

# Lindsay Fraser AM: the Quiet Achiever

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**When Lindsay Fraser steps down from his position as National Construction Assistant Secretary of the CFMEU in November, we will lose a piece of living history.**

Lindsay Fraser, who has held numerous positions with the union since 1964, played a leading role in tumultuous and epoch making periods for the construction industry and in the formation of the CFMEU.

When he started working on site as a Labourer in 1964, it was in a primitive industry where he was sent home without pay if it rained and with no access to facilities.

“You worked a 7am-3pm daily hire with an hour’s notice. To terminate you, all they had to do was walk up at 2pm, with your pay and an hour’s pay in lieu of notice and say ‘see you later’. It was like Labour Hire without any of the benefits,” he recalls. “There was no payment for public holidays, there was no wet weather pay, sick leave or redundancy pay and limited annual leave.”

## **BLF beginnings**

Born into a union family where conversations around the dinner table were about “the fortunes of Labor, union activity and how to support the working class”, it was no surprise that Lindsay did not hesitate to step forward with other like-minded men during that surge of working class activity in the late 1960s and the 1970s, to agitate for better pay and conditions for Builders’ Labourers in Sydney.

“That period was special because certain personalities came together who were able to inspire others to fight for change. Jack Munday who came to Sydney to play Rugby League for Parramatta is often cited as the key player during that time, but he couldn’t have done it without Joe Owens and Bob Pringle,” he says. “Or a membership that was prepared to fight; but it wasn’t hard to get members interested. The pay and conditions were terrible.”

As part of the rank and file, a delegate and then as an official of the union, Lindsay was at the forefront of campaigns for OHS, accident pay and the banning of chemicals on site.

He was also in the fight to save areas of significance either in the built environment or the natural world in what became the famous ‘Green Bans’.

“The union became well known for the Green Bans, but we were also involved in lots of other political issues: women’s rights, peace, indigenous rights, international solidarity. We were a leading militant union prepared to fight for our members *and* for the rights of the down trodden and dispossessed.”

## **Blacklisted, but continuing the struggle in WA**

While he speaks with some sadness about the events that followed when the Federal Branch of the BLF took over the NSW branch in 1974 - which changed the course of the union and the course of Lindsay's life - he was able to put the bitterness behind him.

"Of course, I was angry with Norm Gallagher's role in the takeover of the union and it was a terrible time. I was blacklisted, I couldn't work and I was forced to move with a pregnant wife to the North West of West Australia to make ends meet.

"I didn't have any time for Gallagher, but I accept he achieved a lot of good. I was opposed to the intervention, but I can see now that the Green Bans had come to dominate the union. At one stage there was a blanket ban on everything," he says.

"We operate in an imperfect world and people have strengths and weaknesses. It's important to be strategic and harness the strengths to succeed for the benefit of working people."

Workers in Dampier, in the remote North of West Australia were fortunate that Lindsay, with his experience and political nous found himself among them. He quickly became a delegate and in 1979, he was part of a 13 week strike over a wage rise.

Putting his differences with the BLF aside, Lindsay worked with Jim Bacon, then a BLF organizer (later Tasmanian Premier), to unionise the riggers and scaffolders into the union.

"Despite my views of Norm, he wasn't the union," Lindsay explains. "The workers' interests were far better served by being in the BLF. It's as simple as that."

## **Principled unionism: putting the interests of workers first**

It was doing what was in the interests of workers that again forged his decision to take a position with the BWIU in New South Wales to help the process of bringing in the builders' labourers after the deregistration of the BLF in 1986.

"I wasn't in love with the BWIU. I always thought they rode on the militancy of the BLF. But in the end, I thought I could play a role in getting the blokes the best out of the BWIU."

The guiding principle of doing what is best for the working class is pivotal to understanding Lindsay, according to National Secretary Dave Noonan.

"While I have found his wise counsel and experience of inestimable worth, his principled unionism is the legacy that Lindsay leaves behind in the CFMEU: his ability to put the interests of workers and the union first," says Dave.

After his move to the national office of the union, Lindsay has played a crucial role in OHS reform including the ban on organochlorins, the ban on Chrysotile, the many achievements in the asbestos area and the work done on achieving national high risk work licensing.

He has also led the path for training taking front and centre in the CFMEU's work and his contribution in this area on the national stage is highly respected by the industry and government alike.

It is for his contribution in these areas that he was awarded the Order of Australia.

Former FEDFA General Secretary Vic Fitzgerald says not many people know about this because Lindsay is "a modest man who doesn't brag".

"Other blokes would be flashing such a thing around and telling you about it at every opportunity. Not Lindsay," he says. "He's a quiet achiever. He's done so much for the working man, but he's not one to boast."

A long-time friend, Vic considers Lindsay a "true blue bloke" whose only failing is that he's a "mad St George supporter".

### **"Continue the struggle in the best way we can ..."**

Although sad that his time at the union has come to an end, Lindsay believes he's leaving at a good time.

"This is the most cooperation I've seen between the branches ever. Dave Noonan's been a unifying force and unity is crucial with the attacks we face from the conservative forces," he says.

"It's important that we remember our political conscience in everything we do, because despite the fact that we have such good wages and conditions, there is a class struggle in this country.

"The conservative forces in big business, the government and the media know this although they pretend otherwise. They talk about the national interest, when what they really mean is their profit margins.

"We have a responsibility to ourselves and the broader working class to continue to struggle in the best way we can."

By Jeana Vithoulikas