

## **Hal Alexander**

### **The Bastards Never Told Me I Had No Feathers To Fly With**

I make it to university. Sort of.

The Poet Lorikeet calls them the Green Ban Fusiliers. The Builders Labourers Federation. A healthy rambunctious turmoil pervaded the industry.

Like the Miners, Ironworkers, Maritime and other unions in earlier periods, the BLF had become the fighting vanguard of the working class. It had won improved conditions and pay rates through militant actions. The Master Builders were savage. Like that 'it makes me feel a proud old builder' Jennings creep in the TV advert.

Other bosses and many union officials were snarly because their own troops were talking darkly that the BL's way was the way to go. Like they used to about the Wharfies and other aforementioned.

In the meeting halls of power where these things were discussed, some even spoke with certitude that we could blaze the way, show the world that here in Oz the unions were potential organs of revolutionary power and the vehicles of future proletarian emancipation. Such proclamations led to the usual fulminary esoterics and many trees were sacrificed.

However, justice where its due. The NSW Builders Labourers Federation won many a victory, many hearts and minds, had songs and poems written in its honor and put new political concepts on the agenda. Above all, it fought for its members and their rights.

Stormin Normie Gallagher had his own pan of fish to fry and moved in from the Federal Melbourne office to take over the NSW branch.

The fur flew and splits appeared. In the Party and the Union leadership arguments were heated and unresolved. The rank and file (or some of them) opted for job site occupation.

The University of Technology was a skeletal frame of steel and concrete of thirty stories. The big crane on the Broadway southern side was occupied by a group of union members. The site was enclosed by a five metre high wooden fence. The back Haymarket stretch had a three metre cyclone wire counterpart.

Hindsight does not allow a telling of the names of the aerial campers or who supplied them, relieved them or otherwise helped. Likewise of the two union officials who came to Glassop Street to proposition me but this is the story.

Somehow (someone?) the starter wiring on the back crane was tied in with the building and as it rose it had suffered a circulation seizure. Would I go up next day and try and fix it? They made it sound like the world revolution could depend on it. This bunny said yes but with the odd presentiment that it might be like poking one's prick into a cage of hungry ferrets.

Five a.m. on Broadway, at about opposite to where the main entrance is now, about a dozen BLs and some others like Pat/F taking piccies had gathered. A whistle up and they've barricaded the road a hundred yards either side. Cars queued as a rope snakes down over the hoarding and the blokes heave on it to swing the box over the high wooden fence onto the road. When it thumps down I climb aboard with the doggie. We lift, another heave, the box clears the woodwork and shoots straight up to the top of the structure where I'm deposited.

Great view. Stretching to all horizons.

Sydney. Home of all my homes.

I look down. I shouldn't have.

[Vertiginous (ver. tij' a. nas) - adj - giddy, dizzy, causing giddiness, whirling, revolving.] -Websters.

Yes. All of that. When the fundamental orifice and other organs had resumed their more or less normal functions, I looked over to my comrades in their crane cabin a long way away. They toasted me with a couple of tinnies. Very helpful.

Hoisting the toolbox ahead I wound the cable over my shoulder and edged across the narrow girder to the crane motor. Sussed out, there was no way to reach the burnout without crawling under the motor sump. Nice. There was a tray of sticky oil, black and congealed, under it. I dice the tee shirt and thongs.

They reckon that Cleopatra bathed in oil. She didn't have to rewire a huge metal diesel object at the same time. I did and did it.

Back under and out, looking like ready to sing 'Mammie', I hoy the lads across the way. They wave back, someone presses a starter control and the beast roars into life. Cheers all round. They shut it down and give me the old clenched fist. Then I yell.

"How do I get down?"

The big bearded one leant out of his cabin and replied.

"Walk." The erstwhile dogman joined him at the window. "Yer an angel, brother, maybe you can fly." So can pigs.

The bastards never told me about this.

So down the raw concrete narrow stairway or by ladder where it stopped. The bastards never told me about this. Thirty floors.

Down on the paddock. Sudden realisation that there is no way out to Broadway. The solid timber wall stared back.

And I looked and felt like a furry Exxon oil spill victim.

Or a cormorant in the Gulf War. Bloody undignified.

The bastards.

So I head for the cyclone fence backing on to Thomas Street. and stop.

Outside the only gate are a bunch of blokes. Two seemed to have some sort of security insignia on their shirts. No seeming about the holsters at their hip or the contents. Two others were, to my scrambled senses, Big Norm's boys from Melbourne. They were likely enough looking customers that way. And where were my back up buddies? Where indeed.

What was that about getting a steady job and sticking to it?

I head for the part of the cyclone fence furthest from the hoons, running. As I hoist the toolbox over the top, there's a yell. Something like, "who are you and where the fuck did you come from."

Stealing a fraction of time I yell back. "Been fixing that sump," then hit the top strand on the fly, land in a sprawl on the other side. This was no time for pleasant exchanges of political opinion or any other kind for that matter and head for the markets and Chinatown.

From where would you go in Chinatown in just a pair of footie shorts, carrying a tin toolbox, with no money, having the hard boys on your hammer and everyone staring, partly because you have a wild staring look yourself and partly because you're covered in black shit and the wildness is because the bastards never told you about this?

Dead set right. The Trades Hall to find my procurers of the night before.

Into the Labourers' office first looking for sympathy and that ratbag place can't stop laughing. I enquire as to where my two benefactors might be found. Just a little job they said.

I'm ushered around the corner and along the corridor.

(A giveaway if you know anything of the wierd geography of the warren that was this history soaked, grey edifice. And of a sheltered-world-within-itself to an often grog soaked troupe of numbers men of

left and right who haunt its corridors and crannies. Even the best meaning had to learn to count and, for a few, drink. You could write a hundred books about a thousand characters of a colour and life who schemed, wheedled, raged, fought and laughed within its walls).

And of the staff, mostly women, who ran the union offices and without whose efforts and devotion most organisations could not have survived.

Anyway. Escorted by one of these unsung still smiling ladies, we arrive to confront the perpetrators of stares and laughter. After they had stopped staring and laughing they said they'd run me home. So down and out into Sussex Street.

From there into the Union Secretary's new Kingswood. "Fuck him," they said, not so carefully lining the seat with the Sydney Morning Herald. Back to Balmain, a full body detergent and hose down. Oh, Cleopatra!

You'd think enough was enough! St. Jude you have deserted me.

Working next day at R.P.A. there's a phone call.

"Jim Staples here. Can you come down to my office right away?"

Jim Staples? Hadn't seen Jim Staples since we expelled him, late fifties or so for being rude and out of order. What could he want?

What's that? Some problem about yesterday? Serious?

So I told the boss I was clocking off sick - again. Like yesterday he said. Yair, only worse I told him.

Cut short, the thing was (as related by my 'two best mates' and Jim) the contractors' inspectors had examined the crane and there was either sugar or water or piss or something in the hydraulics that ensured its continued immobility, that that little number would cost a horrible big bundle of big ones to repair and that noises about industrial sabotage were made and possible proceedings under the Crimes Act mooted.

Not all that much really except that we could all be in deep shit. Especially me.

They were all sweetness and light. Jim didn't appear to be wearing any grudges and said they would fix it up somehow.

The important thing was to keep me out of it. They just thought I ought to know.

Ought to know?

That was the trouble.

THE BASTARDS NEVER TOLD ME!