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Tribute to Bill Whiley 1927–2004

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Tribute to Bill Whiley 1927–2004

Abstract

Bill Whiley, long-time union activist and environmentalist, died on Thursday, 5 August 2004 at the age of 76, as a result of the onset of asbestos-related mesothelioma. Bill was an inspiration—an outstanding trade unionist and community activist. In recent years many people in the northern suburbs of the Illawarra came to know Bill as a result of his involvement with the Sandon Point community picket, set up in March 2001. Bill was an active supporter of the picket, and it remains in place due in large part to his efforts.

Tribute to Bill Whiley 1927–2004

Michael Organ

Bill Whiley, long-time union activist and environmentalist, died on Thursday, 5 August 2004 at the age of 76, as a result of the onset of asbestos-related mesothelioma.

Bill was an inspiration—an outstanding trade unionist and community activist.

In recent years many people in the northern suburbs of the Illawarra came to know Bill as a result of his involvement with the Sandon Point community picket, set up in March 2001.

Bill was an active supporter of the picket, and it remains in place due in large part to his efforts.

I passed many an hour at the picket listening to Bill's stories and being educated about the way of the world and politics.

Sandon Point was just one of the many union and community pickets he supported during his long life.

Bill's philosophy could best be summed up in the words: 'If you don't fight, you lose.'

He was a fighter for the ordinary Australian—a fighter to the death.

William Morton Whiley was born on 26 August 1927 at Millthorpe, near Orange.

His father was a farmer and later a railway worker, and his mother was a schoolteacher and former dux of Fort Street Girls High School.

Bill trained with the cadets during World War II, but the war ended before he could be called up.

He began his working life in 1947 as a shunter on the New South Wales railways, based in Broken Hill and working throughout the western districts of New South Wales.

Bill was radicalised by the 1949 coal strike.

The following year, 1950, he got a job in the Broken Hill mines and joined the Communist Party because he was 'fed up' with the Labor party after it supported the jailing of Miners

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Federation leaders.

Bill visited Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union and China in 1955, at a time when Australians were severely discouraged from doing so and were spied upon by the government when they did.

His New South Wales Police Special Branch file attests to that—it was active up until 1994.

Along with his good mate and mentor Bill Flynn, Bill Whiley fought the entrenched power of the ALP's right wing on the Barrier Industrial Council and was the last Communist Party of Australia councillor elected in Broken Hill.

Bill was also a long-term member of the Broken Hill Field Naturalists Society and an early and strong advocate for conservation issues.

In 1975 Bill moved to the Illawarra and began his life as a coalminer at Coalcliff, north of Wollongong.

He quickly became involved with the local union, and apparently the manager who hired him was sacked for doing so.

Bill went on to become lodge president and was elected to the southern district board of management.

In 1982 he was at the head of the hundreds of miners and steelworkers from the Illawarra who stormed Old Parliament House in Canberra.

His retirement from the coal industry in August 1987 only meant one thing for Bill—more time to spend on industrial and community campaigns.

In 1988 he stood on an Independent/Greens ticket with well-known unionist and environmentalist Jack Munday for the New South Wales upper house.

In retirement, Bill served as the CFMEU Mining and Energy Division's national returning officer.

In recent years Bill was secretary of the New South Wales Retired Mineworkers Association and at the time of his death secretary of the New South Wales Combined Pensioners and Superannuants Association, in which he played a leading role in the campaign to save Medicare.

I remember Bill working on the Woonona booth at the last federal election, in November 2001, handing out how-to-vote leaflets for the Greens candidate Carol Berry.

He was in fine form that hot summer's day, sweet talking and cracking jokes with all who came to vote, and using the line, 'Don't go grey, go Green!' as he pointed to the shining grey-white locks on his head.

Bill joined the Greens around the time of the October 2002 Cunningham by-election.

The Cunningham result and rise of the Greens throughout Australia in recent years had given him hope, he said, especially in light of the increasing control exercised by conservative forces at all levels of government.

On 2 April 2004 Bill issued a press release on behalf of the Pensioners and Superannuants Association, entitled, 'Luna Park smiles again—but half a million Australians still waiting to get their teeth fixed'.

A month later he was diagnosed with mesothelioma and forced to come to terms with the fact that his days were nearing an end.

Towards the end of July 2004, Bill joined a unique band of activists to be awarded life membership by the South Coast Labour Council in recognition of his long involvement in significant industrial and political campaigns in the Illawarra.

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On Friday, 30 July 2004, I visited Bill at his home—a little cottage in amongst the bush on the side of the Illawarra escarpment at Wombarra.

In his fragile state he took me by the hand and we slowly shuffled outside together.

We sat down on an old log and Bill smiled as he noted how the frogs had returned to the little creek which ran by his house.

He told me to keep fighting—for Medicare, for the poor and for those who need help.

He was lobbying me, as the local federal member, to the last, just as he had done when he visited Parliament House, Canberra, in December 2003 as representative of pensioners and superannuants across the nation.

Bill was a warrior, a fighter, a great bloke.

We loved him and will miss him dearly.

Bill is survived by his three children: Gregor, Andrew and Lyn.

As Gregor wrote at the time of his father's death:

Bill was a rare individual who cared deeply about the lives of ordinary Australians and worked tirelessly at local, State and Federal levels to improve them. Bill was against unfairness, exploitation and inequality wherever it was found and Australians who knew Bill understood and respected those qualities, and gave him their encouragement and support regardless of their political affiliations. Bill's ideals of openness, inclusion and tolerance were the antithesis of modern 'wedge' politics, and stand as an example to us all.

{This is an edited version of a speech delivered in the Australian Parliament on 12 August 2004 by Michael Organ, Australian Greens Federal Member for Cunningham.}