

Obituaries

Bernie Neville 1938-2022

by Ian Curr

Bernie Neville

born 24/10/1938, died 10/09/2022

Bernie Neville grew up in Leeds in England during World War II and had good working class ethics from an early age. He was a trained cutter of men's suits and remembered fondly his Jewish employer who was so impressed by his skills that he paid Bernie an adult wage while still a minor. This helped Bernie's family as his father died young as a result of harrowing experiences at Dunkirk during the war.

With his wife Mavis, Bernie migrated to Christchurch in New Zealand and worked in the clothing industry. Looking for sunnier climes, Bernie and Mavis came to Brisbane in the 1970s. Bernie learnt a new trade as a cable joiner in the electricity distribution and supply industry in South East Queensland ending up being employed by South East Queensland Electricity Board (SEQEB).



*Bernie Neville (2007)
photo by David Jackmanson*

As a union activist, Bernie did not sit on the sidelines as a commentator but endeavoured to fix things in a practical way. This won him many allies and staunch supporters including his much loved wife, Mavis (May) who sadly passed away in the 1990s. May was out there helping Bernie poster up with a glue pot in hand during the 1985 SEQEB dis-

pute where over a thousand workers, including Bernie, were sacked by the Bjelke-Petersen government.

Bernie led the Electrical Trades Union rank-and-file strike committee during the SEQEB dispute (1985-86). In the end, all that Bernie and SEQEB workers wanted was their jobs back, with their superannuation and long service entitlements intact.

Bernie got neither. Along with a number of other underground workers (cable jointers), Bernie was black banned by his employer. Underground and cable jointing work is highly dangerous because of the high voltages of electricity involved. Doing this work, Bernie was thrown across a basement room in Q1 building on the Gold Coast by thousands of volts of electric current. There had been a breach of health and safety rules by a contractor that caused Bernie to be injured.

Some days during the SEQEB dispute, Bernie believed that he would not make it home at night...so brutal were the personal and physical attacks launched against him. Death threats were made to both Bernie and his family. Senior figures in politics attempted to bribe him to stay out of the dispute. But Bernie stood

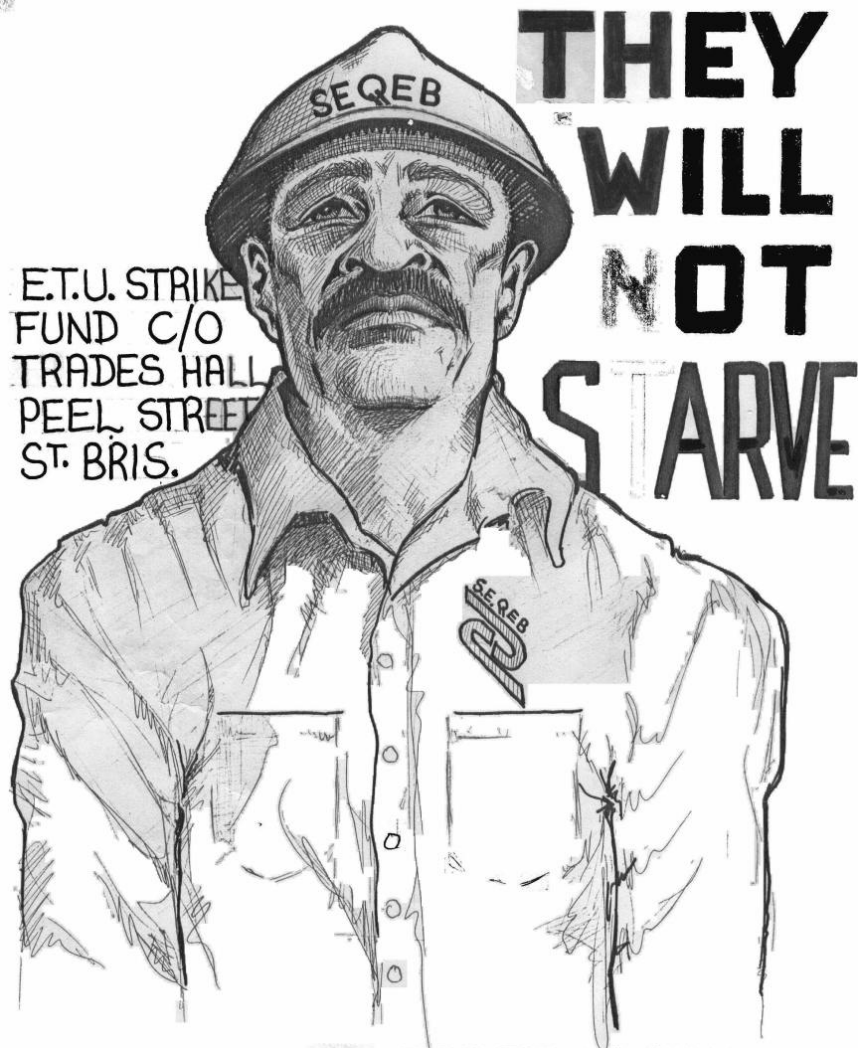
firm. More has to be said about this, but not now.

Bernie was very clever. He formed a great partnership with Phil Perrier who had a talent for depicting on posters what Bernie said in words.

Both Bernie's sons supported him from when they were young. At the height of the SEQEB dispute, his son Michael, still in primary school, locked two scabs in a tunnel only to be brought home by two coppers. Bernie's response was to say: "Good onya, son" and, in the same breath, told the police to "F*** off" slamming the door in their faces.

I first met Bernie in a police van. It was June 1985. We had both been arrested outside the executive building of the Queensland government. Bernie found my arrest to be comical. In the police van with us was Tony O'Gorman, brother of civil liberties lawyer, Terry O'Gorman, and of former police union secretary, John O'Gorman.

Bernie saw me crash tackled from behind by two police officers, Walsh and Monley, as I was holding a red banner with the words "Joh Must Go!" painted in yellow... the slogan of the street march campaign from 1977 till 1979.



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Poster by Phil Perrier c/o workersbushtelegraph.com.au

What Bernie found so funny was, after Walsh executed the flying tackle we hit the pavement together and became rolled up in the banner, end over end, right up to the door of the Lands Office hotel. Both Walsh and Monley lost their caps in the melee.

From that day forward Bernie and I had an unspoken agreement that we would endeavour to make the bastards who were responsible pay for what they did to ordinary workers in Queensland and elsewhere. I know that Bernie lived up to his side of that pact that bound us. I can only hope that I can live up to my side of the bargain.

After the dispute was lost Bernie was forced to take up contract work. He was black banned from employment with SEQEB and never received his proper entitlements of superannuation and long service etc.

One of those contracts was to lay electric cable on the soon to be opened refugee detention centre on Christmas Island. Bernie was curious about the nature of this project which he initially thought may have been the building of both a refugee centre and later a military compound. He wanted to get his hands

on the plans so he asked a supervisor to see the plans for the entire facility. When challenged as to why, Bernie said that he could not lay the cables properly without an understanding of the entire complex. Bernie described to me of how he looked over the new compound from a distance. He was challenged by a federal police officer but Bernie did his best to hide his curiosity. Given reluctantly, Bernie received a hard drive containing the complete plans to Christmas Island. The plans showed a nursery for babies where they would be separated from their parents in a compound behind locked electric controlled doors. On his return to mainland Australia, Bernie made sure that these plans were exposed and senior politicians were asked questions about the purpose of confining babies in a separate nursery.

These plans were shelved. It was Bernie's curiosity and determination to expose the truth about Christmas Island that had helped prevent this from happening.

In recent years Bernie campaigned tirelessly for the West End community house at AHIMSA and for people who were taken advantage of by the Public Trustee. Bernie and Maggie could be seen on a stall at

the West End markets for weeks on end getting 600 signatures for a petition to the Queensland Parliament to save AHIMSA house and exposing the Public Trustee's role in its demise and the abduction and locking up of its former owner, Ross Taylor. Bernie was Ross's power of attorney and tried desperately to have him returned to his family home on Mains Road, Sunnybank.

The campaign "You can not trust the public trustee" became a national campaign to correct the abuse of elders and vulnerable people in the community at the hands of the public trustee. A committee formed to build the campaign with a lot of grass roots organisation that eventually attracted the attention of the mainstream media including the ABC's Four Corners program. Bernie was an active participant in a group led by Roslyn Mirciov exposing maladministration and corruption by corporate bodies set up to self-fund what should be a free public service, the making of a will by the poor and the vulnerable. Instead the Queensland Public Trustee exploits the free will service to extract fees from the estates of ordinary people.

Vale Bernie, I will miss your good humour and humanity greatly.

Under this globalised capitalist system, everyone pays a price. Bernie and his family were no exception. My condolences to his two sons, Brent and Michael, and their families. My condolences also to Bernie's friends and comrades.

Ian Curr is a lifelong union member. He was sacked from the Commonwealth Public Service after 21 years for organising against the introduction of contract labour in Australian Taxation Office call centres.

Curr was an activist in Queensland's democratic rights struggles in the 1970s and 80s.

He has been a member of the Technical and Laboratory Assistants Association, the UQ Student Union, the AWU, the Australian Clerical Officers Association and Commonwealth Public Sector Union, and the NTEU.

He is still active and helps organise the Big Ride for Palestine (Australia) in active partnership with APHEDA (Union Aid Abroad). He is a long-term member of LeftPress Printing Society and is editor of Workers BushTelegraph - a website dedicated to workers control and the abolition of private property.

This article originally appeared on Ian's website at: <https://workers-bushtelegraph.com.au/2022/09/11/vale-bernie-neville/>

It has been edited for this publication