



# Labour History Project

"AN INJURY TO ONE IS A CONCERN TO ALL"

NEWSLETTER 47 — OCTOBER 2009

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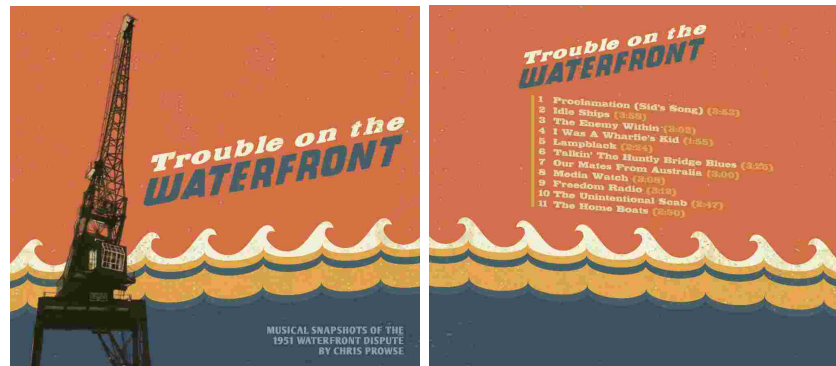
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## REVIEW

**Trouble on the Waterfront**

Chris Prowse's songs are reviewed here by David Grant, who edited *The Big Blue: Snapshots of the 1951 Waterfront Lockout*, which was part of the inspiration for the songs.

Wellington guitarist/songwriter and LHP member Chris Prowse has written a musical based on the 1951 waterfront lockout. Called *Trouble on the Waterfront* it will soon be released on a CD and later in the year he will perform it with a group of musicians in a theatrical production.

The origins of the project were two-fold. Firstly, Prowse came across a photo on the website NZ History Online, of ships lying idle in Wellington Harbour during the lockout. Later, he found a copy of *The Big Blue: Snapshots of the 1951 Waterfront Lockout* in the Wellington City Library. Stories from *The Big Blue* gave him the inspiration for writing the songs, gathering musicians around him, and performing the songs with them for the CD. A second stimulus was personal. He spent some of his childhood listening to his father tell of experiences as an engineer on coasters in the 1950s - including during the period of the lockout - which had a big impact on him. Chris Prowse has a particular distaste for the constraints on the civil liberties of watersiders, sympathisers and families during the dispute as well as the strict censorship imposed on the locked-out men when they sought to publicise their cause. Several of the songs address the issue of civil liberties and censorship.

Prowse also used historical audio as part of his contemporary songs. Speeches by Sid Holland and Jock Barnes sourced from Radio New Zealand Archives have been used on a couple of songs on the album. Well-known broadcasters Sharon Crosbie and Tom Frewen have added their voices to another of the songs.

Collaborating with Prowse on the album were some well-known

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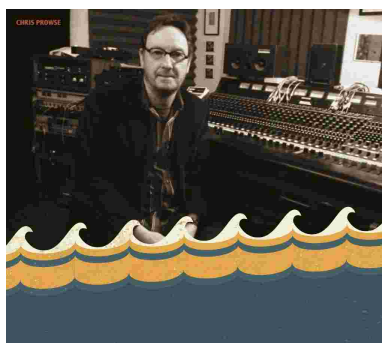
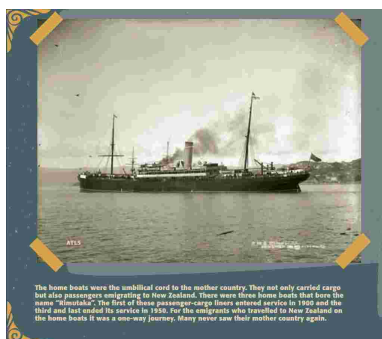
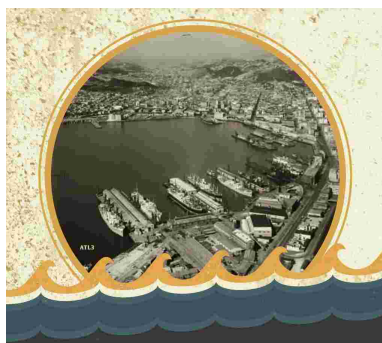
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LHP membership, activities,  
publications and news, see  
the website: [www.lhp.org.nz](http://www.lhp.org.nz).





TOP 1-3: CD booklet pages from *Trouble on the Waterfront*.

ABOVE: Chris Prowse

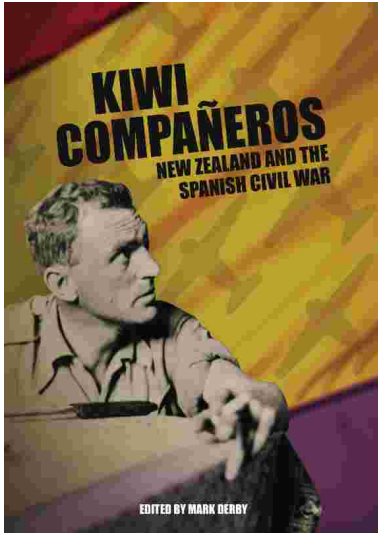
singers and musicians including Bill Hickman (guitar/vocals) of The Shot Band, Prowse's daughter Eva (violin/vocals) and Tessa Rain (vocals) of Fly My Pretties (whose recent album *A Story* was the biggest seller in New Zealand); Andrew Delahunty (harmonica) of The Windy City Strugglers; bass player Gil Eva Craig; songwriter and performer Arthur Baysting, and Darren Mathiassen who is renowned for his drumming with Hollie Smith and Trinity Roots. Prowse produced the album which was recorded in a number of studios around Wellington after which the master recording and artwork went to Stebbings Studios in Auckland for manufacture. It will be released by Ode Records in October.

Songs include *Proclamations* (Sid's song), *Idle Ships*, *The Enemy Within* (based on Sid Holland's infamous comment), *I Was a Wharfie's Kid* (based on Sandra Lee's comment in *The Big Blue*), *Our Mates from Australia*, (an Aussie Seaman recalls: 'It was our boys who introduced cold beer on tap at the Britomart.'), *Talkin' The Huntly Footbridge Blues*, *The Unintentional Scab*, *Standing Side by Side* (for the Women's Auxiliary), *Radio Freedom* and *Clyde Quay Knees Up*.

Chris Prowse has a long musical pedigree, first performing as a teen in Wellington coffee bars such as Chez Paree and the Matterhorn in the late 1960s. More recently, as well as solo work and 'musical adventures' such as this, he has worked with blues singer Marg Layton in many gigs and accompanied her on her album *Trouble & Satisfaction*. He has worked too, with his daughter Eva, performing with her on her recent EP *Five Songs*. Outside music he runs an accountancy/consultancy practice specialising in broadcasting, film and the performing arts. He is a board member of the New Zealand Film Production Fund Trust, a director of Red Rocks Records Ltd, chairperson of the board of trustees at the Hannah Playhouse Trust, and a part-time tutor for the Bachelor of Performing Arts degree at Toi Whakaari: New Zealand Drama School.

LHP members can purchase the CD *Trouble on the Waterfront* direct from Proco Productions for the special price of \$25. Send a cheque to Proco Productions, PO Box 9030, Wellington, or email your postal address to and deposit \$25 by internet to Proco Productions at BNZ Account 020560 0018591 00. Chris and some of the other musicians will be performing some of the songs following Dick Scott's Rona Bailey Memorial Lecture at Toi Whakaari: New Zealand Drama School on 3 December 2009. Copies of the CD will be on sale at the venue.

— David Grant



## REVIEW

## Kiwi Compañeros: New Zealand and the Spanish Civil War

*Kiwi Compañeros: New Zealand and the Spanish Civil War*. Edited by Mark Derby. Canterbury University Press, 2009.

A short time ago, King Juan Carlos and Queen Sofia of Spain visited New Zealand for the first time in 21 years. I had the pleasure of sitting at the state banquet held in their honour. While I was sitting there, quietly reflecting on how little I knew or understood about the history of modern Spain, across the oddly-shaped Banquet Hall at Parliament I spotted Mark Derby and was reminded of his book, *Kiwi Compañeros: New Zealand and the Spanish Civil War*. As a member of the then Trade Union History Project, now Labour History Project, I remembered how he had led a symposium on the subject of this book back in 2006. *'Kiwi Compañeros'* has emerged from that symposium after a time of careful nurturing.

This riveting collection of biographical narrative, oral history, polemic and analysis does not look on the face of it to be an essential contribution to New Zealand's labour history, rooted as that so frequently has been in our indigenous industrial and political struggles here in Aotearoa/New Zealand. What has the Spanish Civil War to do with the 1890 Maritime Strike, the 1912 Waihi Strike, the 1913 General Strike or the 1951 Waterfront Lockout? Quite simply — everything.

The Spanish Civil War was fought from 1936 to 1939. It began with a military revolt, supported by conservative elements in Spanish society, including the Catholic Church, against the Republican government. That government itself had emerged from a long period of tumult under the dictatorship of Miguel Primo de Rivera. Poverty and illiteracy had provoked republicanism but the resulting coalition government was never going to be a permanent political feature if the monarchists and interested army officers had their way.

It became a battle between wealthy landowners, the church, army officers and right-wing parties, led by General Francisco Franco, on one side, and a coalition of left Republicans, socialists and communists on the other — the Nationalists versus the Republicans. To that extent it mirrored every conflict there has ever been of right and left wing ideologies: the privileged, supported by vast pervasive institutions whose vested interests seek to maintain the status quo, ranged against the disadvantaged and powerless who are fighting

for justice, expressed in a more liberal and egalitarian society.

This was the first time a truly international brigade of soldiers and auxiliary medical forces had come together because of deeply held convictions. Forty thousand volunteers arrived eventually, from more than 50 countries. The Nationalists, supported by Hitler and Mussolini, represented fascism. The Republicans represented equality and freedom. That characterisation was enough to call men and women from around the world, including from New Zealand, to travel to and fight in a war which represented every class war ever fought, from the Maritime Strike in 1890 to the Waterfront Lockout in 1951. That is the link with New Zealand labour history.

It is hard to do this book justice in a brief review. Its scope is ambitious to say the least. It begins with a foreword from Marcos Gómez, the Ambassador of Spain to New Zealand, an unusual feature in itself. It briefly outlines the tragic course of the war and moves into short histories of people who fought and attended the fighting. The combination of biography and oral history makes the personal accounts particularly gripping. Sometimes the manner of the writing, such as Dean Parker's vivid account of Tom Spiller's life and times, makes it read more like a novel than a work of nonfiction.

There is something for everyone here: committed Communists who voted to execute those Republicans who gave up under the relentless and well-resourced power of the Nationalist forces; women and men who went as nurses and surgeons to tend the wounded Republicans; men who started out as conservatives and ended up as socialists because of the events of the war; unintentional soldiers who describe with shocking frankness their abhorrence of the killing; soldiers who went back and back to fight, because it was all they knew, having enlisted so young in what sounded from afar like a glorious war; and disillusioned idealists.

There are accounts of atrocities and cruelty, the stuff of wars. There are schisms and divisions amongst the left wing forces as socialists, communists and anarchists contested ideas, tactics, ideologies, loyalties. People entered the war with one set of beliefs and exited with entirely another. There is a homosexual Spanish poet of great renown, Federico García Lorca, who was 'disappeared' with 'two bullets in his "back side" as a fitting punishment for a "queer".' There is Greville Texidor, the Militia Woman and many more besides, each with human stories.

But as well as all of that, this book provides historical reflection and analysis. It is not only biographical. It is also about politics,

international relations, and organisations with interests. It tackles the role of the trade union movement, both within New Zealand and internationally. It highlights the roles of the New Zealand Communist Party and Labour Party in shaping the government's equivocal position on the war in Spain. The Labour Party took a more vigorous position than its government. This book also examines the part played by the Catholic Church in supporting the Nationalists, reflected in tensions within the New Zealand Labour Party because of the importance of the Catholic vote.

It is the variety of this work which makes it endlessly interesting. It is vast in scope but accessible at the same time. It is unified by subject, not by discipline or academic field. It would have been useful to have the author of each chapter listed in the contents because they become difficult to find by author later, but the endnotes, the list of names of New Zealanders who fought in the war, the glossary and the index are all hallmarks of a professional, well-researched effort. Derby and the contributors have added to our understanding of ourselves as human beings and as New Zealanders from this effort.

— Maryan Street, labour historian and Member of Parliament.

#### REVIEW

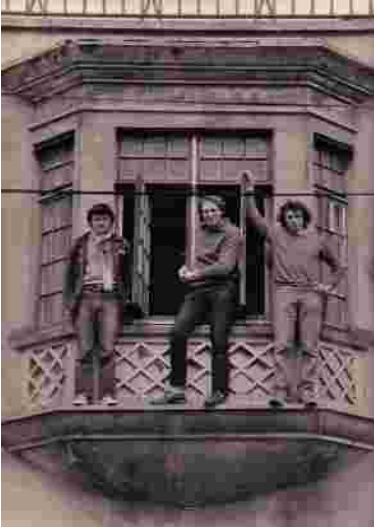
## **A Better World is Possible: 30 Years of Vanguard Films**

*Alex Burton of the New Zealand Film Archive, and LHP Committee member, reviews an outstanding collection of documentaries and other films.*

The New Zealand Film Archive was privileged to host a 30-year retrospective season of films from Wellington-based Vanguard Films in early September this year.

Officially formed in 1979 when the Seamen's Union commissioned Rod Prosser, Alister Barry and Russell Campbell to make a documentary celebrating the Union's hundredth anniversary, Vanguard has been hard at it ever since. The original 'troika' of Rod, Alister and Russell was joined by Shane Loader and Andrea Bosshard in 1988.

Enter 'Vanguard Films' or its associated 'Community Media Trust' into the Film Archive's online catalogue and over 20 film and



documentary titles appear. Enter the individual names of the Vanguard collective into the credits search and you get a further, larger representation of what this group has been up to over the last three decades.

New Zealanders may well be most familiar with Vanguard's more recent productions: Alister Barry's highly-rated trilogy on the New Right experiment since 1984: *Someone Else's Country*, *In a Land of Plenty* and *A Civilised Society*. Russell Campbell's 2005 Film Festival success, *Sedition*, covered the experience of New Zealand conscientious objectors in World War II. Andrea Bosshard and Shane Loader's recent feature film release was *Taking the Waewae Express*.

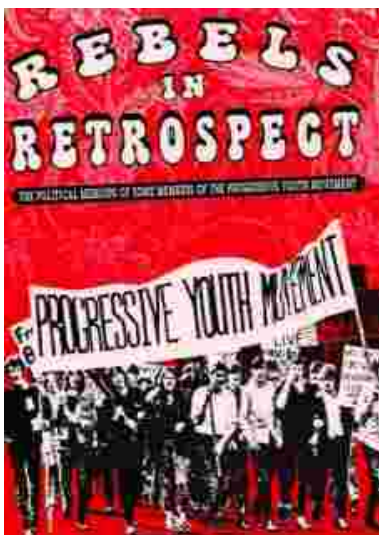
However the whole production list is very diverse and forms essential viewing. Vanguard has consistently ventured into 'difficult' areas of New Zealand's social history, international relations and politics, telling stories that were otherwise unlikely to be told, or worse — told badly.

Their output has been outside the realm of commercialism — all of them have other jobs or sources of income — and the Vanguard operation is based on a cooperative with 'minimalist' funding. Yet it has been able to produce a clear-eyed, superbly researched catalogue of documentary and campaign productions, based on narratives often at odds with the status quo.

This screening retrospective included a reprise of the earliest Vanguard documentary material concerning the union movement: *A Century of Struggle* (1981: a history of the Seamen's Union); *The Hatred Campaign* (1985: the anti-union sentiment evident in New Zealand at the time of unionist Ernie Abbott's murder); *Wildcat* (1981: the story of the timber workers' strike of 1977 and its bitter aftermath); *Kinleith '80* (1982: the successful 12-week strike at the Kinleith Pulp & Paper Mill).

We went offshore with Rod Prosser to the Philippines, where he lived and filmed with the underground revolutionary movement, the New People's Army in *Kasama* (1988) and *The Green Guerillas* (1995: made for German TV and focusing on an indigenous clan trying to save its ancient rain forest).

New Zealand's postwar foreign policy and nuclear stance came under the blowtorch in the wonderful *Islands of the Empire* (1985) and Shane Loader's co-operative effort with Martin Long *No Spy Waihopai* (1988). Also in the same socio-political vein was *Rebels in Retrospect* (1989) Russell Campbell's memorable documentary treatment of the



TOP: Alister Barry, Russell Campbell and Rod Prosser hanging off the Vanguard window ledge, Sydney Street East (now Kate Sheppard Place) in 1982

MIDDLE: *Prospects* Alister Barry/Martin Long (1988)

ABOVE: *Rebels in Retrospect* (1989)



VERY TOP: Vanguard Films Retrospective: Opening Night: Vanguard's Shane Loader and Russell Campbell share some trade talk with the Film Archive's Diane Pivac.

TOP: Alister Barry (right), of the original Vanguard 'troika', dresses up for the occasion.

MIDDLE: Vanguard's Rod Prosser (left) talks to our own Peter Clayworth (LHP Committee member).

ABOVE: Vanguard Films Retrospective Poster.

Progressive Youth Movement, filmed around a reunion of the Christchurch PYM.

The rest of the screening series showed Vanguard's output in the last 15 years with incursions into fictional narrative: Loader's *The Terrorist* (1993), Bosshard's *The Intruder* (1999), and their critically acclaimed feature release *Taking the Waewae Express* (2008). The ground-breaking first documentary *Someone Else's Country* (1996) in Barry's post-rogeromics trilogy was there. Also featured was the excellent *Backroom Troubles* (1997), Bosshard and Loader's documentary about illegal abortion in New Zealand, and *Sedition: the Suppression of Dissent in World War II New Zealand* (2005), Campbell's documentary on conscientious objectors, utilising interviews filmed by him and Barry in 1990.

So this retrospective represents a portion of Vanguard's output over 30 years. It all had an unpromising start when Rod Prosser took out a short term lease on the top floor of a building slated for demolition in 1974 (it and they are still there!). In today's climate a good portion of Vanguard's productions are reaching the film festival circuits, some standard cinema programming, and some squeaking into television programming. For much of its history Vanguard has been pigeon-holed as too polemical, or lacking that required 'balance' for funding or television programming or cinema release.

The Vanguard retrospective shows up just how much of today's documentary making has slipped into a nauseating malaise that purposefully confuses the status quo with 'balance'.

In the end, a balanced view might be that the status quo generally lies. It doesn't just hide certain aspects of the truth, it hides the untenable. Few surprises then that some aspects of the socio-politics highlighted in earlier Vanguard films have become accepted norms, and no surprise that this great crew and another vanguard of filmmakers will be fundamental to our society's wellbeing in years to come.

— Alex Burton

**The following Vanguard titles are available for purchase at the Filmshop:** <http://filmshop.co.nz>.

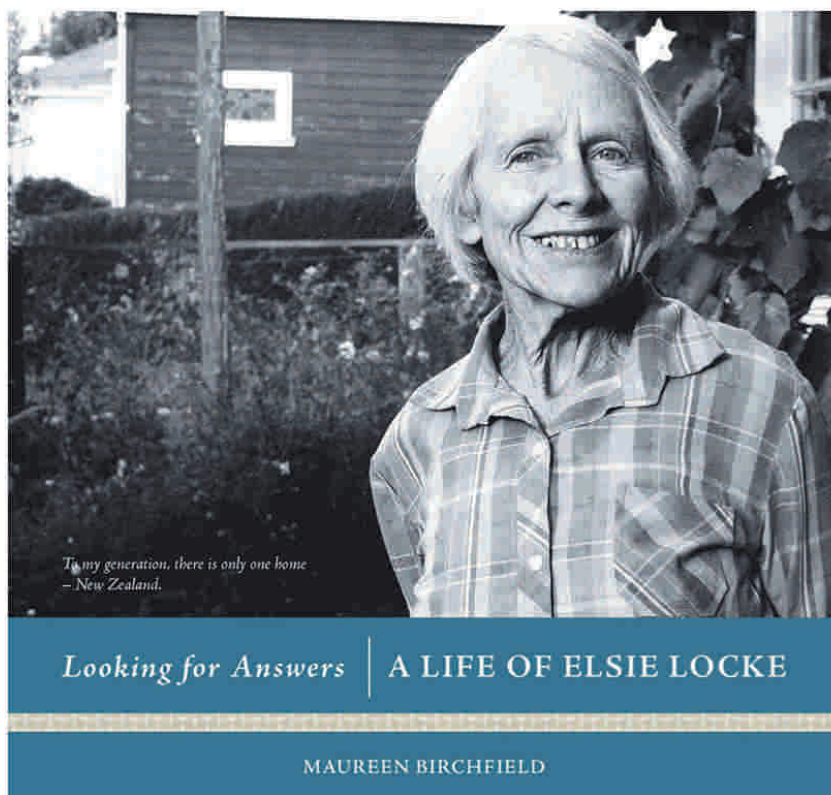
*Wildcat, The Hatred Campaign, Rebels in Retrospect, Green Guerillas, Te Pito o Te Hunua, Someone Else's Country, Backroom Troubles, The Intruder, In a Land of Plenty, Sedition, A Civilised Society, Taking the Waewae Express.*

**Additional information: online only**

For Russell Campbell's fascinating Vanguard Timeline, please email your request to [newsletter@lhp.org.nz](mailto:newsletter@lhp.org.nz).

## REVIEW

## Looking for Answers: A Life of Elsie Locke



*Looking for Answers: A Life of Elsie Locke.* Maureen Birchfield. Canterbury University Press, 2009.

*Charlotte Macdonald, Associate Professor of History at Victoria University of Wellington, reviews a stunning new biography.*

For someone who spent so much of her life working for the collective good, and writing about 'ordinary' people, Elsie Locke might not have approved of a biography on the scale of Maureen Birchfield's magnificent new book. For while she wrote her memoirs (and encouraged others to do so – notably Margaret Thorn, whose work, with Jacquie Matthews, she edited and published in 1997<sup>1</sup>), Elsie was certainly ambivalent about the valorisation she received later in her life. Having her work recognised was one thing; having her life put on a pedestal was something different.

Maureen Birchfield's biography is not a life on a pedestal, but something more powerful and enduring. *Looking for Answers* tells a rich and complex story, and in doing so offers broad insights into contemporary history. It provides a history of the twentieth century as lived by someone who persistently, and insistently, engaged with the major events, dilemmas and ideas which shaped that world.

Elsie was born in 1912, grew up in Waiuku, and died in Christchurch in 2001. Her life spanned almost the whole of the century which Eric Hobsbawm has described as The Age of Extremes.<sup>2</sup> Elsie became politically aware as a student at Auckland University College in the early 1930s, and never ceased to pursue answers to questions of power, justice and conscience. The book's title is taken from her prize-winning essay published in *Landfall* in 1958. Apart from one trip to Canada in 1976, Elsie spent all of her life in New Zealand (and most of it living at the same address in inner Christchurch), yet her engagement was always in the world at large, as well as the world at her gate.

Elsie's political life encompassed 20 or so years as a member of the New Zealand Communist Party – and later disengagement from that membership. This was a passage in her life that was difficult, and at times painful, for her and others to explain, let alone understand. It was one thing to be an advocate for an unpopular cause that subsequently proved popular (such as anti-nuclear, anti-Springbok tour, defending the environment). It was a different thing to have been at the centre of a movement that became less popular, and was much less understood. Birchfield's discussion of this passage of Elsie's life superbly captures the imperatives, and the complications, driving political conviction in the extremes of the 1930s.

*Looking for Answers* also provides a new history of New Zealand and New Zealanders in the twentieth century. Elsie's actions shaped some of that history; she contributed much to creating the historical imagination through which we have come to understand our own society; especially in her writing for children. Her 1965 novel *The Runaway Settlers* is the best known of a substantial body of work.

More than this, Elsie's life as we now have it, gives us a view of New Zealand that gets beyond the predictable narratives and places where History tends to dwell. We have a view of politics and activism from the typewriter, from the hands pulling sheets of paper through the printer and from feet energetically pedalling a bicycle around to distribute pamphlets and papers. With a reputation for speaking directly and acting energetically, Elsie left many trails for a

biographer: soup recipes in one column of *Working Woman* or *Worker's Weekly*, critiques of international policy in another. Far from being a time of quiet domesticity or grey conformity, the 1950s, for Elsie and those close to her, was a decade of tumult and controversy. How many other New Zealand 'housewives' (as she was often described, and which in some ways her life did resemble) wrote to Nikita Khrushchev, the new General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, in 1953?

While the book focuses on Elsie, what emerges from every chapter are many more people who draw our attention: Alice Minchin, the Auckland University College librarian; Emily Gibson, early campaigner for the vote and for peace in World War 1; the much loved and mourned Gordon Watson; the very modern Lois Suckling (co-founder of the Sex Hygiene and Birth Regulation Society); 'Gran' McGowan, doyen of the left; Sid Scott – and many, many more. Elsie outlived many of her contemporaries, living long enough to find herself in later life researching her own past.

*Looking for Answers* gives a wide-ranging study in politics. When Elsie founded *Woman Today*, in 1937, it carried the banner 'Peace, Freedom and Progress'. To many of her political friends at the time that banner was wishy-washy, to others it smelt of subversion. Elsie's political position changed through her life but those goals were ones for which she worked tirelessly – as a socialist, a humanist, a feminist (of the 'up with women rather than down with the men kind' as she described herself), an environmentalist and peace activist. She saw political work in the broadest terms: in what you ate, as well as what you said or believed, how you lived as well as what was enunciated, in the making of the world through song and music, storytelling, poetry, play acting as well as in pamphlets and public meetings.

Birchfield brings to the task of biography all the bonuses of being an 'insider': someone who knew her subject well, and shares a common vocation as a writer and activist, with the skills of an outsider: distance of time and generation, and research expertise. The result is a clear-eyed, warm but always searching account of a life with many branches. The depth of research is evident in the wonderful trove of notes, sources and bibliography, including a listing of Elsie's writing over eight decades in journalism, pamphleteering, history, fiction, poetry, *School Journal* articles and drama. *Looking for Answers'* handsome production by Canterbury University Press has made a book with the story told in words, photographs and documents (many courtesy of the Security Intelligence Service and its predecessors). Elsie Locke famously

never wasted paper, re-using circulars for correspondence and research notes. Every sheaf of her life on the page – *Looking for Answers* – offers value.

— Charlotte Macdonald

#### ENDNOTES:

1 — Margaret Thorn, *Stick Out, Keep Left*. An autobiography of Margaret Thorn, edited by Elsie Locke and Jacqui Matthews, Auckland University Press/Bridget Williams Books, 1997.

2 — Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: a history of the world, 1914-1991*, Michael Joseph: London, 1994. See also Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's twentieth century*, Vintage Books, London, 2000.

## DOING HISTORY

# Keeping secrets and other useful records

*Maureen Birchfield's research for her biography of Elsie Locke (reviewed on page 9) showed the valuable contribution of the Security Intelligence Service to labour history; and the value of keeping records, no matter how dry they may seem.*

I never thought I'd be grateful to the Security Intelligence Service with its devious tactics and shady agents. I was not surprised when my request for access to information on Elsie Locke was declined in 2006. And I wasn't all that optimistic that my appeal to the Ombudsman, following the appointment of a new Director of the New Zealand Security Intelligence Service (SIS), Dr Warren Tucker, would produce a different result. But it did.

In May 2008 I received 220 declassified documents relating to Elsie Locke. Their great value to me, as Elsie's biographer, was that they documented her political, social and cultural activities over at least 30 years. They gave precise dates and times of meetings she attended and listed names of other people present who were of interest to the SIS.

With this information, I was able to provide some substance to periods of Elsie's life about which her memory was hazy, or the conventional record was minimal. One was in the 1950s when she helped found the William Morris Group of entertainers, classified as a Communist-front organisation by the SIS.

Agents' reports ranged from the stolid and plodding to the eloquent and insightful. But even so, for a biographer, the SIS Archive is a

valuable resource.

Other records I found very useful were the minutes of meetings, such as for *Woman Today* magazine and the Sex Hygiene and Birth Regulation Society, during the 1930s. These minutes were written by Elsie in a detailed and revealing way. They expose the factions, conflicts and personalities of those involved. So, to those who advocate skeletal minutes, reduced just to resolutions, think again – a little flesh and substance may provide a rich diet for future biographers.

Similarly, I am thankful that the Anglo American section of the Communist International in Moscow required Communist parties throughout the world to send them minutes of meetings and other documentation, such as reports and correspondence. Thanks to Kerry Taylor, Labour History Project Committee member and researcher into the Communist Party, the Alexander Turnbull Library now has those records available to researchers on microfiche.

And finally, a word to those of you who chuck out personal letters - THINK TWICE. Keep the gems in case their originators become biographers' subjects. I'm grateful that Elsie kept the letters that her friend Guy Harding and her sister Thelma Adams wrote to her when she was in hospital for two years, from 1946 to 1948. The ones Elsie wrote to them no longer exist, but at least I was able to piece together what she was doing and thinking during that period of incarceration. From a prone position, she was very busy and productive, which is why I called that chapter 'Flat Out in Hospital'.

— Maureen Birchfield

## CONFERENCE REPORT

# **Labour History in the New Century**

*A small band of New Zealand labour historians attended this conference of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History in Perth. Peter Franks, LHP Committee member, reports on the highlights.*

An absorbing address by Ann Curthoys about Paul Robeson's 1960 visit to Australia and New Zealand was one of the highlights of the Australian labour history conference which was held in Perth from 8 to 10 July 2009.

Paul Robeson was a famous Afro-American actor, singer and communist. Although it took place during the Cold War, his Australasian tour was a resounding success. His concerts were well attended and his visit was a significant rallying event for the Communist Party, the peace movement, trade unions and the fledgling Aboriginal movement.

Robeson's tour has been commemorated in both countries; for example, it was recalled at the Trade Union History Project's Robeson centennial celebration in 1998. Ann Curthoys' research project is a significant scholarly study. Readers who have information about the New Zealand visit may contact her by email – [ann.curthoys@usyd.edu.au](mailto:ann.curthoys@usyd.edu.au). [Editor's note: See page 28 for Carl Blackmun's account of Robeson in New Zealand.]

Outside the commercial concert programme, Robeson and his wife Eslanda, a distinguished anthropologist, met unionists, peace activists and women's groups. Robeson gave impromptu performances at union meetings; Ann showed a short film clip of him singing for workers on the Sydney Opera house site.

As his Australian tour went on, the Robesons had increasing contact with Aboriginal activists and became better informed about the appalling conditions of their people. Robeson was outspoken about this and promised to return to Australia to campaign for Aborigines' civil rights. Sadly he was unable to do so. Shortly afterward the tour, his health collapsed and he retired from public appearances. In New Zealand, Robeson was critical about the treatment of Māori.

Over 80 people – locals, visitors from out of state and a handful from outside Australia – attended the conference. The Perth Branch's hard-working conference committee is to be congratulated for hosting a well-organised, stimulating and enjoyable event.

The conference opened with a welcome by Kim Collard, a representative of the Nyungar people, the indigenous inhabitants of Perth. In the first plenary session, David Brody, Emeritus Professor at the University of California-Davis, presented a fascinating historical analysis of USA labour law with comparison to Australia. The three key elements of the USA regime were the light-handed role of the state (there was little legislation on collective bargaining until the 1930s), the reliance on judge-made law which has been consistently hostile to unions, and the doctrine of free labour. This dated back to the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment to the USA Constitution which abolished involuntary servitude along with slavery. The courts said that if workers had the absolute right to leave a job, employers had

the absolute right to sack them.

David Brody said that although workers' rights to organise and to bargain have been steadily undermined by the courts, the idea of voluntary collective bargaining is still powerful in America. Union contracts provide significantly higher wages and benefits and do the work of social justice for American workers. The brutal reality is that union density is only 7.5%. One of the difficulties in campaigning for change in the United States was that there was no political narrative to describe the evolution of labour law. Unlike Australia there wasn't a series of public, contested legislative changes; just hundreds of anti-union court cases. The Employee Free Choice Act has been promoted to restore workers' rights, for example by signing union authorisation cards as an alternative to employer-dominated elections. David Brody and a number of other USA historians have campaigned in support of the Act but he was pessimistic about its chances of success despite the Democrats' majority in Congress.

Another highlight of the conference was the dinner which was held in the Power House at the Midland Railway Workshops site. The Perth Branch has been very active in the successful efforts to preserve the history of the workshops. During a splendid meal delegates were entertained by the Working Voices Choir of Western Australia which celebrates its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year.

The conference theme – *Labour History in the New Century* – provided the umbrella for a wide range of papers. It is a tribute to Bobbie Oliver that, as well as convening the organising committee, she edited the refereed conference papers and had them published in time for the conference.

It is possible only to cover a small selection of the papers. 'Anti-labour' history was the theme of several. Lachlan Clohesy's discussion of the links between Liberal MP WC Wentworth and ASIO (the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation) and Frank Gain's paper on Lionel Murphy's 1973 'raid' on ASIO illustrated the usefulness of security files for historians. Bradon Ellem explained how the Robe River disputes in the late 1980s are central in understanding how the once solidly-unionised mining industry in the Pilbara was deunionised.

Indigenous labour history was another important theme. Julie Kimber's paper on the arrest of the union organiser Dexter Daniels for vagrancy was a stark case study of oppression in the Northern Territory. Sue Taffe's paper on the Cairns Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander Advancement League was a happier story of collaboration between workers of different ethnicities.

Ray Markey, Melanie Nolan and I discussed the New Zealand Labour Party in a comparative and transnational context. My paper looked at the shared history of the British and New Zealand labour parties in the early twentieth century. Ray considered similarities and differences between the Australian and New Zealand labour parties. Melanie argued that the New Zealand case undermines the core tenets of theorists of the 'Third Way'.

The two concluding papers were a reminder to historians of the importance of sources. Patrick Bertola explained how he has used medical records collected at the Sons of Gwalia goldmine in Western Australia to construct a profile of the workforce and the occupational health dangers they faced. Margaret Pember outlined the Leonora-Gwalia historical archives project which has enabled students at Curtin University to create a valuable collection of business and union records out of the chaos of an abandoned workplace.

In her closing comments, Nikki Balnave, the federal secretary of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, pointed out that conferences are essential in sustaining and invigorating the community of labour historians. I will remember this conference for both the quality of the presentations and the warm spirit of comradeship among delegates. Perth 2009 was certainly worth the trip.

— Peter Franks

UNION FAMILY: AN OCCASIONAL SERIES

## **The Ballad of Bantam Billy Perkins**

*Jack Perkins has worked for more than 50 years producing documentaries for Radio New Zealand National, notably in the 'Spectrum' series. Jack was a Lancashire lad who arrived in New Zealand at the age of 10. Here he tells some of his father's story: Bill Perkins was a miner, a communist and a war objector: a small, fiery man ardently committed to his political beliefs. Jack has recorded part of his father's story for Radio New Zealand National: it will be broadcast on Labour Day, Monday 26 October 2009 after the 6 pm news. Here is an edited version.*



TOP: Bantam Billy Perkins.



ABOVE: Bill's parents, John and Sarah Jane Perkins

'Bantam Billy Perkins' was the name his mates down the mine gave my Dad. He was small and a fighter — but not with his fists or guns. His life was both defined and distorted by struggle for a political ideal.

I recorded Dad back in the 1980s but I'd left it too long — he was too old and the fire in his belly had lost its heat. I've sifted through the tapes but only bits of them are useable. They've sharpened my own memories though, and I've also had long chats with my sister Vera Potter. She's 10 years older than me.

Bill Perkins stood 4 feet 11 inches in his stockinged feet — that's only one and a half metres. He was a very short man and he had a small man's fiery temper... but, if courage and principle were his measure, make no mistake: Dad was 10 feet tall.

Let's start in 1897 in northwest England, in Lancashire, and more precisely Farnworth, just outside Bolton. Farnworth was home to Sarah Jane and John Perkins. She worked in a cotton mill and he toiled away down a coal mine. Dad came along on the 10<sup>th</sup> of September 1897: the first of three children. Imagine a long line of double-storied workers' houses, built of red brick but blackened by layers of soot from the forest of mill chimneys all around. Some of these stacks have been spewing out coal smoke since the industrial revolution, so it's no wonder the place is filthy. Washing on the line turns grey.

There's no doubt that the alliance of cotton and coal drove the industry of England's northwest — an unholy alliance Dad used to say, and that's hard to argue with because coal and cotton showed up some of the worst aspects of capitalism. The mills and the mines were hungry for workers when times were good but, when the demand for cotton or coal dropped away, thousands were left unemployed, scratching a living as best they could to keep out of the poor house.

These were the conditions Dad was born into. They help explain why he became politically aware at a very early age. At the end of the street where he lived stood an open-air market and every Sunday morning it attracted left-wing political groups. The two main ones were the Independent Labour Party, and the British Socialist Party. Orators from both parties would get out their soapboxes and start auctioning their political views to the crowds at the market. Dad spent hours down there soaking up their rhetoric like a sponge: still only in his early teens. Then he'd rush off to Farnworth library to track down the books they recommended. By the age of 13 he'd finished school but he went to night classes and reading became

his passion — Charles Dickens, American socialist Jack London, and of course the German political philosophers Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. The upshot of all this was that by the time the War broke out in 1914, Dad had rejected the more moderate Labour party and gone overboard for Marxism. Dad was inspired by the better life for working people that Marx promised with the overthrow of the capitalist system. ‘From each according to his ability, to each according to his need’ — how many times did I hear him intone those words over the years. For Dad this was far more than a Marxist slogan. It summed up what was possible under a communal or communist system. And he’d only to look around at the conditions he lived and worked in to see the dire need for change.

Dad was still in his early teens when he joined his father in the mine, much against his mother’s wishes. Sarah Jane Perkins had good reason not to want ‘her Billy’ working at the coalface. It was hard, dirty, dangerous drudgery. New Zealand coal seams could be 10 metres thick but coal seams in Lancashire were often very narrow: sometimes a miner had to pick and shovel on his knees or at best stooped low. There were no bathhouses at the mine and no bath at home; miners had to make do with a swill over the sink to wash away the worst of the coal dust blackening their faces. And looming over everything was the ever-present threat of mine gas explosions. In the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, mine tunnels were spreading out much further from the central shaft and mine owners were reluctant to front up with the money to install costly ventilation. This led to thousands being killed by explosions caused by gas build-ups. It may be hard to believe, but in the period between 1900 and the First World War, Dad recalled three disasters which in total took the lives of about one thousand men. The worst was in south Wales and killed well over 400 in one mine. Then a pit near where Dad worked exploded and upwards of 200 died. The same in a Shropshire mine and there were similar disasters up and down Britain.

In the early stages of World War 1, miners were regarded as essential workers and weren’t expected to join up. But as the war wore on, losses soared and the government response was conscription. Miners were subjected to a kind of watered down conscription called ‘combing’. The idea was to ‘comb out’ some of the younger men for military service without severely depleting the mine workforce. About two years into the conflict, Dad was ‘combed’; but he refused his call-up. The response was swift and decisive. Dad returned home from the mine to find the police waiting to arrest him. It’s often the little things that stick in your mind at times like this. Feeling ravenous after a hard day underground, Dad could see his dinner steaming on the table, but they wouldn’t let him eat it. They marched

him off to appear before a magistrate who handed him over to the military and he was held in the local barracks; he was 18 or 19 years old.

For several days, the military tried to persuade Dad to don the King's uniform, which was a kind of symbolic way of getting him under military law but he'd have none of it. They also paraded him in front of newly-drafted soldiers from his neighbourhood to try and shame him into joining up but Dad remained staunch. He felt that they underestimated him, thinking that someone under five feet tall would be easily cowed by a bevy of six-foot drill sergeants. In fact, the more they tried to break him the more defiant he became. And he even got cocky enough to throw back a few well-chosen mouthfuls about the war being a natural outcome of capitalist imperialism, and that workers should take no part in it. He accused his captors of being the lackeys of their capitalist masters and prolonging the slaughter in the trenches. No wonder they called him 'Bantam Billy'.

Dad's bravura performances didn't help his case one bit. He was sentenced to two years' hard labour and jailed in Wormwood Scrubs just outside London. On the train journey down, one of his guards quietly confessed his admiration for Dad's stand, and said he wished he had the same courage. Back home too, quite a few were impressed by Dad's resistance to conscription. One former workmate told Dad's mother that at heart he was a pacifist but he just couldn't summon up the courage to refuse his call-up. That man never returned from France. When Dad first told me that about a third of his former classmates died at the front or returned with limbs missing and lungs seared by mustard gas, I thought he must be exaggerating; but I should have known better, he wasn't given to stretching the truth. Sure enough, I found that losses like this weren't at all uncommon.

Throughout his life people who didn't know his history very well would refer to Dad as a conscientious objector, but he would wag his finger and proclaim: 'I was never a religious pacifist; I refused the uniform on political grounds. I was a socialist objector and proud of it.'

'Hard labour' at Wormwood Scrubs turned out to be little more than sewing stiff canvas for mail bags and other equipment; child's play compared with work down the mine. The commonly-nicknamed 'conchies' were held in a separate building from the criminals. It was to avoid cross-infection, Dad used to joke; the authorities weren't sure who they feared most: pacifist criminals, or criminal pacifists.

Conditions were humane enough; inmates were allowed books, even socialist literature. But the rule Dad found hardest to stick to was not talking in the exercise yard. He just couldn't get good enough at talking out of the side of his mouth and he often got thrown into solitary confinement for a day or two on nothing but bread and water. In his cell he used to gaze at the stars through the window bars. He told me how he gained solace from their constancy and by thinking that they would still be shining down when jail and the war were long gone. It's hardly surprising that one of Dad's favourite poems was Oscar Wilde's *Ballad of Reading Gaol*, written after Wilde had served a term in Reading prison in 1895.

*At last I saw the shadowed bars  
Like a lattice wrought in lead,  
Move right across the whitewashed wall  
That faced my three-plank bed,  
And I knew that somewhere in the world  
God's dreadful dawn was red.*

*...I never saw sad men who looked  
With such a wistful eye  
Upon that little tent of blue  
We prisoners called the sky,  
And at every careless cloud that passed  
In happy freedom by.*

About a year or so into his sentence, Dad decided to go on hunger strike in protest at his imprisonment. He drank a small amount of water and ate nothing. News of the war and the mood of the country filtered into Wormwood Scrubs; Dad knew that the trenches were still running with blood and there was no quick end to the conflict in sight. The people of Britain were in sullen mood, especially the working classes and the left. Anger over the conduct of the war and its ever mounting losses was growing. The success of the Russian revolution had raised fears amongst the ruling classes that something similar might happen in Britain. The government and the capitalist system overthrown, and troops refusing to fight? At the time, given the exceptional circumstances created by the war, who could be sure what would happen? Dad never knew if the authorities soft-pedalled on him because of the ominous political climate, but a week into his hunger strike they released him and gave him a train ticket back to Lancashire. No one was more surprised than he was. He'd suffered no ill-effects from his fast and he walked out of Wormwood Scrubs with his spirits high. But he was soon brought back to earth by the hard realities in Lancashire.



ABOVE: The wedding of Bill Perkins and Edna Margaret Shepherd in Farnworth, 1925. The best man is Bill's younger brother Walter.

By the time the war ended not much had improved on the industrial front. In fact, as far as the mines were concerned, the outlook was increasingly gloomy. 1921 saw confrontation after the government started to sell off state-run mines. 1921 also saw troops dispatched to maintain order at coalfields. Dad became increasingly bitter and disillusioned as he saw union leaders buckle under the pressure from government and owners. Miners suffered wage cuts of between 10% and 40%.

All this, combined with the triumph of the Bolsheviks in Russia, confirmed Dad's communism. He saw the moderate left and their attempts at negotiation and reconciliation as selling out the working class.

Bill married my mother, Edna Margaret Shepherd, in 1925. Edna had been brought up in a Farnworth fish-and-chip shop. She was a cheerful, warm-hearted woman and, like Dad, had left school at an early age; but unlike him she hadn't continued her education at night school. She went along with Dad's beliefs but was never impassioned by politics in the way he was. Over the years she would pay a high price for marrying a communist. Dad's spurning of the moderate left was already setting a course for the future. He was intelligent, well-read, a good speaker. He would've had little trouble finding a place in the ranks of the Labour party, but he'd have none of it. In his eyes, they were traitors to the working class.

A year after my parents' marriage came the climax of Britain's post-war class struggle, the General Strike of May 1926. Dad threw himself into the strike with his usual enthusiasm; he was always in the vanguard of protests and demonstrations.

The Strike ended in defeat for the national body, the Trade Union Congress, 10 days later — but the miners hung on for several months before the inevitable return to work for lower pay and longer hours.

For Dad the General Strike's legacy was confirmation of the duplicity of Labour and the unions. It also left him with a hatred of Winston Churchill for bringing machine guns onto the streets, trained on demonstrating workers.

Dad's frustration and disillusionment with industrial Britain now took on a different hue. He'd discovered the writings of socialist reformers Beatrice and Sidney Webb, who'd glowingly described New Zealand as a possible future socialist state. This prediction was based on their admiration of the reforms brought in by the Liberal government during the 1890s. Much of this social and industrial



TOP: Bill and Edna just before they sailed for New Zealand in 1929.

ABOVE: The Millerton Football Club, 1930. Bill is seated middle row far right.

Back row: T. Rennie (Treas.) D.A. Nairn, T. Pollock, R. Jack, J. Teihert, W.M. White, G. Geddes.

Middle row: J. Gallacher (Trainer), T. White, C.R. Orman, I.J. Smith (Sec.), A.F. Anderson, F. Riddell ( Pres.), E. Newman ( Captain), W. Perkins, A. Peggie (Trainer).

Front Row: A Pollock, G. Anderson (Mascot), G. Orman, V.N. Smith (Mascot), A. Burt.

legislation was well in advance of the rest of the world. So, it was the Webbs, along with New Zealand's better climate and the fact that he had relatives here that made up Dad's mind. In 1929 he and Mum turned their backs on the discord and squalor of a polluted Lancashire, to seek a new life halfway across the world.

Dad worked around rural Canterbury for a while, helped by relatives, but farm work didn't suit him and in 1929 the coal mines of the west coast lured him to Millerton. Mum and Dad always said that some of the happiest times of their life were spent at Millerton, 'on the hill' as they termed it. The United Mine Workers Union, the UMW, virtually ran Millerton. The UMW's role extended well beyond meetings and negotiations; the Union raised money for good causes, organised picnics and socials and generally looked after the community. Dad was in his element, surrounded by like-minded men, almost all of them from the coalfields of Britain.

In spite of being an inch under five feet, Dad was a keen soccer player and a member of the Millerton All Blacks, as they called themselves. And they had good claim to such an iconic name because this was no Sunday social team. The game was strongly supported and highly competitive amongst the mining settlements on the coast and in 1932 and 1933, the Millerton All Blacks were runners-up in the Chatham Cup, New Zealand's premier knockout football competition.

By now the Depression was biting deeply and miners on short weeks or without jobs were looking for financial help from local authorities. Relief work and the dole hadn't come in yet. Hard-pressed Millerton miners and many of their wives gathered in a park in Westport, the Buller port 25 kilometres down the coast, to demand help from the Buller County Council which happened to be meeting in the Westport Town Hall behind locked doors. Exclusion from the meeting infuriated the Millerton folk and they charged the Town Hall and broke down the doors. Dad was one of the leaders in the assault, but right beside him was a large Lancashire woman. She dwarfed Dad but did more to smash in the doors than the men did. Perhaps it was the effects of hunger, or excitement and physical exertion, whatever the reason, the poor woman fainted as the crowd poured into the town hall. It took several hefty miners to carry her to safety. The councillors were left in no doubt about the plight of those living 'on the hill', but Dad couldn't remember getting any help.

One prominent union figure Dad rubbed shoulders with at Millerton was Angus McLagan, who later held several ministerial positions in the first Labour government. But in the early 1930s, McLagan led

the fight against what was called 'tribute mining'. Tributors were small co-operative mines outside union control. McLagan feared that when the UMW called a strike, the coal bosses would weaken the union's bargaining power by obtaining coal from these independent mines. As the Depression deepened there were bitter tribute disputes at Blackball, Denniston and Charming Creek.

But McLagan had a more fundamental battle on his hands. Pit closures and shortened working weeks were steadily eroding union membership. But the wily Scotsman pursued a dogged but cautious path which maintained the United Mine Workers Union more or less intact, and in 1934, he was able to launch a campaign that largely restored wage rates in the coal industry.

But all this was too late for Dad. He lost his job and was forced onto relief work, much of it repairing roads severely damaged by the 1929 Murchison earthquake. He then received an invitation which must have come like a godsend. The Communist Party offered him a job in Wellington. It involved organising rallies, protests and generally taking the fight to the capitalists. So the Perkins family – now including my sister Vera who was born in 1931 – moved to the capital.



LEFT: Bill and Vera, 1931

But Wellington was a far cry from the socialist-dominated West Coast. Gone was the tightly-knit, like-minded solidarity of Millerton. Instead Dad found a weak and faction-ridden party, with little respect or support amongst working people. He was a fish out of water. The party was also penetrated by police spies. In Dad's view, the authorities overestimated the danger to good order posed by the communists, but nevertheless, so fierce were the attacks on the party that there was rarely a time when one or more of its leaders wasn't in jail. In 1933, the whole Central Committee was imprisoned for six months.



TOP: Edna outside the Glenmore Street attic flat, circa 1932

MIDDLE: Vera just before returning to England, 1934

ABOVE: Bill, Edna and Jack with a neighbour, 1946. Council house in the background

Dad housed his family in a tiny attic flat at the top of Glenmore Street hard by the Karori tunnel and walked each day into the city to the party rooms in Farish Street (now Victoria Street). There he conspired the overthrow of capitalism, albeit with conspicuous lack of success. It was a harrowing time for Mum though. She was scared stiff every time there was a knock on the door because she expected the police with an arrest warrant for Dad at any time, but his luck held and he stayed out of jail. It wasn't long though before his job with the beleaguered Communist Party evaporated and he was back on relief work.

Coming to Wellington was bad enough but Dad now decided to make a move which proved far worse. Mum's homesickness and unhappiness in Wellington would no doubt have had something to do with the return to England, and his brother in Lancashire had promised to find him a job. So in 1934, he packed Mum and Vera onto the passenger ship *Bendigo*, but to save money, he signed on to the *Port Alma* as a bathroom steward. He had only hazy memories of the voyage around Cape Horn, infamous for its savage storms. Dad spent most of the time being sick in his cleaning bucket.

If only they'd hung on for another year or so, they'd have seen the first Labour government come to power, and easing economic conditions. Things got better relatively quickly in New Zealand but in Britain, the Depression ground on until World War 2. Most of the mates Dad left behind in New Zealand had moved into secure jobs and a state house well before the war. If he'd stayed, there was nothing to prevent him from doing the same. Back in England, his brother's job promise came to nothing and Dad faced another six years of unemployment. He didn't get steady work till 1940 when the war created a manpower shortage; he'd been almost 10 years without a secure job.

Not long after returning to Farnworth the family was allocated a council house. This was the only bright spot in a very dreary picture. Dad, of course, was unemployed but the District Nurse used to get Mum odd bits of work looking after sick people and babies. It paid next to nothing but it was enough to prevent Dad from getting the full dole which was severely means-tested. Instead, he received what was called a 'transitional allowance' which was less than the unemployment benefit. Both Mum and Dad would pick up a few shillings here and there through undeclared work. Dad once helped demolish a house and came home infested with fleas.

Under-the-table payments for the odd bit of work was the target of a much-feared and resented official known as the Transitional Man.

He snooped around the neighbourhood on the look out for anyone supposedly double-dipping. He had the right to enter and search homes to assess whether so-called 'expensive' belongings should be sold and offset against the dole. He once went through Mum's kitchen drawers. 'How can you afford cutlery like this?' he demanded. This got under Mum's skin and she indignantly told him the truth: 'It was a wedding present'.

My sister Vera, only six or seven years old at the time, vividly remembers how she was thoroughly instructed about what to say to the Transitional Man about Mum's and Dad's whereabouts if they were out earning unofficially. One time, she was swinging on the front gate when he popped up. 'I've called before and your mother's always out', he accused, glaring suspiciously. Vera politely told him that her mother was looking after a sick friend, but she didn't tell him that Mum was getting a few bob on the side for her nursing. Some of Mum's friends were quite well-off and would give her bits and pieces, mostly clothes. Someone once gave her a fur coat. It was a bit worn and moth-eaten but it sent the Transitional Man up the wall. But even he had to admit that it wouldn't sell for much. So Mum proudly kept herself warm through the long, severe winters with her hand-me-down fur coat.

Of course, Dad had joined the National Unemployed Workers' Movement which had been formed to combat the excesses of the means test, organise hunger marches and draw attention to the plight of the unemployed. Dad took part in several hunger marches in the mid-1930s. Many within the wider labour movement in Britain were dismayed when Labour and official trades union bodies offered little support to the legions of unemployed. Of course, this didn't surprise Dad one bit. The Trades Union Congress even advised trades councils along the route of the famous Jarrow hunger march down to London in 1936 not to help the marchers, although many local branches did give aid.

Dad loved cycling and he combined leisure with practicality by riding his bike as far down as the Midlands in search of work; he often got a flat tyre but never a job. He found nothing permanent until 1940, the year I was born. With younger men away at the war, work was becoming available and he was able to pick up a job at the Farnworth Co-operative Society, driving a van. It wasn't well paid but a regular income, however modest, made a huge difference. Dad neither smoked nor drank and gave his wages to Mum. He'd spare no effort to better his family: I remember him clipping hedges and mowing lawns to get extra money for my piano lessons. Towards the end of the War I can recall frugality, but no shortage of essentials: we ate

well and were adequately clothed. The hard times were over.

But for Mum, deprivation of a different kind lingered on. Her 20-year marriage to a hard-line communist had robbed her of many friends and even some of her relatives shunned her because of Dad. If he sensed any challenge or disrespect for his beliefs he was instantly and fearlessly outspoken. There were never any beg-your-pardons in his outbursts. I remember a bus trip when some unsuspecting passenger slighted the Soviet Union. Dad's volcanic response turned heads, including the driver's who brought the crowded vehicle to a halt while things calmed down. But we were soon on our way again. That was the one saving grace: Dad's displays of anger were spectacular but usually short-lived.

A good friend of Dad's from the Millerton days corresponded regularly and painted a rosy picture of life in New Zealand under the first Labour government, and by the late 1940s Mum and Dad decided to return to the country they should never have left. Vera emigrated in 1949 and the rest of us joined her the following year. By this time, Labour had lost power but the wool boom was beginning, the country was wealthier than ever before, and Dad had no trouble getting work in Wellington minding buses at the Road Services garage.

From my viewpoint, coming back to New Zealand was the best move the Perkins family ever made. I thrived in the climate and outdoor environment, and gained a college and university education which would have been closed to me in Britain. I was a slow developer and would never have made it to Grammar School by passing the entrance exams when I was only 11.

Vera joined the Young Communist League when she first arrived back in New Zealand but soon let her membership lapse. We both went along with Dad's political beliefs in our teenage years, although he never thrust them down our throat, but later we came to question his brand of socialism. He'd pass on Soviet newspapers and magazines to me, but a diet of beaming Ukrainian women driving tractors and praising the latest Five Year Plan contributed little to my political understanding.

During the 1950s and 60s, as former Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin's murderous excesses became undisputed, I'd have long arguments with Dad, but he'd never budge from his support for the Soviet Union. He'd often dismiss facts as capitalist propaganda. The terrible cost in lives of Russia's conversion from a peasant to an industrial economy between the wars, for example. He insisted that this was



TOP: Bill and Edna celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary, 1975.



ABOVE: Bill and Edna with their family (1975).

Back row, left to right: Jack's wife Kath, Bill, Edna, Jack, Vera and husband Pat Potter.

Front row: Grandchildren from left: Kerry, Paul, Mark and Bryan Perkins and Kathryn and David Potter.

grossly exaggerated by the West. But he also firmly believed that Soviet industrial development had been necessary, because Stalin knew that sooner rather than later the fascist-capitalists would attack from the west, and of course that's what happened when Hitler declared war on the Soviet Union. He interpreted the Cold War in a similar way: the capitalist West was out to defeat in any way they could the progressive Soviet-led countries of Eastern Europe. He admitted that life was far from perfect for workers behind the Iron Curtain; but Utopia lay somewhere in the future and only Moscow-style communism could lead to its realisation.

As he grew older, Dad's temper mellowed but, if anything, his politics became more ossified. He was an atheist, but communism was his religion and its tenets were set in stone. After my mother died in 1975, Dad turned more inward and buried himself in Soviet literature. His greatest fear was that his failing eyesight would soon prevent him from reading.

Dad was now in his late eighties and his old comrades were rapidly dying off. He lived in Porirua and would walk several kilometres to Titahi Bay to call on Ken Douglas, who was then head of New Zealand's trade union organisation the Federation of Labour, and a communist. Ken was kind to Dad; he must have been busy, but he still found time to discuss politics with him which Dad found stimulating. Dad may have mellowed but he was still capable of a barb or two. I recall him once returning from a visit to Ken's and complaining about the Douglas' unkempt front garden. 'Here he is, the country's most important union official, and he doesn't keep his lawns mowed. It reflects badly', Dad said, shaking his head.

Dad died in 1995. He was 98. He became senile in his early 90s and in a way, senility came as a blessing: it meant that he was unaware of the fall of the Soviet Union. He would have found the regime's collapse unbearable. Barely out of boyhood his coal-mining mates had called him Bantam Billy and all his life he'd fought to realise his communist ideals – ideals that were first nurtured by the socialist orators in Farnworth market over 80 years ago. I'm so glad he was spared seeing his dreams shattered.

— Jack Perkins

## FEATURE ARTICLE

## One Struggle: Paul Robeson in Australia and New Zealand, 1960



ABOVE: Paul Robeson speaking at the Addington railway workshops, October 1960. National Library ref. PAColl-5405-2. Photograph by Photo France, Christchurch.

*Carl Blackmun has recently completed a research project 'Let Freedom Ring: The International Activism of Paul Robeson, 1949-1960' for his BA (Honours) in History at Victoria University of Wellington. Carl's next project, a thesis for MA, will examine conservative and radical reaction in the USA and New Zealand to the events of 1956 in the USSR.*

Paul Robeson's visit to Australia and New Zealand in October and November 1960, his final concert tour, marked the close of a long and successful career in music and film. But Robeson was not merely a performer. He was also a champion for minority rights, workers, and peace – and a vocal champion at that. Robeson suffered greatly for his willingness to speak out on behalf of these struggles. During the Cold War, an era in which the United States sought more than ever to portray itself as a beacon of democracy and freedom, the issue of civil rights and the treatment of African Americans was an acute embarrassment. To a limited extent this meant the federal government attempted to improve the condition of African Americans, but it also meant the silencing of those seen to be straying from the official line about race relations and discrimination in the United States. For civil rights activists who took their activism abroad, often in an attempt to force the hand of the government at

home, official responses ranged from pressure on venues not to host such speakers and performers to the complete revocation of travel rights.

Paul Robeson became one of the most prominent victims of this repressive climate during the 1950s. His travel rights were revoked between 1950 and 1958. Essentially detained within the USA, his annual income dropped from a six-figure sum to \$6,000, and the stress of the experience caused irrevocable damage to his health. But Robeson remained a figure of significant fame overseas, and once his passport was restored in 1958 he was able to capitalise on this fame with a short, but successful, return to the international stage – and to the protest that had earlier characterised his public persona. In October and November 1960, Robeson embarked on his final concert tour, to Australia and New Zealand. He had long intended to tour the two countries, but had been thwarted for various reasons – an arrangement to visit Australia in 1950, for instance, was cancelled owing to the restrictions on his travel.<sup>1</sup>

Despite his enduring popularity, Robeson remained a controversial figure. Arriving in Sydney on October 12, 1960, he was met at a press conference by a barrage of political questions from a hostile Australian press. The reception came as a shock, and prompted a call by Robeson's New Zealand agent to the media here, asking that political questions be avoided. The hostility of the press should not have surprised, however. Despite geographical isolation, Australia and New Zealand were not immune from the anti-Communist fervour that had characterised the 1950s. Rona Bailey recalled of the time that 'McCarthyism was still there, and there was still this anti-Communist flavour.'<sup>2</sup> In Australia, meanwhile, the Menzies government was seeking to pass legislation similar to that which the USA State Department had used to revoke Robeson's travel rights.<sup>3</sup>

Robeson's difficulties with the media and the authorities rarely translated into popular disapproval, however. Indeed, he was received enthusiastically by Antipodean audiences. The Christchurch Star reported that 'the large audience was vociferous in its approval of his chosen items, particularly those songs which Paul Robeson has made famous all over the world.'<sup>4</sup> The positive reaction was of some concern to USA officials stationed down-under. In Adelaide, for instance, the State Department reported that the 'naïve, uncritical welcome' afforded by the South Australians made for a 'complete propaganda success.'<sup>5</sup> It was not that Australians were pro-Communist; indeed:

*the great majority are strongly anti-Communist. However, they are eager for novelty and, for the most part, completely indifferent to international politics. The few who are politically aware are proud of their political tolerance and would not miss a chance to show how much more broad-minded they can be than the Americans.<sup>6</sup>*

The report went on to conclude (rather ironically) that ‘the years of controversy caused by refusing Robeson a passport undoubtedly increased the impact of his propaganda.’<sup>7</sup> Another account in an FBI dispatch, regarding Robeson’s Melbourne appearance, sought to downplay the audience’s frequent applause – typically ‘reserved... for teenage warblers’ – as simply ‘applause for a great and superb artist.’<sup>8</sup> The author cites the example of the audience’s applause for Robeson’s honorary membership of the Amalgamated Metal Workers and Shipwrights’ Union – the Wharfies – who ‘definitely’ did not have public sympathy – in an attempt to prove the applause was largely uncritical and unrelated to whatever political message Robeson might have been conveying.

Robeson’s official concerts were certainly not lacking in political content, though he rarely commented on political matters in any explicit fashion. A review of his first Sydney concert notes that Robeson’s ‘obvious purpose in compiling the program was to emphasise the universality of basic human wishes and needs.’ Robeson was quoted as remarking, ‘If they call that politics, I plead guilty.’<sup>9</sup> In his informal appearances, Robeson was able and willing to be more explicitly political, though this was a point of concern for his promoters in New Zealand. Robeson’s contract dictated that he was not to appear at ‘unscheduled events’ – that is, political events. Robeson, however, responded to this clause by stating that, ‘nobody is going to stop me singing and speaking to working people if they wish to hear me.’<sup>10</sup> In particular, he sought out local workers, peace groups, and minorities. In New Zealand, Robeson met with Māori at a Māori Community Centre in Auckland, and performed for crowds of union officials and workers. He made an appearance for a crowd of about 1,500 striking waterside workers in Wellington and for another large crowd of railway workers at Addington, Christchurch. Despite the popularity of his visit, Robeson was not received in any official capacity, something local American officials reported with barely disguised glee.<sup>11</sup>

Robeson’s appearance at Addington was typical of his appearances for sympathetic crowds. Speaking to a capacity audience, he covered a broad range of topics in a half-hour address, including the emergence of a free Africa, his pride at being an ‘Afro-American’, the universality of man and the civil rights movement in the USA.

In one especially powerful segment, Robeson remarked that his experiences overseas helped him 'understand that it's just not the black world and just not a white world and just not a yellow world or a brown world; that we all belong to one race, one family – the human family.'<sup>12</sup> The interconnectedness of struggle – for peace, workers' rights, and racial equality – was a cornerstone of Robeson's ideology.

Racial politics were at the forefront of Robeson's mind during his time in Australia and New Zealand. Robeson had been a key figure in the civil rights movement in the 1930s and 1940s. Through his international activism he had been pivotal in making the civil rights of African Americans an issue of international concern. Robeson's avowed support for the USSR and communism more generally, however, was seen as a liability for the fledgling civil rights movement. Robeson's past and present role in the movement was rejected even by African American leaders, and he was instead relegated to the sidelines. Robeson did not refrain from comment on the status of African Americans after his return to the international stage in 1958, but he had adopted a much more conciliatory, deferential tone. This is evident in his comments at Addington, where he acknowledged that, '[in America] we're improving... The Negro youth are on the march, and they're joined by the white youth.' He also noted, however, that it was not 'an easy struggle.'<sup>13</sup>

Robeson's interactions with local Aboriginal and Māori communities convinced him that the struggle for racial equality was no easier in Australia and New Zealand.

*One thing embittered me. On the fifth continent I encountered a serious phenomenon which I have experienced in Africa and America: racial discrimination in the most loathsome form. If we compare the situation of the Maoris – of the aborigines in New Zealand – with the situation of American Negroes from Northern states, we can call the situation simply terrible in which they and the Australian aborigines are. Here open extermination is effected.<sup>14</sup>*

Robeson expressed an intention to go back to Australia and donate all proceeds from his activities there to the cause of the Aboriginal people.<sup>15</sup> In the meantime, however, he did not hesitate to take his audiences to task on these points. At a performance in Melbourne for the Wharfies, for instance, he challenged the crowd, 'if you fight for peace, you've gotta fight for them all, I'm sorry, and that includes a lot of things I see going on round your country too.' In New Zealand, he was more direct, and implored the workers at Addington

'to look at your coloured brothers here and coloured sisters and see that they, not just in words, not just on paper, somewhere they've got to feel full parts of your life in New Zealand. Full citizens, full citizens. And I know that you will achieve it.'<sup>16</sup>

Robeson's promise to return to Australia on behalf of the Aborigines would go unfulfilled. In the spring of 1961, while in Moscow, he apparently attempted to commit suicide. He was shuttled between various facilities around Europe for the next few years, and eventually returned to the USA in 1963. He died, long after his last public appearance, in 1976.

— Carl Blackmun

ENDNOTES:

- 1 — *New York Times*, 9 August 1950, p. 44.
- 2 — 'Spectrum 1002 - Remembering Paul Robeson', 1997, New Zealand Sound Archives.
- 3 — Duberman, M. B., *Paul Robeson*, New York, 1988, p. 488.
- 4 — *Christchurch Star*, 28 October 1960, p. 8.
- 5 — FBI New York 100-25287 - Not Recorded, Dated 7 March 1961.
- 6 — Ibid.
- 7 — Ibid.
- 8 — Ibid.
- 9 — *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 November 1960, p. 6.
- 10 — Bailey, R., 'Paul Robeson in New Zealand', *Trade Union History Project News Bulletin*, 16, August 1993, p. 4.
- 11 — FBI New York 100-25287 - Not Recorded or Dated.
- 12 — 'Paul Robeson sings and talks to Lincoln Efford and other workers at the Railway workshops, Addington', April 1960 (Incorrect Date at Source), Oral History Centre, Alexander Turnbull Library, OHColl-0228/1.
- 13 — Ibid.
- 14 — FBI Main 100-12304-633.
- 15 — Ibid.
- 15 — 'Paul Robeson sings', above n. 12.

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

## **Globalisation and Labour in the Pacific: Re-evaluating the 1890 Maritime Strike**

A Symposium, organised by the Auckland Labour History Group and the Labour History Project, in association with the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History and the New Zealand Work & Labour Market Institute.

Auckland  
Thursday 4 November 2010

**Call for papers:**

Abstracts are due by 1 June 2010 to Ann Williamson at [nzwalmi@aut.ac.nz](mailto:nzwalmi@aut.ac.nz). Refereed papers may be selected for publication in the *NZ Journal of Employment Relations*.

All welcome. Fee: \$40.00

## FORTHCOMING EVENTS

**Rona Bailey Memorial Lecture**

LEFT: Dick Scott addressing attendees at the Wellington launch of his memoir *A Radical Writer's Life* late in 2004. Laughing at his wit are David Grant, then TUHP chair (left) and then Attorney-General Margaret Wilson (right) who launched the book.

The Labour History Project has been fortunate to secure the services of well-known historian and writer **Dick Scott** to give the second Rona Bailey Memorial Lecture in the Rona Bailey Room at Toi Whakaari: NZ Drama School at 11 Hutchison Rd, Newtown, on **3 December 2009, at 7.00pm.**

Dick Scott had a long association with Rona Bailey going back to the 1951 waterfront lockout in which Rona played a leading role clandestinely printing and distributing the watersiders' pamphlets and newsletters which were banned under the government's emergency legislation. Dick was both active in, and writing on the dispute in *The Transport Worker* and this work later evolved into his first book, *151 Days* (1952), an account of the dispute and its ramifications for the state of civil liberties and union 'freedoms' in New Zealand.

Dick wrote a number of other stimulating New Zealand histories over a 50-year career, covering a wide range of topics: viticulture, local history, Pacific history, farming and business. Many people

regard *Ask That Mountain*, (1975) – a fuller account of his earlier work *The Parihaka Story* (1954) – the story of New Zealand's first peace activists Te Whiti-o-Rongomai and Tohu Kakahi at Parihaka as his tour-de-force. My favourites among his other publications are *Seven Lives on Salt River* (1979) an account of settlement around the Kaipara Harbour, which won a number of awards; and *Would a Good Man Die? Niue Island, New Zealand and the late Mr Larsen* (1993), a damning account of New Zealand's patronising colonial rule on Niue in explanation of the chief administrator's murder. His last book, a memoir, *A Radical Writer's Life* was published in November 2004 to enthusiastic audiences. The Labour History Project was instrumental in arranging a Wellington launch for this book in December of that year.

In September 2007, he was awarded the prestigious Prime Minister's Award for Literary Achievement in non-fiction. In presenting the award Prime Minister Helen Clark commented that Dick was an independent and original writer of New Zealand history. "Following his own path he has brought new perspectives to a range of episodes in New Zealand's past. His *Ask That Mountain* is recognised as one of New Zealand's most influential books. Reprinted eight times, it has brought the events at Parihaka into the nation's consciousness," she said.

On 3 December, Dick's lecture will be followed by Chris Prowse and fellow musicians performing songs from his recently written musical *Trouble on The Waterfront*, reviewed on page 2. Full details will be available soon on the LHP website: [www.lhp.org.nz](http://www.lhp.org.nz). Entry to Dick Scott's lecture will be by donation and afterwards the LHP will hold its Christmas Party for 2009. The lecture is open to the public; members are encouraged to 'spread the word' about it.

— David Grant

#### FORTHCOMING EVENTS

## **90 Years of the ILO: the significance for Australia and New Zealand**

Symposium organised by the Business and Labour History Group of the New Zealand Work & Labour Market Institute, Auckland University of Technology, in association with the Auckland Labour History Group.

AUT University Business School, 42 Wakefield Street, Auckland City.  
19 - 20 November 2009

The ILO is the world's oldest and only tripartite international agency, created in 1919 as part of the Treaty of Versailles that ended World War I, to reflect the belief that universal and lasting peace can be accomplished only if based on social justice. The first annual International Labour Conference began on 29 October 1919 in Washington DC. It adopted the first six International Labour Conventions. Today the ILO has 188 Conventions and Declarations and 199 Recommendations. In 1998 the eight Core Conventions were consolidated into four International Labour Standards:

- Freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining
- Abolition of forced labour
- Equality of opportunity and treatment
- Abolition of Child Labour

Contact: The New Zealand Work and Labour Market Institute  
nzwalmi@auct.ac.nz Private Bag 92006, Auckland 1142, New Zealand.

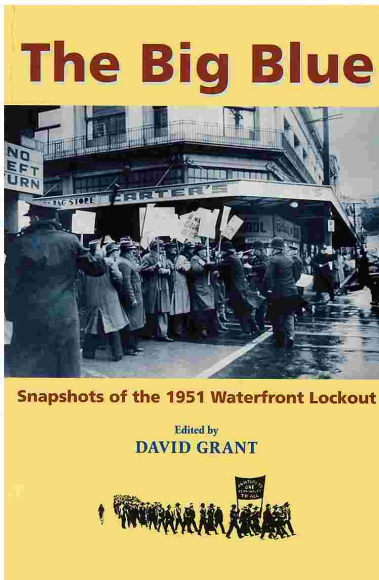
#### WORK IN PROGRESS

## **Families in the 1951 waterfront lockout**

Was your family involved in the 1951 waterfront lockout? In 1951, the government passed regulations that criminalised providing support to watersiders and their families. Despite this, a huge relief effort was built and the dispute lasted 151 days. Grace Millar has just begun a PhD in History at Victoria University of Wellington, on families and the 1951 waterfront lockout. How did families survive? What effect did the lockout have on families? How does looking at the domestic sphere as part of a lockout change our understanding of industrial action?

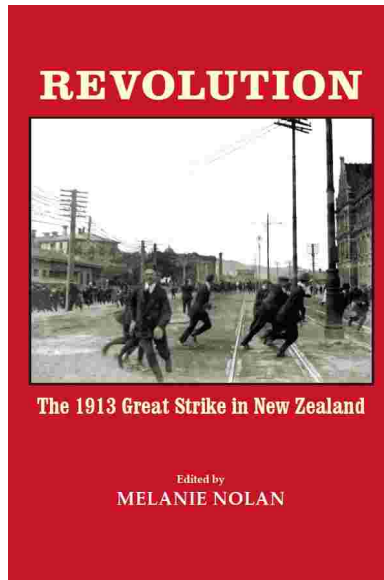
LHP member Grace Millar would like to hear from anyone who has stories to tell about that time, and how people survived. Please contact her at: [grace.millar@vuw.ac.nz](mailto:grace.millar@vuw.ac.nz).

## Books for sale



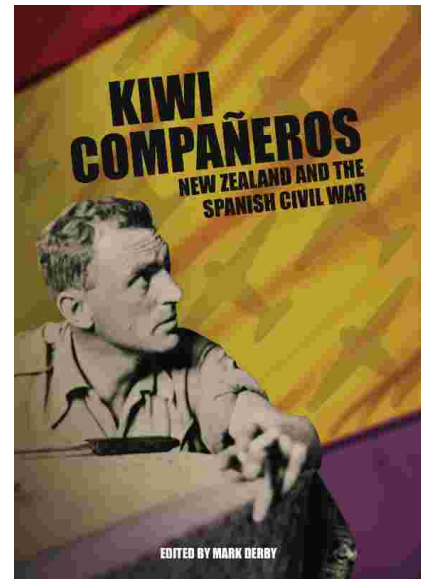
*The Big Blue: Snapshots of the 1951 Waterfront Lockout.*

Edited by David Grant.  
Canterbury University Press,  
2004  
\$18.00 plus \$4.00 postage



*Revolution: The 1913 Great Strike in New Zealand.*

Edited by Melanie Nolan.  
Canterbury University Press,  
2005  
\$25.00 plus \$4.00 postage



*Kiwi Compañeros: New Zealand and the Spanish Civil War.*

Edited by Mark Derby.  
Canterbury University Press,  
2009  
\$35.00 plus \$5.00 postage

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