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Remembering the Warilla Strike: an interview
with Jim Bradley

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Remembering the Warilla Strike: an interview with Jim Bradley

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Abstract

Jim Bradley, the local New South Wales Teachers Federation spokesman at the time of the Warilla teachers strike in 1976 is now an active campaigner on behalf of the disabled. His impressive work with the South Coast Disabled Surfers Association has received national recognition.

Remembering the Warilla Strike: An Interview with Jim Bradley

Interviewer: Anthony Ashbolt

[Jim Bradley, the local New South Wales Teachers Federation spokesman at the time of the Warilla teachers strike in 1976 is now an active campaigner on behalf of the disabled. His impressive work with the South Coast Disabled Surfers Association has received national recognition.]

AA: Jim, what are your personal reflections on the thirtieth anniversary of the Warilla teachers' strike?

JB: I have an unhealthy warm glow every time I happen to think about this period of time, about the strike that went for 28 days. And I have to say that carefully because it sounds too grandstanding to say "what a wonderful experience it was" and yet I have to say in the same breath it was a wonderful experience for those who came through on the positive side of the ledger. There were a number who didn't come through on the positive side, which is unfortunate as it happens in any dispute. There are those who fell by the wayside and to this day they carry the damage of caving in. And that's because we won—if we hadn't, then a lot of the sad stories I've heard (and we won't dwell on them) may not have been so intense.

AA: How do you explain the enormous resilience of those—it ended up being forty, "the magnificent forty"—who stayed out the full 28 days? Was it any one thing or a combination of factors? Did you have daily meetings that buoyed the spirits and so on?

JB: It was a combination, a large combination of things. It was the middle 70s and activism in the unions generally was very strong. I'm not here talking about teacher unions because activism in teacher unions has never been very strong despite the myth that teachers are always going on strike. Can I say straight away it is a myth because teachers don't go on strike, they stop work for half a day

or so and the reason they go out for short periods is the correct judgement of the Federation that they would lose the strike if they went out for what we might call a normal period, going out until you get some sort of a result one way or another. To get back to your question, it was a reflection of the time, a reflection of the fact we were a young staff, we found that the women were most probably stronger than the males... a sweeping statement but we've commented amongst ourselves—you can see in the photos how many women there were—now, they might have been quieter than the loud-mouthed males like me but they were there, they were running the committees, taking the notes, printing the sheets, all the things that had to be done. There was still a strong aspect of left politics in Australia those days with social movements like feminism having an impact. The fact also was that we were in a very tough area—Warilla was regarded as one of the most disadvantaged areas of Australia.

AA: So class was a significant factor?

JB: Class was an amazingly significant factor. We were a working class area. Seventy five per cent of our kids came from housing commission homes and you can still drive through Warilla today and see the housing commission component there. It's a lot less but you can see the homes that were housing commission have become privately owned. Class was a huge factor but another significant feature of that period was the leadership of the South Coast Labour Council. I feel very fortunate, having been through that period, seeing how strong a union movement can be and the Labour Council demonstrated that. By the same token, I feel very sad today when I think about young people, twenty year olds, saying to themselves "Should I join a union?" and they're just not aware, anywhere to the same degree, what a union can mean to them. You knew, generally, what the union movement could mean to you back in the middle 1970s, because it was a powerful force.

AA: Indeed. Then you also have to look at the Warilla strike in the context of the New South Wales Teachers Federation campaign overall. There was a balance of local and general issues. Do you think the real spur was either one? Publicity from more conservative sources, including the Education Department, suggested it was all a Federation ploy and the Warilla teachers were virtually patsies. It seems to me however that the local dimension was of the utmost importance.

JB: I think the Warilla dispute caught the Teachers Federation

blind-sided. They really couldn't have known this would happen and, fair enough, no one could have until it happened. And when it happened it was like manna from heaven for the Federation. It did, however, take a while for the coin to drop for a few of the senior federation officials. The exception was Van Davey, a leading official, because he quickly read the sign and within 24 or 36 hours came down and embraced what we were doing. But it took almost a week before the President of the Federation, Barry Manefield, thought it was significant enough, had enough legs, to become fully associated with it. That probably shouldn't have been too much of a surprise because the Illawarra teaching unions have always been the strongest part of the Federation—along with other pockets, such as the eastern suburbs in Sydney where people like Mairie Petersen played prominent roles. We were a hub of activism, for sure, and so too inner Sydney, but as soon as you started going out to say the western suburbs, political militance was not as evident—and we noticed it as we trucked ourselves into all these different areas looking for support. It became clear that the hotbed of activism was the Illawarra. One of the reasons is that we had some magnificent local leaders there. We had Jim Dombroski, the principal of Warrawong High. We had Mike Dwyer as a young budding activist Federationist—he was a firebrand. We had blokes like Des Tye—I had an enormous amount of respect for Des who only retired a couple of years ago. There was Arthur Osborne who became President of the [South Coast] Trades and Labour Council. Indeed, I think it's notable that so many teachers occupied leadership positions in the South Coast Labour Council. For the last twenty years the majority of Presidents have been teachers—Peter Wilson, Arthur Osborne, Mike Dwyer and people like that. So it was a confluence, a coming together of a whole number of factors and the time was right for an issue to burst out somewhere on class sizes and it just so happened to be Warilla High and when it did come about it was, once they recognised it, manna from heaven for the Federation. The Federation had a chance of letting this become the wedge to drive through their own wider agenda. Nonetheless, I must say that while we started on a very narrow agenda ourselves, within two days it had become connected to all sorts of other issues ... while keeping in mind the catalyst issue was that we had a teacher who was taken off a permanent timetable and transferred and that was the single issue initially. So you could almost not plan how all the pieces could have come together if you were a great strategist but they did come together and the

Federation recognized that there was a flying wedge there that they could get behind and help drive it.

AA: Did the Education Department completely misread the situation, fail to perceive that there could be widespread community support for a campaign which involved genuine educational concerns?

JB: In a sense, without wanting to appear an apologist for the Department, it didn't do a whole lot wrong. It did not, in actuality, behave much differently from usual—it is insular, it treats teachers with disdain and so on. I have a very poor opinion of the Department but how could it have known what was going to happen? How could it have prepared itself for the fact that a bunch of teachers was going to stand on the footpath for 28 days? There was no history of this happening and so a lot of the judgements would have been based on the idea that "If we just wait for another day or two the buggers are going to slink back into their hole." And I suppose they based their whole strategy on that. But once it got out of hand, once it started going into the second and third week, they did start getting a sense of anxiety and urgency but instead of moderating their position or ignoring us, they started making statements which were inflammatory and this actually helped the strike in the last couple of weeks. They said things and played stunts which hardened the resolve of the strikers, if it needed any more hardening. I really don't think, from my experience, the Department learnt a lot from the strike.

AA: You would admit, however, that there came a time when the Education Department's holding off strategy was nearly successful?

JB: Absolutely. And why wouldn't it be? Teachers ... I've been a great studier of my cohort workers—teachers—and I've got to say that I've never been a great fan of teachers as a group. We are conservative people as a group. We vote Liberal or Conservative more than we vote Labor—that's an absolute fact—and we are naturally reticent or reluctant about stepping out of our comfort zone. So I'm not a great fan of teachers as a collective group. But at Warilla it was a different collective group, so we're a little bit different from the general mould. But we still had in the group a significant number of very conservative people who I know to this day would never vote Green or left on any issue and a couple of those were on strike for around 16 days which still makes them part of the second longest teachers' strike in Australian history. What an amazing effect it has when a group of people says "We are not going to put up

with this”, whether or not the individual has misgivings. On that point I’ve got to point out I voted against the strike. I was one of six who voted against the strike, despite the fact that I had initially seconded the strike motion. When I heard that the gentleman we were going on strike over was not a member of the Teachers Federation, I had this complete focus of “If he’s not a member of the Federation, why should I be putting myself out on the bloody footpath?”—that was a fairly standard view amongst trade unionists at the time and I withdrew my seconding of the motion. So I voted against the motion and the vote was something like 70 to 6 but once the motion was passed, I said “We’re in it. Let’s do it”. So I became publicity officer, which was a pretty big job.

AA: It must have been difficult, in that context, to keep up your own morale?

JB: This sort of thing depends upon your background and I came from a solid left background. My parents, for example, were stalwarts of the left labour movement—my sister is Win Childs and so I had a solid background. There were many who did not have that background but still they had the philosophy that if the meeting voted for something you went along with it, at least up to a point. No one, however, could foresee 28 days.

AA: So it’s the principle of solidarity over-riding some personal misgivings?

JB: Absolutely, and the pressure on people not to strike in society is palpable, and I saw it absolutely first hand. I could speak chapter and verse in the confessional about this. Confessional is a good word in this context because the Catholic church actually made an instruction through the pulpits of churches in the Illawarra that teachers should go back to work and ten of our teachers crumbled because of that ... terrible ... and I’ve got a very good friend, although I don’t see that much of him, and his marriage was destroyed over this issue. You also had neighbours, if you lived in a more affluent area, saying “What are you on strike for? You’re a bloody teacher and get long holidays.” There was all that sort of pressure. So the reason we collected ourselves at the gate daily (and this gets back to an earlier question) and gave reports and had a newsletter come out every day was to keep together, to keep organised. And when the Federation saw how organised we were at the grassroots level, they were more encouraged to throw their weight behind us pretty promptly. So we were getting a lot of support from the Federation by the end of the first week.

AA: You’ve already touched on the way that the personal and political can combine, particularly during industrial

confrontations. You have alluded to them being intertwined in dramatic ways—marriage breakdowns and so on. What personal impact did the strike have on those who kept striking and also those who went back. Did, for example, those who abandoned the strike feel guilt or shame?

JB: You could feel a schism between those who stayed and those who left. When the final 40 went back into the school in the afternoon, it was a surreal moment. We went into a hall—37 staff are sitting on one side and we sit down on the other side and we get harangued for twenty minutes by the boss and the deputy and some other turkey was there, all telling us we nearly brought the state down in flames (that really was the sort of language they used). And it took many months, many years, even to this point—I mean, I’m certainly a terrible ... or should I say I sometimes feel a lesser human being for feeling the strong way I do against people who ratted us out or did horrible things against the common good in that strike. I think most of the teachers have mellowed in time, which is fair enough—time cures all—but for a number of years you could feel it. So if someone on staff was having a problem you could hear it: “Well, bugger it why should I give him a hand concreting or why should I take his period for him because he’s sick”. It took a number of years for that edge to come off and that’s understandable.

AA: Do you want to talk about the person who, late in the piece, you were able to identify as the rat in your ranks?

JB: Yes. This is almost Hollywoodesque. Here we have a person, for reasons known best to himself, who gave what could only be described as “pitch and weather reports” (like Mark Waugh and Shane Warne) to the Department of Education.

AA: But he wasn’t paid for this?

JB: Well, you don’t know. You don’t know if he was paid in kind for this, whether he was given promotion for it. Nonetheless, he was given promotion. You don’t know but you can suspect. What brought a person to take it upon himself to have regular dialogue with the enemy—we get into that hard-line terminology whereby we were the troops massing at the gate and the Department (specifically Gillett) was the enemy. So what would bring a member of the strike, what would give him the rationale to have regular contact with Gillett and tell him what was going on within the confines of our meetings? And we only discovered that right at the *dénouement* of the strike. And his involvement actually saved the strike as it turned out. Because until we found out that he had been ratting, the

strike was going to fizzle out. We had always determined that if we got down below 40 (out of 77 staff), the strike would be over and we had made that decision in the first two or three days of the strike. And when we were coming down to the last few days, only three school days out from when the strike did finish, it began to look like it was going to be over. On the Friday we were down to 44 staff and the motion was that the strike was to be called off at 4 o'clock on the Friday afternoon. And it was a procedural motion, meaning no debate. The day before, in order to stall for time, we had called for a 24 hour delay, after which we would consider a procedural motion to return to work. Well, nothing changed. We were dead in the water and there was nothing we could hold the membership on.

By a total fluke, this particular bloke, this rat as I call him very clearly, had obviously had a guilty conscience and he started crying in his beer the previous night with a few of the boys having a beer at the end of a long day. That was confided in me at the moment when the vote was going to be taken, a vote we would have lost. When I found out—sorry to sound a bit egocentric—I couldn't believe it. I felt absolutely betrayed, as anyone would have. But my friends had compassion for this teaching compatriot who had ratted on us and they didn't want to out him. I had the opposite feeling. Bugger it, what right did he have to do something like this? How traitorous. And so when I confronted him in front of this meeting of 44 teachers, he confessed. To this day I really can't believe he did it. I would have thought if you were really on top of your game, you'd be mute, deny it and then it would be all over. We would have lost, lost at the last hurdle. But because he was discovered and exposed, it hardened the resolve again and the meeting threw out the motion to return to work. It was an amazing bit of theatre for half an hour. It's so vivid in my mind, I can almost count the screws in the gyprock garage of the teacher's house where we were holding the meeting.

So we lived through the weekend and then, of course, on the Sunday the tugboat operators refused to handle the iron ore ships and that was it. I've got to tell you, driving down Mt. Ousley that night with Merv Nixon and others and looking at those boats tied up off the Illawarra coast, we stopped the car and screamed in delight and knew we were close to winning. But still we had to get through the gate meeting on the Monday. On Monday March 9, we turned up and counted heads. We could easily have lost ten as a result of that meeting when the rat was outed but we had exactly 40 and that

was enough to put the final cherry on the cake, because the Federation went nuts with the Department and the Government. The Head of the Public Service Board, Gerry Gleeson, is now involved. The Public Service Board is still holding out against the Federation—apparently Gleeson and others had not been told about the tugboats. We're talking goodness knows how much money being held up per boat (probably tens if not hundreds of thousands of dollars) and still the bureaucracy is intransigent. The Federation executive pointed out to Gleeson that 18 boats were being held up, he went out and made one phone call, came back and said "You've got your teacher, it's over". It had nothing to do with the educational value, nothing to do with us being out on the footpath for 28 days, and that's another big lesson of industrial action. It sometimes happens that you'll win for reasons other than those you went out on. It was not decided on the moral issue. It was decided on the fact that they didn't want to be losing what might have been half a million dollars a day.

- AA: Nonetheless, victory did go beyond the issue of the teacher's reinstatement because it spread into other issues.
- JB: Oh, yes. The flow-on effects are there for anybody to see. Anybody who has an interest in history can find out easily that the Disadvantaged Schools Program came from the Whitlam era and that the Differential Staffing program arose directly out of the Warilla strike. These two changes mean that you have a formula which gives more teachers to schools that are doing it tougher, that are disadvantaged. So differential staffing came about almost solely because if you gave it to Warilla, how could you justify that without giving it also to the next disadvantaged school? So it really was the wedge that broke, successfully, the Federation's campaign for years to get some form of differential staffing.
- AA: What then was the significance for you at the time of the strike and what is its historical meaning today. Does it tell the contemporary union movement anything about the possibility of struggle?
- JB: One of the biggest things that I, personally, got out of it, is never to judge the resolve of a group of people until it's tested. You never know, until it comes to a critical situation, how much toughness or resolve they really have as a group. Still, having been a good unionist all my life, I have to acknowledge that it's getting harder. It's getting harder because of the IR laws. Regarding the Federation, it's getting harder (and a lot of people might disagree with me on this) in the sense that teachers are becoming very

comfortable in their lives. If, for example, you have two teachers in a school who are married to each other, if they're head teachers, they're pulling in 160 or 170 grand a year. That is comfortable...

AA: And they send their kids to private schools.

JB: On that issue, let me say that the majority of public school teachers do not send their kids to the local comprehensive school. I've stood up at so many forums and said that and get cringes in return. I challenge any politician at state or federal level to tell me they send their kid to the local comprehensive high school. My nephew and niece, the children of lefties, went to private schools, SCEGS and this sort of crap. So it's getting very tough for the Warilla scenario to be repeated. Secondary boycotts are illegal and so it was a moment in time and I feel very privileged to be part of it. And if I bump into any of the magnificent forty (which I do regularly), there is a secret, almost Masonic, smirk in the way you look at each other, because you did share a moment in time which was very significant and hopefully it will still serve some iconic use to the union movement, certainly in teaching, whereby it signals that this sort of thing can happen if all the situations fall in place.

AA: You have been interested in developing this into a film. You have already referred to Hollywoodesque aspects. What precisely about the Warilla strike is so filmic?

JB: It has everything and for a year I have been trying to get a commercial film group interested. If you're not interested in trade unionism, just put it to one side. If you're interested in the murky world of the docks, or the high drama of people closing Wollongong down, people marching in the streets, shopping centres closed, you had the executive of the Warilla P&C sacked for its initial refusal to support the strike and one of the workers on the docks gave a Pacino-like speech at that meeting ...and the fact that you won in a knockout blow when it was at the grimmest time. To me it's got everything. Teachers, hardly the most radical workers, stood on the footpath for 28 days. You could dress it up and make it very cosmetic, have good-looking people as teachers and all that sort of thing, have Merv Nixon as the big hard man who had a heart of gold. It's got everything. I know things get rosy as you look back and it's almost like a dream to some degree. Yet history is so important and it is so easy to forget that things did happen. Unless there is an historical record of things like this, people will just say no, that's a myth.