NEW DIMENSIONS IN UNIONISM

by Charlie Gifford

Since the early 1960's there has been continuing debate on the left, in official labor and social democratic movements, and among the more far-sighted of the ruling class in all developed countries, on "problems" of modern unionism. The social and economic basis for this preoccupation is clear enough, certainly clearer now than a decade ago. In Australia, unionism's mettle was blunted and its old aims blurred by the relatively comfortable containment of post war economic prosperity. As with all self-perpetuating institutions, its structures and methods had become obsolete, through changes in society's economic base and the growth of non-institutional social movements. Time, and peoples needs, had gone past the traditions of the '30's.

Proceeding apace was a revolution in science and technology, rising standards of education, a younging of the population, the emergence of a multi-racial society, and diversification of the working class. Moral and social consciousness reached nodal points in mass movements against war, racism, women's oppression and despoliation of the environment. This was matched, though on not so easily defined lines, by spontaneous working class reactions to the apparent powerlessness of people in the "relations between things" syndrome of modern capitalism's power-property structures.

Apart from obvious wider implications as to the system's future - all this threatened the relevance of unionism - from whichever angle it was viewed. To the ruling class, which regards labor unionism as an essential element in the regulation and smooth functioning of the system, unionism's loss of relevance would render the working class prey to "alien", radical influences. (A leading U.S. businessman said when visiting Australia a year or two ago, "if the unions didn't exist we would have to invent them.") Hence the generous funding, especially in the U.S., of study groups, institutes and faculties on "modern unionism." Of course, their's is a class concept of modernisation, one to which right wing union leaders readily adapt. It entails slicking up structures and settlement processes; improving "efficiency", hiring large and expert staffs, installing computers, casting union officials in the roles of well paid, collar-and-tied executives - brokers between capital and labor.

From the left, there were varying stances on unionism's dilemma, depending on where one stood politically, while the communist left was going through its own traumas of ideological rectification, with divisions and splits leading to the emergence of new forces and fresh ideas.

The divisions that rent the CPA, especially that of 1968-71 which resulted in the formation of the Socialist Party (SPA), were rooted more in domestic issues than in international ones, although the invasion of Czechoslovakia and the hegemonic power of the CPSU seemed to be the main focus of differences in 1968 and later. The main areas of deepseated difference were attitudes to reformism and the united front, perspectives for the development of the workers movement, the independence of a revolutionary party (independent of the
ruling class, and independent within the world communist movement), and development of a viable revolutionary strategy for Australia.

This is not the place for an excursion into changes in the CPA before and after the split. Suffice to say that new horizons loomed, the spirit of inquiry was untied; "Pandora's box" was opened and the heresies therein collared and buried - including the "heresy" of workers control. Conceptually, workers control implies breaking primary reliance on class struggle confined within the limits imposed by the institutions of the system. And it above all influenced the new thinking of the CPA on the workers movement.

It was no accident that the first significant theoretical contribution on how to break the malaise of the workers movement, and how to develop a new type of unionism, came in the CPA's 1970 20th Congress document 'Modern Unionism and the Workers Movement'. (This is not idle self-praise; there was simply nothing else from the left except occasional essays from academics like Ford and Matthews, and blanket condemnations of unionism's "total irrelevance" from the campus-based "new left".) That 1970 manifesto is a remarkable document, the more so on re-reading. But like most such documents it suffered more from neglect than adherence, it attracted more lip service than real application.

Beyond doubt its main standard bearer was the communist leadership of the NSW Builders Labourers Federation. Perhaps they were uniquely placed; the BLF was the only communist-led building union in NSW, surrounded, so to speak, by the SPA dominated Building Workers Union (BWIU). The BLF leaders were young, or youngish, with visionary zeal, not content to give mere lip service to new ideas. Their achievements and impact over the space of five years are so well known it appears almost trite to recount them. But briefly they were: democratisation of the union; responses to women workers, blacks, migrants, homosexuals; the famous green bans, described by Paul Ehrlich as the most dramatic thing happening in the conservation world and characterised the BLs' excursions into wide social arenas and their rapport with other people in struggle. (Were they demonstrating, incipiently at least, how the working class can be a class for itself and for society?)

On the economic front, their members' position improved dramatically, so much so that building industry wages were cited in the May 1975 metal trades award hearing to show loss of relativity by metal workers. The BLs turned the conventions and traditions of unionism upside down, upsetting the equilibrium of employers, politicians, editorialists and the right and not-so-right in the labor movement. And in extending the dimensions of unionism they cultivated an enormous fund of goodwill and solidarity in the labor movement and the community.

Why then did they fall? Did they commit monumental errors of "left" adventurism and isolationism? Was their defeat inevitable, and did it signify the failure of CPA strategies? Of course they made mistakes. One may ask is it possible for a movement that generates the excitement and elan of the BLs to develop without mistakes? Indeed, can there be an elan without impetuousness, abrasiveness and the mark and clash of personalities? Not in real life, it seems. Apart from those from unrepentant conservatives on the left, surprisingly few criticisms of the main thrust of the BLs work have been committed to paper. Yes, Mundey, Owens and Pringle didn't do enough to woo other union officials; the February 12-day strike was ill-considered, though it was hard then, or now, to see an alternative; occasionally the BLs were "way out" on their issues of struggle and "rather reckless" in their tactics; they "went it alone" too much, especially in the building trades. Those are surely peripheral matters, hardly amounting to a large body of criticism on the major issues. Aside from these, there is precious little offering.

Adventurism is not a new charge against the BLs. It was first laid in 1970 during a five-weeks strike in which flying pickets or "vigilantes" were used to de-scab building sites. Some work performed by scabs was undone by the pickets, and howls of horror were raised at the "violence" of the builders laborers. On May 29 that year the Sydney Morning Herald editorialised "The State Secretary of the union, Mr Mundey, a leading member of the Communist Party, seems to be out to make a name for himself and his party in an extreme and adventurist manner." Nearly five years later that cry was echoed on the left. The SPA paper The Socialist, in its April 1975 issue, lists "adventurism" and "their adoption of the policy of violence" as reasons for the NSW BLs defeat.

The 1970 strike marked the first real consolidation of the BLs leadership with the rank and file, and laid the basis of its public image as a union that got things done. During the second week of the strike, noises and
moves were being made toward the usual conferences and "responsible" settlement - with the employers in a mood to concede nothing. But the vigilante activity started and changed the whole complexion of the strike.

Significantly, the vigilante tactic reached its peak in the fourth and fifth weeks, mass meetings grew in size as the strike progressed, and the majorities in favour of continuing the strike grew at successive mass meetings. By strike's end, with the employers caving in to the laborers' demands, the leadership, far from being isolated from the rank and file, was closer to it than ever. And that was a relationship it held to the end. Meanwhile the labor movement was agog at the laborers' tactics, with Right and conservative left joining the chorus against violence to the bosses' property. To understand that reaction it is instructive to look back to the 1970 Australian Left Review interview with Jack Mundey, so controversial at the time, and so touted by the media pushing "communist plot" themes. People right across the political spectrum were frightened by the strike and the laborers' demands, the leadership, far from isolation, looked commonplace, made so not by the passage of time but by the BLs consistent application to perspectives and methods of struggle that challenged the power and authority of the ruling class.

Did that type of "adventurism" lead to the isolation and fall of the BLs? Of course there are many sides to isolation, with the key questions being *isolated from whom, and on what issues*? One line of thinking poses isolation as a factor between leadership and leadership, officials to officials. Masses of workers apparently don't figure in the relationship, nor in that concept of isolation. Thus the BLs were isolated from John Ducker of the NSW Labor Council, and from other officials including some on the left, especially in the BWIU.

It goes without saying that Ducker was hostile to everything the BLs stood for. He is their inveterate enemy, once doing an Emmy performance on television after a disturbance at a Labor Council meeting during the 1972 plumbers strike - a la Tricky Dick, pyjamaed and clutching family to bosom. In that sense of isolation, the NSW power workers organisation ECCUDO is also isolated from Ducker and ilk, as are rail and bus workers from NSW Transport Commissioner and Labor Council official, Barry Unsworth.

So far as left of centre officialdom was concerned, the BLs isolation, so far as it existed, was chiefly an inspired and contrived one. New ideas and methods always provoke reactions ranging from puzzled askance to confusion to downright conservatism. In this sense, residual conservatism on the left was assiduously cultivated by those who had broken away from the Communist Party and formed the SPA. With important bases in the building and maritime industries the SPA saw the CPA as the main enemy and the NSW BLs as the prime testing area for the "enemy's" ideas and tactics. Putting petty self-interest above class stand, the SPA set out to block and denigrate the BLs, and to isolate them from other unions. Alf Watt, a co-founder of the opposition newspaper The Australian Socialist, which prepared the ground for the breakaway from the CPA (though Watt finally opposed breaking away), understated the situation when he wrote in a circular issued in April this year "From the beginning it (the SPA, C.G.) set its face against any co-operation between its members and members of the CPA, against any united action."

In public statements on advanced actions by the BLs, there was often little to choose between the condemnatory notes of the Sydney Morning Herald, John Ducker and SPA president Pat Clancy. In more cloistered places - on the 'blower' and in the pubs and corridors - the anti-BL campaign ran rampant in cultivating hostility, or at best indifference. Even in the Communist Party, it must be said, there was too often a staid reserve about the BLs; an uncertainty and stand-offishness that impeded a strong and united counter to the SPA-Right campaign. (This lingered to the end in many quarters, expressing itself in the line of "non-interference in BLF affairs" when Gallagher and the employers were taking over the NSW branch.)

All that notwithstanding, the builders laborers were never isolated in the mass sense, nor isolationist in their actions - quite the contrary. There are perhaps two measures of this; one is rapport between leadership and rank and file, and degree of involvement and control by the rank and file in the union; the other is general working class and community support.

Few would argue that the BLs did not excite workers everywhere, drawing respect and admiration and, especially on green bans, attracting wide public support. Indeed by strangely convoluted logic, these strengths became a focus of new criticisms, with both the conservative left and some of the "left" left clucking disapprovingly about "corrupting the
workers with anarchy” and the BLs becoming “the darlings of middle class trendies.”

In words, the SPA places particularly great store in the ‘united front’ and the ‘people versus monopoly’ slogan. But their petty anti-CPA politicking stopped them from seeing the concrete people against monopoly content of the green bans, though they belatedly and reluctantly joined some of them. Similarly, with all their emphasis on united fronts and deals at the top as substitutes for mass action, they turned Nelson’s eye to the fact that at the eleventh hour of Gallagher’s takeover when, according to their rhetoric, the BLs stood in absolute isolation, a large and influential group of Federal Labor parliamentarians issued a declaration of support and solidarity with the NSW branch.

By and large, worker and community support was always there. Certainly, the rank and file of the NSW branch stood at one with the leadership despite an incredible five months of harassment, sackings and victimisation in an industry hit by economic recession. After the takeover move started in October 1974 Gallagher’s organisers, some of whom were defeated candidates on Gallagher’s ticket in the 1973 NSW branch elections, were hounded off job after job by angry BLs. With three months of intervention behind them, Gallagher’s branch had only a few hundred members, many of them new to the industry and shanghaied into the Federal branch by the bosses. (“No Federal ticket no job, we’ll pay for it for you.”) Successive mass stop work meetings rejected the intervention and pledged confidence in the elected NSW leadership. Nor was the BLs leadership isolated community-wise, in the mass labor movement nor from its membership base.

Its downfall resulted from a chapter of perfidy without parallel in Australian working class history. Politics is about power. And isolation of a union usually results from a concerted campaign by the ruling class at a time of its choosing; when it estimates its adversary (or victim) is most vulnerable due to its own mistakes and is short on public or partisan labor movement support. It is interesting to draw a line on the 1949 coal miners strike, usually cited as the epitome of “left” adventurism in post war history. And one should look not just at the event, but at the background - the moods and political perspectives of the left.

In the early post war era most Australian communists believed that capitalist economic crises would repeat themselves in the classical prewar forms, and on a scale even more catastrophic than in the 1930’s. At the CPA 15th Congress in 1948, a section of the Congress Resolution headed “How to fight oncoming depression” stated: “The capitalist world, already deeply affected by the general crisis, which was worsened by the war, is about to plunge into the biggest of all its economic crises.”

Menzies was already talking about banning the CPA, anti-communism and the cold war raged, and the Chifley Labor government was on its last legs. CPA strategy was to deepen the political crisis to complement the economic crisis shortly to come, to expose reformism and assert itself as the alternative to Labor. The coalminers’ strike was slotted into that strategy.

The result was disastrous. The Chifley government immediately invoked emergency legislation and froze the unions’ funds. Eight union officials were goaled for contempt of court after refusing to divulge the whereabouts of funds, and Chifley put troops into the mines. The press ran hot on a “communist conspiracy” theme and Party offices were raided by security police. The CPA had badly overestimated the level of radicalisation of the working class, and had underestimated the depth of illusions in the Labor Party, to say nothing of its other prognoses. As a result the ruling class and the right wing were able to break the strike, alienate public opinion from, and crushingly isolate the CPA and the miners. CPA chronicles are sparing and careful on their analyses of the 1949-51 period, but to the extent they exist they are critical of the Party’s “left” sectarianism at the time.

None of the ingredients of the 1949 coal strike were present in the NSW builders laborers situation - and especially not the “great day soon” perspective. The BLF were seldom vulnerable to frontal attack, nor to bringing themselves down through large-scale indiscretions, as the NSW Askin government discovered in 1970, 1972 and 1973. Partly due to a personal interest in Sydney’s “development”, NSW Premier Sir Robert Askin long rankled over the BLs and their green bans, and was out to get them, as was the Establishment generally. But on what, and how? The “strike violence” thing got maximum 1970 mileage and petered out, only to be revived again during the 1972 plumbers strike. The issue then was not “communist violence” nor the plumbers strike; it was the green bans and the new style of unionism.
Espoused by the BLs. The wealthy developers with their champagne profits had been taken on and beaten. Salt to the wound, the BLs had public support. Askin ranted and raved, backed by the usually bland Sydney Morning Herald throwing caution to the winds by running five hysterical anti-BLs editorials in the space of twelve days.

Hysteria from the right, and calm, considered politicking from the Establishment, gathered momentum during 1973. In June the NSW Master Builders Association mounted a massive press advertising campaign, accusing the laborers of everything from anarchy to sabotage. Simultaneously they closed jobs, locking out thousands of workers with an eye to pitting tradesmen against laborers, and laborers against their leadership. There could be no "sanity" in the industry under the existing leadership, ran the MBA line, focussing on the NSW BLF triennial elections to be held later in the year.

During the latter part of the year the campaign reached a frenzy, with the full weight of the ruling class arrayed against the BLs. In August, Askin used the Summary Offences Act, introduced to fill the hiatus left by the smashing of penal powers by the 1969 Clarrie O'Shea strike, to prosecute BLF officials acting in support of workers job actions. Employers were already co-operating with the Gallagher forces, and in the NSW BLF election campaign the BHP at Newcastle allowed candidates of the Gallagher ticket to enter the steelworks but excluded BLF officials.

Master builders again staged lockouts in the first weeks of November. Askin, in full flight on a law and order kick, threatened to introduce emergency anti-strike legislation against the BLs and power workers. This had been preceded by a late-October assault by Askin and the MBA on the Rocks area green ban. Early in December the MBA topped their campaign with an application for the deregistration of the BLF federally on the grounds that the NSW branch had exceeded its charter in imposing green bans. (The MBA application was based on a ruling by Mr Justice Aird that the green bans were non-industrial disputes, to be settled by negotiation between the developers, residents, conservationists and the unions.) Quite a bun party, and in the middle of it (in October the SPA displayed its "class" solidarity with its Mundey-Nixon cartoon linking Watergate and alleged maladministration of the NSW BLF.

But a "left" takeover, as Gallagher had more than once threatened, held distinct possibilities; indeed it was the only way. The scenario included a divided communist left; the SPA could be relied on to back Gallagher by default; among the rest there would be sufficient confusion and vacillation to shore up a non-partisan stand. 'After all it is only a blue between rival factions of the CP.'

One can speculate on Gallagher's motives. An official of the maoist CPA (M-L) with an implacable hatred for the "revisionist" CPA; a black and white fundamentalist with an ambition for power but with no appreciation of its nuances; opposed to green bans as petty-bourgeois aberrations, and not above breaking them, as with the Melbourne Newport power house ban; in the union movement unscrupulous as a body snatcher out to build an empire with himself top of the heap. Everyone was aware of these characteristics, but everyone underestimated his ruthlessness.

By way of adding spice to the assault on "new unionism", the Sydney Morning Herald in November carried three large feature articles on workers control during the power workers struggle for a 35-hour week, drawing comparisons with the BLs and telling its readers 'if you haven't heard of workers control then you had better learn. This is it - power rationing in the hands of power workers, green bans in the hands of builders laborers.'

The NSW leadership was returned with a 5 to 2 majority in the October BLF elections despite the two-pronged campaign against them. Campaigning on bogus charges of "corruption and mismanagement" of the NSW branch, the Gallagher-sponsored opposition ticket labelled itself "left", which no doubt sowed enticing thoughts in the minds of master builders. Frontal attack had repeatedly failed; there was scant hope of taking NSW from within on a right ticket, and little more with a "left" ticket - and besides, that meant suffering another three years of green bans. But a "left" takeover, as Gallagher had more than once threatened, held distinct possibilities; indeed it was the only way. The scenario included a divided communist left; the SPA could be relied on to back Gallagher by default; among the rest there would be sufficient confusion and vacillation to shore up a non-partisan stand. 'After all it is only a blue between rival factions of the CP.'

While there are some signs that Gallagher had an iron-clad deal with the employers before the Federal intervention began, it's more probable that the deals were worked out in the running. Certainly the employers had long applied pressure on the Federal body as part of their campaign against the NSW branch. In June 1974 they finally achieved deregistration of the BLF federally on the grounds of the green bans and the Federal body's failure to discipline NSW. Gallagher
welcomed deregistration, saying he was glad to be freed of the shackles of Arbitration. But he soon changed his mind. On October 7 1974 the Federal Management Committee of the BLF decided to seek re-registration without the NSW branch, and to establish a new NSW branch.

Gallagher set up office in Sydney in mid-October in what he almost certainly regarded as a long-term operation. It bore the marks of that, for despite the ready co-operation of employers and the NSW government his branch made little progress, other than to occupy the full-time attention of the NSW leadership, with a resultant fall off in work on the real problems of the industry.

When the NSW branch considered invoking an Equity Court ruling forbidding the federal body from establishing a NSW branch, Gallagher waited in a circular to other unions that the NSW officials were stooping to using the bosses’ courts to jail him. Almost to the day of him posting that circular, the MBA sent a confidential letter on October 22, to all its members calling on them to help the Gallagher organisers and to obstruct NSW officials. The sordid and open collaboration between Gallagher and the MBA then began in earnest. On many jobs the bosses carpeted workers one by one and delivered the ultimatum - no federal ticket, no job.

Strike-breaking federal ticket holders were flown from interstate at employers’ expense. Flying squads of NSW police appeared at short notice to block entry of NSW officials to jobs, or to evict them, despite Court orders favoring their right of entry. Wholesale victimisation of delegates and militants raged everywhere. Despite exhaustion from the long campaign against the takeover, the mass of builders’ laborers left no doubt as to where they stood. It was usual for BLs mass stop work meetings to be large and lively, usually around the order of 1,000-1,500. But in February and March at three Town Hall meetings against the intervention there were two meetings of 2,000 and one of 1,400 - the latter on the wettest Sydney day in 30 years.

Yet, on March 24, the NSW leadership conceded defeat, recommending amid deeply emotional scenes that all members join the federal branch. Out of the blue, Gallagher delivered the coup de grace in the form of a package deal agreement with the employers for a $9 flow-on from the Building Trades Award, with employment preference to federal ticket-holders. Coinciding with Gallagher’s announcement, employers let it be known by word of mouth on the bigger jobs that there would be a lockout from April 1 - jobs only to federal ticket-holders. In face of that, there was little alternative to caving in. Sure, the position could have been fought for a while, but at the cost of wholesale sackings, hardship to workers, splits. The suddenness of the final deal - and the fact that Gallagher was prepared to go that far - caught everyone unawares.

How could the final “isolation” have been avoided? Although the NSW officials could have been more conciliatory and modest in their relations with other unions and officials, the only way a substantial difference could have been made would have been to toe the line earlier on: drop the green bans as a significant movement; conform to “responsible” methods; stop being being “disruptive”; and revert to “old and tested” authoritarian norms of unionism. But who on the revolutionary left was prepared to pay that price??

Sometimes it is said that too much attention was paid to green bans and moral issues, and too little to “bread and butter questions”. By and large, the BLs were more successful on the latter than most unions who pay all their attention to “bread and butter”. But their forte, and the deep lesson of their whole experience, was how they combined both, taking unionism out of a one-dimensional world. Ah, to stroll through the top end of Sydney Botanical Gardens on a balmy autumn day on full workers’ compensation at the prevailing pay rate! Yes, a green ban saved the one, being sacrificed to a car park for the Opera House, and the 1971 accident pay campaign in which the BLs played a major part, won the other. (That campaign showed too the potential of a united building trades group. The BLF and BWIU co-operated during most of it, the more so during the long absence abroad of the then BWIU State Secretary, Pat Clancy.)

Still further possibilities of linking the immediate material interests of a section of workers with community interests, and against the monopolies, was shown in the BLs permanency campaign. It began at the end of 1972 at the start of the economic down-turn in the industry. Thus it became a fight for employment, for union hire, permanency based on planned development of the industry - and much more. Within the BLs concept was a recasting of priorities, putting workers’ homes, hospitals and community projects ahead of ugly inner-city office blocks and prestige buildings. As a creative extension of the green bans movement, they developed
ideas of the workers’ movement being concerned with the end results of their labor, not just in bans, but in positive conception, planning and benefit to society. They canvassed community involvement, pointed to the possibilities of reducing land prices and interest rates, and, naturally, once again stirred the ginger of the developers, whose reaction was sharp and determined, in the form of the June 1973 lockouts. Of course, permanency wasn’t won. The SPA leaders turned thumbs down on the issue, posing instead the much narrower demands of 6 weeks’ annual leave and long service leave. Despite sloganising, they couldn’t cope with the actual “people versus monopoly” implications of permanency. Gallagher gave lip service for a time but then, after facilely declaring permanency an impossibility under capitalism, launched into bigger things in collaboration with capital - his campaign to destroy the NSW branch.

By its temp, style and ethos, the BLs movement generated both positive and negative features. Is that really surprising? Everyone who has participated in a mass movement knows that real people in action develop a rich, and at times, bewildering verve, always “more varied, more multiform, more lively and ingenious than is imagined by even the best parties”. On the debit side, and on a mass scale within the BLs, was the emergence of a contempt for organisation and leadership, and for the vision and methods of others. Elitism, in the best sense of that word, can be positive and uplifting when firmly sheeted to a total reality. But when set adrift it can fall victim to the turmoil. ‘No need for organisation, no need for leaders, do your own thing’ - the ultra-democracy of spontaneism was in evidence, especially in the last two years.

Right through the early '70s, the left was reappraising all questions of leadership, masses, democracy, methods of organisation, the role of the revolutionary party in a ‘liberating’ reaction to the long stultification of the stalinist era. In that milieu, all sorts of anti-organisation concepts grew. After all, the very concept ‘organisation’ is an antithesis of absolute democracy. The BLs problems and confusions in this respect were compounded by the temper and excitement of their movement. The problem of how best to combine leadership and organisation with maximum rank and file involvement and the widest democracy has not been solved with the emphasis on leadership, nor did the BLs adequately solve it with emphasis on the rank and file. Similarly, the CPA organisation within the BLs operated in fits and starts - either very good or very bad - haphazardly and without sufficiently clear orientation.

The BLs dared to struggle and dared to win. Their actions were charismatic, exciting and bold. The movement could have asked more of them; but more important, we could have asked more of ourselves and given more. That they lifted the movement to new dimensions, only the blind and the philistine fail to see. When the Gallagher takeover was consummated, there were audible sighs of relief from many quarters. But those reacting that way had best not hold their breaths too long.

The NSW builders’ laborers staged a dress rehearsal. What they pioneered promises to become endemic to the whole labor movement in the period ahead.