



## BLUE MOUNTAINS UNIONS & COMMUNITY

### ANNUAL REPORT 2019-20

Drought. Fire. Floods. Pandemic.

In the 25 year\* history of the BMUC our community has never experienced a 12 months like it. Trade unionists have often been in the front line - working in Fire & Rescue, hospitals, aged care, public transport, and schools. It's been stressful, potentially dangerous work and there's no immediate end in sight. I'd like to place on the public record our appreciation for their magnificent contribution to our community.

As with every voluntary organisation in the Blue Mountains the lock down presented us with challenges - things we once took for granted like holding monthly members' meetings or staging Politics in the Pub – in the pub - became impossible.

**COMMUNITY RADIO:** They say that in a crisis people turn to the radio. Fortunately, BMUC had already established a presence on Radio Blue Mountains 89.1FM but it's fair to say that during the pandemic our weekly show - *Rights, Rorts & Rants* (Fridays 4-6pm on Radio Blue Mountains 89.1 FM or livestreamed on [rbm.org.au](http://rbm.org.au)) gave us a lifeline.

Programs reflected the challenges of our times - shocking examples of wage theft by some of the biggest brand names in Australia; the lessons of the catastrophic bushfire season; human induced climate change; exploitation of foreign workers; the millions of Australians who missed out on JobSeeker and Job Keeper - especially in the mountains' biggest industry - tourism and hospitality. Our program makers gave voice to community campaigners concerned about a range of environmental issues - including the future of Katoomba Airfield, Warragamba Dam and plans for the Great Western Highway at Blackheath. We've also investigated the complexities of 5G.

All members are encouraged to contribute and it's a good sign for the future that some of the most stimulating pieces have been produced by our youngest member - a 16-year-old student, James Dawes, whose knowledge of US politics is truly impressive. Many have taken part, but for all their work keeping the show on air I'd particularly like to thank Fran Dyson, Debra Smith and Merran McLaren.

**MUSIC:** An important part of the program is showcasing the work of local musicians. We may be the City of the Arts but it's not always easy for musos to find a place to perform. Before the Covid 19 struck we were able to stage for the second year running a music event for activists at Blackburns Family Hotel. The entrants for this year's *Sing It! Say It!* contest showed the range of talent in the Blue Mountains - and the audience of all ages that turned out on the night loved it. Many thanks to the Health Services Union and the Media,

Entertainment and Arts Alliance for putting up the prizes of \$500 each, contributing to prizes to local bands of \$500 for Blumedsay, \$300 to Safire Palms and \$200 to Tigermoth. Since then our Music Director Fran Dyson has kept the spirit of ***Sing It! Say It!*** alive by arranging for performers from that night to play at The Family. Once Social Distancing rules are relaxed local musicians will again perform in the ***Live and Original*** series organised by BMUC and held monthly at The Family. This series gives the local music scene a boost by providing industry paid gigs as well as an opportunity for relatively inexperienced musicians to play to a supportive audience. Performers also promote their gigs on the radio show, adding much appreciated live content to the mix.

**BLUE MOUNTAINS AIRWATCH:** This project originated from a BMUC campaign to monitor coal dust. The 12 air pollution monitors and pod set up between Lithgow and Springwood provided invaluable information on smoke hazards during the bushfires. Residents were able to go online and get near real time pollution readings - an important service given the known health risks of bushfire smoke. It's been estimated that over 400 people died across Australia during the last fire season. BMUC joined with Blue Mountains Conservation Society, Lithgow Environment Group, Doctors for the Environment, BMCC and Lithgow Councils appealing to the State Government to extend Blue Mountains Air Watch for five years. When the EPA said that the air monitors would be removed this year over 500 residents signed a petition in support of their retention, which the Member for the Blue Mountains is to table in Parliament. In a later development BMUC member had a chance meeting with Environment Minister Matt Kean while on a bush walk. Mr. Kean promised to consider our request and talk it through with our local member Trish Doyle. Many thanks to Trish for her backing on this issue.

**EXPLOITATION OF FOREIGN WORKERS:** BMUC joined calls for an investigation into allegations of alarming work practices at the Escarpment group of luxury hotels in the Blue Mountains. These allegations made in a series of reports in the SMH and Sun Herald are under investigation by the Department of Home Affairs and the Fair Work Ombudsman - we've yet to hear the outcome.

**POLITICS IN THE PUB:** Before the lock down we were able to stage two ***Politics in the Pub*** events - examining the ever contentious issue of Fair Trade and the never ending War on the Poor where we called for a raise to the rate of Newstart.

**CLIMATE CHANGE RALLIES:** Pre pandemic BMUC members joined other community activists at well attended climate change rallies at Springwood and Blackheath - the latter event organised by Macquarie Electorate Students Action.

**BLACK LIVES MATTER RALLY:** Our members also gave support to a Black Lives Matter rally in Katoomba.

**SUBMISSION ON THE ENSURING INTEGRITY BILL:** We joined many other unionists around the country who saw this bill as a fundamental attack on trade unionism. We sent a detailed submission to Cross Bench Senators. Earlier this year the Federal Government withdrew the Bill.

**ATTACKS ON THE ABC:** Following the loss of one thousand jobs in ten years the Federal Government has continued to reduce funding for the national broadcaster and in June it was announced that another 250 plus jobs are to go, along with major programming cuts including the flagship 7.45 am Radio News Bulletin. BMUC has campaigned for funding and programming to be restored in the interests of democracy at a time when surveys show that more Australians trust the ABC above all other media, and when our own community relied on the ABC for accurate information during our emergencies.

**BUSHFIRE INQUIRY:** Two members gave evidence to the NSW Government's bushfire inquiry - pressing the case for the Blue Mountains Air Watch project, and the need for much greater resources for fire-fighters in future.

**ON THE WEB:** Our blog, website, membership applications, social media, podcasts and YouTube channel can all be accessed via one easy link: [lead.me/bmuc](https://lead.me/bmuc).

**BLUE MOUNTAINS BLOG:** For yet another year Mark Gregory's Blog has tracked important stories in politics and industrial relations – the blog is viewed about 4000 times per month and since its creation has been viewed 479,234 times.

**SOCIAL MEDIA:** We have two Facebook pages, one for Blue Mountains Unions & Community with 728 followers and a much newer one for our radio show Rights, Rorts and Rants with 81 followers. We also have a Twitter account with 2192 followers.

**PODCASTS:** We've recently started publishing material from *Rights, Rorts and Rants* as podcasts. You can listen to them via Spotify, iTunes, Anchor, Overcast, Radio Public, Google Podcasts, Breaker and Pocket Casts.

**SOCIAL LIFE:** Many thanks to Merran McLaren for opening up her home for what was a great end of year party.

**MCRN:** We would like to acknowledge the support of MCRN.

**THANKS TO:** The Family Hotel for again giving the BMUC a warm welcome and great support throughout the year; the BMUC Executive: Paul Wray, Susan Lammiman, Bruce Cornwell, Norm Short, Peter Lammiman, Fran Dyson and especially our Secretary Deb Smith, who does so much in so many ways to keep us going.

**THE YEAR AHEAD:** We hear a lot these days about "the new normal". At the time of writing nobody really knows what that will really be. For example, will Blue Mountains workers currently working at home be allowed to continue to do so after the pandemic? What

agreements are in place for working at home? The biggest private employers in the mountains - hospitality and tourism - have been among the hardest hit by the pandemic - when will those stood down get their jobs back?

I'll end on a positive note: A recent poll found that three out of four Australians believe unions provide essential services to ensure members are paid properly, have a strong and safe working environment, and provide a strong collective voice. It's time to belong to a union.

In Solidarity

Kerry Cooke

President

Blue Mountains Unions & Community

(Blue Mountains Union Council Inc)

June 2020

\* Although we know that BMUC was definitely founded in the 1980's, the exact date is lost in the mists of the mountains.