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A May Day to Remember: March in Support of Willow Grove Green Ban

Willow Grove is set to be relocated in favour of the construction of a second Powerhouse museum.



Photography by Vivienne Guo
by Oliver Pether, May 1, 2021

A coalition of trade unionists, activist groups and students have used this year's May Day to protest against the dismantling of Willow Grove, an 19th century heritage building in Parramatta. Willow Grove is set to be relocated in favour of the construction of a second Powerhouse museum.

May Day, or International Workers Day, is a rally held annually to support workers and express solidarity to the labour movement. Though the event normally takes place in the city, this year it was held in Parramatta for the first time in its history. The move, proposed by the Construction, Forestry, Maritime, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU), aimed to express support for a green ban on Willow Grove. A green ban is a form of strike action where members of a trade-union refuse to work on a project because of environmental or heritage concerns.



Photo: Aman Kapoor

Student activists used the occasion to express support for the CFMEU's green ban and called on similar types of action to be used for other causes. Speeches were made by Tim Livingstone of the Australian Student Environment Network (ASEN), Cooper Forsyth of the USyd Enviro Collective and Charlie Murphy of Pride in Protest (PiP). Livingstone spoke about the power of green bans to force governments into changing course, and how this collective strike action should be used to combat climate change.

The crowd of around 3000 protestors then marched from Prince Alfred Square to Willow Grove, and assembled in front of the building for speeches. Behind them, Willow Grove was hidden from view by a four-metre wall erected by the State Government, dubbed "The Great Wall of Gladys" by activist Suzette Meade. In response, protestors had written anti-government messages on the wall in chalk, such as "What Are You Hiding Gladys?" and "We Have a Powerhouse Museum. This is a Development Land Grab."

Prominent union figure and State Secretary of the construction division of the CFMEU Darren Greenfield paid homage to the late activist Jack Munday and vowed to protect Willow Grove till the end. Other speakers included representatives of the Maritime Union of Australia, the Electrical Trades Union, the Public Service Association (PSA) and Indigenous youth organisation Gamilaraay Next Generation.



Photo: Aman Kapoor

One of the final speeches was made by local activist Suzette Meade and Parramatta City councillor Donna Davis, two women at the forefront of the Save Willow Grove campaign. Meade expressed confidence in her campaign's ability to stop Willow Grove's removal, and declared: "the Government wants to destroy our history, we're not going to let them do that."

Suzette Meade and the North Parramatta Residents Action Group have recently taken the State Government to the Land and Environment Court. They are arguing that the Government's planning processes failed to properly analyse alternate sites for the new museum. The Government has indicated it has no intention of backing down.