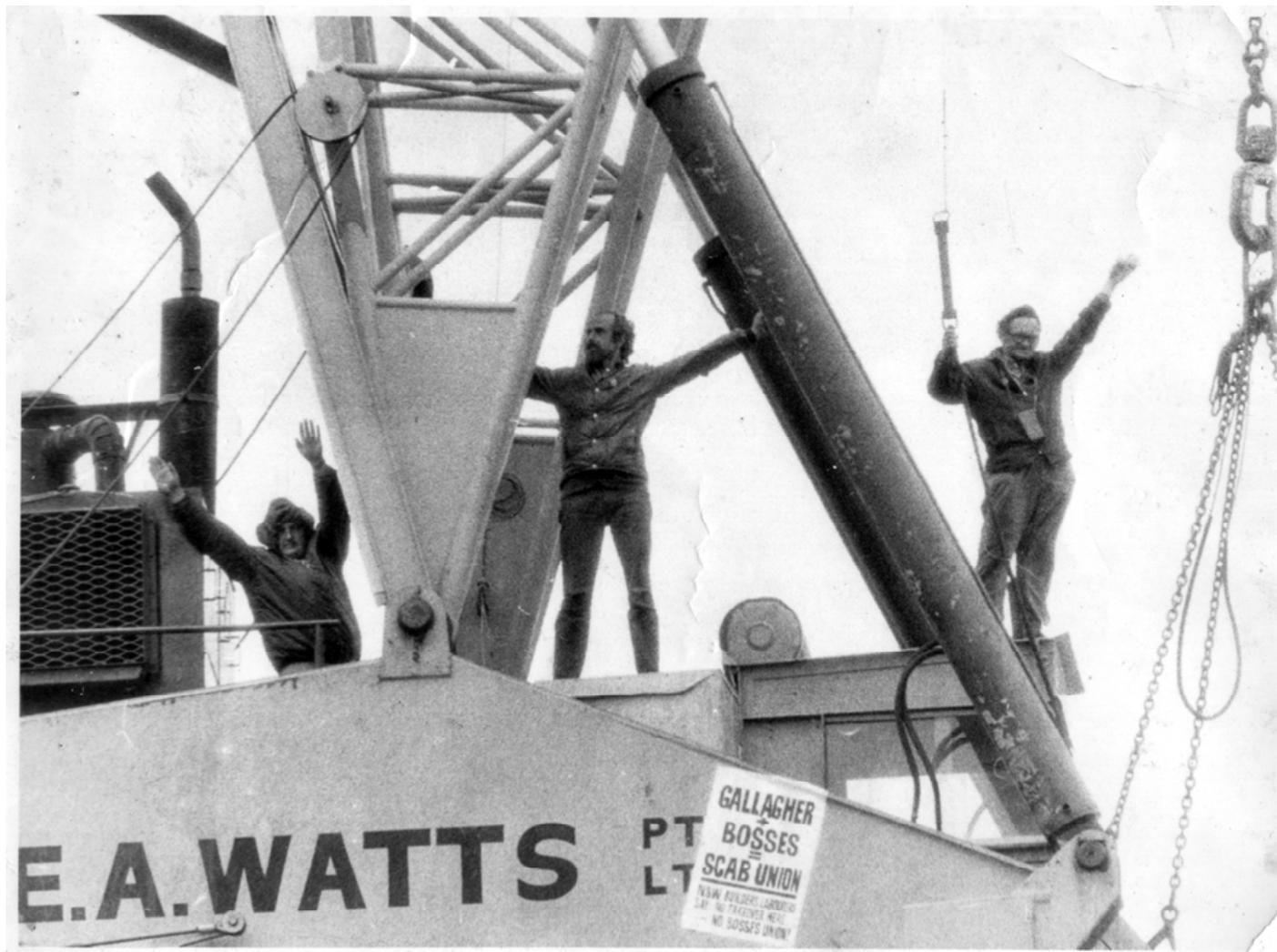


## **Russ Hermann Taking Over The Cranes**



It all started in October, 1974 when Norm Gallagher, the federal secretary of the Builders' Labourers Federation arrived in Sydney with a number of Victorian officials and other assorted people, necessary to provide the muscle to take over the NSW Branch, then led by Joe Owens, Secretary, and Bob Pringle, President. Jack Munday, the previous secretary, had recently retired under the Branch's 2 terms in office agreement.

Norm Gallagher had claimed that the reason for his intervention was the maladministration the NSW branch. Much later, Gallagher was jailed for corruption, but that's another story.

Gallagher's main tactic was to set up a Federal Branch and with the help of the Master Builders Association started issuing Federal tickets. The first job to sack workers who refused to join the Federal Union, was the E.A. Watts job at the NSW Institute of Technology (now UTS) building site on Broadway. The State Industrial Commission had ruled that they be reinstated, but when the men again refused, they were dismissed. This happened on October 18.

Naturally the officials and the rank & file were a little upset. A meeting was called, in fact there were meetings every afternoon in the office and it was decided that we would occupy the crane the next evening.

We arrived at the next afternoon's meeting, expecting that volunteers would be chosen and that it would all happen. Instead, the officials and a couple of party members all argued against it. There was a lot of discussion in the pub that night and four people, including one party member said

that they were still going to occupy the cranes. I was asked to go as well, but said that I was reluctant because I was in a new relationship and didn't feel like sitting up in a cane for a few days, but if they were desperate, I would. At 2.00 am there was a knock on my door. One of the four had disappeared. So off we went.

We had no trouble finding a staircase, but it only went up 2 flights. We then searched for a while and after crawling through scaffolding found it. Then up about 20 flights of stairs. We arrived on the roof and assessed the situation. One crane, the one nearest Broadway was of the concrete slab and only needed a short ladder to climb aboard. The other one, was on a steel tower. Brian and I climbed the tower. A small problem. There was a padlock on the trapdoor on the floor of the crane. Brian suggested we climb out under the bottom of the crane, up the sides and then onto the crane platform. I looked down, it was about a 200 foot drop, and said no way.

I went on to the roof and found a hammer and chisel and proceeded to attack the padlock. By this time it was daylight and we could hear the scabs arriving on the job. I was frantically hitting the lock, sometimes my hand and finally broke the lock as they were arriving on the concrete slab. Then we were the lucky ones. A 30 gallon drum on top of the trapdoor and there was no way they could get in.



Men in the cabin of a crane boil the kettle on a portable gas heater. From left are Mr Peter Stevens, dogman, Mr Terry Edmondson, dogman, Mr "Death" Morrison, builders' labourer, and Mr Paul McFadden, crane driver.

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But for the other two, they were only about 10 feet above the concrete, but they were courageous. They stood with crowbars over their shoulders and didn't say a word, they just looked. After a while, the workers gave up went back down the stairs. We had done it. But it wasn't a great victory. We didn't have any crane drivers to get supplies or change shifts. But we did have a flagon.

Joe Owens was furious. He came up onto the concrete slab and talked to us. We didn't think we'd quite made our point. We told him that we'd come down when we'd finished the flagon. So about lunchtime we came down and Joe led us away without any recriminations from the workers on the job or the police.

Brian and I went back to our job on the Monday. The foreman was furious because we hadn't told him. But he and the owners respected Brian and didn't want any action from the union.

So we settled back into replacing the mastic in the roofs of the three Housing Commission buildings in Surry Hills, known as Poets Corner. They'd leaked for years, and now had finally got to the top of the Commission's maintenance list.

A couple of weeks later at the daily afternoon meeting, Bob Pringle, the President said that they wanted me to go up the crane again. I said I'd already been up once. Bob answered that they needed someone who knew the way up. Reluctantly I said OK. So on the very early morning of the 6th November, we went up again. This time we had crane drivers, dogmen, labourers and a pair of boltcutters. There were four on the Broadway crane and three on the tower crane.

We were much better prepared. We had sleeping bags, a gas stove and a means of getting supplies. The press loved it. TV interviews, the front page of the Herald, and heaps of union members showing support. And the view was fantastic.

## Protest at the top

Builders' labourers occupied 150 cranes at the NSW Institute of Technology building site in Broadway yesterday with supplies of food, drink and blankets to last them a week.

The site has become a focal point in a dispute between the militant NSW branch of the Builders Labourers' Federation and interstate officials who have set up a Federal office at the site in Sydney.

The Federal secretary on the scene, Mr Peter Gallagher said yesterday that the action taken by the NSW branch members was endangering the lives of other workers on the site who were not involved.

The secret, say all the NSW branch, Mr Joe Owens said the five labourers and the two crane drivers would stay up until the company asked to let work proceed.

Mr Justice Stutchey ruled in the State Industrial Commission last week that 10 members of the NSW branch be reinstated on the site. The men refused to join the Federal union and were dismissed on December 18, Mr Owens said.

He said under the rules of the State branch, three months' notice was necessary before a member could resign and join the Federal body.

The men on the cranes would be replaced on a roster basis next Monday, he added.

At the foot of the cranes other members of the Builders Labourers' Federation and the crane drivers' union held a "peaceful demonstration of solidarity" with the men on top.

They voted unanimously to stay on the site and support the cranes, said

The NSW president of the Builders Labourers' Federation, Mr Bob Pringle, keeps in touch by radio.

lots will get  
Landslide for Democrats

interviews, the front page of the Herald, and heaps of union members showing support. And the view was fantastic.

We had a lot of fun playing games with the cops. To get supplies, the dogman would go down in the box and hover just above their outstretched hands. I would be standing on the platform next to where the crane driver was sitting, giving him directions. He would slowly swing the box around with the cops chasing it. Then at a signal from below, he would swiftly swing the box to where the people with our supplies were. They would quickly load the box and it was up and away before the cops could get to it. This was always the highlight of the day, as we would then check to see what goodies they had given us.

We now had a sheet of masonite to sleep on, and we were getting very comfy, even to the point of getting upset if our supporters woke us up too early. On the second day, we were surprised to see Deano, one of our city organisers suddenly arrive in the Broadway crane box. Although the union

executive were a little annoyed, as was the other city organiser, we were very pleased to have him up there. He would come over to visit us and we'd have lots of argument, discussions etc. He certainly brightened things up.

So things went on in a fairly regular way. By now we also had walky talkies. This was useful in giving directions to our suppliers. They also caused me to make a fool of myself, for which I'm still reminded. We'd just had the usual fun with the cops and my unit was still stitched on, when I heard someone say that the helicopters were coming. I nearly shat myself. Was this training for the SAS. I sang out to the other crane. We decided that we would make it difficult. The crane drivers raised the jibs and we started to go round and round. This would make it hard to land. Then we saw them. We waited.

They flew straight overhead and on to Garden Island. What a relief. What an idiot.

After 4 days, it was my turn to come down. Maybe it was because of the helicopters. I wasn't game to ask. Anyway I'd had a great time and it was time to return to the mastic and my relationship.



The sit in lasted 19 days. As well there were sit ins at the Prouds job next to the Hilton Hotel and a Kell & Rigby job at Rose Bay.

Except for a couple of days off the crane having a much needed shower, the Organiser stayed up there 'til the end. One of the cranes broke down and Hal Alexander went up to have a look.

Then on the 17th day, while the occupiers were asleep, one of the cranes caught fire. No one knows how it happened. Some of the people on that crane then moved to the other one. Two days later the cops came up onto the concrete slab. You'd better come down the cops said. There's a milk crate full of Molotov cocktails on the deck and we can't guarantee your safety.

So they came down. It had been a marvellous effort. We held out for another four months but with the weight of the Master Builders behind Gallagher, we were in a no win situation. Every new job started up with his Federal Tickets and that was it.

The final crane occupiers including the crane driver Bobby Chandler were all charged with trespass. The magistrate dropped charges on the Organiser, because he could have fought it on the right of entry.