

BEYOND GREEN BANS

Jack Munday's and Joe Owens' period as leaders of the N.S.W. Builders' Labourers' Federation has now become historic. Then, under the leadership of Jack Munday and Joe Owens' green bans were imposed on building developments meeting with serious opposition on social grounds. That policy is historic because it is not forgotten; but it is a policy of the past, not the present. The present Maoist leaders of the Builders' Labourers dropped the green ban of Victoria Street, opening the way for systematic evictions of working people from Darlinghurst and Kings Cross. The Building Trades Group got a rotten compromise with Theeman over Victoria Street - that a percentage of Victoria Street housing be allocated to low income earners - and even that rotten compromise was not honoured because the Building Trades Group leadership did not want to be bothered with the business of putting working people into Victoria Street housing. It took a cash settlement and bought a club in the western suburbs with the money. These two sellouts by Gallagher's Maoist BLF and the antiGallagher Building Trades Group spelt the end of green bans as a means of industrial and political action. The occasional minor bans retained by the Builders' Labourers or imposed by the Building Trades Group do not represent any kind of serious attack on the social objectives of the big city building developers.

It is no accident that the major battles over green bans have developed around Victoria Street and Woolloomooloo. The importance of green bans was shown in these areas not theoretically but in practice, first by the Mobilisation by Theeman and other developers of thugs to throw out squatters from Victoria Street houses and later by the murder of Juanita Nielsen. The occupation of Victoria Street houses by squatters, however-politically limited their motivations, was a direct attack on capitalist property rights; it was countered by the developers' utilisation of what was in effect a temporary private army of lumpen elements employed by the Kings Cross clubs. This campaign

of intimidation reached its apogee with the direct political murder of Juanita Nielsen. Even if sustained economic analysis was lacking, which it is not, the violence of these conflicts would be enough to show the importance of property speculation for the development of Australian capitalism in the strategy of the ruling class. The old Builders' Labourers involved itself in the fiercest and most intense class struggle of the early 'seventies, and for a time thwarted the developers and the international merchant banks who financed the developers. It is for this reason Australian capital needed Gallagher to smash the N.S.W. Builders' Labourers. The Builders' Labourers were destroyed; Victoria Street and Darlinghurst were opened up to the developers. The foundations were laid for the present revival in housing investment: that is, for mass evictions from Darlinghurst as part of a general expulsion of working people from inner city Sydney: for the substitution for labor under union wages and conditions of sub-contracting throughout the building industry.

Crises in urban development are moments in a far more vast crisis of national and international capitalism. The downturn in the world capitalist economy is being paid for by the working class. Capitalism can only slow the plunge downward of the rate of profit world-wide by laying an axe to the living standards, of workers forcing workers into poorer and poorer housing at higher rents, increasing transport costs, threatening the unions with the army to prevent wages rising while inflation steadily erodes the buying power of the wage packet. Workers by the thousands are forced into the dole queue, where they are victimised and pilloried by the capitalist press because they dare complain when capitalism cannot give them the right to work. It is in such a situation that shares in building developers rise at Australian Stock Exchanges as tenants are evicted and union workers replaced by sub-contractors. A rise in profits in building speculation, before any similar rise in profit takes place overall in mining and manufacturing, illustrates the extremely uneven development of Fraser's efforts to engineer the recovery of Australian capitalism. The same rise in profits also spells disaster from the people from whose life and work the developers' profits are extracted.

Any crisis of capitalism offers the ruling class an opportunity to restructure the economy, eliminating the "least efficient" capitalists, while channeling investment into those sectors of the economy returning the highest rate of profit. In Australia, a "recovery" based on temporarily improved world agricultural prices and a speculative housing boom, shows not the success but the failure of capitalist restructuring. Overseas capital has subsidised a sudden speculative boom in housing which with deepening downturn in the world economy can end only in an equally sudden slump. The cycle of boom and slump alternates more quickly and sharply in the building industry than in any other sector of the economy. A building mini-boom must collapse with any contraction of demand. In the early seventies the high profits of "development" attracted the most unscrupulous and rapacious capitalists into Victoria Street and Woolloomooloo, only to become the first casualties of the end of the boom period. Now, in far less favourable economic circumstances, the developers are moving in again, to be faced in a far shorter period than before, by an even more devastating and disastrous crash. This time they may bring down with them the Fraser Government and its entire recovery program.

For this to happen, the tactics of the workers and their political leaders must be well chosen. The left must implacably oppose every step in Fraser's road to recovery for profits and depression for wages. The coming crash in housing development must be prepared for and utilised to the advantage of the workers. So long as housing development is the profit leader in the non-farm economy, it is the lynchpin of Fraser's strategy, and must therefore be the centre of attention for the left. The left must show the consequences of this "recovery" for workers. It must warn that such recovery will end only in a New crash. It must by an attack on the whole character of housing development under workers control, that is expropriate the developers. This is not a utopia. The involvement of the Housing Commission in

Woolloomooloo under pressure from the Builders Labourers Federation came very close to a situation which could be summed up with the formula "nationalisation under workers control". Here payments to developers showed the Housing Commission to step in as legal owners and edge out the Builders Labourers Federation, which in any case was unwilling to plan much more beyond the enforcement of a green ban. More potentially radical, closer to what communists call expropriation, was the union defence of the squatters in Victoria Street, where no commercial sales or compensation payments were involved. The weakness of Victoria Street's struggle in terms both of the utilisation of the Victoria Street houses and their successful defence, was the artificial 'division of labour' between squatters and building workers, the squatters living in the area, the building workers defending by bans and promises to physically defend the squatters. There was no control by the builders' labourers jointly with the occupiers over the allocation of houses and the conditions of their occupation. This light-minded anarchistic attitude on the union's part meant that the Victoria Street houses were never regarded, publicised or managed as a section of housing stock open to all sections of working people, particularly the **neediest**. For that reason, there was no possibility of Victoria Street being viewed as the nucleus of a revolutionary alternative to capitalist housing which could **be extended**. This was the major reason for defeat in Victoria Street. The minor and temporary illusion of "recovery" has not served only to increase developers' profits. More importantly, from the viewpoint of class struggle, it has raised workers' expectations. Wage struggles have developed throughout the economy, spearheaded by the Pilbara unions, in Western Australia, where the possibility of converting the wages struggle into a political general strike against Court and Fraser was sold out by the Stalinist treachery of Carmichael. The upsurge of militancy or wages has been reflected within the building industry by renewed rank-and-file pressure against the Building Trades Group and Builders' Labourers leaders to wage a strong campaign against sub-contractors. This pressure from below has forced strong words from the union tops - but no action. The subbies are still working. In some unions, especially in the Building Trades Group, they have been allowed to take out union membership. The Building Trades Group makes appeals to the Government and the builders not to employ subbies - since when did the ruling class and its executive committee have unions to keep their house in order? - and "threatens" the Government with "another Razorback". The bureaucrats thus in effect say that if the capitalist state does not yield to pressure from the left it will be faced with pressure from an anti-union extra-parliamentary right. They do not understand that such pressure from the right will be utilised by Fraser and turned against the Wran government. The Building Trades Group leadership is helping the subbies by holding out to them a form of action which **bypasses** the union: This is treachery!

What is at stake in the fight against subbies is the survival of the building unions themselves. It is no accident that the trickle of subbies into the industry grew to a flood around 1974-75 when Gallagher with the help of the MBA was wrecking the most militant building union. If the rank-and-file do not abandon their Stalinist leaders and take direct action against the subbies on the building sites, their union will be smashed. Not just Darlinghurst will be a paradise for subbies, but the whole of New South Wales. A resolution of the Plate, Sheet and Ornamental Glass Workers board of management points the way. It says that in areas where builders and developers are using scab sub-contract labour to do inadequate renovations and substantial numbers of people are being evicted, the union take traditional direct action to clear the sites of non-union labour so that adequate building repairs can be carried out by union labour without working people being evicted. This links action by the union to protect jobs, wages and conditions with support for other working people - a link Munday and Owens did not make. With a new building collapse around the corner, building workers must act now.

These possibilities will become open once again in the near future. Not, however, without conflict. Theeman mobilised a private army against squatters in Victoria Street, so Thomas Nationwide Transport is using security guards with guns against squatters - as well as the majority of ordinary tenants - in three streets in Darlinghurst. Because capitalist forms of housing ownership have been so clearly challenged, the local capitalists are protecting "their" property and their plans to force workers out of the area with guns. This is a class struggle in which force will be used, and it must be used by both sides. Otherwise, the opponents of the developers must resign themselves to the fate of Juanita Nielsen. Differences within the building unions will speedily resolve themselves into struggles between the leadership whose friendship has been purchased by the developers and the rank-and-file unionists fighting in the literal sense of the word to clean sub-contractors out of the building industry. As in the case of the NSW BLS, this will be a struggle involving violence where the scab union leaders will cover the sellouts behind the guns of the developers' armed guards. The way to more jobs in the building industry through union control of the building sites in Darlinghurst now using sub-contractors to evict tenants "renovations". To separate green bans from the fight for more jobs is the surest way to compromise green bans - as Munday and Owens learnt the hard way.

"The socialist program of expropriation, i.e. of political overthrow of the bourgeoisie and liquidation of economic domination, should in no case hinder us from advancing, when the occasion warrants, the demand for the expropriation ... of the most parasitic group of the bourgeoisie". So wrote Trotsky in **Transitional Program of the Fourth International**. At the same time, Trotsky warned we call upon the masses to rely only upon their own revolutionary strength, and not on the power of the capitalist state which will intervene on the other side and we link the question of expropriation to the seizure of power by the workers and small farmers. These demands are entirely applicable to the building industry as it now exists in Australia. On the basis of working class intervention, under the leadership of a revolutionary Marxist party, in housing, far wider areas can be opened up - as the green ban movement in the 'seventies has illustrated. Effective workers' control over urban residential construction places in workers' hands issues of economic and environmental planning, the relation between city and country, as part of the advance to socialism.

