

Selected Links to Eight Green Ban Songs – Union Songs Research Archive

1. Across the Western Suburbs

A song by Seamus Gill and Denis Kevans©Seamus Gill and Denis Kevans 1973

Tune: Across the Western Plains

See – <http://unionsong.com/u118.html>

2. Green Bans Forever

A song by Mick Fowler©1979 Mick Fowler

Tune: Waltzing Matilda

See – <http://unionsong.com/u358.html>

3. Green Ban Fusiliers

A song by Denis Kevans©1972 Denis Kevans

Tune: McAlpine's Fusiliers

See – <http://unionsong.com/u041.html>

4. Here's To You Franklin

A Song by Dave de Hugard©Dave de Hugard 1983

See – <http://unionsong.com/u502.html>

5. CSG IS NOT FOR ME

A Song by Mic Conway©Mic Conway 2015

See – <http://unionsong.com/u818.html>

6. City Of Green

A song by Denis Kevans©Denis Kevans

Music Kate Fagan

See – <http://unionsong.com/u040.html>

7. Don't Close The Depot Down

A Song by John Hospodaryk©John Hospodaryk 2009

[Winner of the 2009 RTBU Railway Song Competition]

See – <https://railwaysongs.blogspot.com.au/2009/01/dont-close-depot-down.html>

8. Monuments

A song by Denis Kevans©Denis Kevans 1970

Music and Performer Bob Fagan

See – <http://unionsong.com/u822.html>

The Green Bans That Saved Sydney – New Matilda on July 19, 2011

Forty years ago a small labourers' trade union executive made a decision that was to change the face of environmental activism around the world and save Sydney from much of the massive overdevelopment of the 1970s.

In prosaic fashion the executive minutes for 4 June 1971 of the NSW Builders Labourers' Federation record an unremarkable resolution: "Moved Bro. Owens, seconded Bro. T Hogan that R Pringle investigate a report next Tuesday on Kelly (sic) Bush".

Thus the first green ban was born. Brother Pringle came back from his inspection and recommended that the union place a ban on building activity at the Bush. Kelly's Bush, the last remnant of natural bushland on the Sydney Harbour foreshore was being threatened by a large housing development. The now famous Battlers for Kelly's Bush, the middle class women of Hunters Hill had asked the Builders Labourers to place a ban on building the development.

What followed in a short four year period was to shake the building industry to the core. The Builders Labourers imposed their environmental bans on over 40 construction projects valued at more than \$4 billion in 1970s terms. At the time there was no heritage or environmental protection legislation. If you owned something you could rip it down no matter how important or historical it was.

There was a massive building boom caused by unregulated overseas investment pouring into Sydney. The pro-development Askin government did not stand in the way of lovely old buildings being demolished daily.

Union green bans saved The Rocks and Woolloomooloo from being turned into a forest of high rise "executive suites"; they saved Glebe from being trifurcated by two major expressways; saved Centennial Park from being turned into a giant sporting complex; saved Victoria Street Kings Cross from destruction; saved Surry Hills from high rise; saved Ultimo from an expressway and saved the Opera House fig trees from becoming a car park. Individual buildings saved by green bans include the State Theatre, the Pitt St Congregational Church, and the Colonial Mutual, National Mutual and ANZ bank buildings in Martin Place. Bans also saved historic buildings in Bathurst, Wollongong and Newcastle.

The union's green bans quickly became known around the world. US environmentalist Paul Ehrlich, British comedian Spike Milligan and Petra Kelly, the leader of the German Greens were admirers. Other unions began to place environmental bans on construction and Green Ban Committees were formed by unions in the UK. Jack Munday was invited to lecture in Europe, Japan, Canada and the USA — and in 1976 he addressed the first United Nations Conference on the Built Environment.

At home, Nobel laureate Patrick White wrote, "It is a rare thing to find a union with so advanced a social conscience".

The difference between the green bans of the 1970s and their paler green version today is that back then, every ban had to be physically defended. Newspaper photos of the time show Munday, Joe Owens, Bob Pringle and other union militants regularly being arrested and hauled off building sites by uniformed police. Developers had no compunction about sending in non-union labour to do the work that the BLF was refusing to do.

Today, with a helpful web of environmental and heritage legislation in place, green bans are mostly imposed as a stop gap measure for other processes such as law suits to proceed. In the 1970s there was only one thing standing between an historic precinct and the wrecker's ball: the men and women of the NSW Builders Labourers.

The union was wiped out in 1975 by federal intervention from the Maoist National Secretary, Norm Gallagher from Melbourne. However, although Gallagher lifted every single green ban, the slowdown in the building industry and the election of the Wran government in 1976 allowed most of the green ban areas to remain untouched until Wran brought in the NSW Heritage Act, the Environment Planning and Assessment Act and the Land and Environment Court Act which prevented the extraordinary plunder of the 70s from ever happening again. Tom Uren, Whitlam's minister for urban development, also bought Glebe and Woolloomooloo for public housing thus saving these remarkable streetscapes for posterity.

The lesson that resident activists learnt from the green ban era was that militant direct action worked in the short term but needed to be wedded to the action of sympathetic governments for lasting reform to occur. We also learnt that what might be seen at the time as unacceptable radical action sometimes needs to happen. After all, the green bans did save the Sydney we love.