

CHAPTER 1

Building Industry Employers and the Building Unions

This section is intended as a brief background to the building industry unions and employer groups in Australia. It does not pretend to be a detailed analysis of the building industry or of the unions involved. These are all discussed in later chapters.

Building workers in Australia are covered by about a dozen different unions.¹ Most of these unions are Federal structures with state branches but some are only operative in certain states. The two main unions are the Building Workers Industrial Union (the major tradesmen's union) with approximately 50,000 members and the B.L.F. with 30,000. The only other building union of national industrial significance is the Plumbers and Gasfitters Employees Union of Australia (P.G.E.U.A.) with a membership of about 17,000. The Operative Painters and Decorators Union claims 20,000 members² but has never wielded any significant industrial force. Major unions with peripheral membership in the building industry are the F.E.D. & F.A., the A.M.W.S.U., the A.W.U. and the E.T.U.

Federal unions became stronger during the sixties and seventies as Federal awards began replacing state awards in many areas of the industry. This came about because of the general industrial trend towards Federal Awards but also because the employers were organising nationally and "exploiting differences in each state to their own advantage".³

The way in which the various building unions relate to each other within each state differs greatly depending on certain industrial, historical and ideological factors.

B.L.F. branches during the period in question varied in ideology from state to state. In Victoria, the Branch was completely dominated by the C.P.A. (M-L) and in South Australia, the Secretary, Les Robinson, was a C.P.A. (M-L) sympathiser. In Tasmania, the Secretary W. (Speed) Morgan was a well known right-winger who at one stage was involved with the Harradine faction. In Western Australia, Secretary R. Davies was also associated with the right-wing of Labor Council. He was replaced

1 The B.W.I.U.'s process of absorbing the smaller unions has progressively reduced the number of building unions.

2 All the above figures are approximations based on information for the years 1974 and 1976 supplied in D.W. Rawson, A Handbook of Australian Trade Unions and Employees' Associations: Third Edition.

3 Pat Clancy quoted in Sun, 26 April 1973.

in the mid seventies by R. Reynolds who, although less overtly conservative, was certainly not "Maoist" in philosophical outlook. The Queensland Secretary, V. Dobinson, was overshadowed by the industrial strength of the powerful Queensland branch of the B.W.I.U. under Secretary Hugh Hamilton. Relations between the B.L.F. and the other building unions ranged from reasonably harmonious in Western Australia,⁴ Tasmania and Queensland to episodically disruptive in South Australia, N.S.W. and Victoria.

In Victoria, the B.L.F. was on poor terms with the B.W.I.U. which was S.P.A. influenced. The Painters' Union which, under the leadership of Secretary Paddy Ellis, had originally supported the Maoists, later turned against the Hill/Gallagher alliance, but still maintained a left stance in the industry. The Plumbers' Union, industrially more militant than either the B.L.F. or the B.W.I.U., was aligned with the Socialist Left of the A.L.P. Under the leadership of George Crawford it co-operated industrially but not politically with both major unions but adopted an independent stance on some issues such as its refusal to be included in the 1974 National Building Industry Award. The four small craft unions tended to support the B.L.F. because "they saw Gallagher as the only thing standing between them and being gobbled up by the B.W.I.U."⁵

The S.A. Branch of the B.L.F. was involved in demarcation disputes during the early seventies with the plasterers, the carpenters and the plumbers. The plumbers dispute was interesting because the S.A. branch of the P.G.E.U.A., under the influence of its Secretary, Bob Giles (an avid environmentalist and Munday supporter), was one of the few building union branches to support the N.S.W. B.L.F. This position obviously caused problems between Robinson and Giles.⁶ In Queensland the situation was different because the Queensland branch of the B.W.I.U. was the only C.P.A. influenced state branch not to follow Clancy into the S.P.A. in 1971. State Secretary Hugh Hamilton remained in the C.P.A. His relations

4 Relations between the unions there were described as excellent by W.A. organiser for the P.G.E.U.A. Bob Bryant (Interview: 10 July 1981).

5 Interview: George Crawford, 8 April 1981. The other states' building industry groups include roughly the same unions although sometimes the small craft unions have become amalgamated or associated with the B.W.I.U. In small states like Western Australia for example, there are only the B.L.F., B.W.I.U., Plumbers, Painters and Plasterers.

6 See especially "To the Plumbers: Be Fair Dinkum Bob", A.B. & C.W.F. (S.A. Branch) Newsletter, March 1973, p.3.; also when State Secretary of the B.W.I.U., Keith Lutz, resigned in 1973 he cited as his main reason the "unions fighting each other for control" of the industry, The News (Adelaide), 31 August 1973.

with State B.L.F. Secretary Vince Dobinson were strained but never overtly hostile.

The overall situation can be generalised in this way. The B.L.F. branches, ranging from Maoist (Victoria and S.A.) to moderate (W.A. and Queensland) to right-wing (Tasmania), all supported Gallagher. The B.W.I.U. except for Queensland (C.P.A.) and Tasmania (right-wing) were under varying degrees of S.P.A. influence, and the Plumbers supported the Socialist Left of the A.L.P. in all branches except N.S.W. The small craft unions either were "associated" with the B.W.I.U. or wary of becoming unwillingly so, except for the A.S.C. & J. which, because of its history, was always in opposition to the B.W.I.U.⁷

In N.S.W., during the relevant period, there were between nine and eleven unions in the Building Trades Group (B.T.G.) of Labor Council.⁸ These unions were the B.L.F., the B.W.I.U., the Plumbers, the Painters, the A.S.C. & J., and six small craft unions which were "associated" or closely allied with the B.W.I.U. These unions were the Federated Brick, Tile and Pottery Industrial Union; the Operative Plasterers and Plaster Workers' Federation (now "associated"); the Operative Stonemasons Society (now "associated"); the Plate Sheet & Ornamental Glass Workers Union; the Tilelayers Union of N.S.W.; and the Slaters, Tilers, Shinglers and Roof-Fixers' Union (now B.W.I.U.).

An accurate estimate of the size of each union is, as Rawson has pointed out, difficult to make.⁹ This would be particularly so with the B.L.F. because of its status as a non-craft union. The difference between financial and non-financial unionism would be increased because of the fact that union rules demand that resignations must be submitted in writing. Given the itinerant nature of the B.L.F. it is unlikely that members submit resignations every time they move into a different industry. Thus many would remain "book" members although employed elsewhere. From the Union minutes and other sources the best estimate I can make is that the Union increased from about 2,500 members in 1961 to about 9,000 members in 1971. It probably rose to a peak of 11,000 in 1973-74.¹⁰ Membership dues rose gradually during the period. In

7 The A.S.C. & J. does not exist in W.A. and Queensland.

8 The number changed because of "association" and amalgamation with the B.W.I.U.

9 D.W. Rawson, A Handbook of Australian Trade Unions and Employees' Associations: Third Edition, pp.2-3.

10 The Union's membership at different stages is discussed in greater detail in later chapters.

1972 dues had reached \$26 a half year, and in 1974 they were \$36. In that year Pringle explained that the annual running costs of the N.S.W. Branch were \$250,000 and that it paid \$75,000 a year in capitation fees to the Federal body.¹¹

The Union covers all unskilled labourers and certain categories of skilled labourers employed on "a construction" - a definition which sometimes brings the Union into demarcation with the A.W.U. which tends to cover labourers on sites not designated as such. The skilled categories covered by the B.L.F. include dogmen, riggers, scaffolders, powder monkeys, hoist drivers and steel fixers.

Using their reports to the N.S.W. Industrial Registrar in 1974 as the basis,¹² the other unions in the B.T.G. had the following memberships - B.W.I.U. 21,850; Plumbers 9,250; Painters 9,500; A.S.C. & J. 5,665; Plasterers 2,659; Brick Tile & Pottery Workers 4,716; Plate, Sheet & Ornamental Glass Workers 1,122; Slaters & Tilers 600; Tilelayers 340; and Stonemasons 352.

The other really significant union in the N.S.W. building industry of the time was the F.E.D. & F.A. which although not a member of the B.T.G.¹³ had about 1,200¹⁴ of its 5,500 N.S.W. members employed in the building industry.

The ideological backgrounds of the N.S.W. building unions in the period were briefly this. The Plumbers, Plasterers and A.S.C. & J. were right-wing. The other major unions were all C.P.A. or C.P.A. influenced. When the 1971 split occurred the B.L.F. and F.E.D. & F.A. remained with the C.P.A. while the B.W.I.U. followed Federal Secretary, Pat Clancy, into the S.P.A. Painters' Secretary Sid Vaughan, although not joining the S.P.A. did leave the C.P.A., and continued to co-operate with the B.W.I.U. rather than the B.L.F. The small craft unions, not industrially strong enough to stand alone, moved further into the B.W.I.U.'s orbit. So although Plasterers under Stan Dixon remained a right-wing union, they became "associated" with the B.W.I.U. and politically indistinct from it. This also happened to the Stonemasons although its Secretary Mick Boyle remained in the A.L.P.¹⁵

11 Sydney Morning Herald, 8 October 1974.

12 The following figures come from D.W. Rawson, A Handbook of Australian Trade Unions and Employees' Associations: Third Edition.

13 It was officially in the Metal Trades Group of Labor Council.

14 An estimation by N.S.W. Secretary of the F.E.D. & F.A., Jack Cambourn, (Interview: 1 February 1979).

15 Interview: Mick Boyle, 29 January 1981. Boyle described himself as "an admirer not a disciple of Clancy".

On the employers' side the position was almost as complex. Master Builders Associations were formed autonomously in each state and only became a formally constituted national body, the Master Builders Federation of Australia (M.B.F.A.), when the push towards federal unionism occurred. The M.B.F.A. was established in Canberra because that is where its main activities take place. It is essentially a lobby group, concerned with the effect of Federal legislation upon the building industry. It is only peripherally concerned with industrial relations aspects of the industry. All state M.B.As contribute financially towards the M.B.F.A.

The national employer body directly concerned with industrial relations is the National Industrial Executive of the Building and Construction Industry which covers civil engineering construction as well as building construction. It includes not only the M.B.As but also the Employers' Federation and the Australian Federation of Construction Contractors.

Within N.S.W. most builders belong to either the Master Builders' Association of N.S.W. or the Employers' Federation of N.S.W. Other employer organisations involved, although some only marginally, are the Master Plumbers and Sanitary Engineers Association of N.S.W.; the Metal Trades Industries Association; the Fire Sprinkler Contractors' Association of Australia; the Master Painters, Decorators and Signwriters Association of N.S.W.; and the Master Slaters, Tilers and Shinglers Association of N.S.W.. Some builders have double or even triple membership in these organisations.

The M.B.A. is the most significant employer organisation in the building industry in N.S.W. The Financial Review describes the M.B.A. as adopting "the tone and approach of the majority of its membership who are old, well established middle and small-scale builders, many of them family or private companies".¹⁶ In 1973 the M.B.A. claimed to cover 1,500 members.¹⁷ Frenkel and Coolican report that less than 40% of eligible building employers are members of the M.B.A. but most non-member firms are very small and M.B.A. officials maintain that in value terms about 90% of work is undertaken by M.B.A. members.¹⁸ However, significant large companies such as Civil & Civic, Parkes Development and Holland Constructions were not members during crucial periods in the seventies.

¹⁶ Australian Financial Review, 8 November 1973.

¹⁷ Sydney Morning Herald, 25 May 1973.

¹⁸ Stephen Frankel and Alice Coolican, op.cit., pp.28-29.

This situation was to cause major rifts among building employers during the 1973 B.L.F. lock-outs and during the 1974 deregistration proceedings. It was not unusual during the early seventies to hear establishment media referring to them as the "fragmented employer groups".¹⁹

¹⁹ Construction, Civil Engineering and Mining Review, Vol. 4, No. 11, 1 November 1971, p.1.