



Photography: Oliver Sirewe

FROM GREY to GREEN

The Eighties have seen the rise of a swathe of urban movements, all focussing on oppression and alienation in the late twentieth century metropolis. Yet the environment movement, despite its many successes, remains wedded to the wilderness. Jack Munday argues that urban issues and the alliances they promise provide a road out of the left's current morass.

Historically, the environmental movement in all the industrialised countries has been essentially the preserve of the more enlightened and articulate of the upper and middle classes. Other strata of the population simply haven't been sufficiently involved.

The movement's main concern has been nature conservation and the protection of wildlife. The Australian experience is a good example. The most successful environmental campaigns here — South West Tasmania, the Barrier

Reef, Fraser Island, saving the dwindling rainforest — all fall into this category.

I don't wish to denigrate in any way these fine actions. They certainly raised ecological consciousness and placed environmental issues on the political agenda. However, Australia is the most urbanised country in the world, and ninety percent of its population lives in eight cities. The myriad urban problems are increasing yearly and it is only in recent years that there has been some attention given by environmentalists to these problems. In some ways

“pure” green issues are more clear-cut, whereas the urban ones are often thornier and many-faceted.

Urbanisation globally has grown at an accelerating pace. In 1950, 28 percent of the world's population lived in cities. By the year 2000, it will have increased to 55 percent.

When one realises that, by the year 2000, the world's population will be nearly six billion it can be appreciated that the problems will be truly enormous. Mexico City and environs, for example, will have over 30 million people.

Another huge problem is the amount of arable land being swallowed up by the sprawling cities and their roads for god car. World motor vehicle registration in 1950 was approximately 50 million. In 1990 it will be over 550 million! Greater Sydney has 44 percent of its entire area taken up by roads. Thirty years ago much of Sydney's fruit and vegetables came from the western and north-western metropolitan areas around Wentworthville, Pendle Hill, Toongabbie and the Hills Districts. Today, all of those areas are fully suburbanised. Red-tiled dwellings and bitumen roads replace the farms. Remembering that soil degradation is now the main problem confronting our farmers this seems an irresponsible misuse of arable land.

The rise of green politics

There can be little doubt that the environmental movement has gained a large degree of public appeal. A major Australian Bureau of Statistics survey in 1986 found that 47% of Australians were very concerned about the condition of the country's environment. The survey estimated that nearly 800,000 Australians visited World Heritage areas in 1986, and that more than four million visited World Heritage areas in 1986, and that more than four million visited at least one national park in the same period.

Since the Franklin Dam controversy, the ALP has paid greater attention to Green issues. In August 1987, Graham Richardson, Minister for the Environment, said, "The Australian Conservation Foundation and the Wilderness Society are organisations with grass roots going out everywhere, which is why for a time I feared the formation of a green party". Certainly, Richardson believed if a party were formed, and had the backing of the ACF and the Wilderness Society, it could have been of great electoral damage to the ALP. "They could have taken a significant number of votes off us. They would be votes coming off the ALP's natural constituency. It is a concern felt right across the factions."

At present, the environment movement is so fragmented and ideologically diverse it is difficult to envisage the formation of a Green party in Australia's contemporary conditions and with our electoral laws as they are today. For the time being the environment movement should continue to impact all political parties.

Even the National Party has entered the Green debate. In an article in the *National Leader*, the National Party's Senator David Brownhill wrote a special article on the importance of the environment. "It would be unfortunate if the National Party, due to misapprehensions about its environmental concern, were to lose electoral appeal simply due to the lack of will to make decisions that are politically rational."

It is of some interest that Senator Brownhill cited the Green Ban actions of the early 'seventies as the first real politicisation of the environment movement in Australia. He particularly noted the controversial nature of the Green Ban philosophy and the central theme of that philosophy "that all work performed should be of a socially useful and of an ecologically benign nature". He went on to say, "While in Europe the Green Movement appears to be restricted to

middle-class professionals, environmental issues in Australia attract people from a wide and diverse spectrum".

While I believe the movement in Australia is still mainly middle class, the Green Ban experience is living proof that the working class and the middle class can forge successful alliances.

Robyn Williams, in a recent address to a national conference of the ACF, told of the tremendous interest internationally that the green bans generated. Paul Ehrlich of the USA and Petra Kelly of the German Greens believe the green ban actions gave the environmental movement a new and wider dimension and opened up the possibility of involving a much broader strata of the population in ecological actions.

It is also true that the Wran government in NSW in the late 'seventies, in introducing the best environmental legislation in this country, was heavily influenced by the popularity of the green bans successes of the Askin years, and the need for genuine public participation in the environment and planning processes. Wran set up the Land and Environment Court with his then good friend Jim McClelland as Chief Judge and, for a period, the new processes flourished.

Unfortunately, with the passage of a few years, things changed dramatically. Large developments and sensitive projects were taken out of public scrutiny, and control was vested in single ministers who did secret deals with developers and entrepreneurs. Darling Harbour, giant construction towers, the monorail, harbour tunnel and countless developments up and down the NSW coast were approved. Public participation ceased. In 1987 the Unsworth government, to its everlasting discredit, sacked the Sydney City Council precisely because the Community Independent council members were, to a certain extent, environmentally effective in thwarting developers.

The picture is similar around the country — with WA and Queensland the real frontier states. The pattern of urban development and redevelop-



ment in the capital cities and larger provincial cities hardly varies. Conservative governments have the worst record, but Labor governments have a tendency to start better environmentally but to adapt quickly to the pace and directions of the developers. This often goes hand in hand with a stress on the job creation function of development, a stress designed to quell environmental opposition. It is necessary to combat this "jobs versus the environment" argument by an insistence that such jobs should be of a socially useful character. Social responsibility should be the cornerstone of all urban environmental decision making.

Resident action groups and other citizens' organisations exist in one form or another in every state. During 1988, two state organisations of urban environmental activists were established. In NSW, under the auspices of the ACF, two conferences were held and a NSW Urban Environment Planning Coalition was established. Well over 150 urban groups were involved in the conferences. A coalition committee was elected. In Queensland, an Urban Coalition was established in Brisbane. A main feature of these coalitions is the great diversity and differing interests of the various groups. At the one time it shows their strengths, yet their concerns can be so different it can also be a weakness unless there is an overall co-ordination. There is a significant potential in these burgeoning urban coalitions.

Left neglect

The old and new Left alike need to question their poor records on the urban environment. Potentially, urban issues and their solutions could be a fertile ground for the Left, particularly since its position has never been weaker. A degree of attention to urban issues from the New Left Party movement and the Rainbow Alliance is promising, and the experience of Green Labor will be keenly followed.

Likewise, trade union involvement in urban environmental issues could not only give them a



much-needed political presence, but could enhance their public profile as well. The ACTU is considering hiring advertising agencies, at great cost, to improve its image. Campaigning against homelessness, and for the diversion of superannuation funds to socially useful production would be a far more lasting benefit and would enhance the ACTU's reputation.

Public transport unions should be campaigning aggressively for the needs of urban public transport and vigorously opposing the car and oil lobbies, Main Roads Department, and so on in their destruction of more homes for roads and freeways. The BWIU, for example, could have enhanced the trade unions' reputation and expressed social responsibility if it had refused to demolish the Regent Theatre in Sydney. It is worthwhile remembering that it was a BLF green ban which saved the Regent Theatre in 1972 when the billionaire owner, Leon Fink, wanted the theatre demolished.

The conservative political climate of the 'eighties is reflected in the unimpressive performance of the left of the union movement and its total lack of creativity around social issues. It could break out of its lethargy if it entered the debate on urban issues such as the problem of increasing homelessness, rapidly worsening pollution, rising noise

problems, the need for a vastly improved public transport service (trains, light rail, ferries and electric buses), the need to move away from the wasteful single standing dwelling to forms of medium density housing, to improve and extend open spaces and maintaining these spaces in a better condition, to create employment by caring for and servicing our city and its environment — in other words, going beyond the traditional "on the job only" considerations which have shackled unions for far too long. What is the use of improving only wages and working conditions if we live in cities devoid of sufficient parks, trees, sunshine? We can win shorter working hours but we still must *live* 168 hours each week.

Expressions of thought such as a real quality of living must replace the more narrow, economist-oriented "standard of living" which conjures up a quantitative rather than a qualitative mentality and state of mind. I remember during spirited debates in the green ban days, some of the dogmatists of the Left claiming that the BLF was the "darling of the middle class trendies", and that environmental considerations were not working class issues. The green ban proponents argued that *any* social, economic, political or ecological issue was of concern. After all, who lives in the least leafy suburbs? Who is subjected to increasing road noise, who has the poorest quality housing, who has least open space? Everything that impinges on working people as citizens should be the right and, indeed, the responsibility of trade unions and their members.

Crisis — East and West

At one time when environmentalists raised the huge problems of the future they were often considered by trade union leaders to be extreme pessimists or Jeremiahs, or distracting workers from the class struggle. Environmentalism didn't cause a sense of urgency or immediacy. No longer is it some dim and distant problem. This generation and, more particularly, their

children, are going to be directly affected by the effects of 200 years of industrialisation and the greenhouse effect. A more ecologically oriented society is required.

Both capitalist and socialist countries have been guilty of great ecological crimes, and both have had a similar arrogant notion of conquering and using nature for "man's" benefit. Both systems have an economic grown fix without seriously weighing up the decisive ecological factors. It will require something of an ethical revolution to bring about the needed change to harmonise with nature.

Capitalism, by its very nature, is acquisitive and predatory and even the more sophisticated countries never even speak of a sustainable society. Nor, for that matter, do any of the socialist models. For example, in the Soviet Union, it is only very recently that any criticism of the USSR's pitiful environmental record has been raised. Fyodor Morgun of the Soviet's Environment Protest Centre has described the USSR's record as disgraceful.

The left of the union movement shows a total lack of creativity around social issues.

Petra Kelly of the German Greens, on a recent visit to Australia, told of a burgeoning green awareness within some of the Eastern European countries. The Chernobyl disaster also made an impact. Gorbachev, in an address to an International Women's Conference this year listed the threat of nuclear war, poverty and ecology as three great problems. He spoke of "ecological disasters confronting every continent on the planet". Years of ecological neglect has affected both capitalist and socialist countries alike. The apparent new environment awareness in some of the socialist countries is to be welcomed. But ecology must be a central feature of socialism, not just tacked on the end of a program.

Whereas the very nature of capitalist is acquisitive, socialism's



nature should be conducive to being able to harmonise better with nature, providing a model of socialism with an ecological heart, a human face and an egalitarian body.

Environment versus employment?

Environmentalists have never effectively combatted the myth that environmental protection exacerbates unemployment. Many corporations, because of their wealth, power and vested interests, succeed in persuading many in the general public about "the selfish self-interest of the environmentalists".

Environmentalists must link up with the more progressive segments of the union movement and draw up their own program of socially-useful employment requirements. There must be a long-term strategy.

Together with trade unions, consumer organisations of other concerned bodies, we should debate the requirements of an ecologically sustainable economy and society. The total concerns of socially useful production and consumption should be addressed. It is a tall order, but there isn't any alternative.

The enormously wasteful use of non-renewable (and renewable) resources cannot continue unless at our very peril. There must be much more attention given to socially responsible job creation schemes. There could be an inventory of such schemes drawn up. Here is where trade unions could be creative. There should not just be the demagogic

politicians' cry at election time of jobs, jobs, jobs, but careful decisions on which socially useful job creation schemes should be pursued. So much damage has been done to the planet that just to repair the damage will require millions of workers.

Socialism's lost century

The evils of stalinism so distorted the perception of socialism that, in many ways, the twentieth century has been the "lost century". Socialism was often considered a dirty word. In the late 19th century and early 20th century, socialists had a vision of a human society in which genuine egalitarian values would prevail, and capitalism and poverty would be abolished. Working people were to be decisive in helping to fashion such a new socialist society.

Such visions and dreams never came to fruition, and the stalinist nightmare set socialism back for almost all of the 20th century.

Now we are at last emerging from that nightmare. If the left learns the lessons of this last century, socialism can still have a future provided that a heightened ecological presence becomes an integral part of its theory and practice. Ecology has become a new, vital ingredient in the left's quest for renewal.

JACK MUNDEY is an environmental activist, and was secretary of the NSW BLF between 1971 and 1974.