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THE POLITICS OF HISTORY
AND THE NEW SOUTH WALES BUILDERS' LABOURERS' FEDERATION

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INTRODUCTION

This paper has two distinct parts. In the first part I will present a short history of the New South Wales branch of the Builders' Labourers' Federation (BLF) between 1967 and 1975. It is an orthodox piece of labour history which I trust would be accepted as good labour history in most Australian university departments and most Australian history journals. In the second part of the paper I want to use this short history to illustrate and develop some of my arguments about the politics of history. In the process I will be indirectly problematizing categories like "good history", and even the category of history itself.

Briefly and simply, the arguments I want to illustrate and develop are: that history is best understood as a series of constructions of the past in the present; that these constructions have definite political effects; that these political effects are best understood at the specific points where the constructions of the past are actually produced (where they are written, spoken or made) and at the specific points where they are reproduced (where it is read or used). In other words, to use the terms of some recent literary theory, history is a series of texts. The politics of these texts are not contained within them, waiting only for skilled analysts to abstract them. Rather the politics of these texts are the politics of their production under specific conditions in particular institutions and the
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politics of their reading (or reproduction or use) under specific conditions in particular institutions.

I will present my history of the BLF as a short history text and then examine the politics of its production as a text and the politics of some likely reproductions (or readings or uses) of it.
In the 1950's the BLF was dominated by a leadership described by one writer as a "rightwing standover officialdom",(2) and by another, less politely, as "a bunch of gangsters who did not hesitate to beat up members who disliked their way of running things". (3) This particular leadership certainly did little in the way of protecting their members' interests. Wages remained low and on-the-job conditions during this period were appalling. As well, the leadership seemed unconcerned about recruiting or retaining members, as is evidenced by the fact that the 1950's average membership level had been increased five fold by 1973.(4)

Throughout the late 1950's and early 1960's opposition to the leadership grew. The opposition manifested itself, at the official level, through the actions of a rank-and-file committee. In the early 1960's two members of this committee were elected as organizers of the union. Their work cleared the way for a 1961 executive election free from standover tactics. A completely new executive, under the secretaryship of Mick McNamarra, won office.

Under the McNamarra leadership the union regained its feet. Wages and conditions in the industry improved substantially. In 1967 McNamarra resigned because of ill health and was succeeded as secretary by Jack Mundey. At the same election Bob Pringle became president. This change of
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leadership brought with it a change of direction for the union. (5)

In the period from 1967 to 1970 the union tentatively developed a more radical approach to union action. A five week long strike in 1970 confirmed the worth of this new approach. It found its way into the strike, which won for the workers the $6.00 per week they were seeking, through the use of sabotage and greatly increased levels of membership involvement. Mundey said of the strike:

The strike was longer, involvement greater and direct confrontation sharper. (A)ssaults on partially completed buildings where employers attempted to use building tradesmen or other scab labour to smash the strike was a particularly new ingredient.

He summed up his optimism regarding the new approach by hinting at the possibility of other unions breaking out of the framework of conventional union tactics:

If a relatively small union could successfully mount such an attack, what could be achieved by the more powerful unions with more resources if they acted in a similar way! (6)

Between 1970 and 1974 the BLF made advances both within the bounds of traditional union activity and outside those bounds. Within the bounds it won pay rises of up to $27.00 per week, an accident pay scheme, paid public holidays and improved on-the-job amenities. As well, it achieved some successes in stabilising a notoriously unstable industry. For example, it almost completely eradicated the fly-by-night subcontractor who previously had made a regular practice of
going bankrupt before paying the workers. (8)

Outside the bounds of traditional action the union made advances on industrial and non-industrial fronts. On the industrial front it worked to achieve recognition of the rights of women and aborigines within the industry and acted to provide for the special needs of migrants, who made up a very large percentage of the industry's workforce. (9)

The union also sought to take confrontation to the arbitration arena. It acted on its stated policy that arbitration should be avoided except in cases where "it sees a direct benefit to unionists" (10) For example, in one particular case an employer instigated proceedings to invoke penal sanctions against the BLF. When the case came up for hearing the employing body and its legal representatives were present at the arbitration court but the union was not. Such deliberate action was unexpected. The union continued to stay away and eventually the employer dropped the proceedings. (11)

The union tried to extend the limits of traditional union activity by practising and advocating varied and novel strike tactics. As well as making continued use of sabotage, the union made use (successfully) of tactics as diverse as occupying a crane at a half built Wong shopping centre for sixty-three hours, and showering under a hose on the steps of the Newcastle town hall.

Internal innovations instituted by the BLF during the period in question included establishment of forums for greater participation by union members in everyday union affairs; instigation (by Mundey) of limited tenure of office
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for union officials (Mundey stepped down from office in accordance with this rule in 1973 and was replaced as secretary by Joe Owens); the setting of union officials' wages at the level of the average membership wage; and the instigation of a policy whereby officials had their pay stopped for the duration of any strike undertaken by the union. (12)

Probably the BLF's most important and widely known step outside the bounds of traditional activity was on the non-industrial front. This was the union's activities in the environmental arena— the placing of bans on particular jobs for environmental rather than industrial reasons (green bans). The first such ban was placed on a job in the well-to-do Sydney suburb of Hunters Hill. An area of bushland known as Kelly's Bush was earmarked by the development company A.V. Jennings as the site for a block of luxury home units. The local residents were incensed. They tried fighting the Jennings corporation using conventional means: they formed a residents' action group, wrote letters to the *Sydney Morning Herald* and attempted to pressure the local and state governments into stopping the development. The conventional means proved useless, and as a last-ditch measure the residents sought the help of the BLF. The union placed a ban on any work that would lead to the destruction of Kelly's Bush. This ban, which was actively defended by the union's members and supported by the Federated Engine Drivers' and Firemen's Association, left the Jennings corporation without
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the necessary labour to go ahead. The project was abandoned and the area saved. By 1975 more than forty green bans had been placed on jobs by the BLF. The bans halted building projects worth an estimated $3,000 million.

All the bans were strongly supported by the BLF members. Their support was of course essential. In an industry as fragmented as the building industry the possibility of employers using scab labour to dodge union bans was a very real one. Yet the members were prepared to down tools and physically defend a ban if they received word one was threatened.

The activities and policies of the BLF under the Mundey/Owens/Pringle leadership were opposed, in varying degrees, in sections of the press, in parliament and in courtrooms. They were also opposed in other arenas by the industry's employers, especially the Master Builders' Association (MBA) and by other Australian trade unions. The press directed most of their opposition to the BLF's stand on environmental issues. In August 1972 the Sydney Morning Herald ran an editorial which said, in part:

> There is something comical in the spectacle of builders labourers, whose ideas on industrial relations do not rise above strikes, violence, intimidation and the destruction of property, setting themselves up as arbiters of taste and protectors of our national heritage. (14)

Peter Samuel, writing in *The Bulletin* in November 1973 took a similar line: "...why should we bother with systems of local government if we allow unions to make town planning and
environmental decisions over their heads". (15)

Another tack was to suggest that the BLF's leadership was isolated from its membership and that any support the leadership commanded would be shortlived. An article published in The Australian in September 1972 said, "Many labourers wonder how long the high principled black bans...would last if the industry slumped. It seems unlikely out-of-work labourers would continue to applaud the leadership." (16) This line of argument was propagated here despite the fact that when it was used earlier in that year, in a letter to the Sydney Morning Herald by the MBA, it drew an immediate reply from twenty three BLF job delegates stressing that they fully supported their union's leadership, especially their policies which encouraged workers to consider the effects of their work, not just the pay they receive for it. (17)

The idea that the union was encouraged to violence by its leadership was also popularised. In another editorial in August 1972 the Sydney Morning Herald - and it is informative to note that in that month, in the space of twelve days in fact, the Sydney Morning Herald devoted five editorials to attacks on the BLF leadership - said: "The patter of planned violence to disrupt and obstruct democratic union processes and to intimidate humiliate and discredit...is crystal clear." (18) Later this notion was pushed even harder to blacken the green bans. In October 1973 the Canberra Times ran an editorial declaring: "The violent incidents that marred the march on the Rocks development
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project in Sydney last week suggest that the federation's
environmental zeal is getting out of hand."(19)

In 1971 the Askin, Liberal, NSW government passed two
amendments to the Industrial Arbitration Act which they
clearly hoped they would be able to use against the BLF. The
first amendment provided for compulsory secret ballots for
union elections and the second provided for deregulation of
unions in "certain circumstances".(20) In November 1972, in
the state parliament, a minister in the Askin government,
Eric (later Sir. Eric) Willis, described the BLF as "... a
group which believes in activities outside the democratically
elected Parliament and is a danger not only to the community
generally but also to the proper and effective operation of
the trade union movement".(21) He went on to make plain his
government's attitude to the green bans:

It could be said that if Mr. Mundey had
been on the scene over the past ten years
Sydney may not have had the many major
commercial and retail developments that
have made it a great city, the greatest
in Australia. Indeed, if he is around for
much longer, it will be a sad
ting..."(22)

Many members of the then Opposition apparently shared
Willis's sentiments. The Deputy Leader of the Opposition, Syd
Einfield, described Jack Mundey as "an enemy of the worker",
"an enemy of the working class" and "an enemy of the people".
While the then leader of the Opposition in the Legislative
Council (the NSW Upper House), Neville Wran, said of Mundey:

Because of what I read of the black ban
imposed on the demolition of the Regent
by Mr. Mundey and the Builders' Laborers'
Federation, I made it clear ...that I
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would not associate in any way with a committee of which Mr. Mundey was a member or which accepted his support.(23)

In 1971 the Askin government seized an opportunity to use its legal machinery specifically against Mundey. The Attorney-General of NSW charged Mundey with two counts of contempt of court. The charges arose from a statement Mundey made at the conclusion of the trial of two prominent unionists who had sawed through the goal posts at the Sydney Cricket Ground on the eve of a rugby match involving the touring South African Springboks. At the trial the unionists freely admitted their "guilt" and offered to pay for the goal posts. The judge decided a much stiffer penalty was necessary, fining each man $500 and placing them both on bonds. Mundey condemned the decision as a miscarriage of justice and called the judge a racist (the basis of one count against him). He claimed that only workers' militant action had saved the men from jail (the basis of the second count). The contempt charge, if proved, could have carried a prison sentence and some members of the Askin government suggested, albeit obliquely, that this would be a good thing. However, a judge dismissed the charge on the first count and though he found the charge on the second count proved, he imposed no penalty.(24)

Several Australian trade unions expressed opposition to the BLF's activities. Some union officials defended the arbitration system against the BLF's attacks. Many more characterised the green bans as "adventurist" or outside the realm of legitimate union action. In short, the majority of Australian unions at the time saw the BLF as trouble makers.
However, despite this, they were prepared to tolerate its activities. The really active union opposition to the BLF came from its own federal branch (a branch dominated by the Victorian branch — with Victorian secretary Norm Gallagher also being federal secretary).

In February 1974 the newspaper Tribune (the paper of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA), the party which supported the Mundey/Pringle/Owens BLF leadership) warned that the federal BLF was planning to infiltrate the NSW branch of the union. Indeed, Gallagher had told NSW BLF president Bob Pringle, "We're going to eat you", although at that stage the only action he took was to have the Federal Management Committee withdraw the NSW officials' right of entry onto job sites.

In May 1974 the MBA applied to the Industrial Court for deregistration of all branches of the BLF. They claimed the union had caused industrial lawlessness, especially in NSW, stressing that it had held up over $3,000 million worth of developments. On June 21 the court found in favour of the MBA and the BLF was deregistered. NSW branch officials expressed delight, and a mass meeting in Sydney three days later passed a motion which read: "This meeting of builders' labourers declares that de-registration will make no difference to our present policies — industrial, political and social."(27) Gallagher and the federal officials were, however, not so delighted. Gallagher soon began advocating re-registration as the correct course of action and claimed that the NSW branch was the main stumbling block to achieving this goal. Acting
on this belief he commenced a more active intervention into the NSW branch.

About this time the rank-and-file of the NSW branch produced an article in their newspaper entitled "The Industrial Crimes of Norm Gallagher". In this article it was alleged that Gallagher had negotiated a $40,000 payoff to lift the green ban on work on the Newport power station in Victoria, had done a deal with right wing unions in order to secure for himself a position on the ACTU executive, had accepted gifts of building materials from employers for use on his own home, had supplied scabs to break a strike in NSW, had sacked office staff who he considered "knew too much", had used standover tactics in union elections, had employed cronies as union assistants, and had indulged in the extravagant use of union funds to purchase cars for his personal use. (28) Clearly relations between the two branches were, by this stage, somewhat strained.

Gallagher set up an alternative branch in NSW (quickly dubbed a "scab" union by the Mundey/Owens/Pringle branch). A mass meeting of builders' labourers at Sydney town hall on October 13 registered strong protests over the federal take-over bid. Owens told the meeting that Gallagher was working in league with the MBA and that his take-over attempt was being funded by that organisation. He asked how could the federal BLF be so poor as to have to borrow $10,000 for emergency measures and yet be able to pay the wages of the thirty organisers of the alternative branch and be able to
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afford the $600 a day offices the alternative branch was renting at the Hyde Park Motel.

Despite messages of support pouring in to the Mundey/Owens/Pringle branch (from individual unionists, conservation groups, residents' groups and even some Labor parliamentarians) the federally supported alternative branch continued its efforts to recruit members. It lowered its union fees as well as allegedly (the allegation coming from Bob Pringle) doing deals with employers so that only members of the alternative branch would be employed. (Certainly a letter, dated October 22 1974, was sent by the MBA to all its members urging them to permit only Gallagher representatives onto their job sites and warning them not to assist the Mundey/Pringle/Owens branch officials, but of course the MBA may well have been acting independently, seeing the Gallagher branch as the lesser of two evils.)

By early 1975 the Gallagher forces were definitely gaining the upper hand. The only ray of hope for the the Mundey/Owens/Pringle branch was a ruling by the NSW Equity Court that the attempts by the alternative branch to win members were illegal. However, no benefit came to the Mundey/Owens/Pringle branch from this ruling because the Askin government refused to act on it. By the end of March the alternative union had become the official NSW branch of the BLF, with Les Robinson from South Australia becoming branch secretary. The new leadership ruled immediately that "militants" would be refused union tickets. Mundey, Owens and Pringle along with many of their supporters were thus
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effectively barred from participation in the union.

THE POLITICS OF THE HISTORICAL TEXT

The politics of the production of the above short historical text is the politics of the production of a piece of university research. This piece is written as a piece of university research for publication in a journal; it is not part of a union history written by union members or officials, or part of a community history written by a member of a community affected by the green bans, or part of some official history of Sydney. It is written within the constraints imposed by a university and by a journal—these are its specific conditions of production. The politics of this writing, of this production, therefore, is a specific politics concerned with specific issues. These issues include: whether the piece follows the conventions (footnoting, stylistic rules, etc) usually followed in order to be accepted for publication in a journal; whether university funding should be provided for research into the BLF; whether the piece fits within the framework or frameworks of historical trade union research dominant within the university and journal concerned (in most Australian universities and journals concerned with trade union research an empiricist framework is dominant).

The politics of the writing of this text (like any text) is not given in the text itself. This politics is not something which can be placed permanently on a grand spectrum.
of left-right or oppositional-dominant. It is a politics which has to be assessed in the specific site(s) of the writing (production) of the text at a specific time. The same must be said of the politics of the reproduction of this text, of its reading or use. The text has no immanent politics, it is not necessarily a left-wing history or a right wing history, an oppositional history or a dominant history. The politics of the reproduction of this text can only be assessed in the specific site(s) where it is reproduced (or read or used) at a specific time.

Before considering some likely reproductions (or readings or uses) of it and assessing the politics of these reproductions, I should point out that the text does not exist as a historical text independently of its reproduction. In this way it exists only as a collection of words on paper and gains the status "historical text" (or "labour history text") through its reproduction within certain institutions (universities, trade unions, journals, books, etc).

One reproduction of the above text may occur in a university history department, more particularly a department, or part of a department, concerned with labour history. Here the politics of the reproduction of this text will involve issues similar to those discussed above in the case of the politics of the production of the text: whether the text follows the conventions (footnoting, style etc) usually followed in order to be accepted as a piece of labour history; whether the text fits within the framework of labour
history dominant in the particular department; etc. In the case of these two issues it is hard to believe that our BLF text would create any disturbances; in most Australian history departments concerned with labour history it would be read as a perfectly acceptable piece of labour history which does not disturb the dominance of the empiricist framework.

But this may not be so in the case of another specific issue involved in this reproduction. This issue is whether the text takes an "acceptable political line". Most Australian history departments concerned with labour history, largely because of the dominance of the empiricist framework, would not understand the politics of the text in terms of their particular reproduction (their reading or use) of it, but rather in terms of the text itself. So it is quite likely there would be disputes within the department as to whether the text takes a "neutral" position (in some history departments a strict adherence to empiricism involves the belief that research is about the uncovering of "facts" which are said to be politically neutral), whether it takes a "left wing" pro-union position or a "right wing" anti-union position, or a position in support of one or other of the BLF leadership groups (in these instances the empiricist framework still demands the compilation of "facts", but the pretence of them being politically neutral is dropped).

The politics of the reproduction of the text as an academic history, like the politics of its production as an academic history, is fairly straightforward. When the text
is reproduced in other arenas, its politics may be somewhat more complex. Consider the use of the text in contemporary BLF politics, and it is not uncommon for labour history texts to be used in trade union politics. The politics of this reproduction could involve very heated issues. The text may be used by the Mundey/Owens/Pringle faction of the union as part of an attempt to overthrow the current NSW leadership, which remains loyal to the federal Gallagher leadership. Or it may be used by the current leadership to justify its continued opposition to the Mundey/Owens/Pringle faction. The text may be used by the Mundey/Owens/Pringle faction as part of an attempt to force policy changes on the current leadership, such as giving more emphasis to green bans. Or it may be used by the current leadership to justify its policies.

The idea of the text being reproduced by diametrically opposed sides of political disputes, to support their case may seem somewhat absurd at first glance. But it only takes a few moments thought to see that it is quite common and not at all absurd. Reproductions of historical texts under the signature of Karl Marx, for example, have been the driving force of many directly opposed political groupings at many levels, including the international level. Such instances only serve to reinforce the argument that texts have no meaning and no politics outside reproductions of them.

Another likely reproduction of our BLF text is a legal reproduction. The politics of such a reproduction would
involve whichever issues were the subject of legal proceedings. In cases before industrial courts the text may be used as evidence by the BLF to demonstrate that the union under its current leadership has been much more responsible than before this leadership took over, and thus deserves an improvement in pay and conditions. Or it may be used in evidence by the employers to demonstrate that the union does not deserve such an improvement. In cases before criminal courts it may be used as evidence in defence of, or to condemn, the particular unionist(s) on trial. Similarly in official inquiries, like Royal Commissions, it may be used as evidence in defence of, or to condemn, particular unionists or the union as a whole.

The text may also be reproduced in the site of federal government. The specific politics of this reproduction would mostly involve issues of industrial relations. The text may be used in the formulation of general industrial relations policy and, more particularly in the formulation of a policy to manage industrial relations in the building industry. In this way government policy makers (ministers, advisers etc) may read or use the text in deciding that conditions in the building industry should be used as a bench mark for workers in all industries, or that conditions in the building industry should not be seen by workers in other industries as a bench mark.
I said in the introduction that my discussion on the politics of history would indirectly problematize categories like "good history", and even the category of history itself. It has done this, I suggest, through my arguments about the operation of particular institutions of history production and particular institutions where histories are likely to be reproduced (or read or used). In other words, I have problematized these categories by stressing that history is not a given object with an unchallengeable ontological status, but a series of products (histories) of particular institutions — products which must be judged not in terms of any inherent properties, but in terms of the way they are used in particular institutions.

It may well be asked why I have allowed this problematization to go on indirectly, why I have not extended my arguments to force these points home. The answer to these questions concerns the politics of the way historiographical essays like this one are read, at least in Australia. I have posed my arguments in a brief, pointed fashion for tactical reasons, because I have calculated that to pose them in this fashion is to give them the best chance of having an impact on the practices of historiography in Australia. In doing no more than highlighting the existence and operation of specific rules and techniques of producing and reproducing histories I am suggesting that it would be very productive for historiography to turn its attention away from "history
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itself", or "histories themselves", and towards these rules and techniques. It would be very productive because it would kill off once and for all the idea that history is a study of the past with no contemporary political relevance.

FOOTNOTES

1 For more details see Wickham, G. "Historiography and the Politics of History", forthcoming, and Wickham, G. "History as Texts" forthcoming.
2 Thomas, P. Taming the Concrete Jungle, NSW BLF Publication, Sydney, 1973, p.15
4 Thomas, P. op. cit. p.64
5 ibid. p.65
6 Mundey, J. "Interview", Australian Left Review, August/September, 1970, p.1
7 Thomas, P. op. cit. pp.16-17
9 Thomas, P. op. cit. pp.71-75
10 ibid. pp.17-18
11 ibid. p.18
13 Hardman, M and Manning P., Green Bans, Australian Conservation Foundation, Sydney, n.d., no page numbers
14 Sydney Morning Herald, Editorial, August 14, 1972
16 Minogue, D. "Portrait of a Militant", The Australian, September 5, 1972
17 Thomas, P. op. cit. p.63
18 Sydney Morning Herald, Editorial, August 23, 1972
19 Canberra Times, Editorial, October 29, 1973
21 ibid. p.2403
22 ibid. p.2404
23 As quoted in Thomas, P. op. cit. p.125
24 Thomas, P. ibid. pp.119-122
25 Tribune (various issues from February 1974 to April 1975), unless otherwise indicated, is the source for the following account of the demise of the Mundey/Owens/Pringle branch of the BLF.
27 Owens J. and Pringle, B., Recomendations, a leaflet distributed at a mass meeting of builders' labourers', June 24, 1974, NSW BLF Publication, Sydney, 1974
28 Builders' Labourers' Unity Committee, "Industrial Crimes of Norm Gallagher", The Rank and File Rag, No. 2, December, 1974