Interview with Jack Mundey

COULD YOU MAKE SOME GENERAL COMMENTS ABOUT THE DEVELOPMENTS IN THE UNION SINCE THE ’70 AND ’71 INTERVIEWS?

I think the most important single advance has been our intervention in the non-traditional areas, particularly on the environment. Having in mind that we are the most urbanised country on earth, the destruction of the urban environments particularly in Sydney but also now in Melbourne and, to a growing extent in Brisbane, means that we’ve been in a fairly advantageous position. We are the first building workers on a project, and no building can be demolished without builders’ labourers.

I think the biggest thing was that we responded to the frustration of people who felt they were powerless to act, such as the people of Kelly’s Bush, which triggered it all off. The extent of the frustration was such that we were inundated with requests from residents and from other community groups who felt that the collusion between State governments, the Federal government’s failure to act, and most particularly, the poor quality of government at municipal level, meant that they came to us and requested us to impose bans. I don’t think there was any great foresight on the part of the Builders’ Labourers Union, but the important thing was that we responded to other sections of the community and in this way commenced the astonishing involvement which has had international repercussions.

YOU MENTIONED IN THE PREVIOUS INTERVIEWS THAT THERE WERE ALL SORTS OF CROSS-CURRENTS OF OPINION GOING THROUGH THE PARTY ABOUT THAT TIME WHICH INFLUENCED YOU. WAS THERE A GENERAL STRATEGIC LINE, AND COULD YOU ELABORATE ON THAT?

Once having commenced on the track, we found the tremendous response I spoke about, and among the thinking segment of the population we now enjoy tremendous support, something I didn’t envisage as secretary of the union when we started. I think it bears out the contention that quality of life issues are increasingly more important in a relative sense to purely economic ones.

WHAT’S YOUR ANSWER TO PEOPLE WHO SAY THAT THESE ARE MIDDLE CLASS ISSUES AND THAT IT’S REALLY A DIVERSION FROM THE CLASS STRUGGLE WHICH IS NECESSARY TO OVERTHROW CAPITALISM?

If capitalism is to be overthrown it is essential that a great section of the middle class have to be involved. We’ve also had growing support among the workers too, and it’s interesting to note the number of rank and file members of other unions who have come to us. Many of our bans have
been in working class areas where the working class themselves have acted in great numbers to impose the ban. There has been a deliberate attempt by the Labour Press group, and others, to say that we are the darling of the trendies, selling out the workers, etc. but that hasn’t been borne out. It would be true to say that the majority of our members now strongly support the union’s position. At the same time, we didn’t neglect the economic issues and in particular the question of permanency, changing the nature of the industry. I believe that if we hadn’t had the big strikes of ’70 and ’71 based on, first of all, civilising the building industry to some extent, lifting up the second class status of the builders’ labourers, bringing forward a formula that the wage variation should be no wider than 100-90, this support would be far less. Incidentally, our stand on the gap between “skilled” and “unskilled” was partly responsible for the ACTU, at the following Congress, putting forward that the ratio should be no wider than 100 - 82. The gap was the thing in the five week strike in 1970, and then in ’71 it was a social issue of accident pay in an accident-prone industry, because of the lack of safety, etc.

But the support arose most importantly of all over permanency in the building industry. Our concept here goes beyond just having permanent employment for the full year, because to effect permanency in an industry like ours, where, with each fluctuation in the economy, the building industry is hit, and the imbalance between the commercial and residential sections glaring (by the middle of next year, there will be ten million square feet of unlet office space in Sydney, compared with four million now), to win permanency in the building industry would be vastly different to winning permanency on the waterfront.

In the building industry, if you’re going to have 200,000 building workers employed throughout the year, then you’ve got to stabilise it, and stabilise it in such a way that the three tiers of government have to work out their rate, their preferences, their ratios, and the expenditure on each. Insurance companies and hot money flowing into the country have put up superfluous office buildings. To win permanency goes way beyond anything else that’s been achieved, and I think we’re going to have a tremendous struggle.

IN OTHER WORDS, YOU SEE THAT THE BUILDING BOOM IN THE SENSE OF CITY OFFICE BUILDINGS COULD DECLINE SHORTLY AND THEN THE PROBLEM OF WORK FOR BUILDING WORKERS WILL ARISE AND THE ISSUE WILL BE -- WE’VE GOT ALL THESE NEEDS, WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO WITH THIS AVAILABLE LABOUR?

Yes, because I don’t believe those who say that because of the capital appreciation they can sit out the green bans. If we win the fight that the inner city area should be mainly residential, with provision for low and middle income earners, then the tremendous appreciation of capital on the buildings will not go on. So I think we’re going to have a real crisis within the building industry in this area, and it’s wrapped up in permanency too, because there are real elements of workers’ control in it. It will mean, as we’ve put forward for a long time now, that there should be a Building Investigations Committee to determine which buildings should be built, and in fact had the BWIU and other tradesmen’s unions come along with us in the fight over the last award, we could have made this a real fighting point. The Master Builders nearly croaked when we put it forward -- you remember their silly stuff, “this is workers’ control, it’s anarchy they’re taking over”. On the monetary side, they coughed up six or ten dollars without any real struggle, whereas before they were always hard to fight on dough. Now the money was there, but no invading of our sanctity, they said, by the setting up of any committees to determine which buildings should be built.

I think this opens up the other side of it, the social responsibility of workers, the examination of the end result of their labour is now on, and I think it’s tied right up with the ecological crisis which exists in our society. Once workers, industrial workers, start to have a say in the end result of their work -- if, for example, unemployment built up, and they demanded that money be diverted to hospitals, to the public sector, instead of to office buildings -- I think that would be partly workers’ control and also an expression of social responsibility by the workers themselves.
And take the motor vehicle -- I think that motor vehicles have got to go in the way in which they're being produced now; they've got to be restricted and greater emphasis placed on public transport. For that to happen, I think there's got to be shock tactics by the workers themselves, the workers have got to take it up, and a section of the workers have got to be involved.

DO YOU THINK THEY HAVE HONESTLY TAKEN IT UP IN THEIR OWN HEARTS?

When we embarked on the green bans, the leadership was a long way ahead of the membership - I think that's the real position. I see that a most essential ingredient is leadership. The very fact that we're defending workers' homes, defending the right of people to live in the city, means that workers could identify. Even though many of them might be forced out to live at Mount Druitt and beyond, they could identify with those people who were fighting to keep the Rocks residential, for example, to keep the 'Loo, Darlinghurst and so on.

I think, secondly, they then saw the success of the union and felt that the union was contributing something of a social nature and there was an uplifting in the confidence of the union members.

WHY DO YOU THINK THE BIG DEVELOPERS AND THEIR GOVERNMENT FRIENDS HAVE BEEN SO POWERLESS TO DEAL WITH THE GREEN BANS?

I think that institutions, governments and the courts, traditionally deal with wages and conditions matters. Australian unions have been politicalised to a certain extent more than many other unions in other countries, especially on international issues. But on social issues we haven't been involved that much, and certainly not to the extent that we have become involved here. I think the phenomenon of having unionists come together with people, with residents, in concerted action formed a new alliance which was so powerful and is potentially still more powerful, that governments haven't found the way to handle it.

It is true that there are diverse groupings, classes and social groupings of people in these struggles. You find the militancy of the Kelly's Bush women, nearly all upper middle class, who went down in front of the bulldozer. But then the same militancy was shown at Eastlakes, which is certainly the other end of the social ladder from Hunter's Hill. It's this that the government hasn't been able to handle, and I think it shows the potentially revolutionary character of ecological action, people in action. And I consider that what the builders' labourers have done has only been a tiny step along the road as to how unions have to involve themselves in the future. In the motor vehicle industry, for example, I think the time will come when the thinking workers will have to tackle the whole question of saying, well, we shouldn't be making these cars, we should divert our energies elsewhere. It will mean that some industries will have to curtail the number of people involved, and by raising their consciousness, with the rest transferring over to other industries performing work that is socially beneficial to the community at large. I think this is essential, in fact, and more important than any Club of Rome or anyone else making great predictions from the top: the workers themselves must become involved in this social way.

IN THE EARLIER INTERVIEWS YOU PROJECTED SOME IDEAS ABOUT THE WAY A UNION SHOULD BE. A LOT OF PEOPLE, INCLUDING MANY ON THE LEFT, FEEL THAT THIS SORT OF THING IS NOT POSSIBLE -- IT'S GOING TOO FAR, TOO FAST. THE REAL TEST LIES IN HOW THE WORKERS REACT. WHAT DO YOUR MEMBERS THINK OF THE UNION NOW, AFTER THE LAST FOUR YEARS OR SO?

With all organisations it's always the conscious element which drives the union forward. But I think, if I can generalise, that the builders' labourers in NSW proudly identify themselves with the union leadership, and particularly with green bans which probably are the most used two words in the Australian press of recent times.

And I'll pose the question, if I can, is the union going too far. There are some critics of Mundey who say he's going to far and he'll lose his economic position. Well, I think that the recent struggle in the builders' labourers ranks in the last couple of weeks -- the sharpness of it, the fact that we've been so isolated because of bastardry -- on the one
hand, Clancy and Ducker, on the other hand, Gallagher -- despite that, and despite the emp
loyers knowing that, the members stuck with the leadership when it was a non-economic
issue -- it was a green ban issue, green bans or no was on the agenda. I think that shows
better than any words that the workers were prepared to come and fight around that. Be-
cause if there had been a backlash, well, there'd be people getting up and saying it's
crazy, we're going too far. But that didn't come through at any of the meetings. A
couple -- there'd be some certainly in the union with backward thinking who would
go, would think, this way. But to get a real picture, the overwhelming majority of the members identify themselves with
this, with the current movement.

THE IMPORTANT POINT WOULD BE THAT THE UNION REALLY HAS EMERGED
FROM ALL THIS STRUGGLE A STRONGER UNION?

That's right. Definitely. But if we can get
back to permanency, if we hadn't projected
permanency, and if we'd just sort of fought on
the green bans, I think we would have been
in trouble. But projecting advanced notions of workers' rights together with the green
bans has allowed us to go a long way.

THERE'S BEEN SOME CRITICISM ABOUT INSUFFICIENT DEMOCRACY IN APPLYING GREEN BANS.

I don't think it's valid. I think all told we
have 38 green bans; we had the action taken
over a young homosexual at Maquarie Uni-
versity and then there was the women's
strike at Sydney University which we sup-
ported, and now most likely a ban -- black as
distinct from green -- on the new maximum
security block at Long Bay. But we've always
imposed these bans at the request of Prison-
ers' Reform, for example, and the students
at both universities coming to us. Those two
things were endorsed at monthly branch
meetings, which are the governing body of
the union between elections. In others --
cultural bans around theatres, and the green
bans -- all of these were preceded by public
meetings. We always insisted that there be a
public meeting and a public expression. If
it be in a community such as the Rocks,
well, they meet, and then that public meet-
ing requests the builders' labourers to impose

the ban, and the builders' labourers at branch
level have imposed the ban. In the case of
historical buildings, or buildings worthy of
preservation, we base ourselves on the Na-
tional Trust, but not on it alone.

SO REALLY THERE'S DEMOCRATIC IN-VOLVEMENT BOTH IN THE WIDER
COMMUNITY SENSE AND WITHIN THE UNION?

That's right. And probably one thing that
should be said, the best thing of all that is
developing now, is that the community is
drawing up their own plans. For example,
the people's plan for the Rocks, where be-
fore you had State Planning Authorities, or
Askin's people making all the decisions
about what will happen to this or that comm-
unity.

The Royal Australian Planning Institute
came out and questioned the wisdom of
building there and about 700 people attend-
ing a public meeting. It was decided that
the people themselves would draw up a
plan for how they want the Rocks to be
regenerated. I think this is extremely imp-
portant, because now it has gone further.
The people who drew that up were mainly
professional people, who did so at the requ-
est of the residents of the Rocks. But in Woo-
loomoolloo, Darlinghurst and Victoria Street
they're going further than that. They're going
for the people themselves to have more say,
not just professional people, as to the type of
community they want.

A LOT OF PEOPLE SAY THE BUILDERS' LABOURERS ARE A SPECIAL TYPE OF
WORK FORCE, THE BLF IS A SPECIAL TYPE OF UNION -- DO YOU ACCEPT THIS
SORT OF ARGUMENT?

No, I don't. I think it's in the question of
leadership. The organised trade union move-
ment, working the way it is now, will con-
continue to exist, but I question very much whether
it will have as much influence in ten years'
time as it has now unless it changes. I also
think if it doesn't change sufficiently, other
militant forms of workers' organisations
will arise which will take over these more
crucial areas. I think that leadership -- includ-
ing people of the left -- is still a problem be-
cause of its conservatism. Officialdom has
held back the workers' movement in a gen-
eral sense. Take the amount of controversy
arising out of such a thing as tenure of off-

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ice. I think I've spoken in about every capital city in Australia and most of the main provincial cities to meetings of communists or worker control meetings, meetings of the left. And invariably, though I try to play it down as not being an important thing, saying that the Communist Party has far more important ongoing ideas, and to try and raise the social issues -- it comes right back to that, particularly union officials themselves, posing such questions as "you're so valuable, how can we replace you" and most of them aren't thinking of me at all, they're thinking of themselves.

IT MUST BE SAID THAT YOU HAVE, PERSONALLY, PLAYED AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN THE UNION.

I don’t denigrate the role of leadership, but I think that, actually, we have always gone the other way, and exaggerated the position of leadership. I think that’s one of the lessons we must draw from our own history, internationally, and also from trade union history in this country. There’s been exaggeration, there’s been over-concentration on getting people in and then keeping them there at any price, even though some are playing no role at all, not even carrying out Communist Party policy or trying to bring the workers forward. You’ve only got to see the two spectacles of the communists, so-called, who went with the Hill group, and their performance, and the communists who went into the SPA. And their performance didn’t start when they went with the SPA. They were performing badly and the wrong way before. So I think the question of leadership is a very big thing, and I think the tenure of office and the relation of leadership to membership is one of our strengths.

In our union, workers identify with leaders and don’t just look upon leaders as getting a cushy job or working towards a seat in parliament, because it’s impossible to occupy a leadership position with us and move away from the workers, move in the circles of arbitration courts and employers as far too many do. It would be interesting to go through them and see, even in the Communist Party, the number of officials occupying positions for some 20 or 30 years. So I do think that limited tenure of office is essential, and I think it should be put forward by the Party in all positions. I think future society must limit tenure of office of all people in public positions where they’ve got decision-making powers. I think it should apply to bureaucrats in government, as well. They’ve got to be rotated and moved out of those positions so that they don’t build themselves in. I’ve seen the most pedestrian trade union officials who are hopeless in their fights for the workers, become very skilled and cunning indeed at remaining in that position of office.

HOW DO YOU EXPLAIN THE HOSTILE ATTITUDES TO THE BUILDERS’ LABOURERS AMONG OTHER LEFTWING UNION OFFICIALS?

I think that, first of all, if we take the Maoists so-called, and the Soviet liners -- I think that their really conservative position wouldn’t allow them to do the sort of things that we’re doing. There are also ingrained habits and the old ways of doing things. Also involved is the old economism - the idea that the economic struggle of the workers is what we’ve really got to be involved in. I think that it is the old-fashioned thinking of these people which has held them back. I think there are a lot of people who I think support the policy to a fair extent, but they do think it’s a bit way out, and they can’t really grapple with how to apply it creatively.

The line that the builders’ labourers are in a unique position is tripe, because if you take the AMWU, for instance, they’re in a better position on the question of pollution. I was once asked on a radio program -- Can you see it going further? And I raised two points: if in the recent oil refining strike, instead of just putting forward the wages question, and they had a good question here because of technological change, etc., they also put forward that the petrol be such that it doesn’t pollute the atmosphere; or if the car workers demanded that there be emission control units on all motor vehicles. These are the sort of social issues which will grip the public at large. And the same thing with pollution up in Newcastle- there wouldn’t be one Novocastrian who wouldn’t support it if all the workers said: Right, BHP, we’ll give you six months to introduce the latest Swedish proposals for anti-pollution, which are way ahead of what BHP are using. I think that sort of action would
lift the unions a long way forward. So I think that ALL unions can find ways to take such actions in their own industry.

WHAT ABOUT ATTITUDES OF YOUNG PEOPLE TO WHAT YOU’RE DOING?

We’ve got more support in the Labourers from young people for the green bans than from older members. That’s very evident. So I think that the young have responded to it. I think that some of the young Trotskyist elements are completely missing the boat on this question of ecology. They’re taking what I could only call a very dogmatic and, I might add, un-marxist view of reality today.

Concerning students, recently I spent a couple of weeks going to other cities, and I spoke at universities and at the August council meeting of AUS in Melbourne. The thing that strikes me about the student movement is that whilst they all say “things are quiet”, there seems to be a real mass interest in radical issues.

I spoke to a meeting of 1200 students at the Adelaide University, and the reception at AUS was tremendous. I find that there are not so many ego-trippers in the student movement as in the sixties -- the Lavers and the Mike Joneses, and some of the others -- I suppose they did play a valuable role, but let’s face it, many of them were bloody opportunistic when you look back. I reckon there’s a new quality coming through in the universities; I think many among them have a more modest approach, a more thinking approach. I think the same thing goes with workers, when workers are given a chance to do things. And, as I have said, they have supported the labourers, who are probably the best example of carrying forward Communist Party policy in this area. I know a revolutionary situation isn’t just around the corner, but I do feel we should get on with building the potential, especially of bringing workers and students together to fight around these issues. I think we can really lift the understanding of workers if we do it.

Now, what are the impediments? I think mainly, again, on top. It’s a question of that strata of union officialdom -- and I probably should say here also that the organised shop committees are, in the main, just as ossified themselves. From top to bottom there’s a bureaucracy in the existing union movement, and I think it’s got to be broken. Bureaucracy is a real hindrance and it plays into the hands of the right wing and assists backward elements of reformism to continue to dominate, even though their position is brittle. They’ve got the power, but, by Jesus, it’s not very strong, and I think we’ve got to give workers more confidence to break through. And that’s why I think workers’ control has to be seized upon. Some look on workers’ control as something of the future; I think that workers’ control has to be on now, including within workers’ organisations.

WHAT ABOUT THE CPA? WHERE DO YOU THINK IT’S GOING, AND WHAT DO YOU THINK ITS ROLE IS?

I really doubt if I would have been still in the Party if those divisions of the last decade hadn’t occurred. I’m very happy that they occurred, and I think that if they hadn’t occurred, the Communist Party of Australia wouldn’t have any future at all. I do think that I find, talking to anarchists and others, that there’s more respect among the left, the genuine left revolutionaries, for the Communist Party of Australia than ever before. And more and more people are thinking of joining the Communist Party now than before. I think the Communist Party has a real future, but I think it resides more in those who are coming in and will come in than those who are in.

IN ’71 YOU SPOKE ABOUT THE NEED TO WIN THE BATTLE FOR POLITICALISATION OF THE UNION MOVEMENT AGAINST THE REACTIONARIES AND THE LEFT CONSERVATIVES. HOW DO YOU SEE THE POSITION NOW? PERHAPS WE COULD POSE IT AGAINST THE EXPERIENCE OF THE UNITED STATES MOVEMENT.

I think the need for politicalisation is the most important issue. I think the Communist Party of Australia and our industrial policy is the main instrument to do it, because I can’t see anybody else doing it. I doubt very much whether the builders’ labourers in NSW would have gone anywhere near the extent they did if its leaders weren’t communists. There are tremendous barriers because...
of the entrenched bureaucracy which exists within unions, and acts as a barrier against their politicalisation. But down below, you find workers talk politics more today than they did, certainly ten or five years ago.

I think the builders’ labourers have acted as a bit of a catalyst. Everywhere I go, I find members of all unions, particularly active rank and file members, condemning their leadership, and then go on and talk about politics. And they say that workers are more politically conscious about the events of the day. I think that television has done something here, especially the news.

WHAT DO YOU THINK OF THE LABOR GOVERNMENT’S POLICIES AND ACTIONS ON ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES?

I raised this point at the Labor Council the other week, when an attack was being made on the Builders’ Labourers Federation by Ducker. We have Pat Hills coming down to the workers’ movement and not mentioning the word environment once in the whole thing, not defending the people who want to live in these areas, even though it’s right in his electorate, and when everybody is saying that Askin has destroyed Sydney.

Contrast this with the fact that both Whitlam and Uren undertook to tackle the crisis of our cities, and that received a lot of air, and a lot of space. And when you take the swinging seats, the swing occurred in two areas, Melbourne and Sydney, and they were often in seats affected by environmental issues, so it meant that people moved from a Tory position to Labor, to a fair extent on the basis of a government that was prepared to tackle the crisis in our cities.

I think they have been consistently good with their words, but their words have exceeded their deeds. I think it’s pretty refreshing, on a comparable basis with the last government, and a lot of State governments; I think that at least their words, their spirit is good, and I think that can be taken advantage of.

WHAT DO YOU THINK ARE THE MAIN STRATEGIC LESSONS OF THE BLF EXPERIENCES?

It seems to me the whole experience of the union shows that the old formula is not necessarily right: that the more advanced action is than necessarily, the less support it must have, and conversely, the more broad an issue, the lower level it is, the more support it must have. This seems to have been really shattered by the builders’ labourers’ experiences. They have shown that intelligent action around an issue does tap a real feeling among people, even though it might be dormant. A type of action which punches through mass apathy and captures people’s imagination, as it were, brings in mass support and attracts all sorts of people – for example, Patrick White.

I think a realistic assessment of the situation allowed us to do this, and that the propositions of the last two CPA Congresses played a part. The conservatives in the Building Trades Group are saying that one-outism is no good: Ducker is saying the same thing – come back to the fold, come back to the hundred and six unions, let us make the decisions. Bignell says, if you take action it affects the plumbers, therefore you shouldn’t take unilateral action and so on. Many unions play on this lowest common denominator, in the name of “strengthening unity” – and to do what? Sweet bugger all.

On the general strategic question, I have thought a lot about that because we have been near the precipice on many occasions in the last few years. There have been all sorts of predictions that “you’re over this time.....” and there were many times when I also thought it. But it has been borne out that if you’ve got a sound base to fight on, even though it might be advanced action, you’ll get support. And this is where the political skill comes in, and I believe that our base was sound and the way in which we imposed the bans achieved strong public support, so that we’re pretty near invincible now unless they bring in new laws, which of course they might well do.

The communist part of it is always known, it’s not as though I’m unknown, and I take advantage of also pointing out the fact that you haven’t got a monolithic communist movement, and of bringing forward our own independent position, which is appreciated by many of these people. One thing I’ve noticed is the ignorance of people, even some politically conscious people, about our independent position. This ignorance is pretty amazing and shows that the CPA still hasn’t projected its new position to any great extent.
IN OTHER WORDS, THE PARTY AS YET HASN'T DONE ENOUGH TO BREAK THROUGH THE WALL AROUND IT WITH ITS NEW IDEAS?

No, definitely not. I tried to make this point at the last Congress -- that I don't think we use the media enough. In this shrinking world where communication is so tremendously important, I question whether we use it enough. Now of course it has been said: well, it's all right for you to talk because you're in a position where you can be used. This is true, but I still don't think we do it enough. We tend to be quite conservative about trying to break this communications position.

SINCE YOUR LAST INTERVIEW FOR ALR THERE HAVE BEEN TWO ACTU CONGRESSES. WHERE DO YOU THINK THE ACTU IS HEADING AND WHAT'S YOUR ESTIMATION OF THE ROLE THE CPA HAS PLAYED. THERE HAS BEEN MUCH CRITICISM OF OUR ROLE AT THE RECENT CONGRESS. ARE WE GETTING ISOLATED, ARE WE DOING THE RIGHT THING OR NOT?

I think that the Communist Party performance at the last Congress was sound; having in mind that the actual numerical strength of CPA delegates to the Congress was down on the previous time. I think the fact that we put forward more strongly our ideas and fought them out in an independent way was good, and I think we also questioned more than ever before the nature of the ACTU Congress itself. I don't think that it's got any great future. Workers don't relate to the ACTU Congress very much -- they think it's something "up there". Most delegates think the same way. Most delegates to it are aged people, and they're almost all mates. It's a bit of a jaunt: "where are we going tonight" sort of thing. The very fact that when Whitlam arrived to open it they had to empty them out of the pub across the road, turn the grog off to get them over there -- twice they couldn't get a quorum -- all those things you know about. Probably in the past the Communist Party has been guilty because we've also had a numbers mentality -- I'm going back years now -- about the thing. I don't think you can ignore the importance of winning positions either, but again, as with our general thinking and our wrong priorities, I think we've been too much on this and not enough on down below. I think the things we raised about the nature of the Congress -- whether it should change, whether it should be commissions, whether it should be a more action oriented Congress -- really livened it up and in that way it was one of the most controversial ACTU Congresses of recent times.

WHAT'S YOUR GENERAL ESTIMATION OF THE ACTU AND HAWKE'S ROLE AT THE MOMENT? HE SEEMS TO HAVE GONE FROM PLAYING A PROGRESSIVE ROLE TO ONE WHERE NOW HE'S MORE KEEPING THE MOVEMENT BACK, EVEN THOUGH HE'S STILL PREFERABLE TO THE RIGHT WING ALTERNATIVES.

As I said a year or so ago, Hawke has passed his zenith as regards his industrial contribution and his unseemly haste to get out of the industrial area into the better grounds of Canberra was terribly obvious, where he modestly puts himself forward as front bench material, at least. But Hawke definitely was a breath of fresh air after Monk; there's no doubt he's done a lot for the union movement in that way. I think I'd go along with John Edwards' estimate of Hawke that he has no real ideological position. Mick Young and Hawke, I think that's about their position, they can go anywhere. Hawke fluctuates -- in fact since the Congress he has gone better on some things than before. He's gone better than MacDonald of the SPA on the current builders' strike and lock-out. On TV the other night, he got stuck into the employers and said he wasn't going to get caught up in the building union differences. So I think that he has been valuable, but because he hasn't got a really firm position, I don't think that he can give the sort of leadership that the union movements wants now that it's become more radicalised.

DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEAS ABOUT THE COMING CONGRESS OF THE CPA?

I firmly support the Party's present position. I think that we've got to find a way to get Party members supporting the Party position a bit more. And the attraction I spoke about before, people coming towards the Party, can be expedited if the next Congress and pre-Congress discussion is given a lot more air. I think we should really strive to get across the line of the Party before the Congress. And I think things will be sharper then,
too, with the Labor Government there could be a bigger crisis by then. So I think it will be a time when there will be interest in the Party position. We still haven’t found the way to get out to the Australian people. We have definitely got to do that.

**ONE WAY TO DO THAT IS MORE INVOLVEMENT OF PARTY MEMBERS IN ALL WAYS. YOU'RE STANDING FOR THE SENATE IN A CPA TEAM, WHAT'S YOUR ATTITUDE TO ELECTIONS? ARE THEY ONE WAY THAT WE CAN PERHAPS BREAK OUT WITH OUR POLICIES IN A GENUINELY REVOLUTIONARY SENSE?**

I don’t think we should see elections as the most important thing. But I think they are an ideal opportunity of bringing forward new ideas, and if they’re associated with activity of the Party membership I think we can make an impact. And I do think that myself standing, because of the way in which the green bans etc. have been associated with the individual Mundey, that we should be able to get that part of our policy across to broad sections.

**WHAT WOULD YOU NOMINATE AS THE THREE MAIN ISSUES WHICH OUGHT TO BE DISCUSSED AND PROJECTED FROM CONGRESS?**

The question of ecology which is so important because mankind’s survival is wrapped up in it. The way in which ecology movements are developed in the next 50 years will determine, I think, whether man can survive. I put it as high as that.

The question of egalitarianism, the imbalance of wealth, the maldistribution of the income, because it’s wrapped up in the same thing of changing life style, and there should be a real campaign against consumerism. The third is workers’ control. To me, they all seem to come together. They all impinge upon each other, because you’re not going to have those changes with the nature of the existing work in the trade union movement or the workers’ movement now.

**WHAT ABOUT WOMEN IN THE INDUSTRY AND THE EXPERIENCE YOU’VE HAD?**

In an all-male industry, I think it was a real breakthrough that we could get women working in this industry. We’ve even gone further than that now by encouraging them to get more skilled jobs. When they first came in, it was significant that they were mainly put on an extension of what I call the bedroom or the kitchen: they were being nippers, they were getting lunches and cleaning the sheds up. They have made a deliberate attempt now to get tickets, such as hoist drivers’ tickets. We haven’t made a breakthrough with great numbers, but we had some very fine struggles -- a work-in to get women on jobs, a rather humorous one at the brewery where, through an 18-year old girl, after 130 years, women now employed by Tooths get a drink of beer. And it has also been good for the industry. I think it’s humanised the industry a bit, women coming into it. I think that on the broader aspects, there’s a better appreciation by the workers of the problems of women. I don’t want to exaggerate this, but they are starting to come through. And the very fact anyway that, in a male-dominated industry, we were able to break through is itself extremely important.

**HAS THERE BEEN A “MALE BACKLASH”?**

No. Among some of the older workers, at the beginning, but again its significant, hardly any from younger workers.

**IN ’71 YOU RAISED THE QUESTION ABOUT THE PROBLEM OF MIGRANTS, ESPECIALLY WITH RESPECT TO RELATIVITY OF WAGES. WHAT ABOUT THIS AND OTHER PROBLEMS NOW, ESPECIALLY CONSIDERING THE FORD STRIKE?**

I think we’ve failed to appreciate the problems of the migrants and their problems have been doubly difficult for reasons that you know. I think that at last we are trying to do something as the two recent migrant conferences indicate, even though there were big weaknesses. They indicate a big movement forward, and at least a first tackling of the tremendously difficult problems they have. Take our industry, for example: the really big problem is the southern Italians. People say, Oh yes, the
Italians are good on concrete, they do it back home. But most of them have never handled concrete before. They come from the poor agrarian parts of Italy and because the unpopular side of builders' labouring is concreting and excavation, then it's in those hard areas that we find migrants working. In nearly all concrete yards they gather together, and they work under the most arduous circumstances. We've never really tackled this. In our union, we now have a Greek, a Yugoslav and a Portuguese who also speaks Italian and Spanish on as organisers. That's how we're tackling it from the top level. At job level (job ORGANISERS, we call them, not job delegates, so as to differentiate) we've got many migrants now coming forward, but the change is slow. I think the Ford outburst was a pent-up frustration and anger of the workers. Laurie Carmichael was very honest in saying that we underestimated the position. In fact it's true. The Communist Party wasn't the only force which made this mistake -- in fact, our record has been better than others.

IN ALL THE EXPERIENCE OF THE UNION, THERE'S BEEN THE QUESTION OF MUNDEY AS A FIGUREHEAD. YOU'VE SHOWN BY YOUR ATTITUDE TO TENURE OF OFFICE AND SO ON THAT YOU DO NOT GO ALONG WITH THIS, BUT HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT THE PROBLEM AND WHAT'S THE CORRECT WAY TO HANDLE IT AS FAR AS YOU ARE CONCERNED?

People close to me have said that I've been affected by it, but I think I've kept my feet on the ground pretty much. I don't think I've ego-tripped that much. But I think it's because of the bureaucratic nature of our society that a figurehead is brought out. Union officials generally don't talk to the media. They don't want to go on television or they answer the radio by saying, well, the executive will discuss it the week after next and give you a reply. Because I was always so available, I always made good news, and with things happening in the Labourers' union the way they did, one thing led to the other, all placing me in a different position.

NOW THAT YOUR TENURE OF OFFICE IS FINISHED, HOW DO YOU FEEL PERSONALLY ABOUT IT AND WOULD YOU TELL US SOMETHING OF WHAT YOU PLAN TO DO?

The last few years have been very exciting in the Builders' Labourers' Union and I'm particularly happy about the success we've had in the ecological area. I think we really started something there and my main interest will be in that area. I think it is potentially very revolutionary and that the Communist Party has a real responsibility to become involved there. I personally would like to link up with the Total Environment Centre and Ecology Action. I think if we can relate our experiences in a real way and not immodestly, to other workers, we'll get other workers also involved in ecology action. I think this is what I'd like to do. But I've got no regrets about stepping down; the loss of the power doesn't greatly affect me and I think it's also a test, because I'll still be on the executive of the union and I'll still be fighting for the maintenance of our line. The interesting thing to find out in the future is how my influence will still be in the union. That's unresolved. Things do change, people do have different emphasis on different areas, different thrusts, don't they? It would be unreal to think the next bloke's going to come in and carry on in the same way. But anybody can make a statement in the builders' labourers. All our meetings no matter how controversial are regarded as open to the media at all times. Anybody in the leadership of the union can make a statement. It hasn't got to come through just the august secretary. This has created problems, I think there's a bit of competing at times. Now that I'm going, there are signs of it there. But nevertheless, I think that's better than the other way.

But I feel my main future is trying to take Communist Party policy particularly in the ecology area, into other unions and getting action going amongst workers.