

GREEN BANS

Green bans by the building unions are one of the few uniquely Australian contributions to the international workers movements. The building unions in the early 1970's in Sydney imposed 'green bans' ie. a ban on demolition or building work in support of an issue of heritage and / or environment.

The Building Workers Industrial Union (BWIU), the Federated Engine Driver's and Firemen's Association (FEDFA) and the Builders Labourers Federation (BLF), under the leadership of Jack Mundy, Joe Owens and the late Bob Pringle imposed bans on many sites to protect heritage buildings, parks, bushland and even historical suburbs in Sydney. The first green ban imposed was at Hunters Hill where the BLF prevented the building of home units on one of the last remaining sections of bushland on the Parramatta River. These bans in the 1970's stopped inappropriate building in Centennial Park, saved numerous historical buildings and even stopped the bulldozing of heritage suburbs including Glebe, The Rocks, Woolloomooloo and Newcastle East End.

Eventually the developers colluded with right wing union officials and politicians to attack the radical branch of the BLF in NSW. They eventually took control of the union and put an end to green bans. However in more recent years, green bans have re-emerged. In the early 1990's the Construction Forestry Mining Energy Union (CFMEU) imposed a ban on the demolition of the historical Finger Wharf at Woolloomooloo. This ban was maintained for over 2 ½ years and eventually the wharf was saved.

Other bans have included a ban that forced the state government to significantly modify the refurbishment and extension of the Sydney Conservatorium of Music. This ban reduced the visible bulk of the extended building and its impact on the Botanical Gardens. A ban in Centennial Park prevented McDonalds building a fast food outlet. A ban at Circular Quay prevented Sydney City Council from inappropriately modifying the historical Museum of Contemporary Arts. One of the most recent green bans in 2004 prevented the state government selling foreshore land at Pyrmont Point to develop high rise units. Some of the bans on major sites and some on small site in response to community campaigning.

At Erskineville in inner Sydney one ban prevented the government selling land to developers to build units. This land has now been turned onto a park and is called Green Bans Park. In 1995 the Roads and Traffic Authority (RTA) decided to sell land at Erskineville to developers which would have resulted in the site being developed for housing units. The state government did not seem concerned that this working class suburb had one of the lowest ratios of public space to residents anywhere in Sydney. As the site was being used for open space by the local community there was huge opposition to the RTA plans to sell off the site. Council approached the RTA to hand over the site for use as open space but this was rejected unless Council paid full market rates for the site. Unfortunately the local council could not afford to pay full market rate for the site. The local community became organised and protested against the RTA sell off plans. The CFMEU supported the community move and placed a 'Green Ban' on the site. This meant that CFMEU members would be encouraged, not unions, to do any building work on the site if it was sold off to a developer. Because of this green ban and the radical protest of local residents the RTA received no offers at the auction it held as it would have been very difficult for any developer to build on the site. The State Election in 1996 saw the Australian Labor Party (ALP) Opposition promise to hand the site to the local Council for use as open space if it was elected to Government. This was done in 1997 with a handover celebration in the Park when the ALP was elected to government.

Council then embarked on a community consultation process in which people were invited to express their ideas for the site. This was developed into a master plan which was placed on public display for comment. After this display the master plan was then developed into detail design and drawings which were used to tender the works so as to get it constructed.

From this tender Council engaged a contractor in October 1997. Construction started in November 1997 and was completed in April 1998. An opening ceremony for the Park occurred in May 1998.

Green Ban Park has a magnificent photographic display of the community / trade union campaign to save open space for the people. You can learn about this great campaign by visiting the Park at the corner of Albert Street and Erskineville Road, Erskineville.