil drilling could be allowed".<sup>42</sup>

The one constant which prevented drilling from going ahead was union power.

When it was reported that Fraser might allow drilling, the ACTU immediately reconfirmed the union commitment.

The *Courier Mail* reported on May 16 1979 that the ACTU had placed a total

ban on all drilling and mining operations on the Great Barrier Reef:

The A.C.T.U. president (Mr Hawke) said last night the ban was effective immediately.

He said that the Barrier Reef was a natural resource of inestimable value.

It should be preserved at all costs—and forever...

Mr Hawke said that the A.C.T.U would seek the support of international union organisations for its reef ban.<sup>43</sup>

This action by the ACTU had followed a request from the Queensland TLC with Secretary Fred Whitby reiterating that there would be no compromise by the union movement within Australia on drilling of the Reef.<sup>44</sup>

The decision was praised in a letter from prominent environmentalist Vincent Serventy, President of the Wildlife Preservation Society of Australia, to the TLC:

Our Society welcomes your reaffirmation of the ban on drilling on the Great Barrier Reef. As you know this was the first time anywhere in the world, where the union movement had taken direct action to protect the environment and signalled the birth of the 'green ban' movement, though in your case it might more aptly be described as a 'blue ban'.<sup>45</sup>

The continued threat of union action, the intransigence of environmental activists and overwhelming public expectations that had been crystallised by the bans meant that drilling on the reef was now well and truly off the agenda.

### Reflection

The incredible action taken by unions in 1970 has so much relevance for today.

Unions had the power to protect the Reef. Alongside uncompromising environmental activists, they pushed back governments which ignored public opinion and the science.

The Great Barrier Reef, with its diversity of life, is again under threat—this time by climate change.

The Great Barrier Reef is a unique environmental treasure, but it is also a canary in a coalmine. It is warning us of a catastrophic future if we do not act.

We have already witnessed the destruction and loss of life and livelihoods caused by unprecedented fires, floods and famine induced by global warming.

Governments, both conservative and Labor, are not prepared to do what is

needed to protect the reef or our society.

Their over-arching concerns are for the coal mining companies and their profits and maintaining the “confidence” of corporations to invest. Just like the Joh Bjelke-Petersen government, they are ignoring popular opinion and the science. The Queensland Labor government endorsed the massive greenhouse gas emitting Adani coal mine.

Unions could play a key role like they did in 1970.

In 1970, Queensland unions took unprecedented action to protect the reef. Some of these unions had members directly involved in the oil and mining industries. But they stepped outside those immediate interests and acted for the whole of society.

That sort of union action is needed

now to demand an end to fossil fuel exploitation, the transformation of our economy with new jobs that will not leave any worker worse off.

Of course, there are differences between then and now.

Union coverage today is much lower, and unions are hindered by laws which constrain industrial action. But the stakes are higher.

In the 1970s, unions were on the offensive in fighting for pay and workers’ rights and not afraid to take industrial action regardless of its legality.

Meanwhile it is also essential for environmental activists to see the potential in an alignment with the union movement and the power that unions represent as the activists in the WPSQ did in the 1960s.

**Alison Stewart has been a socialist activist since the mid-1980s. She is an original member of the Cloudland Collective (CC), established in the wake of the election of the Newman government to oppose its neo-liberal agenda. Since then she has been involved with the CC organising forums on issues such as climate change and the role of unions. She helped organise the 2021 joint forum with CC and the BLHA on slavery in Australia following Scott Morrison’s scandalous and ignorant comments that no such thing existed here.**

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Judith Wright, *The Coral Battleground* (West Melbourne, Vic.: Thomas Nelson, 1977), 152.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>3</sup> Rohan Lloyd, *Saving the Reef* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> Wright, 8.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>7</sup> Lloyd, 119.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 120. Lloyd quotes from James Cook University holdings: Busst to Whitlam, September 5, 1969, JCU, Busst Papers, 2/16.

<sup>9</sup> Lloyd, 120. Lloyd quotes from Queensland State Archive holdings: Garland (Commonwealth Secretary AEU) to Bjelke-Petersen, September 16, 1969, QSA, SRS 1043, ID 538155.

<sup>10</sup> Wright, 92.

<sup>11</sup> Amalgamated Engineering Union, Submission to the 1969 ACTU Conference, quoted in Wright, 92.

<sup>12</sup> Wright, 104.

<sup>13</sup> Minutes of the second session of the 44th Queensland Trade Union Congress, October 16, 1968, pages 2-3, Trades and Labor Council Collection, University of Queensland Fryer Library, 118, Box 9.

<sup>14</sup> Decisions of the 45th Queensland Trade Union Congress, page 19, TLC Collection UQFL118, Box 90.

<sup>15</sup> Courier Mail, January 6, 1970, TLC Collection, UQFL. 118, Box 328.

The TLC clearly felt that their actions around the Great Barrier Reef would be historically important and set aside everything in this folder that they thought was related: newspaper clippings, flyers, letters, press releases.

<sup>16</sup> TLC Collection UQFL118, Box 328.

<sup>17</sup> TLC Collection, Box 328.

<sup>18</sup> TLC Collection, Box 328.

<sup>19</sup> *The Australian*, January 6, 1970, TLC Collection, Box 328.

<sup>20</sup> TLC Collection, Box 328.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Wright, 105.

<sup>23</sup> Letter from Queensland Trades and Labor Secretary Fred Whitby, January 14, 1970, TLC Collection UQFL118.

<sup>24</sup> Courier Mail, January 14, 1970, TLC Collection, Box 328.

<sup>25</sup> *The Australian*, January 14, 1970, TLC Collection, Box 328.

<sup>26</sup> Courier Mail, January 14, 1970, TLC Collection, Box 328.

<sup>27</sup> Courier Mail, January 1970, TLC Collection, Box 328.

<sup>28</sup> Wright, 120.

<sup>29</sup> *The Australian*, January 7, 1970, TLC Collection, Box 328.

<sup>30</sup> Letter from Merv Vining, Acting Secretary, QPTTU, to the Queensland Trades and Labor Council, February 13, 1970, TLC Collection, Box 328.

<sup>31</sup> TLC Collection, Box 328.

<sup>32</sup> Courier Mail, January 7, 1970, TLC Collection, Box 328.

<sup>33</sup> Courier Mail, January 14, 1970, TLC Collection, Box 328.

<sup>34</sup> Lloyd, 132.

<sup>35</sup> Telegram from Gorton to Bjelke-Petersen, January 19, 1970, Queensland State Archives, SRS 1043, ID 538159 as quoted in Lloyd, 133.

<sup>36</sup> Busst to Wright, February 4, 1970, JCU Busst Papers, 2/13 as quoted by Lloyd, 141.

<sup>37</sup> Cabinet Minute, Decision 14082, Committee of Inquiry – Barrier Reef, February 1970, p. 2. Quoted in Lloyd, 151.

<sup>38</sup> Courier Mail, May 6, 1970, TLC Collection, Box 328.

<sup>39</sup> A. Flynn, letter to Fred Whitby, Secretary QTL, May 7, 1970, TLC Collection, Box 328.

<sup>40</sup> "Drilling for Oil Poses New Threat to the Great Barrier Reef." *New York Times*. September 4, 1970, p. 10. <https://www.nytimes.com/1970/09/04/archives/drilling-for-oil-poses-a-new-threat-to-the-great-barrier-reef.html>

<sup>41</sup> Wright, 175.

<sup>42</sup> Courier Mail, May 16, 1979, TLC Collection, Box 328.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>44</sup> Courier Mail, May 12, 1979, TLC Collection, Box 328.

<sup>45</sup> Letter from Vincent Serventy to Queensland TLC, May 16, 1979, TLC Collection, Box 328