BLUE MOUNTAINS UNIONS & COMMUNITY ANNUAL REPORT 2022-23

It was another year when the rich got richer and the poor got poorer, against a background of crippling rent increases, surging inflation and new evidence of corruption at the big end of town. This quote from the Equality Trust, summing up life in the UK applies equally well to Australia.

"the explosion in the number of billionaires over the past few decades and accelerating inequality and growing poverty, are in fact two sides of the same coin"

(London Review of Books 15 June 2023)

The demands for change and real action to injustice and inequality have been the primary focus of our activities in 2022/23.

The Essential Workers campaign: In the run up to the state election our members supported the state-wide union campaign to improve pay and conditions for essential workers. While essential workers were widely praised for playing key roles to bring Australia through the pandemic, their work was not immediately rewarded with improvement in their pay - pay which for many had been going backwards for years. The union case cut through at the ballot box. In June the new Labor Government announced a 4.0% pay rise plus 0.5% superannuation for essential workers. But as Mike Morey, secretary of Unions NSW said at the time: “Is this offer enough to compensate workers for the cost-of-living pressures they are facing? Of course not".

The NSW Election: Long running BMUC member Trish Doyle retained her seat in the Blue Mountains with a thumping victory and an increased majority (8% swing), and was subsequently appointed as private secretary to the new Environment Minister, Penny Sharpe. Another more recent BMUC member Dr Jenna Condie ran for the Greens as a first-time candidate increasing the Greens vote (0.5% swing) in the mountains.

Lethal Bias - The War to criminalise Australia's construction Workers is a documentary written and produced for the CFMEU by Matt Peacock, the current BMUC vice president. As author Christos Tsiolkas says: "This film reveals the hypocrisy and bad faith that underlies the continual demonization of the union movement from the construction industry and from conservative governments". Matt's film received an enthusiastic response at its Blue Mountains launch, with many remarking that it told the other side of the story - the one you'll not find in Murdoch media.

Politics in the Pub returned after a long COVID shutdown with lively and well attended functions at The Family Hotel covering some of the most challenging issues of our times. 'The Drums of War' addressed the AUKUS agreement, the eye watering sums involved and its implications for Australia's defence. The attendance was our biggest for several years, reflecting the depth of community concerns. Another JPolitics in the Pub focussed on the lessons from the Black Summer Fires, and clear evidence of how the Blue Mountains, then a non-coalition seat, missed out on recovery grants, despite the devastation of the fires. Speakers included Mayor Mark Greenhill, an early member of the BMUC back in the 1990's. At the time of writing further events are planned, including a PiP on July 29 addressing the Housing crisis, and on the Voice to Parliament later in the year.

AIRWATCH: Our long running campaign to restore air pollution monitors has picked up momentum since the change of government, and we believe it's become all the more relevant given the catastrophic wildfires that have shrouded much of North America in toxic smoke. As a new El Nino could well be heading our way later in the year, the prospects of further bush fires remains high.

BMUC believes readily available air pollution readings should be available to every home in the Blue Mountains and Lithgow. The cost of new monitors is relatively low, while the price of inhaling bushfire smoke is proven to be fatal for vulnerable people.

MAY DAY: A contingent of BMUC members joined this year's March at Port Kembla where the theme was AUKUS. The march and rally drove home the many reasons unionists believe that the current AUKUS deal is a highly expensive and deeply flawed mistake.

RADIO: Our weekly radio program, ***Rights Rorts & Rants*** broadcast on Radio Blue Mountains 89.1FM (Fridays 4-6) delivered an eclectic mix of interviews and music including detailed items on the ROBODEBT scandal (Thanks to Deb Smith) and forensic examinations of various government and big business rorts by our resident legal commentator Mike Holland. RRR is a collective effort led by Deb, Fran Dyson and Merran Maclaren with contributions welcomed from our wider membership.

WINTER MAGIC: presents us with a wonderful opportunity to reach out to the wider community as 20,000 visitors stream down Katoomba Street. This year we'll be concentrating on the Yes campaign for the Voice , while also giving visitors the chance to sign up in support of our petition to bring back AIRWATCH.

MUSIC: As ever an important part of our activities. In October with the generous support of The Family Hotel we staged an evening with **George Mann**, the New York based former union organiser who has produced albums featuring folk music legends like Pete Seeger and Tom Paxton. On the night George lived up to his reputation as a " walking playlist of popular folk songs of the last 60 years".

Two of our members, Tom Flood and Stephen Langford arranged to have another campaigning American singer **David Rovics** perform at a private home in Katoomba - he proved an inspiration as "a peace poet and troubadour of our times".

By the way, it was good to see **Billy Bragg** giving his support to ABC striking CPSU workers during his recent tour.

CONGRATULATIONS: to long time BMUC member and union activist John Tognolini for being awarded lifetime membership of the NSW Teachers Federation.

THANKS: As ever to the Blackburn family and the staff of The Family Hotel for their consistent support of the BMUC during the last 12 months. As we're a voluntary organisation their assistance makes all the difference.

Thanks also to Merran MacLaren for again opening up her home for our end of year party.

Thanks also to our Executive: Ann-Maree McEwan, Fran Dyson, Matt Peacock, Willem Hendriksen, and our Treasurer, Bruce Cornwell for overseeing our finances. Finally I'd like to also again place on record my thanks to Deb Smith, our tireless secretary whose work in so many different ways plays a crucial part in keeping the BMUC such a well-oiled organisation.

Kerry Cooke
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