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The Hilton Bombing

At 2.30 am on 13 February 1978, General Secretary McMahon received a phone call from George Hooke, City Council Industrial Officer, advising that a bomb had been detonated in a footpath receptacle when refuse was being loaded onto a garbage truck. The explosion killed two innocent garbage members, Alec Carter and William Arthur “Bluey” Favell, and severely injured the driver, Bill Ebb, when the truck was thrown forward. As a correspondent later commented in the *Sun Herald*:

The tragic event was to forever change the peaceful characteristic nature within Australia, alerting the population to the fact we were not isolated from terrorist tactics. The bomb placed in the receptacle outside the Hilton Hotel in George Street, Sydney, containing about thirty-six sticks of gelignite, was apparently aimed to cause injury or death to one or some International Delegates attending the 1978 Heads of Commonwealth Conference.¹

Sydney City Council garbage truck after the 1978 explosion



Source: *The Counsellor*, No. 2, 1978 p. 7

A usual reaction of Union members when there is a death on a job is for a strike, so the General Secretary rang Organiser Evans, instructing him to attend at the Depot at 4.00 am where garbage and cleansing members were to start work, and advise them to go to work and donate their day's pay to a fund he proposed to set up, which they did. He gave an interview on the ABC's "AM" program at 8.00 am that day, announcing an Australia-wide appeal for funds to assist families of the victims.

The fund was established for the family dependants of those who had died, and donations of from \$8,000 to \$50 were received. Another major donation was \$8,600 raised at a benefit night organised at the Revesby Workers' Club, where patrons were entertained by 25 top performers who donated their services free. During that evening there was a bomb scare at the Club, but those attending refused to take directions to leave the building, and the function continued uninterrupted until 3.00 am. The Revesby concert was followed by functions at three other inner-city clubs, raising over \$3,000. Others who donated were: the City Council, \$5,000; MEU NSW, \$3,000; MEU Victoria, \$2,000; Rooty Hill RSL Club, \$1,600; Newtown Leagues Club, \$1,100; Lady Rylah (donation of paintings), \$1,000; Labor Council of NSW, \$1,000; and City Tattersalls Club, \$1,000. In addition, there were substantial donations from Cleansing Department employees, while \$2,600 was donated directly to the widows from other Councils throughout NSW, other unions, and individual MEU members from numerous Branches. The General Secretary took up the issue with the Prime Minister, who had offered the shopkeepers in the Hilton Hotel arcade some assistance due to loss of trading. He also wrote to the Labor Council of NSW:

Dear Mr. Ducker,
Secretary Labour Council of NSW,

Delegates would be aware of the deplorable horrific act of terrorism, which occurred on February 13, 1978, which has resulted in the death of two innocent members of this Union employed by the Council of the City of Sydney.

The Union has arranged for collections from members and the public who wish to express their condemnation of such act by contribution to an appeal for financial assistance to the dependant wives and young children between 7 and 9 years of members, who were victims of the tragic bombing.

The Ironworkers' Union has responded with a generous donation of \$500 and it is requested that the Labor Council of NSW support the appeal and recommend that all affiliate unions make a substantial donation to the appeal and also request their individual members to do likewise.

This Union deplores such acts of terrorism and those who perpetrate such acts of violence by the use of explosives and terrorism to achieve their ends, and requests Labor Council of NSW to endorse such policy.

It is also requested that Labor Council of NSW endorse the Honourable Neville Wran's, Premier of NSW, Statement made in the NSW Parliament on February

14, 1978 and support this Union's view on behalf of members of the necessity for police responsible for security to be given every opportunity to obtain the maximum information from overseas as to security and surveillance measures necessary to be taken to obviate further repetition of this dreadful act of terrorism.

Also that the ACTU take up with the Fraser Government the necessity for similar liaison with overseas by Federal Police involved with such security.

It has been noted that the Fraser Government proposes to fully compensate businesses in the arcade under the Hilton Hotel for loss of trade during this week, due to closure of the arcade, and noted the Federal Government's complete disregard for the plight of the families of the victims by the callous statement that the compensation scheme will not apply to any of the victims because they would be covered by industrial Awards or other compensation schemes.

This Union considers that whilst Workers' Compensation may be assessed, and premiums charged, for normal injuries which may occur, it certainly does not account for loss of life through terrorist activities, the prime responsibility for which must rest in this instance with the Federal Government in their arrangement for such Heads of Government to attend the Government Conference in Sydney.

Accordingly it is requested that the Federal Government be advised by Labor Council that this Union considers the loss of over 25 years of future wages earning by the innocent victims and the resultant detrimental financial stringencies place on their families equates more so with the necessity for compensation by Federal Government than the loss of one week's business trading by shopkeepers.

It is therefore requested that the Prime Minister make a lump sum payment of compensation direct to the families or a substantial donation to the "Appeal for Dependant Families of Bombing – February 13, 1978".

Labor Council could express their condemnation of this tragedy by a vote of condolence to the widows and families of the deceased.²

Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser then established a trust fund for the education and benefit of the children of the deceased, contributing \$15,000 for each child, to which fund other donations were to be received. The NSW Premier, Neville Wran, made substantial *ex-gratia* payments to the widows. The City Council was very generous in its financial and other support to the widows and families.

The Union appeal fund had accumulated \$150,000 when closed on 8 May 1978, and this was subsequently distributed to the widows and children.

Each year for fourteen years after the tragedy a remembrance service was held at the George Street site until discontinued at the request of the families.³