

Labour History Project

NEWSLETTER 53 | NOVEMBER 2011

Open-cast Mining on the Denniston Plateau
The Miners' Militant History
Return to Arras—the NZ Tunnelling Company
Women in the 1951 Strike: An Untold Story
Canberra Conference on Labour Biography
Slouching Towards Bethlehem



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For more information on LHP membership, activities,
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www.lhp.org.nz

GUEST EDITOR: Pat Martin
DESIGN: Jared Davidson

COVER: Runanga unionists in front of their
new Miner's Hall, built in 1908.

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FROM THE SHOP FLOOR

Introduction from guest Editor Pat Martin

I started writing about labour issues over 30 years ago. In 1979, I became a union organiser for the Hotel and Hospital Workers, the forerunner of today's Service Workers Union. I was one of a bunch of young union tearaways out to change the world. We charged about the Wellington region, inflaming as many disputes as we resolved.

“What does the union do?” was the most common question from members. So we set up our own union newspaper, *Push*. The name was meant to sum up the union's new aggressive campaigning stance. After the third issue, a gleeful member sent in a copy of a gay magazine advertisement for a male lubricant, also called ‘Push’, and asked if there was any connection.

Nevertheless, it was a feisty little rag and members seemed to like it. So did the media. With half-a-dozen organisers constantly in and out of workplaces around the town, we simply rounded up all the stories and put them in the paper. Mainstream reporters soon learned to scan it for news leads. Daily papers and television once picked up three stories from one issue, a fact that amazed a journalist friend at the time. But that could be a mixed blessing. After a housemaid at the James Cook Hotel told me she had been banished from the hotel's public areas until she shaved her legs, I wrote a brief piece about it. The story took off, first in the *Evening Post* and then on TV1's *The Holmes Show*. It seemed the whole country was talking about whether women should shave their legs.

I worked on the paper long into the night at the Media Collective, in an old house in Brown Street in Newtown, laying it out by gluing down strips of type on A3 pages until the fumes had me in a worse state than the street kids hanging out down the road. Later, the technology moved from glue to hot wax, and the jangled brain cells were greatly relieved.

It was satisfying to get our stories out and we were able to highlight some major exploitation in the hospitality industry. The potential for industrial action in cafes, restaurants, taverns and motels is limited but publicity can be potent. Often it was the threat of exposing poor wages and conditions that made a real difference.

Despite all the good work on the ground, at any time the mainstream media could wash over us like a tsunami. Prime Minister Muldoon was forever on television saying unions were ruining the country. One afternoon I walked into a restaurant kitchen. A sweating kitchenhand on the minimum award wage was elbow-deep in greasy hot water. “Giddyay,” I said, “I'm from the union.” “You bastards are ruining the country,” he replied, and kept on scrubbing a stack of dishes that reached up to the ceiling.

For a couple of years in the early 1990s, I was editor of the *Seamen's Journal*. I know of very few organisations where members take such pride in belonging as seafarers do in their union. They scrapped among themselves but fiercely defended the union. The entire maritime industry is like a secret society with

its own traditions and, for a landlubber like myself, it was a great education. When the *Rena* recently ran aground on a Bay of Plenty reef, I thought of the stories about flag of convenience shipping and exploited foreign labour the union had been raising 20 years ago. Maybe someone will listen now.

For most of the 1990s I was editor of the *PSA Journal*. It was a great job. The 1990s were a tough time for unions and the public sector. Through a network of members, delegates and organisers, I was able to round up stories about cutbacks, restructurings and pay campaigns. Journal approval ratings rose throughout the decade. People were hungry for information and desperate for strong advocacy, although this did create some editorial tensions further down the track. Good communications though can lift an organisation's morale. One PSA organiser said to me, "When I read the Journal I feel proud to work for an organisation that does all this stuff".

At times in union history, the labour media has thrived. Every New Zealand union in the 1980s seemed to have its own paper. Some were rubbish. Others had great stories, quality writing and excellent design. Over many decades in New Zealand and elsewhere, thousands of labour publications added up to a mass alternative voice. Most have disappeared, with our Employment Contracts Act particularly destructive. Today, of course, there's the internet and social media, but there's something energising about handing out a union publication on the job. We called our hotel worker's paper "an organising tool". It was deeply satisfying to sit in a crowded staff room as members thumbed through the paper talking about what was in it.

Stories have a power to move people. Unions, with all their conflict, humour and drama, have great stories. I've just worked on the EPMU union journal, *The Metal*. Members of that union tragically lost their lives at Pike River. Many people wonder how a 19th century disaster could occur in the 21st century. The union has a long collective memory and through the pages of *The Metal* shows how improvements to miners' health and safety made 100 years ago have been eroded today.

Certainly, electronic publishing has changed the form of the message. The internet, texting and twitter are all used in highly creative ways. But when I read about Pike River, the *Rena*, and public sector cutbacks, it seems to me the content of the message hasn't changed that much at all.

Articles in this issue confirm that theme. The coal miners' overview, Jack MacManus' legacy, an interview with my mother about the 1951 strike, and fate of the Denniston plateau, all weave the past into the present. They give us context, put fire in the belly for today's battles, and point the way forward.

Chair's report

I've given plenty of lectures and public talks on labour history over the years, but last Labour Day was my first experience of giving one via the 'people's microphone'. This is a technique developed by the Occupy Wall St sit-in for addressing a large outdoor crowd without using electronic amplification. The speaker pauses every half-sentence or so to have their words repeated by the whole audience. In this manner, from a platform in Wellington's Cuba Mall,

I described the stand taken by carpenter Sam Parnell at Petone in 1840 which made New Zealand a world leader of the eight-hour-day movement, and is commemorated by Labour Day.

It felt strange at first to hear my impromptu speech repeated back to me, phrase by phrase, by a crowd of several hundred people. But I found the ‘people’s microphone’ an efficient, moving and deeply satisfying form of communication. The speaker is obliged to remain terse and to the point. The entire audience is unquestionably awake and following what’s been said. There is a remarkable emotional force to having one person’s words repeated by a host of different voices—old, young, male, female and in various accents. It’s an experience I’m unlikely to forget.

The following week Bill Rosenberg, the CTU’s economist and a member of the LHP committee, was down at the Occupy Wellington site giving a talk on the politics of economic inequality. Jared Davidson, the designer of this journal and a published labour historian, spoke to the Christchurch occupation and a version of his talk appears in this issue. No doubt other LHP members and supporters also contributed to these and other occupations in a variety of ways.

It’s been a valuable reminder to me that the power of labour history derives less from nostalgia or preservation of the past than from its importance for understanding, and above all changing, the present.

Mark Derby
Chair – Labour History Project

The members of the LHP committee are: Mark Derby (chair), Jim McAloon (treasurer), Claire-Louise McCurdy (secretary), Toby Boraman, Michael Brown, Peter Clayworth, Peter Franks, David Grant, Richard Hill, Pauline Leverton, Valerie Morse, Grace Millar, Melanie Nolan, Mary-Ellen O’Connor, Bill Rosenberg, Marie Russell, Lisa Sacksen, Sue Shone, James Taylor, Dave Wickham.

Current research



Key events or people in PSA history

The NZ Public Service Association (PSA) celebrates its centenary in 2013 and a working group (with Labour History Project representation) has been planning various events and publications to highlight this important milestone in New Zealand’s trade union movement.

The group is keen that the centenary is marked in a range of locations where the organisation has worked, not just focus on the national activities around the Wellington head office. A suggestion has been made to create some plaques depicting an event and/or person which has significance to the PSA in that local area. Plaques would be placed in the PSA regional office meeting rooms where members gather for union events. The group is keen to get a wide selection of possible events or people to choose from and has asked the Labour History Project for suggestions.

The plaques would take the form of a professionally framed photo or photos with a short explanatory note. The offices are located in Auckland (there are

many meeting rooms), Hamilton (Waikato/BOP), Palmerston North (Central Districts), Christchurch, and Dunedin. The group is also contemplating plaques for the various meeting rooms in the Wellington office and would welcome ideas. Some suggestions are:

- Jean Parker (the member on whom the equal pay case was focused for Dunedin.
- The New Plymouth power station as an iconic strike that was successful for the Palmerston North office.
- The dental nurses marching in Wellington to meet the government, to mark a watershed point in the union's history.

Send your suggestions to:

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Changing representations of organised labour in New Zealand, 1968–1981

Between 1984 and the early 1990s the fortunes of organised labour in New Zealand declined dramatically. The numerical strength of the trade union movement shrunk from 683,000 in 1985 to 363,200 in 1995. In explaining this major change in the union landscape, academics, activists and unionists have confined their discussions to legislative and economic changes that characterised the decades of the 1980s and 1990s. As important as such studies are, they often overlook changing societal views of trade unions in the years leading up to the 1980s.

Given this gap in the examination of organised labour's decline in New Zealand, I am working on a research project that examines public and political representations of trade unions between 1968 and 1981, and how such representations may be related to subsequent events. As well as accessing a range of printed material from this period I am hoping to interview a number of rank and file trade unionists involved in the movement as a means to access first hand insights from the 'flaxroots'. If you were a member of a trade union between 1968 and 1981 I would value the chance to interview you about your experiences. The interview would be recorded, conducted in a place of your choosing, and will take approximately two hours to complete.

For more information or to make a time to meet, contact:

Ryan Bodman
ryankb@gmail.com
 or phone 0211459681 or evenings at 09 815 6509.

Approved by the University of Auckland human participants ethics committee on 16 September 2011 for (3) years, Reference Number 7473

NEWS ROUND UP

Canberra conference on labour biography

Peter Clayworth



Above Left: CONFERENCE GOERS CHECK OUT THE STORAGE FACILITIES IN THE VAULT OF THE NOEL BUTLIN ARCHIVES AT THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY IN CANBERRA. THE ARCHIVES ARE ONE OF AUSTRALIA'S PRIME REPOSITORIES FOR LABOUR HISTORY MATERIAL.

Middle: A POSTER FOR AN 8-HOUR DAY CELEBRATION (INCLUDING THE VICTORIAN GOAT RACING CHAMPIONSHIP) ON DISPLAY AT THE CONFERENCE.

Right: A NSW MUNICIPAL EMPLOYEES UNION BANNER ON DISPLAY AT THE CONFERENCE. PETER CLAYWORTH.

Labour History and its People: The twelfth national labour history conference, ANU, Canberra, 15-17 September 2011

The following account of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History (ASSLH) conference in Canberra is more one of my personal impressions, rather than any attempt at a comprehensive report. The 12th annual labour history conference was organised in conjunction with the National Centre of Biography, based at the Australian National University, with the theme of biography.

New Zealand's Labour History Project was well represented with Peter Franks, Peter Clayworth and Grace Millar all presenting papers. One of the main organisers was our own Melanie Nolan, who is now in Canberra as the Director of the National Centre of Biography and General Editor of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*.

The well attended conference, while focusing on labour biography, covered a wide range of topics. In fact, one problem was that the conference was almost too inclusive. The large number of papers presented on the second day meant that six streams were operating at once. This meant that each paper only had 10 or so people in the audience. On the other hand, the papers I attended were nearly all of high quality and the small audiences asked questions with enthusiasm.

On the morning of the first day a number of addresses marked the fact that the ASSLH were celebrating its 50th anniversary. There were some rather heady discussions on the uses of theory in the writing of labour history, but I was personally more engaged by Don McRaid and Neville Kirk's discussions of transnationalism. These two scholars, both now based in Britain, looked at the flow of working people through the world and how this affected the writing of labour history and labour biography.

Here I must declare my own biases. Being in the process of writing a biography of Pat Hickey, a labour activist who travelled the world, a conference with an emphasis on biography and transnationalism was of prime interest to me. With a considerable number of papers touching on the IWW and the syndicalist era at the beginning of the 20th century, I found plenty to absorb and discuss. I came to the conference after three days in Melbourne, tracking down information on the period Pat Hickey spent in Australia. So for me, the conference acted like a crash course in Australian labour history—much of it through that most valuable of conference processes, discussion over food and drinks. Our Australian comrades proved as hospitable as ever, despite the occasional trans-Tasman ribbing over our alleged fondness for sheep.

The conference's biographical emphasis meant we were introduced to some fascinating historical characters, such as Muriel Matters, the South Australian suffragette who flew in an airship over London emblazoned with the slogan 'Votes for Women.' Papers on a range of characters who travelled between various countries allowed for a lot of parallels to be drawn. In just one example, we saw the great similarity of the story of Pat Mackie, the Kiwi stirrer who led the Mt Isa strike in the 1960s, and the travelling activists of the early twentieth century. There was some comment that the biographical focus led to less concentration on social history of broader groups, but some of the papers presented did fill this gap. Notable was Grace Millar's paper on the long-term consequences of the 1951 waterfront dispute on the household economies of those involved. This set me thinking that for much of our labour history we need to look at the way the consequences of workers' struggles resonate for years afterwards.

A valuable addition to the conference was a chance for a guided tour through the Noel Butlin archives, a fantastic repository of labour and business history held at ANU. A further bonus was the publication of a large number of the papers in an extensive book, which we received as part of the conference pack. This was a great feature given that there were too many papers to be able to get to all you wanted to hear. Overall, I must emphasise that the most valuable aspect of the conference was to meet and swap ideas with Australian labour history comrades in the most convivial of circumstances.

Auckland notes

David Verran

'What's Left?' seminar

Auckland Labour History Group activity continued on 30 July 2011 with around 30 attending the 'What's Left?' seminar, held a day after the Auckland launch of the FOL history *Unions In Common Cause*, with Carol Beaumont presiding. Many of those at the launch also came to the seminar.

The speakers at 'What's Left?' were Erik Olssen (Emeritus Professor of History at the University of Otago and author of numerous publications in labour history), Peter Franks (also an author of numerous publications in labour history), and Margaret Wilson (Professor of Law and Public Policy at Waikato University, former speaker of Parliament, Minister of Labour and other portfolios and a former president of the Labour Party).

The three panellists analysed New Zealand labour history and how that history offers lessons for the future. They were posed the following questions:

- What is the future for the labour movement?
- What strategies and policies might arrest the decline of the movement?
- Will Labour generate a new social vision, or remain confined to ‘market liberalism lite’?

It was noted at the seminar that labour historians in the past have largely ignored the moderate majority in the labour movement when analysing historical trends. Some conclusions were that in the past unions were too dependent on the state; instead, they need strong foundations in the workplace and need to win the political arguments and get public support as much as winning the industrial campaigns. They also need to be the voices not only of their own members but of working people as a whole. They need to celebrate their successes more and ultimately be confident they can get through the bad times.

In conclusion, more such discussions needed to be held and with a wider audience participating.

At our 18 October committee meeting, we said farewell to Ray Markey (President of the Auckland Labour History Group, Professor of Employment Relations and Director of the New Zealand Work and Labour Market Institute at the Auckland University of Technology). Ray has brought both liveliness and a depth to the cause of labour history here in Auckland, as well as nationally and internationally, especially in links with Australian labour historians. Ray is returning to an academic post in Australia and we all wish him well.

Griff Maclaurin and his bookshop

Followers of the story of New Zealander Griffith (Griff) Campbell Maclaurin, who died while operating a machinegun in the grounds of University City in Madrid in 1936, may be interested to learn a little more about what happened to his Cambridge bookshop after he left for Spain.

James McNeish in his *The Sixth Man; the extraordinary life of Paddy Costello* (2007) on page 69 claims it was run by Maclaurin's wife or widow. However, there is no trace of any marriage and there is certainly no mention of a wife in Maclaurin's will.

Instead, the sole beneficiary was Kitty Caroline Cornforth (nee Klugman), the wife of Maurice Campbell Cornforth (1909-1980). Maurice was a Communist Party of Great Britain member from 1933, while Kitty was also the sister of James Klugman, a best friend of spy Donald McLean and who together joined the CPGB in 1931.

I recently received an email from Jesús Requena, son-in-law of Michael Alonzo Elliott, who in turn was the son of Alonzo Markham Elliott—the executor of Maclaurin's will and his successor in managing the bookshop. He writes:

Alonzo M. Elliott died 10 Jul 1982 in Basingstoke, England suddenly of a heart attack. Maclaurin founded a communist bookshop in Cambridge before he went to Spain and handed its management to Alonzo when he left for

Soon afterwards, when Alonzo went to Spain, the bookshop was managed by Kathleen Elliott, his [Alonzo's] first wife, until his return from Spain in 1939, and then after he left in 1940 for British Army service.

The bookshop continued until about 1950. After WW2 Alonzo worked as a journalist for the *Daily Worker* and then *Soviet News* until his death. He remained active in the International Brigades groups until his death.

Further research confirms that Alonzo was born 10 February 1912 in Ipswich, Suffolk and married Kathleen Robinson in the last months of 1936. He married for a second time in 1946 and again in 1957.

Study of Tailoresses' Union earns historian award

Siwan Gwynne



OTAGO GIRLS' HIGH SCHOOL PUPIL TESSA MACAULAY (18) HAS RECEIVED THE NEW ZEALAND HISTORY TEACHERS ASSOCIATION YOUNG HISTORIAN AWARD AT OTAGO GIRLS' HIGH SCHOOL. PHOTO BY PETER MCINTOSH.

Otago Girls' High School has a new historian in its midst. Year 13 pupil Tessa Macaulay received the New Zealand History Teachers Association Young Historian Award on Monday (31 November).

The New Zealand History Teachers Association and the New Zealand Historical Association gave the award to Tessa based on her research on the 19th-century founder of the New Zealand union for tailoresses, Harriet Morison. Tessa undertook the research project as part of her internal school assessment, and never imagined her work would lead to the young historian award. "I definitely wasn't expecting it," she said. "I'm stoked."

She chose the topic following a suggestion by her history teacher to write something about the union and decided to focus on its founder. The opportunity to learn more about local history made it even more appealing, she said.

Harriet Morison was famous for getting better work conditions and wages for women who worked in Dunedin garment sweat shops.

The hardest part of the assessment was obtaining all the research, Tessa said. In 19th-century New Zealand, women were generally not involved in leadership, which meant anything to do with Harriet Morison was written under male names. Tessa was assisted by staff at the Hocken Library, which was a big help, she said.

She hoped winning the award would further the reputation of the school and said it was great to see the history department recognised in this way. The prizes included with the award were \$300 in book vouchers and a year's subscription to the New Zealand Journal of History.

Next year, Tessa plans to attend Victoria University, in Wellington, where she will pursue a degree in law and psychology. She also hoped to fit in some history.

Story and photo reproduced courtesy of Otago Daily Times.

FEATURE ARTICLES

Open cast mining on the Denniston Plateau

Peter Clayworth



Part of Plateau, Denniston.

A 1906 POSTCARD OF DENNISTON SENT BY EITHER PAT HICKEY OR ONE OF HIS BROTHERS TO THEIR MOTHER IN OCTOBER 1906.

Denniston is a site of immense importance to the labour history of New Zealand. The plateau, just to the east of Westport in the Buller, has been the site of coal mining since the late 1870s. The Denniston Incline, the switchback system used to transport coal trucks down the 700-metre escarpment, was known as one of the engineering wonders of the world. Denniston was also the birthplace of coal mining unionism in New Zealand.

In 1884 miners, mostly from the coal fields of Durham, Yorkshire, and the Forest of Dean, Gloucestershire, founded the Denniston Miners Protection Society, with John Lomas elected as the first president. The union was to survive in various incarnations through until the closure of the Denniston underground mines in the 1990s.

At the height of mining activity in the early twentieth century, over a thousand people lived on the plateau in the communities of Denniston and Burnett's Face. Many significant unionists spent time there. In addition to John Lomas, other prominent leaders of the Denniston union included John Foster, John Dowgray, and Edward 'Billy Banjo' Hunter. Paddy Webb and Pat Hickey began their careers in New Zealand as socialist activists while working at Denniston.

The miners of Denniston had to strike for their union's survival in 1884, a dispute they eventually won after a long struggle. The union was involved in major industrial disputes throughout its history, from the 1890 strike through

to the waterfront dispute of 1951 and beyond. The Hill, as Denniston was known, was also the site of a thriving working class community, with a co-operative store, chapel, churches and medical facilities all largely set up by the workers themselves. Lodges, sports teams and brass bands were all part of the miners' social world.

Now only a small number of people live permanently on the Hill, attracted by its isolation and beauty of this unique place. The Department of Conservation have been developing a major tourist attraction that will give people an underground mining experience at the old Banbury mine. For the historically minded, Denniston has a large complex of archaeological remains from the mining days covering much of the plateau. In addition to those with family connections or a historical interest, a whole new generation have discovered the Hill through the popularity of Jenny Patrick's fictional work *The Denniston Rose* and its sequel *Heart of Coal*.

The Denniston and Stockton plateaus are also important ecological sites, although Stockton has been severely degraded by the open cast mining now taking place. Both areas are home to great spotted kiwi (roroa), fern birds, green geckos, giant weta, fresh water crayfish (koura), rare snails and a diverse range of other native invertebrates. They also have a strange flora of stunted rata and trees and tussock.

There is now a chance that the Denniston plateau will suffer the same fate as Stockton. Buller Coal Ltd, a subsidiary of the Australian mining company Bathurst Resources Ltd, has bought the mining rights to the entire plateau. Bathurst are already producing coal from the open cast Cascade mine on Denniston and expect to be getting coal from the Brookdale mine by January next year. These are both relatively small mines that Bathurst bought from private operators.

The major controversy is over Bathurst's proposed open cast Escarpment mine, a 140-hectare mine on conservation land on Denniston. The West Coast Regional Council granted Bathurst resource consents for this mine on 26 August this year, despite environmental concerns. The Buller District Council strongly supports the mine, which it is estimated will create around 185 jobs in the Buller area. DOC did not present any evidence to the resource hearing, a lack of involvement in the consent process which is deeply worrying should it become a trend.

Forest and Bird and the West Coast Environment Network did present evidence on the ecological significance of the plateau, calling for a ban on mining on it. The resource consent is currently blocked as Forest and Bird and the West Coast Environment Network, along with the Fairdown Residents Association, have launched an appeal to the Environment Court. The Fairdown Residents Association is not necessarily opposed to the mine as such, but is concerned about the impacts it might have on their community.

Environmental groups are particularly concerned that the Escarpment mine is simply the first of the series of mines that will cover much more of the plateau. Bathurst say they hope to eventually produce up to four million tonnes of coal annually. Climate change activists, such as the Coal Action Network, are also concerned over the global impacts of coal production. Bathurst argue that

Denniston coal is high grade, high value coal to be exported to Asia for steel production, and that at present there is no alternative product better suited for this use.

The history and archaeology of Denniston, including its deep significance for labour history, are all the product of the coal mining of the past. At present the historic sites threatened by the new mining proposals date from the more recent mining of the 1950s. If the open cast mining expands in the future, the older nineteenth and early twentieth century sites may also be endangered. Some readers may consider that sacrifices of the historical and ecological sites of Denniston should be made to create work for the people of Buller in the future. My personal view is that the history and ecology of the Denniston plateau should be protected from the further impacts of opencast mining.

Peter Clayworth is an historian whose family have a long connection with the West Coast. He has previously been involved in a number of environmental campaigns opposing logging and mining on the West Coast, but he also has a brother who works at the Stockton mine. Peter is currently working on a biography of Pat Hickey, a labour activist who worked at the Iron Bridge mine at Denniston.

The miners' militant history

Jared Davidson



RUNANGA UNIONISTS IN FRONT OF THEIR NEW MINERS' HALL, BUILT IN 1908.

From the arrival of colliers in the 1870s to New Zealand's biggest strikes, miners have played an active part in the struggle against capitalism. As Len Richardson points out: 'Coalminers occupy a special place in the history of industrial radicalism in New Zealand'. Socialists of many shades considered them 'a revolutionary vanguard destined to bring capitalism to its knees'—to employers they were troublemakers holding back the progress of modern development. Regardless of how they are painted, there is no doubting the importance of miners in New Zealand's labour history.

Miners were some of New Zealand first migrants, transplanted from the English coalfields to the 'New World' in the late 1870s. Unfortunately for the colonial coal masters, these miners brought with them the 'twin evils' of Methodism and unionism, and in 1884 formed the first miners' union in Denniston. They quickly went about organising their own Federations to accommodate the diverse situations of the coalfields—the Amalgamated Miners' and Labourers' Association in the 1880s and the more successful Miners' Federation of 1908. Meanwhile, during the Maritime Strike of 1890 miners took strike action in support of the general seamen's strike.

The latter Federation was the result of a dramatic strike in the town of Blackball—traditional home of New Zealand radicalism. Growing militancy was stoked by the arrival of radicals like Patrick Hickey and the propaganda of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). Their advocacy of direct action and revolutionary industrial unionism related to the miners' disenchantment with the labour laws of the day, such as the Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration (ICA) Act, which disallowed unions from striking. In 1908 the formation of a New Zealand Socialist Party branch signalled the rise of revolutionary ideas in the valley. From 1907, 'Blackball miners and their employers had been on a collision course' over conditions, Richardson says, so when seven miners were fired for taking 30 minutes 'crib-time' instead of the 15 imposed by the company it was the final straw. All 120 Blackball miners ceased work on 27 February 1908. This was a deliberate challenge to the ICA Act and the Arbitration Court tried to intervene, but community solidarity was too strong.

After three months the company gave in, sending waves of enthusiasm for direct action throughout the country. The resulting Miners Federation grew into the 'Red' Federation of Labour, whose preamble stated 'the working class and the employing class having nothing in common'. This 'baptism of fire' did not end in Blackball however, for the Red Feds soon found themselves involved in two of New Zealand's most violent labour struggles: the Waihi Strike of 1912 and the Great Strike of 1913.

The Red Feds encouraged class struggle free of 'labour's leg iron': the ICA Act. Affiliated unions, including the miners of the Waihi Trade Union of Workers, began to de-register from the ICA. So in 1912 when 30 engine drivers in Waihi re-registered under the ICA (reportedly encouraged by the bosses), the union struck in protest. On 13 May, Waihi came to a standstill. However the strike failed. Intense police repression and violence saw the balance of power shift to the bosses. During what became known as the 'Black Week', the Miners' Hall was stormed, striker Fred Evans was killed by a police baton to the head (becoming the first worker to die in an industrial dispute in New Zealand), and unionists and their families were driven out of town as police stood by.

On the heels of the Waihi Strike came the Great Strike of 1913, in which miners played an important part. In October, Huntly miners called a strike when the company dismissed two union executive members, while in Wellington the watersiders struck when the Union Steam Ship Company refused to pay travelling time for shipwrights. Strike action soon spread. Miners on the West Coast took wildcat strike action without waiting for official sanction, and shut down the ports of Westport and Greymouth. Fearful of the miners' militancy, explosives were shifted from the Runanga state mine to a private munitions magazine in Greymouth.

The Great Strike involved some 16,000 workers and resulted in a general strike in Auckland. Massive demonstrations and union control of the waterfront was eventually broken with ‘Massey’s Cossacks’—farmers enrolled as special police—and the hand of the state. Before long naval ships in the port of Wellington had their guns trained on the city, machine guns lined the streets, and soldiers with naked bayonets protected ‘free’ labour to re-open the docks. By December, strike leaders were arrested for sedition, the strike collapsed, and the coalition of government and employers gained a complete victory. Miners, true to their fighting spirit, were some of the last to return to work.

After the Great Strike, miners battled employers over conditions and the contracts system, until the outbreak of the First World War threw up new a new issue: conscription. When the government introduced a national register of men of military age, West Coast miners threatened industrial action to halt what was perceived to be the first-step towards compulsory conscription. A ‘go slow’ was put in place in late 1916. The government promptly assured miners that if called up their appeals would be favourably heard, but nonetheless miners were refused exemption until coal production was back to normal rates. In April 1917, miners on the West Coast struck, demanding that all military conscription cease. A compromise was made—legal action against the strikers and the refused exemptions were dropped in exchange for a promise of no strike action for the duration of the war. Although radical anti-conscriptionists on the Grey Valley were unsatisfied, the miners accepted the government’s terms.

Throughout the 20th century, miners were also heavily involved in revolutionary political groups. As well as the aforementioned New Zealand Socialist Party and the IWW, miners were members of New Zealand’s first Communist Parties. West Coast Marxists were involved in the New Zealand Marxian Association (1918), the Communist Party of New Zealand (1921), and the West Coast Communist Federation (1922). In 1925, Blackball became the headquarters of the Communist Party, whose secretary in 1927 was also the secretary of the United Mine Workers, a federation of miners formed in 1923.

From the 1919 Alliance of Labour and the unemployed workers’ unions of the Depression years to the 1951 Lockout, miners featured in the many struggles of labour against capital. However the defeat of 1951 signalled what Richardson describes as the ‘slow and lingering death of mining unionism and the communities that sustained it’. Mining no longer played the crucial role it had during its development, technologies changed, and communities fragmented. Yet miners’ struggles continued, and will continue as long as mining and capitalism exist. As recently as 2009-2010, miners at Stockton, Spring Creek, Rotowaro and Huntly East took industrial action against Solid Energy, showing that the struggles of miners in New Zealand are far from history.

Jared Davidson is the author of Remains to be Seen: Tracing Joe Hill’s Ashes in New Zealand, designer of the LHP Newsletter, and when time permits, a regular attendee of Blackball May Day celebrations. Reproduced courtesy of The Spark.

SOURCES

Len Richardson, *Coal, Class and Community: The United Mineworkers of New Zealand 1880-1960*, Auckland University Press, 1995; Bert Roth & Janny Hammond, *Toil and Trouble: The Struggle for a Better Life in New Zealand*, Methuen, 1981.

Return to Arras—the NZ Tunnelling Company

Mark Derby



HOME FROM THE BATTLEFIELD IN 1919, JACK MACMANUS ADMIRES HIS DAUGHTER PEARL.

The Western front during the deadliest days of World War One does not seem a promising site for effective industrial action. Yet the New Zealand Tunnelling Corps, a unit that burrowed beneath enemy fortifications and was made up mainly of ex-miners, gained a reputation for its expertise and bravery but also for stubborn defence of workplace principles.

Its commanding officer, Major Duigan, described his men as a group of rugged socialists who included 17 former union secretaries and who were prepared to act collectively to secure decent working conditions. One dispute followed an order by British officers to dig tunnels to ‘military height’—that is, too low to swing a pick. On another occasion the tunnellers worked alongside Welsh ‘pitmen’ who were given only two meals a day. Again the New Zealanders downed tools until adequate meals were provided for everyone.

Winning these disputes meant refusing direct orders, and in the field of battle only an extremely determined, capable and united group of men could hope to get away with this. The Tunnelling Corps was such a unit. As described in the February 2010 issue of this journal, its members were mostly skilled miners and other underground workers, with a reputation as the fastest tunnellers on the Western front. Many were also veterans of union battles such as the 1912 Waihi strike, and carried those experiences into the conflict overseas.

From 1916 the Tunnelling Company was based at Arras in Belgium, a town which already had ancient salt mines deep below ground. The New Zealanders extended these and created new tunnels, building a system of galleries, kitchens, headquarters and hospitals capable of housing 20,000 men. The tunnel system's landmarks were given New Zealand place names, from Bluff at one end to Russell at the other. A memorial to the 41 New Zealand tunnellers who lost their lives at Arras was unveiled in 2007 and an underground museum, Carrière Wellington, opened the following year.

In April 2012, historical researcher Sue Baker-Wilson will lead a party of descendants of the Tunnelling Corps men to Arras. Among those making the trip will be several grandchildren of Irish-born tunneller 'Big Jack' MacManus, a lifelong labour agitator who has so far inspired three generations of descendants to follow his example.

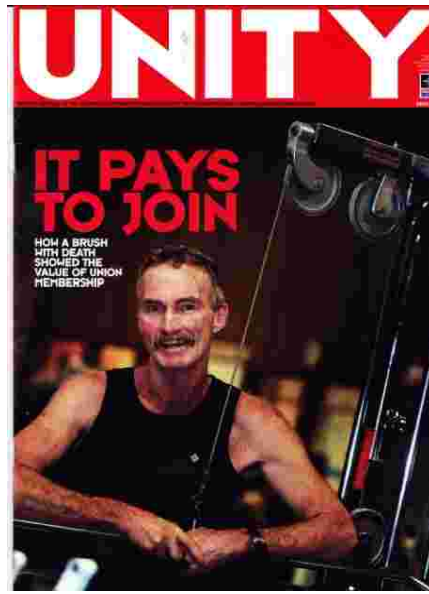
Jack MacManus was born in County Cavan in 1875 and soon afterwards his parents took him and several siblings to Australia. At 15 he became a cattle drover and a member of the Australian Workers Union, working alongside Aboriginal drovers and learning some of their language. He became an organiser for the union, which represented outback shearers and other migratory rural workers. A succession of shearers' strikes eventually made it impossible for active unionists to remain in the region and Jack, together with fellow AWU organiser Mick Laracy (later secretary of the NZ Shearer's Union and a founder of the *Maoriland Worker*), moved to the South Island in the first years of the 20th century. Jack was a founding member of the Dunedin Socialist Party and in 1908 chaired a large May Day meeting in support of the striking Blackball miners.

At a Socialist Party conference in 1909 Jack met his wife Nellie, and they would eventually have 12 children. Five days after the marriage he was elected secretary of the Dunedin General Labourers Union and later South Dunedin's candidate for the newly formed Labour Party. During the Waihi miners' strike of 1912 he was the first member of the United Labour Party executive to openly support the miners and their families.

Jack's son Frank, also a union activist, has said that his father left Dunedin after the 1913 strike because he refused to work alongside those who had scabbed. He moved his young family south to a railway construction camp in the Catlins, where they lived for two years in a wooden-floored tent. At the age of 40, and with three children, Jack MacManus enlisted with the Tunnelling Corps, perhaps because many of his younger workmates had done so and he felt an obligation to join them. In 1918 he reported from France, 'We have seen a Red Fed go out to try to rescue from burial in a shell crater a man who out here was a non-unionist. Such happenings are common, and do not give rise to a thought. All are in complete harmony—to try to beat the German.' Sue

Baker-Wilson says, 'It is a letter written home by MacManus which has provided us with the most information and which has led to us being able to identify the place our men were first buried.'

Jack survived the war and returned to Dunedin where he became the city's first Labour councillor, serving two terms in the 1920s. His wife Nellie helped form a women's branch of the local Labour Party and remained politically active throughout her life.



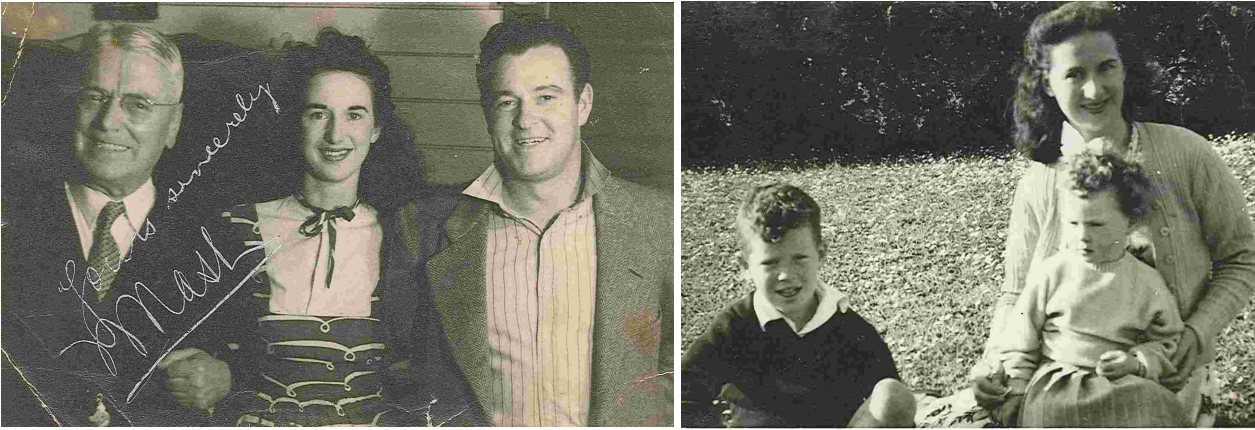
GARRY PRESTON, COVER STAR OF THE JOURNAL OF THE NSW CONSTRUCTION, FORESTRY, MINING AND ENGINEERING UNION.

The exceptional dedication and principles that guided Jack's life have been passed on to his large family. One son, Frank, became a president of the Tramways Union. A daughter, Margaret, was eventually made a life member of the Labour Party and her son Garry has been a unionist since he began a carpentry apprenticeship at 15. Like his grandfather, Garry became an organiser for his union, but was made unemployed by the Employment Contracts Act. He then retraced Jack MacManus's movements in the opposite direction and found work in Australia where he became a site delegate for the NSW Construction, Forestry, Mining and Engineering Union, eventually joining its committee of management. One of Garry's sons is now a security guard and union activist, and his daughter works for a union law firm. Garry's brother Steve MacManus, the Marlborough representative of the Central Amalgamated Workers Union, is also taking part in the April 2012 journey to Arras. Garry expects it will be 'quite an emotional trip. I've tried to base my life around grand-dad.'

For more information about the NZ Tunnellers Co. 95th anniversary expedition, contact:

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UNION FAMILY

**Women in the 1951 strike:
an untold story***Pat Martin*

'Union Family' is an occasional series about a contributor's family member and their involvement with the labour movement. We welcome suggestions for contributors and subjects for this series.

Above Left: PAT'S PARENTS, MAUREEN AND JACK MARTIN, IN 1949, WITH THEIR LOCAL MP FOR HUTT, WALTER NASH.

Right: TWO YEARS AFTER THE 1951 DISPUTE, MAUREEN WITH PAT'S OLDER BROTHER STEVE AND SISTER KAY.

My son Liam was 16 when he asked me what he should do for a school history project. "Interview your Grandma about what it was like when your Granddad was on strike for six months," I suggested. One evening, about six months before Mum passed away in 1999, he caught a train from Wellington to the Hutt Valley and sat down with my mother Maureen, the tape running.

The interview that follows helps to cover a big gap in the history of the 1951 waterfront dispute: what was it like for the women involved?

My father Jack was one of the freezing workers at the Gear Meat Company in Petone who voted to support the locked out waterfront workers. For the whole six months, Mum was pregnant with her second child, Kay, my older sister. My older brother Steve was four. Mum and Dad were renting a state house for £1 8s 3d a week in Waiwhetu in Lower Hutt. They later bought it and raised five kids.

Dad, 31, had worked at the Gear since leaving school at 12, apart from nearly five years fighting in North Africa and Italy in the Second World War. He spent his entire working life in the freezing works.

But the experience Liam captured is Mum's. She was a natural story teller who, like many Depression-era children, had a great love of books and learning. She came from a strong Labour Party family. Her father, a former seaman and World War 1 veteran, worked on public works projects after the war and Mum grew up in works camps. When she was five, the family moved from the Mangahao Dam, where they had lived in a house that was half wood, half canvas, to the Khandallah Public Works Camp where her father worked as a railway tunneller on the Johnsonville line and then on relief work. She gave out Party pamphlets around the Khandallah camp with him before Labour's 1935 election victory.

For many years after the event, 1951 was discussed in our home. At family gatherings, the uncles over their flagons and the aunties with their sheries

would debate union militancy, the heroes and villains, and the Labour, National, and Cold War politics of the time. I learnt that “scab” was the vilest name anyone could be given, and that the Tories were anti-worker to their core. Today Dad’s framed 1951 loyalty card sits on my mantelpiece.

Interview

When did it happen?

Well, we had a bit of an idea that the freezing workers would join with the watersiders because there had been quite a bit of trouble on the wharves. The watersiders wanted extra pay for overtime and they wanted extra money for unloading lampblack. A lot of the bags they were unloading were broken open. They had a lot of lime in them, it was a very dirty job.

They wanted extra money for that and of course the shipowners didn't want to pay them. Well there was a lot of arguing going on about it; actually they were giving them the orders, they weren't negotiating properly with the union, they were ordering them to do this, ordering them to do that and ultimately the watersiders got pretty fed up with it. They asked other union branches to, you know, help them, encourage them and back them up, and ultimately the freezing workers agreed they were being unfairly treated so they would go out on strike in support of the watersiders.

At the time I was very sick, I was pregnant with my second child and I was in the hospital when my husband came up and told me they had gone on strike. He was at the Gear Company. We all thought it would be over in about a fortnight. Well, we were all quite wrong about it because it went for 151 days. That's a long time.

How did you feel when Jack first told you they were going out on strike?

Well, I wasn't surprised about it, but I wasn't happy about him being on strike. But when it came to their principles, well of course they have to uphold them and that's it. I just thought, “Oh well, we'll manage, it won't be very long anyway”. But the time went on and on and on and things became quite difficult with no money coming in.

Eventually the strike committee had to pay out a certain amount of money every week, 25 shillings a week we would get, for groceries. Now that wasn't very much. That groceries' order had to be used at a little shop designated by the strike committee. We were getting low on vegetables and that from the garden; tomatoes were still growing and onions so they were useful but the 25 shillings wasn't really enough. Eventually the strike committee made arrangements with farmers in the Wairarapa to supply us with meat. That was illegal but the farmers were somewhat in sympathy with us at the time. The freezing workers in Waingawa would cut up the meat and send it over in trucks and they would use the farmers sheds because they couldn't use the works.

The farmers were very good, that was very decent of them to do that. They would bring the meat over in trucks, over the Rimutakas, down to Lower Hutt where they had a distribution centre which would supply the families of the strikers with the meat and also some vegetables to supplement the groceries.

Was that enough?

No, I don't know how families kept going on it, it wasn't enough.

So how did you manage?

Eventually we had to borrow money from my mother-in-law to pay things like electricity and the rent, things that you really needed to have. I also had a very good grocer. I used to go down to the telephone booth—we didn't have phones at home—and ring my grocer in Moera. He would deliver my groceries before the strike and I would pay him straight away. So when the strike committee gave us the voucher I said to him, "I'm very sorry but you probably know that Jack's on strike and we only get the 25 shilling voucher from the committee and that's not enough to keep the family going". He said, "Oh yes, I know about that". And he said, "I want to tell you something Mrs Martin. If it wasn't for people like you I could not keep open because your money is there every week and if there is anything you need at all, don't hesitate. And you don't need to pay me for it now, just ring me and I'll bring it over to you and don't worry about the money, just wait till the strike is over and you're well and truly on your feet because it's customers like you who keep this shop open".

Some of his customers used to go to the Trentham Races and it wasn't unusual for them to owe him six weeks' pay for the groceries. He was very, very kind to offer me the chance to get what I needed and it was good of him. I mean not many people would do that.

Did it ever look like Jack was going to have to go back to work?

Oh no, you would never stop the strike, no, no, good heavens I'd have left him. You know what the name is for someone who stops the strike, don't you? A scab.

How did you feel about the scab unions?

I was very annoyed about them. In fact I was very annoyed with Jack's office manager at the freezing works because he came to my door one afternoon and tried to persuade me to ask Jack to go back to work while the strike was still on. The reason he wanted me to do that, so he said, was because I was pregnant. And I said, "There is no way that because I am pregnant I would ask him to be a scab". Well he didn't like that very much at all, but that was my feelings and I was very annoyed about it.

The men that did work on the wharves during the strike were in a very bad position, they were very stupid to have done what they did. All along the wharves they had those big iron fences all covered in canvases so the people going past would not see the men who were working, not only the servicemen but the scabs as well. There was one young man there who took Jack's job at the freezing works during the strike but he didn't last long once the strike was over. He was out of it.

Once everyone went back to work did most of the scab labour leave?

Oh gradually, gradually they all got out.

They weren't very popular then?

No, they couldn't live with themselves. They'd have 'scab' written right across their house with paint when they got up in the morning.

Did anyone you know personally scab?

Yes, I knew one young lad, he was about 16 and his father insisted on him going back to work. He had to carry that name for the rest of his life and I felt very sorry for him because he was only a boy. His father did him a very bad turn.

Why do you think the Government was so extreme?

Well they were a National government, they had no time for unions. They brought in laws that people could be imprisoned for helping strikers, they weren't allowed to have any news come over about the strikers, in the papers or over the air in case people sympathised with them.

What did you think of Sidney Holland?

Dreadful man! He really was. And his Minister of Labour was even worse. Oh they were dreadful, they really were. They turned New Zealand into a police state during the strike, threatening to imprison people all the time.

Were there a lot of protests, that sort of thing?

Yes, there were protests but the police stopped that sort of thing. They wouldn't have strikers marching, they used their batons on them.

What did Jack do during the day?

Well, there wasn't very much he could do. He did some work around the place, worked around his mother's place, painting that sort of thing. Because they couldn't work during the strike, they weren't allowed to work during the strike, nobody would employ them. They could do voluntary work but they needed money to support their families. It was a very trying time and some of the strikers got very unruly and on edge. They were all very much in the same position really of not enough money coming in, getting into debt. We never recovered from that strike, as far as money goes because we had to pay back money to Jack's mother that we had borrowed. See, you were not paid a great wage in those days. A lot of the men were on edge and you had to be careful about what you said to them. If somebody said the wrong thing they didn't take it well.

Did you ever see any of the violence?

No, I didn't really but then again I was at home most the time. I was still quite sick.

Who were the main people involved, the main leaders?

There was Peter Butler, Toby Hill, quite a few well known ones and they all did their best.

Were you happy they kept the strike going so long?

Yes, I would rather they held on no matter how long it took because I would never, ever ask Jack to forget his principles, no way.

As the unions started going back to work and the employers looked like they'd win, how did you feel?

Well when it was over, I don't know that they had won. They didn't expect the men to stay out as long as they did, they lost a lot of goodwill, especially over the attitude of police and the law. The whole strike was over in July and I'll never forget how pleased Jack looked the day after it was over because he was

a worker, he was a person who wanted to work.

A lot of people had no jobs to return to. Did that affect Jack?

No, he got his job back and the company wanted him to join the staff which meant if there was ever another strike he could stay with the company and get paid, he didn't have to go out and he felt he had done his share so he did join.

How did you keep up with what was happening with the strike?

They had a lot of meetings, the strikers would have meetings.

Did you ever go to those?

No, it wasn't for the wives, it was for the men. There is one thing I will say. The wives, when there's a strike, they suffer every bit as much as the men do because they are worried, they're trying to keep the house going, make sure the family's fed on very little. They get into debt and it's very, very hard.

The men don't realise how hard it was on the wives and when I look at their card that says "STOOD LOYAL RIGHT THROUGH" and is signed by the trade union officials, I think, "Now, why wasn't there one for women?" Because the wives all talked, they all knew how hard it was. Even now when there is a strike on I always think, "Well, I wonder how the wives are getting on", and I have supported some of them.

During the strike did the wives get together?

Well, we used to meet in the Plunket rooms or out shopping and talk it over, say who's gone back in and some would say, "My husband wants to go back in", and some would say, "My husband would never go back in". We used to discuss all that sort of thing and when they said they wanted to go back, I would say, "He is going to let down the rest of the men who have been out all this time and he's going to let himself down and his family down too".

There were very few of them who went back really. The men never forgot a man who went back and the time would come when they would see the man out and they would say, well they weren't allowed to call a man a scab so they invented a nickname, "McNab". Well that's a bit unfair on all the McNabs in the country but that's what they would say instead of scab, because that was against the law. Once you were a scab you were always a scab.

Did you feel proud that Jack stayed out so long?

Yes I was, but I did feel sympathy for that young man who was pushed back into it by his father. Jack didn't look on him as a scab, he knew he was pushed back into it by his father. He was only a kid and we spoke to him, he was the only one we ever would speak to. If he was older and his father wasn't like that it might never have happened to him, it may never have affected his whole life.

What does the strike mean to you now?

Well I think at least they showed these big shipping companies that they could stay out because they were used to putting their foot down on anybody's neck and keeping it there, they didn't want to pay for all that dirty lampblack work. When Jack did go back to work I was about six weeks off having Kay and there were so many things I needed for her. Normally you would buy two or three dozen nappies, but I had to buy them in a long roll and cut them to size then sew them all up so I would have enough for her. When I was at the hospital

the nurse asked me did I have this and that and when I said no, she asked, “Why haven't you got them?” I said we didn't have any money, my husband's been out on strike and she said, “Well he shouldn't have been”, and I told her it's a matter of principle and she said, “Well what about you and the baby?” And I said, “Well it's his baby too”, and I said I wouldn't interfere in that way. If he felt he should be on strike then he should be on strike and I was quite agreeable to it.

This interview is held in the National Library.

REVIEWS

If you have material you think we should review, or are interested in reviewing for us, then contact the reviews editor at reviews@lhp.org.nz

Truth

Toby Boraman

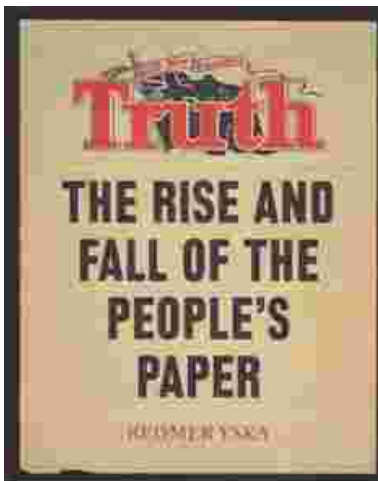
Truth: The Rise and Fall of the People's Paper. Redmer Yska. Craig Potton Publishing Ltd, 2010, 205pp.

Why review a vulgar tabloid that claimed to be ‘the people’s paper’ while at the same time indulging in nasty union bashing, work shirker hating, communist baiting, protester loathing, feminist detesting, and classical ‘page-three girl’ sexism? Yet *NZ Truth* was not always a crude (yet popular) tool of the conservative establishment to propagate its views. From its establishment in 1905, *NZ Truth* was a left populist paper that can probably be considered the best-selling leftish paper in New Zealand history—although its leftism was mixed with racism (like much of the left of the time) and a sensationalist focus on divorce court proceedings and the like.

Viewed from this right-wing era when the press is almost universally neo-liberal, it is astonishing that right up to the early 1920s the *NZ Truth* was generally sympathetic to radical politics—including revolutionary syndicalism—and militant strikers, and pioneered consumer advocacy and investigative journalism into profiteering capitalists.

NZ Truth became largely supportive of the first Labour Government, before continuing its drift further to right in the post WWII period, especially after some conservative Wellington capitalists got hold of the rag. They launched a crusade that even went to the extent of shock! horror! ‘exposing’ some social democratic politicians for investigating the possibility of nationalising some industries during the third Labour Government.

Yska, as he coyly admits, was a former reporter for the *NZ Truth* in the 1970s and 1980s. His book starts off in a rip-roaring fashion with a delightful story of internal tensions within *NZ Truth* in the 1970s. At the same time editor Russell Gault was rabidly trotting out his pro-Muldoon union-bashing line, he was battling staunch unionists within *NZ Truth* itself whom he disparagingly dubbed ‘the Marx brothers’. This gave me the impression the book was going to examine some of the fascinating internal contradictions within *NZ Truth*.



Indeed, Yska claims he will examine the ‘office politics and internal forces that shaped Truth’ (p. 11). However, his main focus is on the editorial and proprietorial cliques that ran the paper, with journalists and others on the shop floor popping up now and then to play a bit-part role. Yet this focus is understandable given that the paper ran for over 100 years (1905-c.2009) and the mind-boggling amount of research that was required, and most importantly that the paper was largely shaped by those at the top.

This is a general, sweeping history of *NZ Truth*, which Yska achieves well. Given my own biases, I would have preferred to see more material on the period when *NZ Truth* was left populist in its early days, and more explanation offered as to why it lurched to the right, or why it stood out amongst the press in supporting radical causes. Yska’s primary explanation for this is to focus on the change of ownership from the notorious Australian left-wing capitalist John Norton to his more conservative son Ezra Norton. Yska argues that in 1922 Ezra wished to make the paper more profitable by ditching the radical politics and gaining a wider readership by going more mainstream (for example, by having greater sport coverage, and appealing to women), while continuing the tradition of focussing on scandal, sex and divorce cases. This explanation, while obviously true, seems to me a bit incomplete as it does not examine the wider context of the time.

For example, before WWI when class tensions in New Zealand were probably at their historic zenith and there was a popular radical movement, it was easier for a populist anti-wowserist paper to appear on the stands and attempt to cosy up to (and profit from) that working-class larrikin-like element (and reproduce its racism, as well). When class tensions died down after a brief upsurge following the Russian revolution of 1917 and the second wave of syndicalism after WWI, radical politics lost popularity. Thus it became easier for *NZ Truth* to ditch its revolutionary socialist editor Robert Hogg.

Yska poses an important question: he believes *NZ Truth* reflected working class culture better than other publications, including leftist ones, which ironically tend to be alienated from the masses they purport to support. That is, people bought the paper right from the start mainly for its lurid diet of sex, divorce and crime stories, rather than its politics in both its left and right wing phases.

Did *NZ Truth* then reflect its working class readership? Or did it attempt to manufacture consent from above by inculcating a fairly rabid capitalist ideology and cultural conformity, especially from the post WWII period onwards? Probably both. *NZ Truth* can be used to justify the two main schools of thought regarding the conservatism of New Zealand workers. The first generally claims that New Zealand workers are inherently moderate or conservative and have a strong ‘reactionary’ streak (as evident in the post WWII history of *NZ Truth*). The second claims that history is not set in stone—the working class has radical potential, and that periodically a large-ish minority of that class support militant action (as evident in *NZ Truth* before 1922). I much prefer the latter view. But I concede that overall the truth is probably somewhere in the murky grey area in between, given the impossibly contradictory and complex nature of working-class life, and how left and right wing views within that class generally wax and wane according to the level of class struggle and social dissent in society.

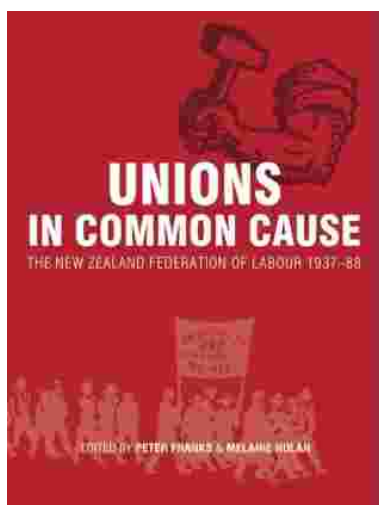
Overall, this book is crisply written and has a nice narrative flow throughout.

I have to admit the times I've researched *NZ Truth* in the 1960s and 1970s I found the paper a bit of a joke: short, superficial, violent, lacking in content, and full of ludicrous assertions such as blaming the 1979 general strike on 'communists' within the unions (rather than that strike being the product of the discontent over falling living standards of hundreds of thousands of workers). Yska does a good job in attempting to rescue *NZ Truth* from allegations it was a just a dumb tabloid by stressing it was innovative and irreverent, and dug up stories other papers did not. But he does not see the paper with rose-tinted glasses, establishing its close links with the SIS in the post-war period, and documenting its sexism, racism, and near hysterical tirades against protesters and socialists, as well as its often shoddy journalism. I would have preferred more in-depth analysis, but the book does not set out to do that. Yska ably achieves what he set out to do in providing 'an accessible, popular work that captures the salty flavour of the paper itself' (p. 11).

Unions in Common Cause

James Keating

Unions In Common Cause: The New Zealand Federation of Labour 1937–88. Peter Franks and Melanie Nolan (eds). Wellington: Steele Roberts Aotearoa, 2011, 224pp.



The New Zealand Federation of Labour (FOL), it seems, is a victim of the condescension of history. Despite its longevity (1937-88) and apparent efficacy (during those years income inequalities in New Zealand were reduced to the lowest margins on record), it remains overshadowed by its smaller, militant predecessor, the 'Red Feds' (New Zealand Federation of Labour 1908-14). In this new collection, *Unions In Common Cause*, editors Peter Franks and Melanie Nolan seek a systematic re-examination of the FOL, an institutional history that extends beyond the decisions and biographies of its leaders. Rejecting the criticism of unionists who sought immediate gains as 'conservative and uninteresting', Nolan and Franks argue that the history of the FOL needs to be understood within the shifting social, cultural, and economic milieu of post-war New Zealand.

Unions in Common Cause arose from the November 2007 conference celebrating the 70th anniversary of the FOL, and its chapters are organised chronologically, beginning with the arrival of Peter Fraser in 1911. Erik Olssen begins, skilfully interweaving the institutional and ideological precursors to the FOL. Although many of the inter-war organisations 'failed', he argues that they incubated cadres of activists, and kept alive the vision of a powerful industrial union movement intimately involved in Labour politics.

In his chapter, Peter Franks documents the debates between these activists in 1937, when the previously fragmented labour movement coalesced around an umbrella organisation that gave workers an important and influential voice.

Despite the editors' decision to transcend the focus on leadership, the enmities, opinions, and personalities of union leaders are never far from centre stage. The feud between Seamen's Union president F.P. Walsh and Waterside Workers Federation secretary 'Big Jim' Roberts, unravelled across 14 issues of the *Evening*

Post, contextualises the ferocious debates that lit up the unity conference from which the FOL was formed in April 1937. Yet, as Franks carefully notes, the controversy and vituperation that marked the conference did not overshadow its achievement, the creation of a central organisation that united most New Zealand unionists.

Melanie Nolan, in her ironically titled chapter on the ‘Walsh Years’, seeks to move beyond the shadow of a personality large enough to cloud historians’ assessment of the wider policy issues that the Federation faced. Chief among these in its first three decades were raising the standard of living, and the dramatic increase of women’s participation in the workforce. In a detailed and nuanced fashion, the chapter clearly outlines shifting dynamics within the labour movement and the mounting pressures on the complex post-war wage-fixing system fostered by the Federation, governments and employers alike.

The last 20 years of the Federation’s history, examined by Ray Markey, saw the organisation struggle to provide leadership to the union movement amidst economic turmoil, social change and, by the late 1980s, major structural reform. Economic difficulties encouraged greater co-operation between the FOL and public sector unions, eventually resulting in the Federation’s amalgamation with the Combined State Unions. Yet, as Markey relates in his dense chapter, the ‘collective movement power’ amassed by the combined unions could not disguise the erosion of structural links with the state, compounded in 1991 by the Employment Contracts Act.

Fittingly, for a book concerned with grounding the Federation within its social and cultural context, the final chapter is an edited (and annotated) transcript of a fascinating panel discussion held at the 2007 conference, with prominent trade unionists reminiscing about the transition from the FOL to the Council of Trade Unions in 1987.

A product of the long collaboration between the CTU and the Labour History Project, *Unions in Common Cause* makes extensive use of the council’s photographic archive, and the text is peppered with snappy vignettes that accompany images of important moments and figures in New Zealand’s labour history. Although by no means a systematic account, *Unions in Common Cause*, the first book on the Federation of Labour since Bert Roth’s *Trade Unions in New Zealand: Past and Present* in 1973, is a thoughtful, incisive, and welcome contribution to the historiography. Hopefully, as its editors desire, it will inspire further engagement with New Zealand trade union institutions.

Slouching Toward Bethlehem

Peter Clayworth

Slouching Toward Bethlehem: A Life Story of Robert Muldoon by *Dean Parker*. Performed by the *Bacchanals* at *Bats Theatre*, Wellington, 31 August - 10 September 2011. Directed by *David Lawrence*.

‘The most evil New Zealand Prime Minister ever.’ Such was the by-line advertising *Slouching Toward Bethlehem*, Dean Parker’s thoroughly entertaining drama on the rise and fall of Robert David Muldoon. Certainly that was how we saw



Muldoon where I grew up in Stoke, Nelson. As schoolboys my mate Graeme and I had a picture of the PM we knew as Piggy placed squarely in the middle of our dart board, an action commended by most adults we knew. Growing up in the era of the dancing cossacks, the SIS Bill, Think Big and the Springbok Tour, Muldoon was for us the Enemy; opposition to him was automatic. When our 1984 deliverance from his rule was turned into the betrayal of the working class through Rogernomics, such youthful certainties were thrown to the wind.

Despite the 'evil' advertising blurb, the Muldoon portrayed in Parker's *Bethlehem* is not the one-dimensional melodrama villain of my youth. Nor is he the 'cuddly Muldoon' that some people began to construct as Rob did the Time Warp while the Rogernomes sold off the family silver. Director David Lawrence and the players of the Bacchanals presented a many-sided portrayal of Muldoon. They gave us a degree of understanding for the man, without covering up or excusing his many brutal and megalomaniac actions.

Phil Grieve was wonderfully convincing in the role of Rob Muldoon. A fine achievement when you consider that, before this play, David McPhail's caricature was almost more familiar than Muldoon's own performance of the role. (It was even said that in his later years Muldoon himself came increasingly to resemble McPhail's Muldoon). Grieve regaled members of the audience with such accusatory lines as 'Are you a teacher?', taking us back to the days of Muldoon's roadshows. Such election campaign oratory and demolition of hecklers is now largely gone, its last gasp being the glory days of Muldoon and his nemesis David Lange. Grieve brilliantly and eerily channelled the polarisation between 'Rob's mob' and the 'pommies, commies, poofters and stirrers'.

Bethlehem has elements of classical Greek drama with the Bacchanals acting as a chorus of characters through the stages of Muldoon's life. The members of the chorus swapped roles throughout the performance, playing everyone from a range of National and Labour politicians, Tom Skinner, Sam Hunt, yuppie socialites, reporters, protesters, Mickey Mouse waltzing with Rob at Disneyland and a thoroughly evil conglomerate Brierley monster. Fortunately for the audience, characters were always clearly signposted, sometimes literally, so we could work out who was who.

There was a Shakespearean element in the structure of the play, with the phases of Muldoon's career presented in three Acts; 'Pretender', 'Prince' and 'King.' The Greek and Shakespearean elements were appropriate for what was in effect an unfolding tragedy, of which we, the audience, know the outcome but the players involved do not.

In 'Pretender' we see the young Rob growing up through the hard times of the 1930s. Over the breakfast table of their staunch Methodist household, Muldoon has his first political education witnessing the ideological clash between his dedicated socialist grandmother, Jerusha Browne, and his individualist capitalist uncle Wally Browne. Rob's doting mother tries to protect him from the reality of his father's breakdown and incarceration in an asylum. Harassed by bullies over his 'loony' dad, Rob fights back. The stropky fighting spirit he shows becomes part of the bully he himself becomes. The feel of the times is brought out by the old Methodist sacred song, 'Will there be any stars in my crown?', which is reprised in a telling way with Muldoon's passing at the end of the play.

In 'Prince', the 'rough beast,' the populist Muldoon, is contrasted to the patrician elements of the old National Party, as represented by Norma Holyoake, (Kirsty Bruce), and 'Gentleman' Jack Marshall (Andrew Goddard). Marshall, officer to Muldoon's corporal during the war, is portrayed as Julius Caesar, taken out by Muldoon's coup. Rob goes on to dance with the devil, as represented by the advertising agency Colenso, of 'dancing cossacks' fame.

The final act, 'King', has Muldoon in power, effectively using his power to destroy those in his path. Colin Moyle is ousted through the notorious smear campaign. Muldoon emerges as the victor in a boxing match with the trade union movement. This is the man who twice threatened to use the Public Safety Conservation Act to avert strikes. Yet both Muldoon and the FOL are shown as emerging from a milieu which will be swept away after 1984. The monster of Brierleys, appearing at one stage of the action, is a portent of things to come. Muldoon is opposed not just by the unions and Labour MPs, but also by the 'trendy lefties' emerging during the '60s and '70s. A motley collection of puppets sing for us the Red Flag Bush Band's rollicking little number 'the Little Corporal', celebrating Rob's defence of the country from an array of stirrers and trouble makers. As always though, the greatest danger comes from within. Just as Rob has overthrown his former leader Jack Marshall, so it is the plotters within his own camp who finally roll the defeated Muldoon from his leadership of the Nats.

Brianne Kerr convincingly played the long suffering Thea, 'Tam'. She provided a constant presence through most of the play, in contrast to the role swapping chorus. Thea evolves from the bright eyed young Nat and admirer of Rob, to a disillusioned but resigned consort who has witnessed a string of infidelities and drunken behaviour. Muldoon is shown to be destroyed to a large extent by his own flaws, as drink, womanising and dictatorial behaviour cloud his judgement. Yet we also see glimpses of true humanity, such as when he invites his driver Athol in for a feed to the family home.

Slouching Toward Bethlehem is more of a character study than a history play. Some of the most significant events of Muldoon's reign are completely ignored. There is no sign of Think Big, the Springbok Tour, or his fraught relationship with Marilyn Waring. Perhaps a melodramatic serial rather than a one-hour play would be the only way to fully encompass the sweep of the Muldoon era. Yet as a character study, *Bethlehem* was deeply worthwhile. While the play shines a light on many of the actions by which Muldoon brought himself and the country down, it presents a believable portrait of how the man came to be as he was. For those of us on the left who wish to understand labour history, it is as important to understand the Massey's, Sid Holland's and Rob Muldoon's; the farmers, employers and neo-liberals, as it is the story of workers and their organisations. Perhaps a well thought out and researched fictional work such as *Bethlehem* can give a deeper understanding of a personality than may be achieved by a factual biography. Dean Parker, David Lawrence, Phil Grieve and the Bacchanals are to be congratulated for a play that entertains with insight.



What is the Labour History Project?

The struggle for workers' rights has a long history in Aotearoa New Zealand. Trade unions and the fight for a fair society are important strands of our national story. Many major historical events have their roots in labour-related issues. These have also been key influences on national politics and the evolution of New Zealand society. Labour history connects New Zealand to the world. Work has been a prime factor in our migration history and local unions (and related groups) have important links overseas.

Much of New Zealand's labour history, however, remains undocumented and unpublished. The social history of work in New Zealand has been relatively neglected by historians. Without a more accessible labour heritage, we overlook important ways of understanding New Zealand's past and present, and vital perspectives on where we are heading.

In 1987 the Trade Union History Project (TUHP) was formed by historians, trade unionists and political activists to help document New Zealand labour history. Initially established with state funding, since 1991 the organisation has relied upon volunteer resources, donations, and occasional publishing grants. In 2008 the TUHP changed its name to the Labour History Project (LHP) to better reflect the range of member interests. The LHP is an energetic and independent incorporated society. It has over 150 individual and institutional members and maintains links with affiliated organisations such as the Auckland Labour History Group, trade unions, libraries, museums, academics, and counterpart groups overseas. It is the only national organisation dedicated to fostering New Zealand labour history and cultivating an important part of our collective memory. The Labour History Project has no affiliation with the New Zealand Labour Party or any other political party.

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