

**THE AUSTRALIAN BUILDING CONSTRUCTION EMPLOYEES  
&  
BUILDERS LABOURERS FEDERATION  
AND THE NEW SOUTH WALES BUILDING INDUSTRY**

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**An Employer's perspective of an Industry in Crisis  
1970-1974**

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for  
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**I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institute of higher learning, except where due acknowledgement is made in the text.**

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## SYNOPSIS

Australia, during the twenty five years that followed the end of the Second World War, experienced increased prosperity and a stable industrial relations system in which the Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Commission (the federal commission) played a dominant and authoritative role.

The NSW building boom which began in the latter part of the 1950s introduced new technology, concentrated building workers in the central business district of Sydney, and broadened the range of skills required of builders' labourers.

The major NSW building tradesmen's union, the Building Workers' Industrial Union (NSW/BWIU), had a communist leadership. The national body of that union lost its federal industrial registration in 1948, and the NSW/BWIU moderated its behaviour after it nearly lost its own, NSW state, registration in 1957.

The Australian Building Construction Employees and Builders' Labourers Federation (ABLF) had a federal award under which most of the members of its NSW branch (NSW/BLF) were employed.

The leadership of both the ABLF and of the NSW/BLF were communist. The Communist Party of Australia (CPA) suffered a defection by the ABLF leadership in the early 1960s to a communist party which endorsed Marxist-Leninist policies. The BWIU leadership also left the CPA (and formed the Socialist Party of Australia) following an announced shift in policy direction by the CPA in 1969. That shift in policy abandoned the 'united front' concept and adopted ultra-left policies which advocated vanguard action by small groups. The announcement by the CPA of its new policies occurred after the gaoling of a Victorian union leader which signalled the virtual collapse of the previously authoritative, and punitive, role of the federal commission.

The structure and politics of society underwent enormous change during the 1960s and early 1970s which was an era of protest during which various social movements were formed.

The NSW/BLF became a major participant in those protests and movements, and conducted various industrial and social campaigns during the first half of the 1970s. Those campaigns were conducted in line with the ultra-left policies of the CPA, and this isolated the NSW/BLF from its federal body and from the trade union movement generally.

This thesis analyses some of the campaigns conducted by the NSW/BLF during the period 1970-1974 and the various responses by the Master Builders Association of NSW (MBA/NSW) to those campaigns.

The MBA/NSW broadened its membership base during the 1950s, and the effect that its new membership structure had on its decision-making processes is also considered.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis is an attempt to describe events that occurred in the NSW building industry, during the years 1970-1974, from an employer's perspective. Much of the material was therefore obtained from the records of the Master Builders' Association of NSW and I record my appreciation to the MBA for its generous support.

Those with whom I conducted interview were most helpful and I thank Les Ball, Lindsay Cooper, Ernie Morris and John Twyford for the information they so freely imparted.

Much of my resource material was obtained from a diary I maintained during those interesting years. While a significant amount of my diary notes comprise my own observations, a great deal of assistance was provided at the time, by the late Wally Glover and by Ray Rocher, to my understanding the relevance of those observations. Further, in compiling my diary I was very much assisted by Inaam (Anne) Tabbaa - who was appointed to the NSW Industrial Commission in 1991. The information I obtained from many interviews with Ray Rocher were included in the first draft of this thesis. While that information was later deleted due to my having attempted to cover (and explain) too much, I have retained the material for some future endeavour.

Brian Seidler informed me of the Lend Lease publication which provided such detailed explanation of many of the reasons behind the building boom of the 1950s and 1960. Ernie MacDonald, former chairman of Civil & Civic, provided me with a copy of that book which he had kindly asked Dick Dusseldorp to sign.

Suzanne Jamieson has been my supervisor throughout my two attempts to have this thesis accepted. My first attempt occurred during various crises that the NSW building industry experienced in 1992-1993. Due to my eleventh hour race

to meet deadlines, I denied myself the benefit of Suzanne's advice and opinions for a great deal of the thesis. I alone accept responsibility for my failed effort which was blighted by my poor skills with a word processor, my lack of attention to proof reading, and numerous sins related to syntax. I thank Suzanne for her guidance and patience.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

		<b>Page</b>
<b>DECLARATION</b>		ii
<b>SYNOPSIS</b>		iii
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>		v
<b>LIST OF TABLES</b>		ix
<b>LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS</b>		x
<b>CHAPTER 1</b>	<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	1
<b>CHAPTER 2</b>	<b>THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NSW BUILDING INDUSTRY 1850-1950</b>	8
	Introduction	8
	The Master Builders Associations are formed	8
	The formation and development of trade unions and of their industrial awards in the NSW building industry	11
	The organisation of work on a building project	19
	Political and social events of post-war Australia	21
	Summary	22
<b>CHAPTER 3</b>	<b>A TIME OF DRAMATIC CHANGE 1951-1969</b>	25
	Introduction	25
	The anti-communism attitudes of the post-war years	25
	The Building boom begins	26
	The MBA/NSW changes its structure	27
	The formation of AFCC	29
	The Builder/Developer emerges - a new type of member for the MBA/NSW	30
	Further developments within the union movement	31
	The ABLF gets a new award and the NSW/BLF gets a new leadership	33
	Changes to societal mores and structure, the CPA suffers defections, and the Australian industrial relations system breaks down	35
	Conclusion	39
<b>CHAPTER 4</b>	<b>THE NSW/BLF MARGINS AND AMENITIES DISPUTES - One-out Unionism 1970-1971</b>	41
	Introduction	41
	Dogmen and Crane drivers - an example of elitism	42
	The NSW/BLF Margins campaign	46

		<b>Page</b>
<b>CHAPTER 4</b>	The NSW building tradesmen's 'catch-up' claim	63
<b>(Continued)</b>	The NSW/BLF Amenities campaign	65
	NSW/BLF opposition to the Summary Offences Act	69
	Conclusion	72
<b>CHAPTER 5</b>	<b>THE SPECIAL LOADING CASES AND THE ACCIDENT PAY CAMPAIGN 1971-1972</b>	75
	Introduction	75
	The NSW building tradesmen's Special Loading Case	76
	The Accident Pay Case	80
	The Employers attempt a joint approach	89
	The NSW/BLF Special Allowance and Disputes Settlement Procedures Case	90
	Conclusion	103
<b>CHAPTER 6</b>	<b>THE NSW/BLF LINKS WITH WIDER SOCIAL MOVEMENTS 1971-1974</b>	107
	Introduction	107
	The Student movement	108
	The Women's movement	112
	The Green Bans	116
	Conclusion	124
<b>CHAPTER 7</b>	<b>WORKER CONTROL AND THE PERMANENCY OF EMPLOYMENT ISSUE - The Rocky road to De-registration 1972-1974</b>	126
	Introduction	126
	The rocky road to de-registration	127
	The post de-registration period	139
	Conclusion	142
<b>CHAPTER 8</b>	<b>CONCLUSION</b>	143
<b>CHAPTER 9</b>	<b>EPILOGUE</b>	148
	Introduction	148
	The ABLF – a prisoner of history	149
	The MBA/NSW suffers a loss	153
	Conclusion	158
<b>SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>		159



**LIST OF TABLES**

		<b>Page</b>
Table 2.1	Daily Wage Rates for labourer (unskilled trades) as at 31 January 1911	15
Table 3.1	Classifications and wage rates for Builders' Labourers in the 1962 ABLF Award	34
Table 4.1	Comparison of tradesmen's weekly wages from 1 November 1970 as per Judge Sheehy's "Catch-up" Decision	64

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABLF	Australian Builders Labourers Federation; and (since October 1972) Australian Building Construction Employees & Builders' Labourers Federation
ACTU	Australian Council of Trade Unions
AFCC	Australian Federation of Construction Contractors
AFCEC	Australian Federation of Civil Engineering Contractors
AIB	Australian Institute of Building
ALP	Australian Labor Party
Arbitration Court	Commonwealth Arbitration Court
ASC&J	Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners
AWU	Australian Workers Union
BCA/NSW	Builders and Contractors Association of New South Wales (formed 1873 - the original name of the Master Builders Association of NSW)
BLF Award	(Federal) The Builders Labourers (Construction on Site) Award
BLU	Builders Labourers Union (formed 1901)
BTC	Building Trades Council (formed 1886 - an earlier version of the Building Trades Group of Unions)
BTG	Building Trades Group of Unions of the Labor Council of NSW
BWIU	Building Workers Industrial Union
Carpenters' Award	NSW Carpenters & Joiners & Bricklayers Construction (State) Award
CBD	Central Business District
CI/IPC	Construction Industry Industrial Policy Committee

DLI	Department of Labour & Industry
Federal Commission	Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Commission
FMBA	Federated Master Builders Associations of Australasia
IPC	Industrial Policy Committee
IRC	Industrial Relations Committee
Labor Council	Trades & Labour Council of NSW; and (since 1973) Labor Council of NSW (This abbreviation is used in the chapters dealing with events after 1950)
MBA/NSW	Master Builders Association of New South Wales
MBA/NSW Council	Council of Management of the Master Builders Association of NSW
MBAV	Master Builders Association of Victoria
MBFA	Master Builders Federation of Australia
Minutes	Minutes of the Council of Management of the MBA/NSW
National Award	National Building Trades Construction Award, 1975
Newcastle MBA	Newcastle (NSW) Master Builders Association
NICC	National Industrial Construction Council
NIE	National Industrial Executive of the Building and Construction Industry
NSW/BLF	New South Wales Building Construction Employees and Builders Labourers Union; and the New South Wales Branch of the Australian Building Construction Employees & Builders Labourers Federation
NSW/BWIU	Building Workers Industrial Union of New South Wales; and the NSW Branch of the Building Workers Industrial Union of Australia
NSW/PGEU	Plumbers and Gasfitters Employees Union of NSW; and the NSW Branch of the Plumbers and Gasfitters Employees Union of Australia

PGEU	Plumbers and Gasfitters Employees Union of Australia
QMBA	Queensland Master Builders Association
Rank and File	The committee established by activist builders' labourers in the 1950s to contest the NSW/BLF elections. The committee continued an activist role after its nominees won control of the union
rank and file	A generic term for ordinary on-site workers
SPA	The NSW State Planning Authority
State Commission	Industrial Commission of NSW
TLC	NSW Trades and Labour Council (formed 1871) -This abbreviation is used in the chapter related to events from 1850-1950
ULPS	United Labourers' Protection Society
VBIA	Victorian Building Industry Agreement
Vigilantes	The name given by the NSW/BLF to groups of activists which conducted campaigns on behalf of that union
Watson formula	The formula, introduced by Commissioner Watson, which established the rates of pay for various categories of builders' labourers as a percentage of the carpenters' rate