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Bluey Evans and the 'Bucco Panno' a 1951 Waterfront Incident

The use by Patrick Stevedoring of 'goons' wearing balaclavas, with their Rottweilers, to evict the working waterside workers from the Swanson St. Docks, Melbourne in 1998, at the outset of the MUA dispute, was only a continuation of a policy that the precursor of this employer, operating then as James Patrick, used in by-gone years. This is a dramatic story, which tells how a waterside worker in Sydney put a halt to this practice of intimidation that is still remembered and talked of by old wharfies to this day.

As a former merchant seaman I am fully conversant with the activities of the so-called 'bucco mates'. Old sailors have recounted tales to me about the time they were carried on many British and foreign ships. These were individuals, without proper certification, who were employed by some unscrupulous shipping companies to intimidate and physically discipline seamen if they stepped out of line. The practice was commonplace in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Singling out, then assaulting those militants, or any who questioned the scandalously poor, prevailing living and working conditions. The ships of the Unilever Company early last century, running from the UK to the Niger and Belgian Congo for cargoes of palm oil, were notorious for the employ of these brutal enforcers. There is even a reference about one during the building of Isambard Brunel's 'Great Eastern' in 1861, ('The Great Iron Ship' - James Dugan P.55 Pub. - Hamish Hamilton 1953). It relates the downfall of such an individual at the hands of an irate Irish fireman.

'The Great Eastern's crew were suppressed by a tough boatswain's mate. The firemen complained loudly of the beatings and the first officer had to pay him off. The boatswain's mate sneaked back on board to get some last licks at the firemen the day before sailing. He grappled with a big Irishman. Kicking and gouging each other across the deck, the two men fell over the rail and landed 30 feet below on a scow; they continued the battle across the scow and into the Solent River. The [boatswain's] mate swam towards the ruined abbey on the bank, followed by the fireman. They were pulled out half drowned but still full of fight.'

This preamble sets the scene for an Australian Shipping and Stevedoring Company, James Patrick, who during the Depression and post WW2 years were fully engaged in the covert practice of physical intimidation of their workforce by the employment of 'bucco foremen' at their wharf sites. (The waterfront jargon for foremen in general, was 'Pannikin Boss' or 'Panno', for short.)

During the war the new left wing leadership, under the direction of their famed communist general secretary, Jim Healy, transformed the Waterside Workers Federation into a militant force prosecuting worker's rights that had become very diminished during the 1930s Depression. Sustaining the nation's war effort saw the depleted work force, mainly older men, doing twenty-four hour shifts to keep the cargoes and the ships moving during those perilous years. At war's end the Federation demanded an end to the degrading conditions under which work, on the Sydney waterfront, was conducted. The hiring of labour at the wharf gate was terminated, as was the 'bull system', with all its concomitant abuses and corruption, where compliant and subservient employees were given work preference. Substituted in its stead was a roster system, conducted at a 'Pick-Up' centre each morning and the work apportioned fairly. Gone were the days of the wharf workers walking the 'Hungry Mile' (lower Sussex St.) each day and every day and hanging around outside the gates all day, in the hope that they would be chosen for a few hours work. The roster system saw workers organised into gangs, which comprised a set number of workers, some of whom worked aboard ship down the hatch stowing or unloading cargo, winch drivers and a signaller on the ship's deck, and others working on the wharf and in the adjoining shed. Usually the wharf work was confined to the older men who were known as 'veterans'. In the forties and fifties, all work was executed by ship's gear. There were no wharf cranes. The gangs were numbered and the members of each gang worked together, going to the various jobs as a group. When a ship berthed, a set number of gangs were engaged for the discharge, corresponding to the number of cargo hatches on each ship. Some wharfie's worked independently and were known as 'floaters'. They fitted into the gangs where illness or injury created a vacancy.

When the war ended thousands of servicemen were demobilised and soon found their way back into industry. The world experienced a boom time as the ravages and shortages of war were repaired and replaced. Shipping, being at the forefront of transportation burgeoned, as did the waterfront labour force. In 1951 some 7000 waterside workers were employed on the Sydney waterfront. This was prior

to the era of containerisation that witnessed the decimation of waterfront jobs. In the 1950s as many as 80% of the Sydney work force were ex servicemen. They were a much more militant group than pre-war, as the great struggle against world fascism had released more assertiveness and expectation, and being recipients of war time propaganda, which foretold of a better and fairer world, they, in the main, demanded that this should happen. All were loath to return to the pre war world of deprivation and poverty. They elected communist and militants to the leadership of the trade unions to achieve this.

Bluey Evans

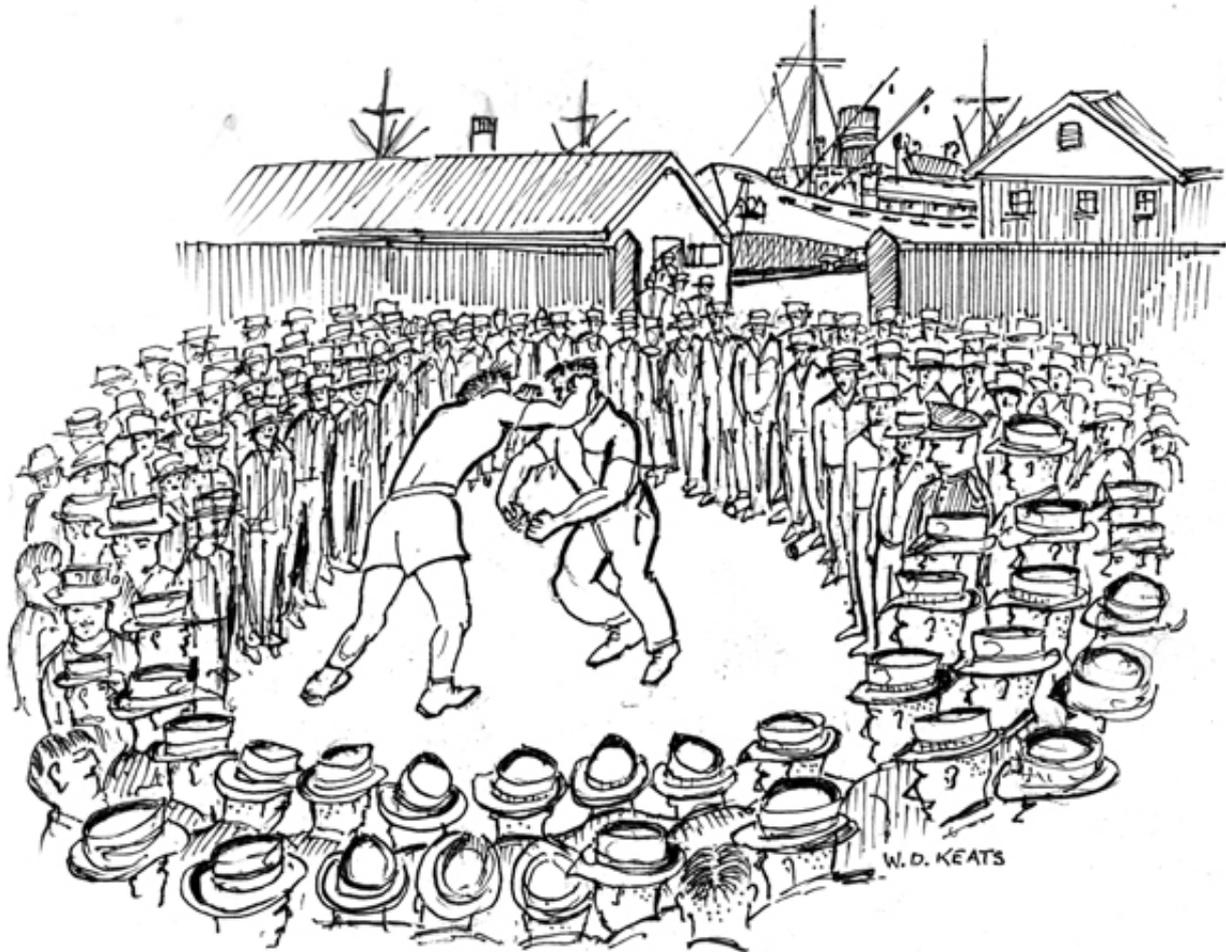
Ron (Bluey) Evans was one of these returned men. He had joined the Federation and had been working on the Sydney waterfront for two years. In his mid twenties he was a veteran of the battle for Milne Bay where the Japanese suffered their first land defeat at the hands of the Australians. He had been injured and repatriated to Australia where he had spent time in the Concord hospital. Three other brothers, saw war service overseas. One as a Japanese POW on the Burma railway. He came from a working class family. Reared in the N.S.W. rail junction town of Werris Creek, his father was an engine driver in steam. By nature Bluey was a typical Australian of those times with a larrikin spirit, quick-witted and humorous, he was well liked by his work mates. His work gang was comprised of young men in his own mould; most were ex-soldiers such as he, whose politics were decidedly left wing. Bluey had gravitated towards the Federation leadership and the Communist Party.



On the eventful day in 1951 when Bluey's path crossed that of 'Panno' Jack Sykes, his gang was engaged to work at Walsh Bay aboard a Blue Funnel ship and to discharge the cargo it brought. James Patrick was the stevedoring company who employed the labour and controlled the cargo's discharge. Bluey's ebullient manner soon fell foul of the foreman. Sykes and his siblings had been reared at the Rocks, the old historic urban area which encompassed the hill above Walsh Bay. They were a tough family, reared in one of the toughest precincts of Sydney, The Rocks and its environs had been the home of the ill famous 'Pushes', the street gangs that had infested its streets in the early century. Born in this milieu, Jackie Sykes was known as a hard character and as one of Sydney's toughest street fighters. This ability, and his aggressive 'stand-over' attitude, soon brought him to the notice and into the employ of the stevedoring company, James Patrick, who had a policy of employing these bullies. They were used to enforce unpalatable conditions, or to weed out any recalcitrant or militant employee. The victims would be singled out, harangued and goaded and finally provoked and bashed. The consent of his employers to act in this way was unspoken and covert but understood and was affected by Sykes with alacrity. Selecting, then baiting his victims with abuse and inveigling them into combat. A situation through skill and experience he was very well equipped to handle. He was not averse to administering a kicking to an opponent who had succumbed and fallen too quickly to his initial onslaught. So as Bluey's gang commenced their work, Sykes the foreman, was paying them attention as he knew of this gang's militant reputation. It was only a question of time before Bluey himself was receiving very close scrutiny. His witticisms, banter and obvious popularity among his mates made him an obvious target. More so, when Sykes observed him selling the communist weekly newspaper, Tribune, to other wharfies. After which he set out with purposeful intent to denigrate and provoke Bluey. Each day he would make it his business to have a verbal joust with him, which was quite unproductive because of Bluey's quick wit and mastery of repartee. As the week wore on the exchanges had degenerated to abuse, his voice grew louder. The abuse became taunts, which was his well-tested method to provoke a scapegoat into retaliation enabling him to use his superior pugilistic skill. This was done in front of the victim's mates and always had a salutary effect. He would later claim that he had been attacked first which would bring further punishment from the Stevedoring Commission, often by the banishment of the victim from the industry.

His abuse towards Bluey had reached depths of derision as the working week ended but Bluey had resisted the provocation. Sykes then interpreted Bluey's conduct as being submissive. The practice was at the end of shift for the workers to line up and hand in their medallions at the gate. Each medallion contained a number that was given to each at the commencement of the job. The wharfie removed it from the board at the commencement of the workday and replaced it when the shift was completed. In this way the wages clerk knew how many men and who were employed, on the one job. On the

Friday of the incident, a long line of wharfies queued to replace their medals and as Bluey waited his turn in the line, Sykes stood near him mouthing insults. Calling him a 'dog' which in the vernacular of criminals means a coward, and savouring the response his verbal comments were having on the assembled workers at Bluey's expense.



During the week Bluey was wide awake to what was involved as he had met these bullies before, but he was also cognizant of the fact that if he became involved in a tussle with Sykes during working hours he could face the disciplinary action of the Stevedoring Commission, which oversaw the operation of labour on the waterfront and even be excluded from the industry. So he ignored the foremen's mouthing. However when Bluey reached the door of the company's office he made a loud formal verbal complaint of Sykes's conduct to the wharf Superintendent. He then picked up his gladstone bag, which every wharfie carried and walked through the wharf gates and outside onto the public road where he turned around and faced Sykes dropping the bag and beckoning for Sykes to come out onto the public place. On witnessing this, mighty roar went up from the two hundred workers who had lined up to clock off work. The seasoned street fighter, Sykes, completely underestimating his adversary because of his earlier passive response to his jibes, rushed out to do combat with this upstart. Bluey, sensing that this would occur nimbly stepped aside and hit him with heavy punches with both his left and right fists. The momentum of Sykes's charge gave added effect to the blows. It was then thaffae suddenly realised that he had a major battle on his hands and brought into effect every pugilistic stratagem he had ever learnt and used. However, as the minutes passed it became evident that the speed of his younger opponent's reflexes was superior and unable to use his dirty tricks in front of so many witnesses, he started to make mistakes and received some heavy punishment in return. By this time hundreds of wharfies had gathered around the combatants as the workers from the other ships at Walsh Bay knocked off and rushed to witness this epic fistfight. Some six hundred crowded around the fighters, most hopefully to witness the downfall of a feared 'stand-over man'. Sykes rallied with flurries of wild punches some of which struck home, but as the fight progressed it was becoming apparent to those looking on that he was starting to face defeat.

The Patrick's wharf superintendent, seeing the way the contest was developing into the defeat of his henchman, rang for the police and three carloads of police arrived. As they moved to break up the fight a cry went up from the hundreds of on lookers, 'This is fair go/leave them alone!!' So insistent and threatening did this appear to the police that they hesitated and stood back. The tremendous physical effort that each combatant had expended was now beginning to show, but as Sykes was the older man

and was not used to his clashes lasting anywhere near the duration of this encounter, it was evident from the gasps that came from his bloodied mouth that his reserves of strength were fast being depleted. It was then that he fell to his knees. Bluey waited for him to regain his feet then knocked him down again. An old watchman called out to Bluey to 'Give him another one for he had been knocking down old men for years!!' Bluey obliged and Sykes went down again. By this time Bluey had worked himself up into such an aggressive state that he knelt down beside his opponent in readiness to continue the bout. A policeman walked over and put his hand on Bluey's shoulder. 'Let him up mate he's had enough!!'

It had been a brutal encounter but its aftermath had repercussions right around the waterfront. Word of Sykes's defeat at the hands of an unknown, spread like wild fire. There was little sympathy for Sykes and his defeat had a profound and lasting effect in halting the behaviour of his ilk on the Sydney waterfront. Bluey quickly became known as the man who had beaten Sykes and his appearance anywhere caused curiosity and compliment. Both combatants were summoned to report before the officials of the Commission. The Union fully backed Bluey after gathering evidence from those who were witness to events leading up to the fight and knowing of the foreman's bad reputation. Sykes was suspended from the Industry for six months and Bluey resumed his place in his gang and went to work as usual.

At this time, (2005), when a reactionary, conservative Federal Government attempts to turn the industrial relations clock back a century, it is well to remember those workers who fought literally to erase contemptible work practices. Without vigilance, unscrupulous employers who still abound in conditions of rampant capitalism could easily revisit these unsavoury practices.