GREEN BANS
INSPIRATIONAL ACTIVISM

A tribute from Lee Rhiannon and the Greens NSW
I find the history of the Green Bans deeply inspiring. This is an amazing story that entwines Sydney’s history, with union struggles, great wins for the environment, heritage and public housing.

This is also a story about the history of the Australian Greens party. Our roots go back to the community activism of the 1960s and 1970s.

Green Bans changed the political weather four decades ago. The decision of the Builders Labourers Federation to down tools when developers threatened urban bushland started a great movement.

The coalition of residents groups, environmentalists, unionists and students embodied progressive people power. Both the federal and NSW governments felt the heat.

Laws were passed to promote community involvement in planning decisions, to curb destructive development and to protect the environment and heritage.

The German Greens took their name from the Green Bans after the activist Petra Kelly visited Australia in the 1970s.

This was the world’s first Green Party and in time the name and principles of social justice, ecological sustainability, grassroots democracy and nonviolence came back to Australia when the first Greens Party in this country was formed in Sydney in 1984.

This publication is dedicated to Green Ban leader and Greens Party member, Jack Mundey. He has dedicated his life to the environment and social justice, and now is a proud member of the Greens.

Lee Rhiannon
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Special thanks to Paul Fitzgerald, Kerri-ann Jones, Scott Rickard, James Bourne, Lesa de Leau and Ben Raue for their assistance in preparing this booklet.
Produced by Australian Greens Senator for NSW, Lee Rhiannon

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The paradigm-shifting Green Ban movement was born in Sydney in the early 1970s. Green Bans were industrial actions by unionists at the centre of non-violent campaigns that united union members, environmentalists, resident action groups, and students.

They had many wins – stopping deplorable developments and the destruction of low-cost housing, bushland and heritage buildings, and hastening improvements in planning and environmental laws. Led by Jack Mundey, Bob Pringle and Joe Owens, the Green Ban movement inspired people around the world. Jack is now a member of the Greens.

In the 1960s and 1970s corruption was rife in NSW politics and among police. It was in this context that more than 50 Green Bans were imposed.

The first ban was called a ‘green ban’ rather than a ‘black ban’ to emphasise its environmental purpose – it was to protect bushland: Kelly’s Bush in the affluent Sydney suburb of Hunters Hill.

The colour stuck when the second ban was imposed in late 1971 in The Rocks, at the request of residents fearful of plans for massive high-rise overdevelopment in that historic precinct.

The most bitter of the campaigns in which Green Bans featured was against the destruction of Victoria Street, Kings Cross. Beautiful terrace houses providing low-cost accommodation were to be destroyed to make way for a housing complex up to 45-storeys tall. The fight went on for years and included the atrocity of the murder of anti-development advocate Juanita Nielsen.
In the early 1970s, Green Bans were instrumental in stopping the destruction of large parts of Glebe, Balmain, Darlinghurst, Kings Cross, Taylors Square, Woolloomooloo, Centennial Park and Newcastle’s East End.

Many buildings of great heritage importance, including historic buildings around Martin Place were saved. Often bans were imposed when developers’ intentions first became clear, causing them to re-think their plans.

Among those who found the Green Bans inspirational in the 1970s was Petra Kelly, a German political activist visiting Australia.

She took the name ‘Green’ (Grün) and philosophy home with her and used them when in 1980 she became one of the founders of the German Greens (Die Grünen), a political party promulgating the four basic principles of ecological sustainability, grassroots democracy, social justice and non-violence.

A few years later the name and the new political concept came back to Australia when the first Greens Party in Australia was formed in Sydney in 1984. The party was registered in 1985.

Greens parties worldwide took their name and principles from the German Greens, who were heavily influenced by the Green Ban movement.

The Green Bans also had far-reaching political repercussions. They were an essential element in the upwelling of opposition to the wanton destruction of heritage buildings and the environment and played a key role in influencing politicians to back progressive planning legislation.

In 1975 the Whitlam government passed the Australian Heritage Commission Act. It was a major step towards the identification and protection of built and natural items considered important to the people of Australia.

In 1977, the NSW Government passed its own Heritage Act and in 1979 it brought in the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act to lay down a framework for urban planning that required extensive community consultation.

Although they were less than perfect and have been considerably watered down since their introduction, these laws were important steps forward.
In 1969, after Jack Mundey, Joe Owens and Bob Pringle became leaders of the NSW branch of the Builders Labourers Federation, they issued a statement that building workers ‘had a right to express an opinion on social questions relating to the building industry’.

Prompted by this, the group of middle-class women who comprised the ‘Battlers for Kelly’s Bush’ asked the BLF for help to prevent the destruction of the bushland for luxury housing.

There was a spirited debate when the BLF executive considered the request, with some members saying, ‘We haven’t got any builders labourers living in Hunters Hill. Why should a piece of bushland there be our concern?’

The BLF executive decided they would impose a construction ban if the Battlers could demonstrate that it would be in the wider public interest. The Battlers called a public meeting which was attended by more than four hundred and fifty people who overwhelmingly passed a motion to seek help from the BLF. The BLF then imposed the first Green Ban.

In response, the developer AV Jennings threatened to employ non-union labour to do the job. The BLF out-manoeuvred Jennings, threatening to stop work on a different AV Jennings project, in North Sydney, ‘if one blade of grass or one tree is touched in Kelly’s Bush’.

The media and the (corrupt) Premier Sir Robert Askin attacked the BLF as ‘mere builders labourers’ and ‘proletarian town planners’. The Green Ban at Kelly’s Bush bought the Battlers time to have the development approval reconsidered by the government and local council.

Kelly’s Bush was saved. It was not developed into luxury harbourside apartments for the privileged few, and to this day remains urban bushland for all to enjoy.

This campaign set the precedent for cooperation between unionists and community activists.
The NSW Government had owned all of The Rocks area since resuming it after the plague outbreak in 1900. In the early 1970s plans were afoot to demolish the working class public housing in favour of a $2 billion commercial skyscraper development. This would have destroyed a community with a heritage of 160 years.

Nita McCrae, one of the residents who formed The Rocks Residents Group, could trace her ancestors in The Rocks back to 1800. The resident action group approached the BLF and the union imposed a Green Ban in late 1971.

The BLF and the bulldozer drivers’ union (FEDFA) joined residents in protests, and in occupying buildings which were to be demolished. There were many confrontations, including, in November 1973, a demonstration on Playfair Street where more than one hundred people were arrested.

The Sydney Cove Redevelopment Authority, the government-appointed body in charge of the 22 hectares proposed for “urban renewal”, was heavily weighted towards business and commercial interests and had no community representatives.

SCRA’s initial plan, in February 1971, envisioned two-thirds of the Rocks being cleared and rebuilt as commercial office space, three new hotels and new high-rise residential blocks.

Each year SCRA reviewed its plan and each year ameliorated it, and in 1974 it instituted an “Advisory Committee” which included some Rocks residents.

The Green Ban remained in force until 1975 and eventually succeeded in ensuring that all buildings north of the Cahill Expressway would be retained, conserved and restored. And, importantly, that the existing residents could remain.

The heritage character and low-rise accommodation remaining in The Rocks today is attributable to people-power, residents fighting back, and the wisdom of Jack Mundey and the NSW BLF.
Victoria St, Kings Cross

Long-term squatting, development-linked murder

In April 1973 a Green Ban was imposed in Victoria Street in Kings Cross in response to a vicious program of forced evictions and demolitions by a developer who planned to replace low-cost housing in beautiful terrace houses with high-rise buildings.

At first the developer, Frank Theeman, seemed open to compromise and ordered his architects to draw up another set of plans. But these positive signs gave no warning of the darkness that was soon to envelop Victoria Street. Gangs of armed thugs terrorised residents and attempted to make Theeman-owned houses uninhabitable.

Among the many tenants who stood their ground was Mick Fowler, a sailor who returned to his flat after being at sea to find his property had been removed. Fowler dug in his heels and refused to be intimidated.

About two-thirds of the residents refused to leave, despite eviction orders and despite being offered financial inducements.

Inspired by other resident action groups, the tenants formed the Victoria Street Residents Action Group. The National Trust wanted to preserve the terrace houses and even the State Council of the Liberal Party announced it had concerns, agreeing with the National Trust that the buildings were of heritage significance.
Some of the activists suffered terribly. Arthur King, a leader of the resident action group, was kidnapped and terrorised for three days. When he was finally released he left the action group and the area.

Juanita Nielsen, a journalist who ran the local newspaper, Now, and who supported the resident action group, was murdered in July 1975. She is remembered by the annual Juanita Nielsen Memorial Lecture, initiated by Lee Rhiannon.

The civil disobedience included squatting in the targeted buildings. The squat was organised along ‘commune’ lines, had child minding, and ran regular Sunday meetings and film screenings.

On 3 January 1974 the squatters were forcibly evicted by police. The Green Ban was lifted late in 1974. It had been successful in saving most of the houses and preventing most of the abhorrent overdevelopment.

EXPRESSWAY DEFEATED

The North-Western Expressway was proposed by the Department of Main Roads in the early 1970s.

The expressway would have sliced through the residential areas of Ultimo, Glebe, Annandale, Rozelle and Leichhardt, displacing 2,500 people at a time when the high cost of housing was already pushing out many low-income inner city people.

In July 1972, the Save Lyndhurst Committee requested a Green Ban to prevent the destruction of the historic house Lyndhurst (built 1833–1835) in Glebe.

The house was in the pathway of the north-western expressway and it became a potent symbol for the anti-expressway movement.

Resistance took the form of demonstrations at demolition sites and squatting in DMR-affected properties. In 1972, an anti-expressway council was elected in Leichhardt, led by Mayor Nick Origlass.

After several confrontations between residents, police and demolishers and the imposition of the Green Ban, the DMR put the expressway on hold. In 1978, the Wran Labor Government abandoned much of the expressway link.
WOOLLOOMOOLOO
Residents under seige

In a zoning scheme in 1964, Woolloomooloo, immediately to the east of Sydney’s downtown area, had been earmarked for “comprehensive development” with provision for development bonuses for developers who bought and consolidated sites.

The developer Sid Londish quietly consolidated more than two hundred and seventy properties, and announced plans for an enormous high-rise development.

At about the same time, the NSW Government released plans for an expressway through Woolloomooloo. In addition, the federal government was planning high-rise development on land owned by the Department of Navy, and the NSW Government resumed 37 hectares for more commercial development.

In the face of these threats, the Woolloomooloo Residents Action Group was formed in 1972 and at the instigation of a local priest, Father Edmund Campion, the group asked the BLF to impose a Green Ban on the whole area.

By then, Londish had evicted many residents of the houses he had bought, and the Department of Main Roads had evicted most of the people who were impediments to its expressway. But the BLF and bulldozer drivers’ union (the FEDFA) refused to demolish the houses.

The Green Ban meant the residents could no longer be ignored. After a year of confrontations and stalemate, the newly elected Whitlam Labor Government used the fact that it owned land in Woolloomooloo to become involved.

A committee of representatives of all levels of government was formed, consultations with the residents took place, and after two years, an alternative plan was agreed which involved retaining low-cost housing, including public housing for up to 2,000 people.

Largely funded by the federal government, the plan meant that about 90 percent of the remaining historic terrace houses would be preserved and renovated for residential use.
UNIVERSITY BANS
Women and gay rights

In 1973, Jeremy Fisher, a twenty-year-old student at Macquarie University was expelled from student accommodation at the university because he was gay.

The Student Representative Council turned to the BLF for assistance.

The SRC argued that a student’s sexuality was irrelevant and of no concern to the university. The BLF’s policy was to campaign against discrimination, including supporting gay rights.

Jack Mundey admits, however, that he was apprehensive about explaining the union policy to the BLF members on site.

To Jack’s surprise the workers did not hesitate to go out in support of the dismissed student.

Macquarie University had new buildings under construction which came under the workers’ Green Ban. Jeremy Fisher’s enrolment was reinstated.

Around the same time, the BLF also imposed a Green Ban at Sydney University, where two graduate students, Jean Curthoys and Liz Jacka, were proposing to run a course on ‘The politics of sexual oppression’.

Although the Arts Faculty approved the course, a male-dominated professorial board declared the women unfit to teach the course.

The university urgently needed some buildings completed, so the BLF was able to negotiate to have the women run their course the following year in return for lifting the Green Ban.
CENTENNIAL PARK

For much of 1972, there was a Green Ban on Centennial Park, as the Liberal Premier Robert Askin had plans to build a giant sports stadium there in the hope that Sydney might get the 1988 Olympic Games. The proposal covered 30 percent of the entire parklands. It was a diverse group that saved the park with the writer Patrick White and the BLF’s Jack Mundey uniting the locals. The Green Ban won the battle and the plan was shelved.

RECENT GREEN BANS

In the early 1990s the CFMEU – the union that now covers building workers – placed a ban on the demolition of Finger Wharf at Woolloomooloo, which lasted for two and a half years and eventually saved the wharf.

In 1987, the state government had decided to demolish the wharf, which had been built by the Sydney Harbour Trust between 1911 and 1915. When demolition work was due to begin in January 1991, more than a hundred protestors gathered to demonstrate against its demolition.
A Green Ban was imposed and after further public meetings, protests and debate, the government relented. Instead of being demolished the wharf was renovated into a boutique hotel and private residencies.

In 2001, the then Lord Mayor of Sydney, Frank Sartor, was leading a push to demolish the art deco Maritime Services Building at Circular Quay which housed the fledgling Museum of Contemporary Art. The union movement imposed a Green Ban which stymied this idea.

A Green Ban by the CFMEU in 2004 also forced the state to retain heritage-listed Union Square in Pyrmont. A ban was placed on the demolition of four 130-year-old Victorian terraces which had been listed by the National Trust.
In May 2016 the CFMEU placed a Green Ban on any redevelopment work that would result in the privatisation of the famous Bondi Pavilion. The union responded to a request from the Save Bondi Pavilion group for assistance.

Liberal Waverley Council under Mayor Sally Betts, well known for having a close relationship with developers, had signed off on a $38 million upgrade plan for the Pavilion.

If this plan was adopted many community activities would have been evicted from the Pavilion and the recently renovated theatre and music rooms would have become commercial space. Much of the Pavilion would have turned into a restaurant and shopping precinct.

Community opposition, led by Save Bondi Pavilion has attracted broad based support. A community concert featuring performances from those who use the Pavilion attracted hundreds of people. This event, now expected to become an annual concert, was held to showcase the community activities that the Betts plan would evict from the Pavilion.

Built in 1928, the Bondi Pavilion has long been considered one of Australia’s most recognised beach cultural icons. It is listed on the NSW State Heritage Register and has also been listed by the Heritage Council.

In the mid-1950s use of the Pavilion declined. In the 1970s there was an increase in community activity and a theatre was opened on the first floor of the Pavilion in 1975 by the then Prime Minister Gough Whitlam.
In the late 1970s the changing rooms, lockers, former Turkish baths and courtyard were demolished. In their place a new netball court, an art gallery, a gymnasium and an amphitheatre were constructed. In 1978 the building was officially reopened as the Bondi Surf Pavilion Community Centre. The pavilion today is still a community centre where many cultural and film festivals are held.

Rock Against Racism, Latin American Festivals, International Women’s Day functions and Festival of the Winds are some of the events the Pavilion has become famous for.

In 1987 an earlier Liberal Council attempted to privatise the Pavilion. A strong community campaign was successful in saving the Pavilion as a community centre and local agitation on the issue spilled over into the local government elections that saw the defeat of the Liberal Council.

At the May announcement of the Green Ban on the Pavilion, Jack Mundey, leader of the Green Ban movement in the 1970s said

“It’s terrific to know that the spirit of the Green Bans will live on forever”.

CFMEU State Secretary Brian Parker proclaimed the Pavilion was an integral part of the community and the Bondi foreshore - “The original Green Bans movement was about saving our history and our heritage from developers. We saved the Rocks through Green Bans and now we will step in to save Bondi’s heritage.”

As of July 2016 Waverley Council was still under sustained pressure from the active community group Save Bondi Pavilion and many high profile supporters determined to keep the Pavilion as a community centre. The Green Ban remains in place.
Jack was born in 1929 on a small farm in the Atherton Tablelands, the fourth of five children. It was the middle of the Depression, and life was tough. His mother died when he was just six. Perhaps these difficult beginnings forged his fighting spirit.

In his early teens he went to live in Cairns and in 1951 his sporting talent was spotted by a Parramatta Rugby League scout. He moved to Sydney where he played with Parramatta for three seasons.

Working first as a metalworker and then as a builder’s labourer, he was a committed member of the Federated Ironworkers Union, the Builders Labourers Federation and the Communist Party of Australia.

There were violent union meetings in those days to which bosses sent paid thugs with instructions to silence militant voices. Jack was noted for standing his ground to challenge the employers, especially about the safety of workers in the building industry, which had the highest accident rate of all industries.

In 1969 he was elected secretary of the NSW BLF. Under his leadership, along with Bob Pringle and Joe Owens, the union won improved wages and conditions in an industry which had previously been notorious for poor conditions and corruption.

As well as imposing Green Bans, the union won the right for women to work as builders labourers, and
supported Aboriginal people in their battle for land rights.

This period of progressive activism came at a high personal cost. In April 1975, Jack, Joe Owens, Bob Pringle and twenty-one other members of the NSW BLF were expelled from the union.

This followed a power struggle with Norm Gallagher, leader of the Victorian BLF and federal secretary of the union. Gallagher would later be found to be corrupt, but at the time his federal role gave him a lot of clout with the Master Builders Association (MBA).

In 1974 Gallagher had set up an alternative NSW branch and the MBA agreed to give first preference in employment to its members. In March 1975, the ACTU gave full recognition and support to the Gallagher branch and the old leadership had no choice but to give in and recommend to its remaining members that they join the Gallagher branch.

The NSW Labor Council – now known as Unions NSW – did not support the Green Bans or stand up for the BLF when Gallagher took over. Speaking at the celebration of the life of Joe Owens in September 2012, Mark Lennon, Unions NSW Secretary, said that the state’s peak union body now recognises that approach was a mistake and that the Green Bans were of great significance.

In 1976 Jack Mundey was invited to speak at the first-ever international conference on the built environment in Vancouver. Innumerable speaking engagements followed.

He was later made a life member of the Australian Conservation Foundation and served for six years as Chair of the Historic Houses Trust of NSW. In 2007, an area in The Rocks was named “Jack Mundey Place”.

All his life Jack has continued to give voice to the voiceless and inspiration to the downtrodden. Jack joined the Greens in 2000 and remains an active member.
In 2001 when Lee was a NSW state MP she founded the annual Juanita Nielsen Memorial Lecture to commemorate the life and times of Juanita and to encourage women in public. All speakers are women.

Juanita Nielsen, publisher of the independent newspaper NOW and active campaigner against high-rise development in Kings Cross, disappeared in July 1975. Her murderers have never been brought to justice.

The circumstances of her disappearance remain unresolved but it is commonly believed that she was murdered by agents of developers.

Although unable to establish the exact place and manner of her death, the Coroner found ‘evidence to show that the police inquiries were inhibited by an atmosphere of corruption, real or imagined, that existed at the time’.

The lecture has been given by prominent Australian women including Christine Milne, Anne Summers, Kerry Nettle, Larissa Behrendt, Sylvia Hale, Jane Caro and Sarah Maddison.

Read transcripts and watch videos from the Lectures at: greensmps.org.au/juanitanielsen

Jane Caro delivering the 2011 Juanita Nielsen Memorial Lecture.
BLF Secretary Jack Mundey being arrested at a picket, 1973

Jack Mundey addressing a protest in the 1970’s

Image 1
Kelly’s Bushland in Hunter’s Hill
Image 2
From “The Sun” November 1973

Petra Kelly, one of the founders of the German Green’s party

Kelly’s Bush Protest mid 1970’s

Jack Mundey with residents from the Rocks, mid 1970’s

Image 1
Victoria St home of Mick Fowler
Image 2
Juanita Nielsen outside her home, 1974

artwork for “Rocking the Foundations”

Sydney University Students supporting BLF in the 1970’s

Image 1
Sketch of the 1960 sport stadium development proposal
Image 2
Finger Bay Wharf pre 1991 conversion

Jack Mundey addressing a gathering in the 1970’s

Jack Mundey and Lee Rhiannon at a rally to save Tamarama Park, 2010

Jane Caro at Juanita Nielsen memorial lecture, 2011
Keep in touch with Lee Rhiannon and the Greens

The Greens continue to promote the legacy of the Green Bans - protecting our natural environment, urban green space and heritage areas, as well as standing up for human rights, social justice and strong unions.

To sign up for information from Senator Lee Rhiannon, visit lee-rhiannon.greensmps.org.au/signup/

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