

Vale Jack Munday (1929-2020)

May 11, 2020

Jack Munday, the union leader who inspired generations of activists to build a modern environmental movement, died last night, aged 90.

Jack, as the Secretary of the NSW Builders Labourers' Federation (BLF), came into prominence in the early 1970s in an era of a massive building boom when developers were intent on destroying urban green spaces and huge swathes of historical Sydney. From a fledgling start when Jack led his union to protect a small parcel of land on Sydney Harbour called Kelly's Bush, a movement with international ramifications was created.

It was based around a simple yet profound concept. His union would place an industrial ban on unwanted development only after the local community approached the union and supported such a ban. Importantly, the members of the union at the site would then vote to endorse the ban. Jack would famously quip to a journalist that it wasn't a traditional "black ban" but a "green ban", and thus a movement was born.



At their height, the Green Bans protected communities from billions of dollars of ugly development that had created concrete jungles in so many cities around the world. For cities such as Sydney it meant the protection of the historical Rocks area around Sydney Harbour, which had been destined to be razed and replaced with massive concrete and glass towers. Inner city suburbs such as Glebe were protected by the Green Bans after plans were created to bulldoze motorways through their heart.

From Sydney, the movement spread to regional areas, to other Australian cities, and to other countries.

The NSW BLF created a huge social movement that linked together so many disparate political struggles – it protected low-income housing for workers, fought for women to be accepted into male-dominated industries, placed a Green Ban on Macquarie University after one its colleges had denied accommodation for a gay student, stopped development in places such as Centennial Park, and exposed the corrupt links between politicians and developers. Importantly, the Green Bans empowered ordinary citizens to band together and act in the interests of the community.

While the NSW BLF had support from one allied building union, the NSW Federated Engine Drivers and Firemen's Association (FEDFA), there were attempts to isolate the NSW BLF within the union movement at the time. Importantly, therefore, it is worth noting that the NSW Teachers Federation was the first union outside the building industry to recognise what the NSW BLF was campaigning for and to endorse formally the Greens Bans movement.

The Green Bans heavily influenced others in the international environmental movement. Petra Kelly, the

famous German anti-nuclear activist on a visit to Australia, was so inspired by the Green Ban movement, that upon her return to Germany she created the world's first Greens political party.

The struggle to build the Green Bans movement was difficult and opposed by powerful and vested interests. Jack was the subject of countless death threats, and developers with close links to some politicians worked to undermine the union while encouraging conservative media commentators to rail against the BLF and its leadership. Yet, over time, the Green Bans captured the imagination of the public leading eventually to significant legislation at a state and federal level designed to protect natural and urban environments.

Eventually, Jack and other leaders of the NSW BLF, were illegally removed from office after developers had colluded with corrupt federal officials. But the Green Ban movement had, by then, a life of its own. A small union consisting of labourers on building sites had shown the world that ordinary people can build a grass-roots democratic movement and by doing so challenge power and wealth in ways that until then had never been imagined.

On a personal level, Jack had rejected his Catholic faith as a young adult and had joined the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) in 1955. But throughout his life, he worked to build broad alliances and to work with disparate groups and individuals. Jack could never be accused of being doctrinaire. As he once wrote: "My dream, and that of hundreds of thousands, or millions, of others might come true: a socialist world with a human face, an ecological heart and an egalitarian body."

The NSW Teachers Federation expresses its condolences to Jack's partner, Judy, as well as to his wider family, friends and close comrades.