

Kevin Cook

From building sites to Aboriginal education

Kevin Cook was for many years General Director of the cooperative that ran Tranby Aboriginal College in Sydney.

This is a lightly edited transcript of an interview Kevin did with Hal Alexander and Russ Hermann in February 2001.

Q I want to ask some questions about early days and about your work in the unions and other questions about Tranby. How did you come to Sydney—and from where—and what were your first impressions?

KC I come to Sydney from Wollongong and I got a job at the paper mills as an ironworker. I'd been working in the steelworks in Port Kembla under the Ironworkers [union]. I didn't like the hierarchy of the Ironworkers. It was right-wing. Never did anything for us down in Wollongong. And we had a few strikes at the paper mill, and they never did anything for us in Sydney.

Q You finally ended up working in the

building industry. How did that come about?

KC Well I worked with a guy called Roy Bishop. We used to get one another jobs. We used to work on shut-downs, mostly. And if he knew of a shut-down and he'd got a job there, he'd try and get me in—or vice-versa. I was working at Tumut at the time and he rang me up and said that he'd got me a fantastic job. And so I snatched it straight away, come back down to Sydney, and lo and behold he'd got me a job as a dogman.¹ And the only time I'd seen dogmen is when I drove past and seen 'em clinging on to loads and going up six or seven stories and...

Q How did you feel the first time you went up?

KC (laughs) Well, I went up on a—you're not supposed to do it—on a concrete kibble.² And when I landed up at the top, you could see my fingerprints on the steel kibble. That's how much I thought about it. And I was heading down the stairs goin' home. But they talked me into staying. So—yeah, that's how I got...

Q But you got used to heights...

KC I didn't mind the heights so much as I got used to riding the loads. And that was pretty dangerous at the time.

Q And you became part of the rank and file movement in the Builders Labourers Federation?

KC Yeah. The rank and file—when we were dogmen, it was a job where you could do things. You had control of the crane. If you didn't lift and didn't put things where they wanted it to go, well it'd hold up the job, and you were a pretty important cog in the wheel. And the dogmen, on a whole, were pretty strong. And at that time they had a dispute on with the builders. When there wasn't any work for the dogmen, what we'd do was

1 A dogman: A worker who rides with the load being lifted by a crane.

2 A kibble: Steel container filled with wet concrete being lifted by a crane.

clean the crane down and work in and around the crane. What the builders wanted us to do was to be brickies' labourers and do other work, taking away the right of another person to have that job. So we refused. And both Roy and I got the sack three times in three months for doing exactly the same thing. That was refusing to do other work. So the other crane—the other dogmen—supported us and we got on fairly well with a lot of the other dogmen. And then Roy went and became an organiser and not long after that I became an organiser of the BLF, the union.

Q What do you think about the relationship between the leadership of the union over that period, and the rank and file?

KC Well the leadership and the members of the union were one and the same. We had as much say as the president of the union. As I saw it from where I was sitting, we dictated the disputes that we'd get into. We dictated what was going on in the union. And even to have a sit-down and talk with the secretary of the union, Munday, or the president, Bobby Pringle, was like a breath of fresh air—where in the Ironworkers, you didn't even see the organisers. In the steelworks we were on strike for three days, and we called out the organiser—it took him three days to get out. And he come out and said, get back to work. So we stoned him. He went to the boss first, came out to us and said get back to work. So we stoned him and stayed off another couple of days, never saw anybody else and we went back to work.

Q What do you think about the position of the unions in relation to Aboriginal struggles over the years. Do you think that the unions have played a useful and helpful role?

KC I was involved a lot within the Builders Labourers Union. Anything to do with Aboriginal issues came to Bobby Pringle and me. And then Bobby Pringle said, look, you handle it. And so—the Builders Labourers Union played a very good role of supporting Aboriginal issues. As did the Wharfies, the Seamen, the BWIU then, Metalworkers, Teachers Federation

and a lot more unions: the Missos,³ at a later stage the Public Sector Unions, and there's the Nurses' Unions. And there's a heap of unions that you wouldn't think that would get involved, which were involved. And were involved in a supportive way. They didn't come up and say, look, this is how you should run this dispute, they said, look, if you get into any trouble, you should have a look at doing things differently. But not telling you what to do. So it was really good. The Land Rights dispute which I was involved with since 1977 til it went through in 1983—we had huge support from unions, church groups, and a lot of individual people supported Aboriginal people over that period of time. And only for the people supporting us, and the unions, we wouldn't have got to first base. And we had a Labor Government in power then; Wran was in power.

Q Where were you when the '72 Aboriginal Embassy was busted?

KC I was in Sydney. But the following weekend thousands of people from all over the country went down. We had buses from Sydney. We organised buses. The union movement played a role there and paid for buses.

Q I remember seeing you in 1982, walking out of the Watch House in Brisbane after being arrested at one of the quite heavy demonstrations held in connection with the Commonwealth Games at the time.

KC Yeah. I went up there and—I was a bagman. Both Gary Foley and myself. We worked for an organisation that gave us money to take up there. And we were supposed to bail the people out who got arrested. And we weren't supposed to be arrested on that occasion. But we all sat down and they started arresting people. They came up and asked people to get off the street or they'd arrest them. And we watched the coppers

3 In order: the Waterside Workers Federation; the Seamen's Union of Australia; the Building Workers Industrial Union (which at the time mostly covered trades workers, rather than labourers); Amalgamated Metal Workers Union. Missos: Federated Miscellaneous Workers Union. All these have since amalgamated into larger unions.

come down and bundle people into the back of the police wagons. I didn't see Foley get arrested, and the copper come up to me and he said, git up, get off the effin' road. And that's the first time I ever heard a copper say 'fuck' (laughs). And I was taken back and I told him to get fucked. So he threw me in the back of the wagon—from about thirty foot away. When we went to get charged the sergeant behind the desk was counting all this money. And when he finished I looked him straight in the eye and I said, I think there's a bit more there. So he went really red in the face. He started counting it again, and when he got to the end, I said, that's right. I wasn't going to trust me luck—asking him to count it again.

But yeah, that dispute was very well organised. The people who were organising on the ground—the Aboriginal people from Brisbane, and there was a few other people from other states but mostly from Brisbane, or Queensland, they organised it—no violence—when the arrests were made there was no violence by us. They were very well disciplined. And it got the publicity that we wanted and we were in the back of the van and we could hear whoever was in charge of the police operations was saying to the coppers, you done a fantastic job. We watched it on TV—you done a fantastic job. There was no violence, etc etc, and he was praising the coppers. And—but it wasn't the coppers, it was the Aboriginal people who got arrested that day—there was no sign of violence. There was a few niggles and that but they got into the wagons and off they went.

Q So, you've also been in many other demonstrative actions, as well as all kinds of other work. What do you think about all that now. Do you think that it's wise to pull the coppers on, or do you think people went too far?

KC I looked at my involvement with the Builders Labourers as a very good training ground. You know, we had the green bans, and especially the Rocks,⁴ where people got arrested and the police used a lot of force.

4 The Rocks is an old and tiny suburb of Sydney, on the south of the harbour around

Victoria Street,⁵ where there were some heavy people running around Victoria Street and wanting to loosen a few people up. But once again it was very well disciplined. And I think that's the key, you have to be disciplined. And I think the marches where the coppers might like to get in and have a bit of a go now and again, just to keep them in practice, but it's the governments, like Askin, 'run over the bastards.' It's the governments who can say yay or nay to the coppers doing what they like. So it's not actually the coppers. They're doing a job for their bosses. They don't have to do it so violently, but they're doing their job. And I think that you have to have a go. It was a very small union, but it got the backing of the people, and that was the main thing. It got the backing of the people. That's why it was so good.

Q I remember one demonstration in the early 90s I think it was of another kind, that is, in which there were differences of opinion in the Aboriginal movement about proposals arising from the then Labor government's Green Paper. And the proposal to allocate a certain—whatever it was, five or seven per cent—of land taxes to Aboriginal Affairs. Looking back on all that, what do you think about that situation at that time, and whether it was good or bad—or useful?

KC You'll always have difference of opinion within your groups. Some people wanna go this way; some people wanna go that way. And that's right. Like you can't have it all one-way traffic. There has to be a few disputes between the different people and coming from New South Wales, we were a diverse Aboriginal population. You go fifty miles down the coast and their issues are a lot different to the issues in Sydney. So it's good. But the thing is that in the end we might go different roads, but

the approaches to the Sydney Harbour Bridge. It was threatened with redevelopment in the early 1970s.

5 Victoria St, Kings Cross, was a poor, close-knit, inner-suburban community threatened with redevelopment in the early 1970s. The stories of both these struggles are told in Meredith Burgmann and Verity Burgmann's book, *Green Bans, Red Union: Environmental activism and the New South Wales Builders Labourers' Federation* (1998).

we're wanting the same thing at the end. And you get angry with one another at different times, but that's all right. And I think that in the end people get together on the main issues. Land Rights was one. I think that you see people now have land that never would have owned land, only for the Land Rights Act.

You see people who have got cattle stations and all different other industries that they've built up since 1983, that they never would've been able to get into, only for the Land Rights Act. So, the battles were long and hard-fought, but I think that it's paved the way for development. But the Land Rights Act was never, ever gonna fix everything up. Same as the Land Rights Act in any other state was not gonna fix everything up. But it does go a little way to giving people some self-confidence, self-respect—ownership. Ownership of land is a very big thing in Australia. You could be the world's worst person and own large areas of land and command heaps and heaps of respect. That's the status of owning land. And I can't see why people were scared of Aboriginal people owning land. Everybody else in Australia owns land, so why not Aboriginal people.

Q Aboriginal people owned it all, once.

KC Yeah. We're only getting a little—a tiny, tiny bit back and they still—the governments haven't paid yet, in full.

Q Well Kevin, you've led a very active life to come to the attention of various forces throughout — within the state — particularly the secret police, the Special Branch, and even more so, ASIO. What is your view about that kind of thing in general, and do you know of any specific instances of ASIO agents interfering in the affairs of the Aboriginal people?

KC We didn't worry about ASIO or anything like that, because everything we did was very open. We had open meetings and everybody knew what we were doing. We knew that ASIO would be there. Since then I've read people's dossiers and how they tapped people's lines and

said that this person gave all the names of people that were at meetings. But no, it didn't worry me. And I don't think it worried any of the Aboriginal people. Because we were up front. And the other thing that we used to laugh about, was people saying, and especially ASIO or people like that, were looking for white people who were behind the Aboriginal people telling them what to do. And we used to laugh and say, that's great. If they don't give us credit for our ability to organise—you know, while they're running around looking for somebody, then they're leaving us alone. So no, we didn't worry too much about that. In fact we used to laugh about it.

Q Well at the end of your working career—or even during it—you became associated with Tranby Aboriginal College in Glebe. Could you just give us a quick rundown on how that came about, who were the characters, what support you might have got from the labour movement—from the political parties of the labour movement—and of course from the unions—and how successful was all that?

KC Well, there was a lot of players there. Alf Clint came into the union and we had a meeting—but when he came in there was a strike, so we had to deal with the strike—and I arranged to meet him the next day. He came in again and Tranby was after money. I didn't know much about Tranby and went out to have a look at the building. I talked to Alf; I talked to Bobby Pringle, who knew more about it than I did at that particular time. We gave Tranby some money and some other unions gave them money. I forget what the issue was at that time. But I liked what I saw. He asked me to get onto the board of directors, which I did. And then right throughout there was a number of union officials and a lot of other unions who supported Tranby.

And when the BLF closed down, the NSW Branch, I was down in Wollongong fishing and Alf asked me to come up and be a student there and also to work there. So I went up there. The place has always struggled for money. And it's still struggling now. But it had some incredibly good

backing. The trade union movement, the churches, and individual people supported Tranby, but not in an organised group, like we've got now. We've got the Friends of Tranby. Tranby College is an organisation that has practised reconciliation since day one.

Q What Tranby has done, in connection with education amongst Aboriginal people is one thing, but Tranby had played some role—quite a big role—in many wider political questions in connection with American Indian people, in connection with the East Timor people, in Bougainville and in other ways. Would you like to comment about that?

KC Well when I was first there, Mal Clint had a close connection with Walter Lini⁶—they were both Anglican priests—and before Independence we had a number of people coming over from Vanuatu and they stayed at Tranby—Barak Sope,⁷ Walter Lini's sister—and our students got to know what was happening there and supported the independence struggle in Vanuatu. A lot of American Indians came and spoke at Tranby. The South African struggle: a lot of the people from the ANC, Oliver Tambo.

Q Kanaky?⁸

KC Yeah, a lot of people from Kanaky. And a couple of the people that were in Australia went home and were killed, that we knew. And that was a very sad thing. We've got a very good link with the Maori people. A lot of people from interstate find out about Tranby. They might come to Black Books, or they might have heard by word of mouth about Tranby's involvement in the different issues. So they come to Tranby and that's really good, because it gives the students a very wide view of what's happening all around the world. And we feel proud that that our small

6 Walter Lini was a leader of the Vanuatu independence movement and later prime minister.

7 Barak Sope was a leader of the Vanuatu independence movement and later prime minister.

8 Also known by its French colonial name, New Caledonia.

help helped in some way the people from Vanuatu. Zimbabwe, when they were going for independence, people came out from Zimbabwe and we knew people from that struggle. So there's a lot of other people. East Timor is the latest. And there's all the Bougainville people. While there's ever any discrimination going on in countries, Aboriginal people will fight that, because—we've got a hand from international groups as well.

Q What do you think are the major struggles that you've been involved in over the years?

KC With Tranby, there's been 1988, I think that was the biggest, and I think it showed people that Aboriginal people from all over Australia could organise themselves to be a force to be reckoned with. We had thousands upon thousands of Aboriginal people at that march.⁹ And you know, thousands upon thousands of people helped organise it.

We had a lot of non-Aboriginal support in the '88 struggle. Deaths in Custody—that started at Tranby College. The first meetings were held there. Building Bridges—that was an organisation that we set up with the Maori people in the first instance, and so that we could show the younger people our different programs and issues, using rock 'n roll bands. And we got the best non-Aboriginal bands in Australia to support us: Midnight Oil, Hunters and Collectors, Paul Kelly, Scrap Metal and—the New Zealand band, Crowded House, among others, and to get them all in the one place at the one time, and doing it for nothing, it was a huge achievement. And after—we used to have Building Bridges at Bondi Pavilion every year. And then it was taken over by an Aboriginal mob—Survival—and that's still going. Which is what we wanted it to do. The people who were organising for Building Bridges were non-Aboriginal people. And we said we had other work to do as well. And as soon as we can get an Aboriginal group to take it over, it's gone. So that went. And it's still going and it's still attracting thousands upon thousands of non-

⁹ Forty thousand mostly Aboriginal people marched behind banners saying, "We have survived", on 26 January 1988 in central Sydney.

Aboriginal people who are building up that support-group base for us.

The next struggle is gonna be the Treaty. And that's gonna go for a few years I'd imagine. And it's gonna be a lotta work. A lot of education of non-Aboriginal people. A lot of education for Aboriginal people. To find out exactly what people want in that Treaty. So it's like the struggles that have gone on before are for gaining experience, I reckon, for what's gonna happen in the future. We can organise, there's no doubt about that. And I believe that Aboriginal people are the best-organised group in Australia. And I think, too, that Tranby has led the way. And I'm not saying that other Aboriginal organisations are not doing it, because that's not right. We've got the Friends of Tranby. We've always had non-Aboriginal people supporting the organisation. One, because we started off without government funding, and we ran into the eighties without government funding. I think it shows the maturity of the organisations, to be able to work with different people. And I'm glad to see Tranby has led the way, I believe, in that field. And it'll continue to lead the way.

Q Can you talk about Tranby's survival until you got government funding in the 1980s?

KC Tranby College, from the fifties to the eighties, closed down three times for the lack of money. We didn't have enough money to pay the wages for any of the employees and we didn't have money to bring the students down and look after the students when they got here. The governments weren't interested in Aboriginal adult education. It wasn't a vote winner, so they didn't worry. And it was only the Trade Union Movement, the church groups and individual people that saw the need for education that kept Tranby going. And they didn't have very much money at all. I'd been there since the early seventies, or the mid-seventies. And — only for the Trade Union Movement, on a number of occasions, in my time, we would have been closed down.

At one stage we'd called everybody together and said, look, after next week we haven't got any money at all to pay wages. We had enough

money I think just to keep us going with the students. And a couple of the teachers, who were teaching there, who were getting very little money at the time anyway, had to get a job—I think one of them got a job teaching English as a second language. And people were going to apply for the dole and still work at Tranby, if they could. Somebody left us some money in an Estate, and it come through three days before we had to close down. Things like that. Tranby has never gotten a lot of money. But with the Friends of Tranby—that’s a fund-raising group—and they come from all sorts of backgrounds. But mostly working-class background. And they’re in there raising the money, you know, and it’s—like we shouldn’t have to do that. The government should be funding the organisation. We get incredibly good results with our students. But without people like the Friends of Tranby, without the Trade Union Movement, without the church groups, Tranby would have been closed down years ago.

Q There’s another one we forgot, and that’s TUCAR.

KC In 1975, when we were involved in an organisation called Black Defence, we were looking at different issues and one of the issues was a cattle station in North Queensland. Aboriginal people owned a cattle station up there and the next-door neighbour was a non-Aboriginal person and each year they—or when the both of them were non-Aboriginal people-owned, the cattle stations, they used to round up the cleanskins and divide ’em 50-50. When the Aboriginal people bought the cattle station, lo and behold, all the cleanskins were on the white person’s property. They used helicopters to push ’em over onto their property, they branded ’em and there was no 50-50. So Aboriginal people came down to Sydney saying look, this is what’s happening, can you do anything?

The person who owned the cattle station in the Northern Territory was the guy who owned Suttons Motors. And we had demonstrations outside his Parramatta Road car sales. Police stopped, all the traffic stopped. There was a big fuss about it. The outcome was that the cattle station paid compensation to the Aboriginal people, and also they got a

percentage of their export market. Which was incredibly good. And the bloke from Suttons Motors, he was more than generous working with the Aboriginal people after that.

The Black Defence Group saw the need, when Aboriginal people came down from all over the country, for some sort of land rights. Under the different Acts Aboriginal people weren't getting a fair go. So they decided to set up the NSW Land Council. At that meeting they decided to set up a TUCAR—Trade Union Committee for Aboriginal Rights. Where before we used to go to the different unions, and get support, this way we could have a Trade Union committee and have the organisation set up and we'd have a meeting once a month, come up with the different issues, then the delegation would go back to their unions to vote on the issues and whether they'd support or whether they wouldn't. That's been going since 1977. And since the 80s Kevin Tory's been involved in it. It's been going from strength to strength. You know, there's a lot of issues that TUCAR has gotten into like helping out with organising the '88 march. The different Aboriginal people in trade unions—or not in trade unions but in the workforce—they don't know their rights, so that TUCAR has played a role in getting them involved with their unions and getting the union to help with their disputes in the workplace. I think that's been a really positive step, because it's all right for Aboriginal people to go out into the workforce, but it's really important that they know their rights as a worker, and not to be in a job for four or five years and not getting any upgrading in the Public Service especially. And that's been happening to Aboriginal people for a long time. They've been in the same job for five or six years. And very competent people, and not been able to get up that ladder.

So I think on the whole, Tranby College has been responsible for a lot of that. A lot of the setting up of the different organisations. And I think that we can be quite proud.