

A lesson in the failure of syndicalism

Australian union leader Norm Gallagher dies at 67

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Norm Gallagher, former federal secretary of the Builders Labourers Federation (BLF) and a founding member of the Maoist Communist Party of Australia (Marxist-Leninist), died last year in a Melbourne hospital after years of ill health. While his physical death occurred at the age of 67, Gallagher's political outlook had reached a dead end more than a decade earlier.

Gallagher claimed to be a socialist. He was, on the contrary, an exponent of militant syndicalism, a tendency that gained a significant following in the workers movement in the boom conditions of the post-war period, when employers were able to grant limited concessions to the working class.

Syndicalism was especially strong among workers in industries where conditions were harshest—in the mines, on the waterfront and in the construction industry.

Aggressively using the strike weapon and other militant tactics, workers were able, over time, to substantially improve their wages and working conditions and abolish some of the more brutal forms of exploitation.

But no matter how fierce the struggles—many took the form of bitter protracted strikes and pitched battles with the police—they never challenged the framework of the profit system. Militant syndicalism, like the more openly collaborationist form of trade union politics practised by the rightwing unions, confined workers to the purely economic struggle of seeking a better price for the sale of their labour power within the present system.

It would be true to say that the gains made through these methods contributed to undermining the socialist outlook that had animated the struggles of important sections of the working class in an earlier period. The conception that reforms were temporary and that class exploitation could only end through the fight to abolish the capitalist system gradually receded.

Socialism or communism, for leaders like Gallagher, was confined to rousing speeches. It was always divorced from the day-to-day struggles of the working class, and this helped to convince workers that they simply had no need of politics—any problem could be overcome by going on strike.

Gallagher, like many of the old style “left” union leaders, rose from working class origins to the top ranks of the union apparatus. He was born in 1931 in the slums of Collingwood in Melbourne. Life was tough and Gallagher soon developed skills as a street fighter, something that undoubtedly stood him in good stead later in the rough and tumble of the construction industry.

Leaving school at 14 years of age, Gallagher worked at a series of jobs, including offsidings on delivery trucks and a stint of tent boxing, before becoming a builder's labourer two years later. By the time he was 18 he had become a job delegate representing 250 workers.

Gallagher soon came to the attention of the construction union leadership, which was dominated by members of the Stalinist Communist Party of Australia. After being sent on a trip to the Soviet Union in 1950 and joining the CPA, Gallagher's rise through the union ranks was rapid. Just 11 years later he became the national general secretary of the BLF and by 1970 also held the position of secretary of the Victorian State branch.

In the CPA, Gallagher was trained in the thoroughly nationalist and opportunist politics of Stalinism. The party accepted the framework of the capitalist system and subordinated the working class to the reformist Labor and trade union bureaucracy. This outlook remained at the core of his political thinking after he broke with the CPA and helped found the Maoist CPA (Marxist-Leninist) in the Sino-Soviet split of 1963.

If anything, Gallagher's nationalism only became more overt. The CPA (M-L) raised the banner of Australian “independence” and called on workers to seek a common front with “progressive” sections of the ruling class to resist foreign domination. This position was to provide the rationale for the class collaborationist alliances Gallagher would set up, aimed at advancing the interests of a number of Australian building companies against overseas developers.

Until the late 1960s, builders labourers suffered the worst conditions in the building industry. They performed the most menial backbreaking tasks, worked in unsafe conditions and were the lowest paid. Amenities were non-existent, with labourers taking meal breaks and changing clothes in the dust and grime of the work site. At knock-off time they would huddle around the buckets of water provided for washing.

Due to the unskilled nature of their work, labourers lacked the bargaining power wielded by tradesmen. But this situation was to radically change when new methods of production emerged in the construction industry in the late 1960s, associated with the advent of high-rise buildings.

The union's members operated the massive cranes, provided the crane chasers, erected the scaffolding and poured the concrete for the new high-rise structures. Gallagher was able to use the changed circumstances to substantially improve the conditions of his members.

This provided the basis for the fierce loyalty he commanded among builders labourers and other militant workers and for his reputation as a working class champion. Workers were attracted by Gallagher's anti-boss rhetoric and class slogans (“Dare to struggle. Dare to win”) and impressed by his seeming ability and willingness to fight “toe-to-toe” with the employers. His rough appearance and tough mannerisms contrasted sharply with the manicured respectability of the rightwing union officials.

In industrial disputes the BLF became known for its “guerrilla tactics”. But despite his fame as a master tactician, Gallagher's methods were neither new nor profound. Mostly the union's members would simply

walk off the job in the midst of a concrete pour, resulting in the immediate loss of millions of dollars to the developers.

The building companies soon learnt it was cheaper to play ball with Gallagher than to quibble over concessions and in many cases they made deals with the BLF leadership, guaranteeing them industrial peace.

Gallagher's perspective, depending as it did on continuing class compromise, was to run into a brick wall in the changed circumstances of the late 1970s. His political outlook completely disarmed the BLF membership and rendered them incapable of either defending the gains they had previously made or of preventing the complete destruction of the union they had built.

A growing world recession saw the ruling class internationally initiate an offensive against the working class. In Australia, the Fraser Liberal government had proven incapable of dealing with an escalating working class movement against wage restraint and unemployment. Powerful sections of big business supported the installation of a Labor government led by the former rightwing president of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) Bob Hawke.

Labor's task was to discipline the working class and create the conditions to claw back its past gains. This was the essence of the Accord struck between Labor and the ACTU just prior to the 1983 elections. Any expression of working class independence or militancy, no matter how limited, was to be ruthlessly stamped out.

From the moment the Labor government came to power Gallagher bent over backwards to accommodate himself and the BLF to its big business program.

In April 1983, one month after the elections, the BLF chief was released early from Pentridge Jail—where he was serving a three-month sentence over a long-standing contempt charge—so he could attend Labor's tripartite summit of government, business and union representatives. Along with the entire union bureaucracy Gallagher voted for the summit's final communiqué endorsing the Labor-ACTU Accord.

In 1984, in exchange for Labor's dropping of a deregistration proceeding against the BLF begun by the Fraser government in 1981, Gallagher signed a Code of Conduct with the ACTU. The Code pledged that the union would “eliminate industrial action in support of wage claims and conditions” and settle disputes “in a manner consistent with the economic strategy of the Federal government”.

Gallagher, desperate to maintain his base among militant union members, was unable to deliver. BLF members engaged in industrial action on key building sites in Victoria, Queensland and New South Wales (NSW) throughout that year. By the end of 1984, the NSW Wran Labor government, with the support of the Communist Party-led Building Workers Industrial Union and other “left unions”, moved to deregister the BLF's NSW state branch.

At the same time Gallagher was hauled before the courts over allegations that he had received secret commissions from construction companies in exchange for exempting their sites from industrial disruption. The allegation arose out of a Royal Commission into the activities of the BLF launched some three years previously by the Fraser government.

The corruption charges against Gallagher were to play a decisive role when the Hawke government finally moved to deregister the BLF federally in 1986. They served as the pretext for union officials around the country to declare the BLF a rogue union and to either join in the assault, or refuse to lift a finger in its defence.

The Hawke government's campaign to smash the BLF was carried through with a particular viciousness, designed to intimidate the entire working class and deter any further resistance to the Accord. On major building sites in the state of Victoria, the BLF's stronghold, builders labourers were rounded-up by BWIU officials, accompanied by management and squadrons of police. They were ordered to immediately

sign over to the BWIU. Those who refused were sacked on the spot and blacklisted in the industry.

Under these conditions the defence of the union and the conditions won by building workers required the development of a political struggle to unite all sections of the working class against the Labor and ACTU leadership and wage a fight against their pro-capitalist program.

While the objective conditions existed for such a struggle—Labor's agenda had created widespread anger and opposition among workers—at no time did the Gallagher leadership consider such a course of action.

To do so would have meant stepping outside the framework dictated by the union bureaucracy, something that Gallagher, because of the very nature of his politics, could not and would not do.

Even as thousands of builders labourers demonstrated their determination to defend the union, Gallagher continued to oppose any political struggle. He refused to organise national strike action by his own members or turn to other sections of the working class.

Instead he engaged in a series of manoeuvres involving limited industrial action on a site-by-site basis. These were designed to avoid a decisive confrontation with the Labor government, while pressuring individual employers to drop their support for the deregistration procedures.

Throughout the conflict with the Labor government, the Gallagher leadership refused to call a mass meeting of builders labourers in Victoria, the state where it had a large combative membership and where the union enjoyed the support of militant sections of workers in other key industries.

In fact, it was Gallagher himself who was to deliver the final fatal blow. In April 1986, the night before a meeting in Sydney that attracted over 2,000 builders labourers and large contingents of other workers determined to fight the Labor government, Gallagher appeared on national television advising his members to sign over to the BWIU. He assured the workers that the best course was to carry out a “guerrilla war” within the ranks of that union, but the real effect was to demoralise and disperse the BLF's members.

The Labor government's easy victory over the BLF and the total capitulation of its leadership profoundly shocked wide sections of the working class. Their belief in the union's willingness and capacity to fight the Accord was shattered.

The era in which Gallagher's syndicalist approach could operate with a degree of success had well and truly passed. Whereas in the past companies relied on a national-based supply of labour, enabling the unions to press for limited concessions, now employers and developers threatened with strike action could simply shut down production and move elsewhere—interstate or off shore.

Most significantly, Gallagher's underlying confidence in the strength and permanence of capitalism, and the national reformist outlook for which he fought, politically disarmed the more militant layers of the working class in the face of the far-reaching changes in world economy that began in the mid-1980s and were to accelerate so explosively in the 1990s.



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