

2. Life and death on the job: The Builders Labourers' Federation — rank and file democracy, 1970 to 1975

Sydney in the 1960s and 1970s was being transformed almost overnight from a small, low city huddled round the harbour into a city of sky scrapers.¹ There were big profits to be made by the building companies if they could harness the money flowing into the city. So this new high rise cityscape was being built from scratch with short cuts and no previous experience. The workers were mostly members of the Builders Labourers' Federation (BLF) which, until then, had been a small, powerless union. A few others were in the Building Workers' Industrial Union (the BWIU). They were all as unfamiliar with this style of high rise building as the companies.

Most of these BLs (the nickname for the BLF members) had been working in small job teams on suburban house or light industry sites until the boom brought them all together for the first time in the CBD. New materials were making it possible to build bigger and higher buildings, all needing more and more workers to make it happen fast. So suddenly, these workers from the suburbs were expected to build scaffolding and carry loads up onto buildings which were 20, 30 and 40 floors high. Industrial accidents occurred sometimes in other industries Kevin had worked in. His own uncle had died on the job in the Wollongong steel industry. But in Sydney's new high rise building boom, the danger was there every day for every worker — and it was a real issue of life and death.

Cookie met it on his first day on the job.

Kevin: Roy Bishop was a key to me going onto a site and into the BLs.² We'd worked together as iron workers in the paper mill in Botany, but then I was working up at Tumut. Roy rang me up and said: 'I got you this fantastic job! Plenty of money. So come up here quick! Snatch it!'

So I snatched it! The next day I drove back down to Sydney. And there it was: TC Whittle's job. As a dogman!

1 Meredith Burgmann and Verity Burgmann 1998, *Green Bans Red Union: Environmentalism and the New South Wales Builders Labourers' Federation*, UNSW Press, Sydney.

2 The 'BLs' was the widely-used nickname for the Builders Labourers' Federation and for its members. Pronounced 'bee-ells'.



Figure 2.1: Dogman on hook at Harrietville, Victoria, 1940.

Photograph by JA Smith, 1940, republished courtesy of his grandson, 'williewonker' at <<http://www.flickr.com/photos/87791108@N00/3242643681/in/photostream/>>

Do you know what dogmen used to do? You were riding the loads all the way down the buildings. The crane driver was on the top but he couldn't see you all the time. He could only see the wire going over the edge. You could signal him with a rope that ran back up along the wire to a bell on the crane, but that was all you had. Some of the old blokes used to paint a line on the wire, and then they could see where you were supposed to be. They dropped one of the kibbles, that's the cement holder, on top of a double decker bus doing that one day! So the dogmen were ridin' around on the hooks and the slings – and the slings were only as thick as your finger!³

I said to Roy: 'No! you're crazy!'

But he talked me into it. So I got the job but I'd never worked as a dogman before, in fact I'd never worked on a building site! ...So I didn't know anything! I got on the kibble. It's illegal to ride but we used to ride it up in the morning save walking up the stairs. Roy had just said 'Jump on that, grab on and up you

³ The term 'rigger' is often mistakenly used to refer to dogmen, but as BLF members who actually did the job, like Kevin and Joe, have explained, a 'rigger' did not ride the hook, but instead erected and dismantled scaffolding and moved machinery onto and off a site.

go, I'll stay down the bottom'. So I jumped on and when I got about six foot up, I looked down and I thought 'As soon as I get off this, I'm going to walk right down them stairs and *out of here!*'

And when I got off, you could see my fingerprints in the steel, I was hanging on that tight!

Being in the Builders Labourers' Federation in the 1960s and 1970s was a completely new experience for workers in two ways. First, they were making buildings very different than they had ever made before, on sites where there were no amenities, using strange new techniques and working in tall, dangerous building conditions when there were few effective regulations to protect worker safety. Body hire was still being practised: workers would line up before dawn on the street and bosses would drive past and hire them for the day or by the hour — there was no job security, no conditions, no guarantees about tomorrow. Workers were plentiful, cheap and expendable. This meant that workers were being made to take high risks with no safety protection or security.

But, secondly, the new city building boom also meant that as a union, these workers had more power than ever before. The complicated steps needed to get high rise blocks up meant that workers could have a major impact on building progress if they acted together and stopped work to demand improvements. Some moments were crucial — for example, the floor for each level had to be filled with concrete at the same time, because to interrupt the pour and restart it, to do the floor in stages, would weaken the result. So if labourers downed tools in the middle of a concrete pour, not only did work have to stop at the time, but the area already poured would have to be allowed to dry and then jackhammered up again, so it could all be done in one go. So work would be held up for days. What did it mean for Kevin to be in the union in those heady days? In this chapter, Kevin talks with Joe Owens and Bobby Baker, both key activists in the NSW Builders Labourers' Federation, with Meredith Burgmann who wrote a history of those times in the BLs, with Robyn Williams, an Aboriginal activist who was one of the women who became a builders labourer and with Paul Torzillo, a friend who is now a doctor but who worked as a BL when he was a student.



Figure 2.2: Things had not changed much by 1965. This photo, taken by Valentin Sowada, shows Lance Shelton, known to other BLs as 'Blackie' or 'Sooty'. He was an Aboriginal member of the NSW BLF riding on a load in the construction of the State Office Block. The photograph is known as 'The Rigger, Sydney c. 1965'. This photograph was held in Joe Owens private collection, and he explained that this image was widely circulated among NSW BLF members in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly among those, like Kevin and Joe, who had worked as dogmen.

Photograph © Valentin Sowada and is reproduced courtesy of the Sowada family, *Yesterday's Images*.

As *Kevin* tells the story, after that very reluctant start: I ended up staying there about six or eight months. Because when we were dogmen, it was a job where you could *do* things. You had control of the crane. If you didn't lift and didn't put things where they wanted it to go, it'd hold up the job, and so you was a pretty important cog in the wheel. And the dogmen, on a whole, were pretty strong. When there wasn't any work for the dogmen, what we'd do was clean the crane down and work in and around the crane. What the builders wanted us to do was to be brickies' labourers and do other work, taking away the right of another person to have that job. So we refused.

They sacked us three times, because we wouldn't do other work that wasn't dogmen's work. The first time, I think we were out two days and Joey Owens got us our job back, plus time lost.



Figure 2.3: Joe Owens speaking at BLF rally at UTS tower site, with Bob Pringle.

Courtesy Dr Meredith Burgmann.

Joe Owens had skills that were important for dogmen because, as a young man from Wales, he had been a merchant seaman and so he knew about ropes and knots and high working places.

Joe Owens: I came into the industry in the late '60s... I was one of the few organisers who'd ever worked as a dogman. See dogman in those days ... we used to ride the hook, it was a terrible thing! I'll never forget, one old doggie, old Sooty, said to me, 'You know mate in this job, you run on piss and coffee. And after a while you give the coffee away!' He was right! He was pretty well right, doggies running on booze!

Kevin: The other dogmen supported us and we got on fairly well with a lot of them. And then Roy went and become an organiser and not long after that I became an organiser too. Now the rank and file membership and the leaders of the union were one and the same. We had as much say as the president of the union. As I seen it from where I was sitting, we dictated the disputes that we'd

get into. The rank and filers dictated what was going on in the union! Even to sit down and talk with the secretary of the union – Munday – or the president, Bobby Pringle, was like a breath of fresh air.

In the Ironworkers, you didn't even see the organisers!

In the steelworks in Wollongong, we were on strike for three days, and we called out the organiser – it took him three days to get out to us! And then he went to the boss first, come out to us and said, 'Get back to work'. So we stoned him and stayed off another couple of days, never seen anybody else and we went back to work. So we didn't go on strike again.

I had to think very hard about being an organiser in the BLs. And I talked to Roy about it. But I was lucky, Tony Hatfield and Dino at a later stage, and Roy especially ... They all sat down with you and talked with you, if you had any problems on the job and things like that. I'd say, 'Come out on my job, I've got a bit of a problem', so they'd come out. You weren't *alone*. I said to Pringle, he was the president of the union, 'I want you to come out' ... and he'd have to come out! He wouldn't say, 'Oh... I won't come out', he'd just come! Or I'd say to Joe Owens, 'Look, I've got a problem' and he'd come out.

Joe Owens: I was in the industry from the early '60s – not in the BLs – but in the industry – and from about the mid '60s... things began to change, you had democracy on the streets... Cookie was there, and I mean the world was *spinning* in the late '60s, early '70s... it was *spinning*! We had street marches about Vietnam, we had street marches about everything. I mean it sort of grew... into the green bans and then the Aborigines came into it. I remember Stan Sharkey from the BWIU, bringing down a rangy old Koorie called Captain Major from the Gurindjis who were running this big wages and land rights strike in the Territory.⁴ He was about six-foot three and he had feet about two foot long, never seen a fella like him! He had a crook heart so Freddy Hollows was gonna cure him and we all met him, talked about all those issues for the first time.

For us at that time it was all flying! We were the maverick wing – Mundy and meself and a couple of others – we were the maverick wing of the Communist party. Bobby Pringle was in the Labor Party, and he was out there flying... and big Pringle was the one who started bringing in the Aboriginal issues and that was when I met Cookie... He came on later as an organiser.

⁴ Joe remembered Captain Major's visit but Vincent Lingiari and a number of other Gurindji leaders also visited Sydney and spoke at union meetings.



Figure 2.4: Gurindji representatives at BLF meeting c.1967, to support Gurindji land rights campaign. Captain Major sits in front with BLF members, listening to Dexter Daniels speaking.

Courtesy Dr Meredith Burgmann.

Kevin: Yeah, I joined up in 1970 and I got to be an organiser about 18 months after. Cause you know it was only a very small union. And for so long, everybody who worked in the building industry was treated like shit. If you were a builders labourer before the end of the '60s, people would laugh at you! People used to say they were a garbage collector before they'd say they were a builders labourer.

But after Munday and that got in, everybody was proud. Because there was a fight on, you know? To restore your confidence, to have a bit of that self esteem back. People respected the Builders Labourers! And for a builders labourer to say what buildings they're gonna build, and what buildings they're not gonna build, was never heard of! Bob Pringle was one who wasn't frightened of a fight! ... I don't think anybody was! ... And the bosses got the shits!

Joe: ... And the trade unions in the right wing got the shits about it too!

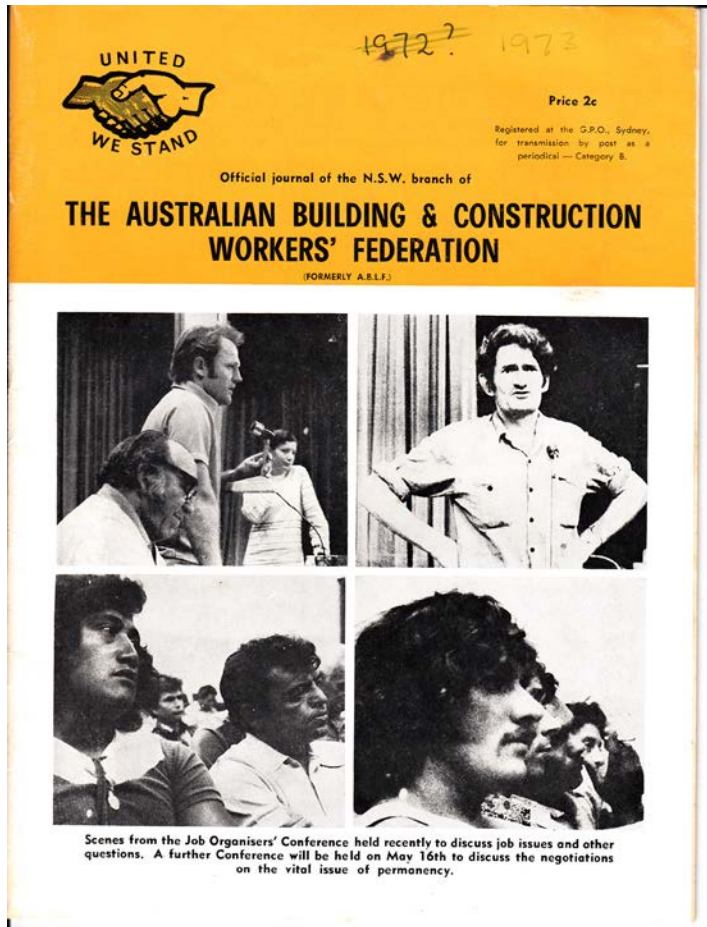


Figure 2.5: BLF Newsletter cover with Kevin Cook as organiser with Maori organiser beside him, 1973.

Courtesy Dr Meredith Burgmann.

Kevin: ... And so did the developers. They just couldn't understand how much power we had! You know, take the dogmen. We'd say to them, 'We want this'. And they'd say 'No'... And we'd say, 'Okay, just wait till you've got a pour on! ... We'll go home half way through it!' And see, if we did that, they'd have to let it set and then they have to jackhammer the concrete out of it once it sets... and then start all over again!

Meredith: That's actually a fairly traditional way that someone got to be an official in the BLF – by being militant on the site and then getting to know the officials and then being put on as an organiser...

Kevin: See as officials, we represented the rank and file. That's what we did, you know — we *were* part of the rank and file! And if there was any trouble on the site, well the dogmen had a lot of power, and we'd just say to the boss, 'If you don't do this, well we're going home, halfway through your concrete pour!'

Bobby Baker: Cookie and me both did the same sort of work, we were both dogmen. Kevin was working with Roy Bishop when I first bumped into him. We were working for a long time around the game before Kevin was organising, and there was all these issues that came all at the same time. See it was the tail end of the '60s, it was about money and conditions. The conditions ran into issues like safety and amenities, and then we got involved in Vietnam and then there was Apartheid, so we got involved in Apartheid. There was land rights issues and then there was issues of equal pay for women, so we got involved in equal pay for women and so it kept rolling on. Things like the green bans grew out of that attitude rather than anything else. And the attitude was, if there was something there to have a go about, well we should investigate it, and if it concerned workers, then it was our business. It wasn't to do so much with being in the Communist party. I mean, Bobby Pringle was in the Labor Party, other people weren't in anything. We seemed to think if it was an issue that a worker was involved with, then it was our business. If they were going to send workers off to war then it was our business. If there were black guys working on building sites, then it was our business what was happening there. One thing leads straight into something else.

Kevin: But the safety stuff had been hard to get up early on... when you think of all the guys that died on building sites, it must have been screaming out for something.

Bobby: Yeah it was eight dead in one year.

Kevin: That's when we decided that we wouldn't ride the hook any more.

Bobby: We had a meeting, Kevin was there and organisers like Tommy Hogan. And the bosses were saying to Tommy, 'What would you know?' Because Tommy was a brickies labourer see? So he said to me, 'You come in here, cause you know'. So he made me do it. Tommy's about six foot tall and about four foot across his shoulders, so he stood me up and said, 'You tell them', so I said, 'This is the way it is, you know there's guys getting killed'.

We said, 'Look, there's too much of that, so we're going to have one dogman up the top and one dogman down the bottom and you only ride them if you have to'. We got away with getting rid of the hook, but I wasn't all that popular down the pub.



Figure 2.6: Regent Street Redfern, injured builders labourer on job site, 1972.

Courtesy Dr Meredith Burgmann.

Kevin: Yeah, that was a lot better too. I know I nearly got killed, a couple of times on that York Street building. It was lucky I had this driver, Riley, he was a fantastic driver. But we had one time when we had about 40-foot lengths of timber and we were dropping them over the side. When we got to the right floor, there was a tray to drop the wood into. And you had to line the wood up first so you could tip it down see?

But the bell rope that I used to use to signal him had got caught in the timber and I didn't see it.

Well, when I pulled it to tell him to stop, there was nothing! And the wood hit the building, and the timber started spreading. It was about seven, eight stories up and you could see the ground through the timber. I would have went straight down with it. So I jumped out of the sling and ran down this timber, up there in the air and then I dived! Straight into the building!

I just went straight down to the pub!

Bobby: Yeah that's right, it was that sort of thing. I mean it was funny — if you didn't get hurt.

See the issues of safety were important. There was nothing there. The jobs had no amenities, no facilities, nothing: if you got hurt, bad luck, and if the ambulance didn't get there quick enough you know, you could bleed to death, even if you'd just done something really simple. So we had a long campaign to get a first aid officer on the job and, and that was a fairly heavy campaign. I mean it was simple things, like I want a tap. You're working with reinforcing steel or something and you're trying to do it, and you give yourself a gash with it. Well if you do a really bad job of yourself, there's no one there at least to put a bandage on it, or do something, hang on to you till the ambulance got there. So they were fairly long and hard campaigns. The idea I suppose from quite a lot of companies at the time was really that, you know builders labourers were cheap and you could get hundreds of them. They didn't stand there waiting for you to die, but they didn't show a lot of sympathy if anybody got hurt.

Kevin: It was like they thought: 'There's plenty more builders labourers! We'll just pick'em up...'. And they didn't like you going home when someone did get killed or injured either.

Bobby: No, they weren't happy about that! And if someone got killed, we'd go around to the job and you'd collect as much money as you could off the blokes, because compo took a while. You'd go to the boss and you'd say, 'The guys gave us 200, so we want you to give us 200', and mostly they'd give it to you, well, sometimes. Most of them would sign a cheque. One guy leaned against a hand rail on a building to push a load, and the hand rail went and he fell. He had six kids. So we went around, Kevin was one of the guys going around getting money, because his wife would have waited at least three months before she ever got anything at all.

The real problems with the building industry were those types of things, but when you solved those problems, other problems didn't look impossible. We didn't win them all. We tried to stop them putting up the monorail, and never won that! But you know, you'd just have a go!

Just like the conditions of the big jobs in the booming economy were new, the way decisions were made in the BLF was new. With so many rank and file workers as officials, and with such active contact between union office holders and jobsites, making decisions was always a matter of debate and discussion. Kevin took many lessons away with him about how working people built up confidence in their organisation.

Kevin: Well you'd talk to the workers first, and sometimes they'd say, 'Oh no, we're not gonna do that' and so you'd sit down and talk to them. The Manly

job was like that. There were these tall buildings that meant a lot of work for builders labourers, but residents and people on the beach didn't like the shadows. A lot of the blokes on the site weren't long in the union... couple of them were Maori fellas. We had two or three meetings, and they said 'No'. Then they called another meeting... they called it themselves... and they brought in the tradesmen. They had meetings amongst themselves at lunchtimes and at different times and then they decided that they wanted to get some expert advice. So we took Colin James the architect up there.. and after they'd talked it out some more. In the end *they* made the decision that they were going to put this ban on! ... and the people from Manly were pretty okay about that! But the workers missed out on 12 months work.

Paul Torzillo: Was it tougher in the places where there were mostly migrant workers? Where they weren't speaking English easily?

Kevin: No. We had interpreters ... we had people translating ... Vini Perez was one ... and he interpreted meetings...

Joe: The BWIU did a bit of it ...but we did more!

We went round the concrete yards and those Italians come with us, to talk about the issues at the concrete yards. Them sort of blokes appreciated it. They reckoned, 'Well them blokes are doing a little bit for us, they want us to know what's going on. They don't want us to just stick our hands up and not know what did we vote for'.

Bobby Baker: You had to look at the historic thing I suppose: first off we got wages, then we got safety and conditions on jobs. I mean, there was nowhere to get changed on a job, you'd be working in the middle of Sydney, you'd get covered in crap and you went home like that. So those were the first issues, once you did those, you had some trust, the guys trusted you and we had mass meetings. We very rarely did any large issues without mass meetings, and because probably about 70 per cent of our membership were migrants we made an effort to get stuff written up in at least three or four languages and try and get interpreters to meetings. By putting the whole of the issue before workers, and then asking what they thought, they trusted us really. If we said, 'We think we should stop work in support of some people trying to keep a bit of bush on the harbour', there'd be muttering, even the office people were saying 'Bloody silver tails!', but the point is, it was the issue rather than the people. And so they support you, it was okay. And then we'd say, 'Okay we want a 24 hour stoppage over Apartheid in South Africa'. We'd explain what's happening there. We probably had more mass meetings than any other union in history. Kevin'd tell you, he went to plenty of them.

Kevin: But I've seen it where people wanted to put on bans where the workers on the job voted against it. They come to a mass meeting, put their claims to the mass meeting and I've sat beside a real good mate of mine, Roy Bishop, where we've voted differently, on the ban, and got up walked out, went to the pub and had a couple of beers together. You know it was that sort of thing, if you got beat at a meeting it was a political decision, you know, a political decision. So it didn't fracture the union in any way, which was really good. Some you won, some you lost.

The union was very democratic. It showed a lot of people, especially me, what could be done by very small amount of people if they all stuck fats. And those principles have carried on, all the way through to working with Aboriginal people in the early land rights campaign. When Gallagher's mob came in and used the federal union to take over NSW, not one person defected from that original BLF group and many more hundreds come on board. And they didn't get paid. They were just in it for the principle. That's why it never got defeated. They were a very strong, close knit group of people!

Joe: The other thing was, mate, you can look back on it as a bit of a golden age even though History can never repeat itself. But it was a time when people weren't *afraid* to tackle issues! In those years, we weren't afraid to tackle issues. And it was also a time when we were used to strikes. And we've never been a patty cake industry, you know we were hard! and it was a hard industry, so you weren't afraid to raise the issues.

And there was a great deal of trust, because while we got all the fame and fortune came to us because of the green bans, there was a fucking lot of hard industrial work went on down below you know, the fight for dirt money! You'd had to fight for height money! You'd had to fight to stop somebody getting sacked! We'd had to fight for all that sort of stuff, long before Super[annuation] ever came in.

So while the other stuff got all the prominence and publicity, the day to day stuff was the thing that they trusted you for. I'll never forget a bloke tellin' me that! It was after we went on strike for about four weeks to get the same margin of skill. This was in 1970 and if anybody'd asked me in 1968 would you ever hold the industry out for four weeks, I'd have said no, we couldn't! But we did then! We held it out. And there were very few scabbed on us.

Paul: Do you think being successful on those struggles round conditions and pay, that fact that you took the bosses on, do you think that helped you when you had to come to the social issues?

Kevin: You wouldn't have got the support if you didn't do that...

Joe: It's a bit like talking to a 60-year-old building worker and saying, 'Look mate, things've got to change' and him saying to you, 'Fuck, mate, We've done it like this for 60 years! ...You're old enough to know we rode the hook! What was fuckin' wrong with that?'

Fuck! Six blokes got killed in four months! Did people think we didn't think about it!

The old blokes don't want to listen to you... I was talking with these old scaffolders a few years ago and I said, 'Things had to get better than what they were...'. And one old bloke was heckling me all the time and I said, 'You and me worked on the fuckin' Commonwealth Offices, long before it became Chifley Tower, when that doggie went down. I was on the beam watching him go down, and I watched him hit a concrete fucking truck, his arm came off. And I come down and fuckin' spewed and *you* spewed with me!' And he said, 'Yeah I remember that Joe'.



Figure 2.7: Wall graffiti at Woolloomooloo – the BLs seen as the only protection for existing low-income residents against high rise apartment blocks.

Courtesy Dr Meredith Burgmann.

But they just want to tell you about the good old days! And I say there was fuck all good about the 'good old days'! Because it had to get better! Nothing ever happens easy does it?

The 1970s saw many university students taking up casual work as BLs, attracted by the militancy and the camaraderie in the NSW BLF. Paul Torzillo was one, working as a BL in his holidays from medical school. The 'worker-student' alliance was closest to reality at least for a while in the BLF. But the conditions were no better for middle class students like Paul than they were for everyone else in the industry.

Paul: It was important to remember just how dangerous the building industry was in those days. When I was a student in the '70s and working at the abattoirs, I have a vivid memory of going to a funeral service for that young bloke who was an organiser who fell off a building site and died in the '70s. You spoke at the service for him, Joe, about the building industry and how dangerous it was...

Joe: Yeah, that was Dave Shaw. He fell off scaffolding... his father came to see me about a month after. His family were well off. His father just came around and he knocked at the door, he said 'I'm Dave's father'. I'd seen him at the funeral, and I said, 'Oh yeah, come in...'. He'd lost his son and he just wanted to know what had happened, what was he like... And I said, 'I don't have to tell you any lies, mate, he was one of the fuckin' greatest!'

Kevin: He was a nice bloke wasn't he.

Joe: ...And a *good* bloke... he was a front liner! In that time, we were all on the front line... and that was what Dave was like. He was a nice, decent young bloke. I don't think he ever belonged to the building industry, cause he wasn't like us... well he wasn't a brawler!

Kevin: But he wouldn't take a backwards step either, he had a lot of guts...

There were some very different experiences for Koories working in a union like the BLF from those they might have had in other unions, and particularly the rural Australian Workers' Union (AWU) where many Aboriginal workers were in unions as shearers and rousabouts. The ethnic mix in the city unions was very different – the building industry particularly included many recently arrived migrants. And the lines of racial segregation were not so rigid in the city as they were in the bush, so the BLF took an important role in supporting many of the Aboriginal initiatives in the early 1970s.

Kevin: I think the Koories who'd been involved with the union found that racism's not only just Koories but it was blokes on the jobs. You know the bosses were callin' Italians 'wogs'... and that soon stopped! We sacked a couple of bosses, you know, got rid of the foremen, for doin' that!

Joe: Yeah, it was a big issue. I'll tell you how it worked... sections of the industry was based on your nationality. We only had half a dozen concrete yards. The biggest one was Martin and Gasparini who were all Italian. If you went into earthworks, it was all Greeks. Do you remember there used to be a pick up in Newtown... at six in the morning these big young Greek blokes'd be all there... the pick up [body hire] for casual labour was all on in those days...

And if you went into formwork, you had Yugoslavs. Cookie, do you remember the brawl on in St Martin's Tower, between the Yugoslavs and the Croatians? because that war was on then... But you got South Americans, Spanish ... they were all in form work. You got into steel fixing it was all the same...

When you got into rigging and scaffolding and dogging, you had mostly the home grown mob... blokes like me that went into that 'cause I was an ex-seaman and I knew about ropes. And that was one of the ways I learnt about racism. In my first week ever, when I was a young seaman, and I was in South Africa, I went to a bar with these Lascars, off a P&O boat. We went into a black bar... and the coppers beat ME up! This was back in the '50s. I was the wrong bloke in the wrong bar... they beat the living shit out of me! And I went back to the ship and... Well... these lascar blokes got me back to the ship! ... and I had a broken arm and collar bone and ... the old Bosun said to me 'What the fuckin' hell happened to you?' and I said, 'I got bashed by the coppers down at...' and he said, 'What were you doing drinking in the fuckin darkies bar?' And I said 'Well *you* never said anything to me!'

I was about 18. I'll never forget that! Beaten because I was in the blacks' bar!

Judy Chester: Usually its blacks beaten up 'cause they're in the white bar!

Joe: Oh well if you were black and you went into a white bar you got *killed*! I just got beaten up! They would have got killed!

Paul: With a lot of the membership born overseas you can't romanticise people's identification too much, you couldn't assume that they'd know much about Aborigines or be interested. It would have been a tough problem to deal with, explaining any sort of issues at all, let alone black ones. Did they think 'Oh well, fuck them, we're working hard', or did they identify, or was it a bit of a mixed bag?

Kevin: I think the bosses played right into our hands, because, on a building site, most of the bosses, whether they be foremen, leading hands, thought they

were a cut above everybody else and they'd go along and say, 'Get out of here you wog bastards' and all of that, and the Builders Labourers' union got onto that, and started pulling the bosses up and in fact sacking the bosses for being racist.

So that built the migrant people up too, no longer could the boss come up and call an Italian a wog, in a detrimental way. He might say, 'Hey you wog bastard' if he was a mate of his, but on no account could he do that if he was angry or had the shits, he just couldn't do it, because he'd get the sack. That made it a lot easier when you were talking about black issues, it was a social issue the same as not calling migrants 'wogs' on the site. And the bosses done that a hell of a lot and the migrants got very, very angry.

Bobby Baker: Yeah, we certainly had Greeks and Italians and other people marching in the land rights marches. Kevin's right about that. They all saw themselves as downtrodden in some way, one way or another, they were called 'wogs' or whatever and they didn't like it, naturally! So if you said the black fellows are being pooped on, they says, 'Fine, I'll come along to help you'. So Cookie's right, but it was a very cliquey union, it truly was, but there was a lot of work put in, it doesn't happen just over night. We had interpreters at every meeting. I think we had some of our stuff put out in about five languages. We made it clear what we were on about, so if we wanted people to go to land rights marches, we didn't just say, 'Get along there!' We said, 'You're going there because this, this and this'. So when they went they knew what they were doing, they weren't just wandering along, waving things and not knowing what they were talking about.

Kevin: And we had a lot of migrant organisers through the years too, that helped a lot.

Paul: Cookie, later on you had lots of contacts with migrant groups. Did that start then, when you got those contacts in the BLs?

Kevin: Yeah, through the Builders Labourers. And especially the Greek Communist party, the Italian Communist party, FILEF,⁵ Panucci's mob, the Italian Education mob... So that was all a lead up you know. When I went to Tranby I still had those contacts and so we brought them in on Tranby. And we had incredibly good communication with a lot of the migrant groups ... and you can see in the 1988 march... where they put on a show to raise money for us... You should have seen how many different groups they had on!...

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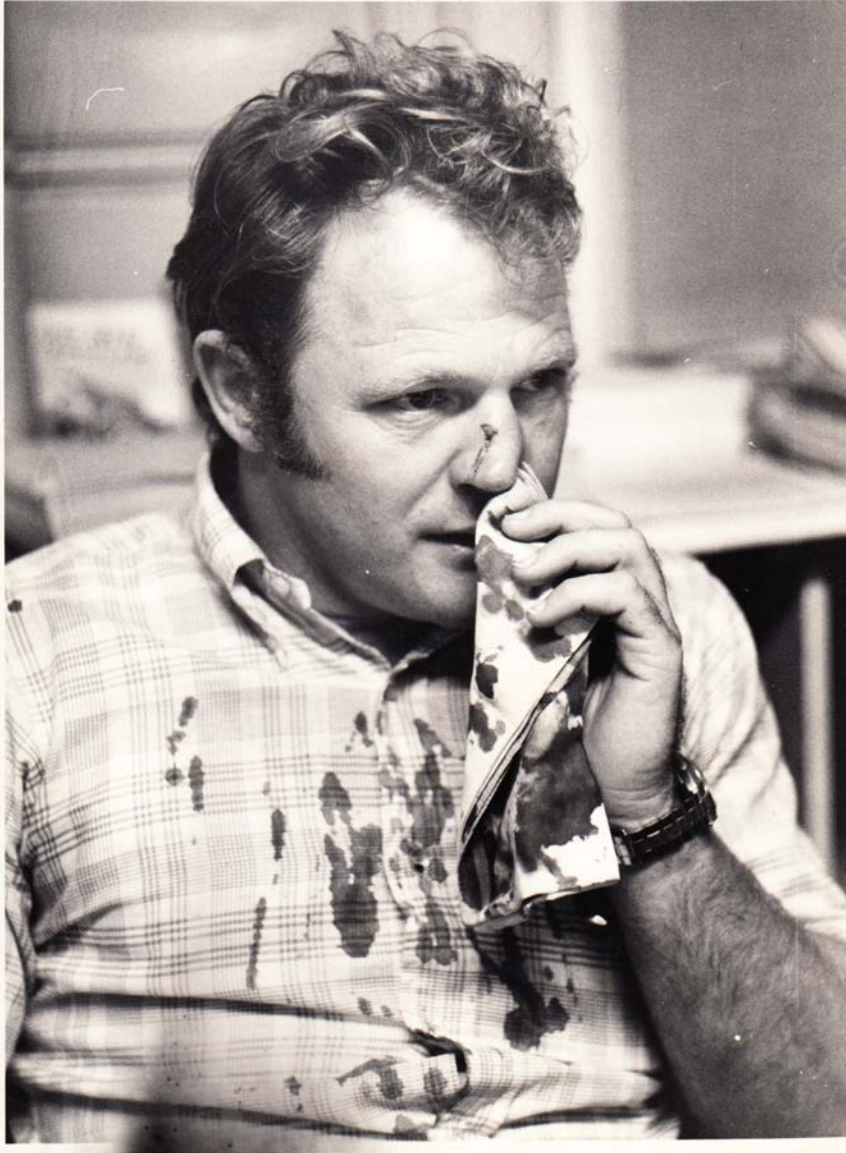


Figure 2.8: As the BLF presence became more widely felt, the federal Builders Labourers' Union developed an alliance with the Master Builders' Association to intervene and take over the NSW Branch by supporting deregulation of the NSW Branch from the Arbitration System. The conflict led to bloodshed and violence on the job with both police and rival federal BLs targeting NSW Builders Labourers' activists. One result was Bob Pringle being bashed.

Courtesy Dr Meredith Burgmann.

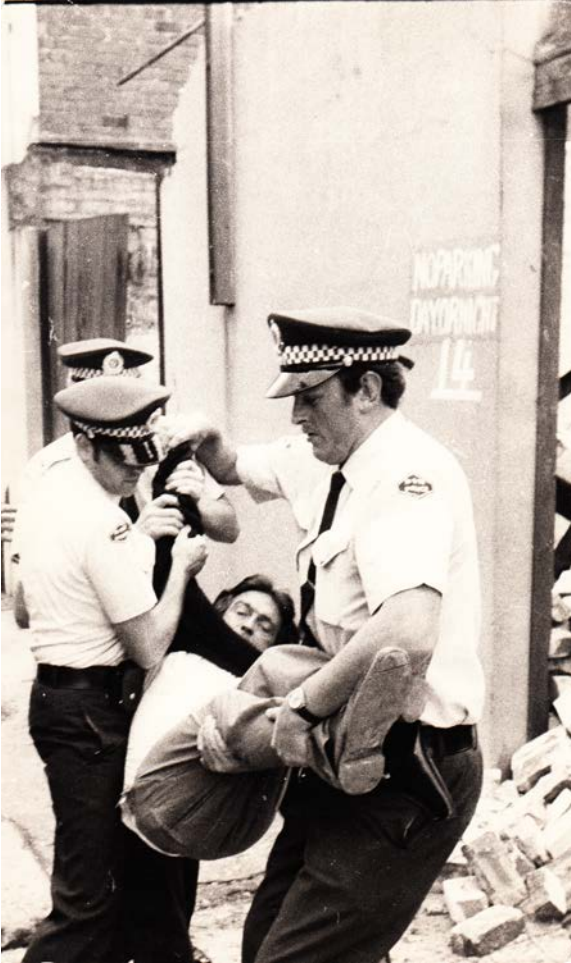


Figure 2.9: Another result of this conflict was Joe Owens being arrested.

Courtesy Dr Meredith Burgmann.

Kevin's time as a BL — and as an organiser — taught him many things, even beyond the many contacts he made with groups like the migrants. Some of these lessons reinforced what he had known from growing up in the Koorie community, like the importance of sharing and the value of face-to-face communication. Others came from these completely new industrial conditions on the city building sites in the 1970s. As distressing as struggles over trying to get living wages had always been in many industries, the dangerous life and death conditions faced by BLs everyday of the week created a deep bond of comradeship and loyalty which cemented everything Cookie knew about the advantages of acting together. 'Sticking fats' took on a whole new meaning when you had just seen someone fall from a load at the top of a building and be torn apart by the impact as they

hit the footpath 20 storeys below. You knew you had to act together to get that changed. Just as important was the extraordinary experiment which the BLF had conducted in those brief years of rank-and-file control, with limited tenure of office, so union officials went back to the job when their term was finished. No other union was run like this, and it meant there was no gap between the leadership and the members of the union. For Cookie, it was another powerful lesson about how to organise to get things done – it was by leading from the grass roots. So these two lessons were ones which Kevin remembers in particular as the ones he carried with him into all his later work.