

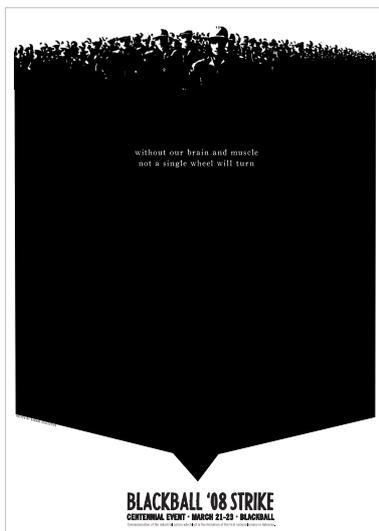


Trade Union History Project

“AN INJURY TO ONE IS A CONCERN TO ALL”

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NEWSLETTER #44

October 2008

Welcome to the first issue of our newsletter under a new committee. Our long-time and heroic former editor Colin Hicks resigned from the position in early 2008. We warmly record our thanks and appreciation for his dedicated work over many years.

New format

From the next issue (February 2009) the format of the newsletter will change from an entirely printed publication to a primarily electronic one, distributed via email as a PDF file for reading on your computer, or printing on your printer if you prefer. That way we save printing and postage costs, you receive the newsletter sooner, with images in glorious colour, and fewer trees are felled in the process. We will continue to produce a few paper copies for archival purposes, and for those who can only receive them through the post — but electronic distribution will be our preferred format in future.

New features

We aim to provide news about labour history events, as well as reports on workers' history. New branches of our organisation can count on space in the newsletter reserved for their own communication needs. See p.7 for the first report from the recently founded Auckland branch. Members' work-in-progress in the broad area of labour history will be a regular feature (committee member Lisa Saksen kicks off with a summary of her work on women), along with relevant news from our overseas affiliates such as the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History. We plan to include previews of events, courses and productions, as well as reviews.

New look

A new masthead and general redesign is in process, thanks to Christchurch designer and TUHP member Jared Davidson. Perhaps even a new name for the publication — your suggestions for one are welcome.

New editor

I've been around the TUHP off and on since 1998 when I was involved with the Paul Robeson centenary seminar. I currently work as a social researcher in the Department of Public Health at the University of Otago, Wellington. Please contact me with any comments, suggestions and contributions at: newsletter@tuhp.org

— Marie Russell

MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIRPERSON

A new name, a new aim

Twenty-one years after its formation, the Trade Union History Project is finally experiencing a complete renovation, from a new name to a revised constitutional structure and expanded scope of activity.

The Annual General Meeting in May 2008, held at the Workers Educational Association rooms in central Wellington, resolved to change our name to 'Labour History Project' to better reflect the changing face of the organisation's work.

Although the trade union movement – its traditions, culture and objectives – remains at the centre of our activity, we also need to work on a broader scale, taking account of working people's lives, of progressive historical movements outside the union movement, and of international developments in labour history.

The AGM also confirmed significant changes to our constitution which encourage the formation of local and thematic branches, such as the recently established Auckland branch.

Finally, there was a complete replacement of office-holders as follows:

Chair: Mark Derby

Secretary: Toby Boraman

Treasurer: Lana Le Quesne

Committee: Donald Anderson; Neill Atkinson; Michael Brown; Alex Burton; Peter Clayworth; Peter Franks; Maxine Gay; Richard Hill; Dave Morgan; Russell Pierce; Marie Russell; Lisa Saksen; Sue Shone; James Taylor; Kerry Taylor

The new committee extends its thanks and appreciation to the outgoing chairperson: David Grant; former secretary Mark Derby and treasurer Colin Hicks.

As the Labour History Project takes over and extends the TUHP's proud 21-year record of achievement, our work is as necessary, inspiring and challenging as ever. We are confident that we have the skills and enthusiasm within our organisation to meet those challenges.

**The Blackball Strike and Labour History**

What a great thing it is to be celebrating a union victory. The labour movement is good at celebrating our defeats but not so good at celebrating our victories.

Andrew Little's comment at the seminar during the Blackball 08 Commemoration points to the importance of the Blackball Strike.

The strike marked the start of the militant revolt against New Zealand's arbitration system which dominated industrial relations in the years before the First World War. The eleven week strike began as a protest



"His Imperial Higness Labour" from
'New Zealand Observer', March 14th, 1908.

over 'crib' time – the miners were only allowed fifteen minutes for lunch. The strike is often referred to as the 'crib' or 'tucker time' strike. At an Arbitration Court hearing in Greymouth a couple of weeks into the strike, Justice Sim pronounced fifteen minutes adequate for 'crib' before adjourning for an hour and a half for luncheon. The strike began after the mine manager sacked seven men, all of whom were members of the Socialist Party. Attempts by Labour Department officials to broker a settlement were unsuccessful.

News spread and there was strong union support for the Blackball miners, particularly from other West Coast mines. Crucially, however, the union at the nearby Tyneside mine at Brunner and the Greymouth wharfies' union didn't support the strike. They refused to cut the supply of coal to the Blackball mining company's vessels or to stop loading them.

The Labour Department prosecuted the union for striking. During the Arbitration Court hearing of the case, Jack McCullough, the Workers' Representative on the court, mediated an agreement between leaders of the Blackball union and the company's directors. This included reinstatement of the seven men. Accepted by a special union meeting, the compromise was repudiated by another meeting the following day and by the company. Union leaders toured New Zealand to get support. £1600 – about \$NZ230,000 in today's terms – was raised, half from mining and other West Coast unions.

The strike dragged on with further unsuccessful attempts to negotiate a resolution. Finally the company gave in and conceded the union's demands. It was a great victory. On the other side of the island, the Canterbury Trades and Labour Council burst into spontaneous applause at the news. The sequel to the strike was highly embarrassing for the Arbitration Court. It had imposed a £75 fine on the union for striking illegally. The union refused to pay. The court ordered that the fine be collected from individual union members. Sheriffs seized goods from Blackball mining families and held an auction to raise money for the fine. The miners took over the auction, the union was the sole bidder and a derisory 12/6d was raised.

One of the main events during the commemoration of the strike at Blackball at Easter (21-24 March) 2008 was a well-attended seminar on the history of the strike and its contemporary relevance. A number of the speakers spoke again at a TUHP seminar on the strike in Wellington on May 10 2008. Many of the papers questioned, revised and added to the history of the strike and its place in NZ labour history.

The first speaker at the Blackball symposium was Eric Beardsley, whose 1984 novel *Blackball '08* was influential in telling the story to a new generation. He stressed the importance of the flooding of the Tyneside mine (see review of Brian Wood's book, this issue) for the union's victory.

Peter Clayworth spoke about Pat Hickey, one of the union leaders who became a national figure after the strike. Countering some historians' views, he argued there was no evidence that Hickey and other radicals plotted the strike to attack the arbitration system, rather that they were opportunists.

Melanie Nolan's paper summarised the existing historiography. She used McCullough's experience of the strike to explore the diversity of socialist and labour perspectives in the years before the First World

War. Like Wood, she looked at the employers. Improved organisation and advocacy through employers' associations, new doctrines of efficient management and anti-unionism meant this was also a period of growing employer militancy.

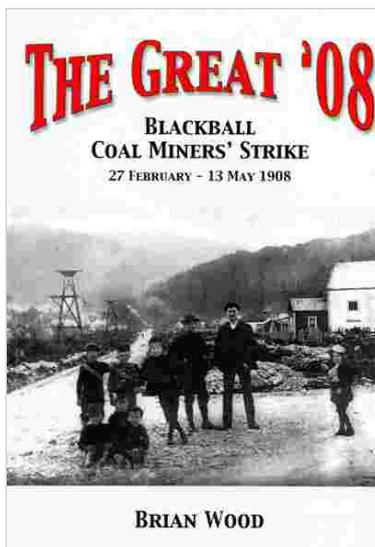
Graeme Colgan, Chief Judge of the Employment Court, presented an analysis of the four court cases during and after the strike. A notable feature of the litigation was that while the union took unsuccessful action against the company, all proceedings against the union were taken by the state through the Labour Department. Mark Derby discussed the importance of understanding the international context of the strike. To illustrate the point he told the stories of two people born on the West Coast — Lola Ridge and Len de Caux — who became active in the United States anarchist and labour movements.

Neville Bennett's paper looked at the economic and social aspects of the strike. He contended that falling living standards at Blackball, a new and remote settlement where necessities were scarce and expensive, may have contributed to the miners' willingness to strike. The West Coast and Blackball are often said to have been the birthplace of the Labour Party. My own paper argued that the mass base for Labour was created in working class electorates in the cities through the political campaigns organised by the 'moderate' advocates of an independent labour party to win workers away from the Liberal Party.

— Peter Franks

Some of the papers from the seminar are available online:

www.blackballmuseum.org.nz



BOOK REVIEW

The Great 08

The Great 08: Blackball Coal Miners' Strike 27 February - 13 May 1908 by Brian Wood. Available from Brian Wood, Main Road, Blackball 7804. 230 pages. \$49.95 plus packaging and postage \$5.50.

Brian Wood has written or contributed to a number of publications about West Coast history in recent years. In the 1990s he wrote the definitive history of the Brunner mine disaster which was an impetus for the development of workers' compensation in New Zealand.

In *The Great 08*, Brian has written the most detailed account yet of the Blackball Strike. His book is valuable for this and also because it revises the existing history of the strike in several important respects.

Wood starts with an analysis of the employer, the British-owned Blackball Coal Company, in the context of the 'imperial capitalism' of the times. The company's purpose was to secure high quality coal for the imperial trade, mainly in refrigerated primary products, that was essential to New Zealand's economic wellbeing. The company's local directors were members of the Christchurch business elite. Earlier histories have focused mainly on the union leaders, but Wood highlights the important roles played in the strike by George Gatenby Stead, the company's chairman and a wealthy Christchurch businessman, and Jack McCullough, the Workers' Representative in the Court.

His examination of the Blackball community and the 'discordant issues' between management and workers challenges the popular notion that the strike was about 'crib' time and counters the argument by some historians that it was instigated by radical agitators to promote class war. He shows that the key issue in the strike was the union's demand for 'eight hours bank to bank'. The miners' working day included the time it took to travel from the mine entrance or bank to the workface and back again — some ten hours.

The radical activists like Pat Hickey and Paddy Webb were important. Unlike some other West Coast mining towns, Blackball had its own branch of the Socialist Party. Wood points out there were other influences at work. Miners' housing was poor, their living standards were low and the early twentieth century was a time of falling real wages and rising prices. A strong Celtic component in the workforce supported an uncompromising attitude to management. To improve the miners' lot the union needed to win greater power in the workplace.

The final section of Wood's book is a detailed account of the strike. The settlement followed Stead's sudden death in late April 1908. It has been argued that this helped to open the way to a resolution, as Stead had been uncompromising towards the union. Wood argues convincingly that the end to the strike owed more to the West Coast weather. The Tyneside mine, which had supplied the Blackball mine owners with coal, was suddenly flooded. On 9 May it was abandoned. Three days later the company directors negotiated an end to the strike and work resumed at Blackball on 13 May.

— Peter Franks

Blackball 08



Saturday's procession

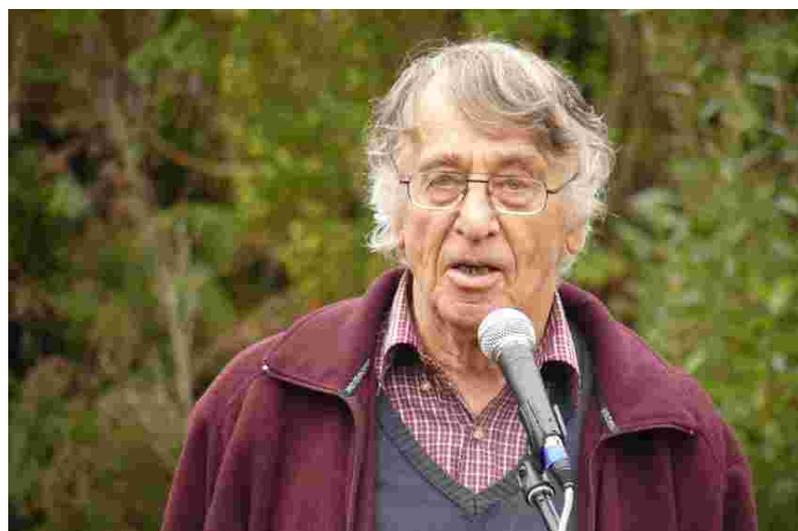
Parades are a tradition on the Coast. On a damp Easter Saturday (22 March 2008), a procession of locals, unionists and MPs with banners including the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union, the Australian mine workers' union, the Public Service Association, the Nurses' Organisation, the Association of Staff in Tertiary Education



TOP: The procession heads up towards the mine entrance. Photograph: Jared Davidson.

ABOVE: Backdrop to the morning gathering at the mine entrance. Photograph: Jared Davidson.

PREVIOUS PAGE: Music, banners, solidarity. Photograph: Simon Nathan.



The 'Bosses' lead the procession amid calls of 'get back to work'. Photograph: Jared Davidson; One of the vintage trucks to pass by during the procession. Photograph: Jared Davidson; Brian Wood speaking at the mine entrance. Photograph: Simon Nathan.

and the New Zealand Labour Party braved the rain. They were followed up the main street of Blackball by a long line of vehicles, many of them historic, and moved up the main street to the entrance of the old mine.

At the mine entrance a minute's silence was observed for those who had died there. Brian Wood (pictured opposite) then read the names of the 166 strikers (in a boon to historians the Arbitration Court listed them as an appendix to one of its judgments). He called on descendants of the strikers to identify themselves. A number did and several spoke of their pride in their forebears and their home.

Choir, Choir, Pants on Fire (the Wellington women's union choir) ended the commemoration at the mine entrance with a rousing singing of 'Solidarity Forever'.

— Peter Franks

NEWS ROUND-UP

Auckland Labour History Group formed

Following its successful Trans-Tasman Labour History Conference in 2007, the Auckland committee took steps to constitute a formal Auckland Labour History Group. Members of the Trade Union History Project living in Auckland have also joined the new group. Membership stands at 15. Ray Markey is interim chair, and Gay Simpkin interim secretary of the group.

Discussions about the group have taken place in the context of a wish to form a branch of an overarching New Zealand labour history group. This was timely in the light of recent moves by the TUHP to reconstitute itself. There is also a hope that eventually an Oceanic labour history association, encompassing Australia and the Pacific, might be formed. At present, the group has formed on an interim basis until a national body is established.

The first activity by the group was to organise a celebratory tribute to Hone Tuwhare. This took place in Forde's bar (a local sympathiser of the Left) on Sunday 6 July 2008, with about 40 in attendance. MP Judith Tizard opened the afternoon, and speakers were Janet Hunt, Tuwhare's biographer, and Gaylene Preston whose 1996 documentary on Tuwhare was also shown. Steve Abel provided live music. Irish stew and soup complemented the whole.

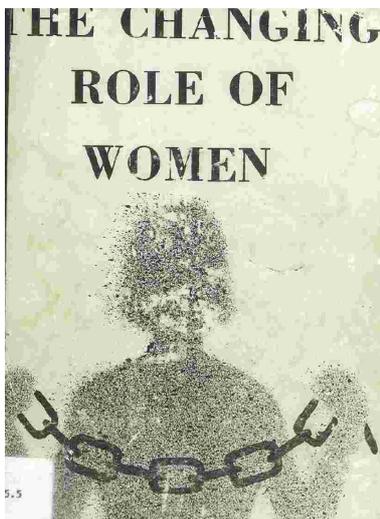
As part of the Auckland Heritage Festival in September the Auckland Labour History Group, with the assistance of the New Zealand Film Archive, screened the documentary film *Fighting Back*. This was made in 1949 by Cecil Holmes after he was suspended from the Film Unit in Wellington for Communist Party membership. Pioneer New Zealand film-maker Rudall Hayward was also involved. The documentary records events of the 1949 lock-out by Auckland employers of the local Communist-led carpenters' union. It recounts the employers' tactics and shows the response of widespread solidarity among Auckland workers. Cecil's younger brother Basil who starred in the film, was in attendance.

— Ray Markey, Gay Simpkin

FEATURE ARTICLE

Between the Waves: Feminism in New Zealand

I am writing a PhD thesis on four New Zealand communist parties from the 1960s to the 1990s. One of my areas of interest is the effects that second wave feminism had upon both the practice and the theory of these communist organisations.



Original Cover of the book of the lecture course held by the Linden Play Centre 1966 – note how the woman's figure is indistinct but the chains are in bold.

First wave feminism is the name that has become attached to the various struggles for women's suffrage in the later part of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Generally second wave feminism is seen as emerging from the anti-Vietnam War and anti-racist struggles in North America in reaction to the overt sexism displayed by the male leaders of these movements.¹ But, while the word "wave" may be a useful term to describe periods of overt political action, it does give the impression that between the "waves" women were generally content with their position in society. As far as New Zealand is concerned, as my researches have uncovered, this was definitely not the case.

In 1966 the members of the committee of the Linden Play Centre were impressed by a lecture given in the USA and broadcast on New Zealand state radio on the "potential of women" and decided to organise a series of lectures on 'The Changing Role of Women' to be given weekly over a six week period. They expected a turn out of around 50 people. Instead over 300 people attended the course and the committee noted that the question was "evolving as a topical and pertinent subject in New Zealand today".²

Following this first series of lectures, the University of Auckland held at least two series of talks on this same subject in 1967 and 1968. Similarly, the Waikato branch of the Society for Research on Women in New Zealand (which was formed as a result of the Linden lectures) held series of lectures in 1969 also called "The Changing Role of Women".³ These efforts suggest widespread feeling that some important factor was impacting on women, although no-one seemed to be sure of exactly what it was. But it was noted that women, especially young married women, were unhappy and anxious.

There are a number of trends that could account for the unhappiness of women living the 'suburban dream'. Firstly, this generation of "baby boomers" was the first where most women, including middle class women, expected to do paid work, even if only for a few years before marriage.⁴ This meant that most women experienced a period of personal economic independence before marriage. Secondly, the extension of the school leaving age and the expansion of secondary schooling which occurred under the first Labour government raised the educational standards and expectations for women, who previously may well have left school at age 13.⁵ Thirdly, both advertising media and general media generated an idea of the suburban idyll, with the perfectly coiffured and aproned housewife, finding utter fulfilment in taking care of equally perfect children while awaiting the return home of the husband. This was generally at odds with reality and never more so than in the matter of the fulfilment expected to be experienced by housewives. There was also the issue of the suburbs themselves. Often isolating and raw, with little to sustain either intellectual or physical well-being, the new

suburbs, whether developed by the government or private concerns, lacked not only community facilities but also the feel of a community. No wonder then that many women felt trapped and many suffered deep unhappiness and some clinical depression.⁶ One of the speakers at the first series of lectures pointed out that of the attempted suicides which were treated at Wellington Hospital in one year, totalling 184 cases, 123 were women and 100 of these women were aged between 16 and 45.⁷

The themes of the lectures given in the first series were generally replicated in the other series; the changing role of women in society; mental health for women; women in work; women and leisure and women's contribution to society. Statistics were produced which showed that women were marrying earlier and this meant that by the time all the children produced by the marriage had left home the woman concerned would have on average another forty years to get through before she died.⁸

On reading the published lectures it is clear that speakers brought their individual approaches to the problems facing women. One of the issues concerning both men and women was what to do with all these women who had no focus to their lives once their children had left home. Community and voluntary work was urged upon women who were in this position, which was seen, by implication, as being a dangerous one.

...due to better living conditions and the conquering of many diseases, the expectations of life for New Zealand women has been raised to 75 years. Formerly it was 45, synchronizing with the end of the child bearing years. In present circumstances, a woman has as long after menopause as her adult life preceding it. Immediately there is a decision to be made – how to “make use of” (in the best terms) to “fill in” (in the worst terms) this section of life, when one is physically capable of many accomplishments.⁹

To ensure that women in the future would be ready for this lacuna in their lives, educational authorities were urged to provide a wider education than that needed to prepare a girl for a short working life between leaving school and marriage.¹⁰ Besides, it was pointed out, that a well educated wife made a far better mother and wife than one trained only in household duties.¹¹

However to demonstrate the differing views put forward in these lectures one of the male speakers indicated that, while men and women had equal IQs, they were not suited to the same tasks.

Man is the dominant partner, the hunter, the lover. Woman is better at repetitive tasks, e.g. knitting, which explains her particular aptitude for mass production lines in factories, in offices, or in any occupation that call for repeated small tasks. On the other hand, man is better at policy making, the making of long term plans, at seeing an objective undeterred by side issues. Woman [sic] tends to stay with the minutiae and therefore not to see the wood for the trees. Strong words? Perhaps, and there are exceptions of course, but these tend to have manly characteristics. Joan of Arc for instance was more man than woman.¹²

This person seems to have been somewhat conflicted himself as he also recommended that women should read Simone De Beauvoir's 'The Second Sex', a book he appears to have completely misunderstood.

While there are some pages of patronising and paternal advice to women in general and housewives in particular (the sections on women's legal rights penned by men are so self-congratulatory that even today they can induce rage in the reader) there are those who were trying to take the economic and social position of women seriously. W B Sutch, in particular, with his call for women to refuse to socialise boys to think that it is women's role to pick up whatever they leave on the floor, his enthusiasm for true equal pay, and his denunciation of gender-determined subjects at school, made the case that it was possible to change society to better support women.¹³

Do not let anybody in secondary school take a pre-vocational course especially if that course is homecraft or clothing or commercial.

Raise the school leaving age.

Keep your youngsters at school for four or five years.

Take advantage of every educational opportunity there is after secondary schooling; the Polytechnic, hair-dressing schools, typing schools and universities.

Agitate for full employment.

Work hard for industrial development.

Make quite sure that equal pay is an issue – wherever it is an issue that you fight on the right side of it.¹⁴

Likewise the discussion of Mrs M. Gilson who pointed out that

We pay lip service to the equality of men and women in New Zealand but we really have not yet achieved equality of opportunity, and the operative word is "opportunity". Women have not yet the same opportunities as men in New Zealand.¹⁵

So, while historians may recognise waves of activity around women's rights, in the dip between the waves, the subordinate place of women was not forgotten. Men and women recognised some of the stresses this caused in women, and looked for remedies. The unexpected eagerness for discussion on this subject was filled by women who probably thought they were just common New Zealand housewives. But common women...

...like bread will rise.

— Lisa Sacksen

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1 — But in New Zealand when an oral history project was conducted to discover whether similar attitudes existed in the Anti-Vietnam war movements and whether these led to the development of second wave feminism in New Zealand the results did not point in this direction. Roberto Rabel and Megan Cook, "Women and the Anti-Vietnam War Movement in New Zealand", **National Oral History Association of New Zealand Journal**, Vol. 10, 1998.

2 — Linden Play Centre and Society for Research on Women in New Zealand, Inc., **The Changing Role of Women**, Wellington, 1966, p.1.

3 — *ibid.*, Society for Research on Women in New Zealand, Inc. Waikato Branch, **The Changing Role of Women**, Hamilton, 1969, The University of Auckland, Department of University Extension, **The Changing Role of Women**, Auckland, 1968.

4 — The Society of Research on Women in New Zealand, Inc., **Urban Women**, Dunedin, 1972, p.12. This book is an outcome of the Linden Play Centre lecture series, which motivated a group of women to form the Society for Research on Women in New Zealand. The Society organised the interviewing of women throughout New Zealand and the collation and analysis of the results. While the results were published in 1972, the interviews were undertaken in 1968/69.

5 — *ibid.*, p.33. This shows that while an almost equal percentage of boys and girls left school in 1967 with no qualifications, for every other school qualification, apart from Bursary and Scholarship, girls out performed boys..

6 — *ibid.*, p.32, this shows that 19% of the women interviewed who were married at the time of the interviews wanted some help for feelings of depression. However this number was more than double for that of women who were living apart from their husbands, but not yet separated or divorced..

7 — Linden Play Centre and Society for Research on Women in New Zealand, Inc., **The Changing Role of Women**, Wellington, 1966 p. 11.

8 — Waikato Branch of the Society of Research on Women in New Zealand, **The Changing Role of Women**, 1969, p.14.

9 — Linden Play Centre and Society for Research on Women in New Zealand, Inc., **The Changing Role of Women**, Wellington, 1966, pp.5 – 6.

10 — *ibid.*, pp. 40 – 41

11 — Waikato Branch of the Society of Research on Women in New Zealand, **The Changing Role of Women**, 1969, p.12.

12 — Linden Play Centre and Society for Research on Women in New Zealand, Inc., **The Changing Role of Women**, Wellington, pp.24 – 25.

13 — *ibid.*, pp. 54 – 64..

14 — *ibid.*, pp. 64 – 65.

15 — *ibid.*, p. 56.



One colour hand screenprint by Garage Collective, 640 x 900mm.

COMING EVENTS

1968 — A Year of Revolution? A 40th Anniversary Seminar

Date: Saturday 6 December 2008

Time: 10 a.m. until late afternoon. Registration and morning tea from 9.15. LHP Christmas Party to follow at the end of the seminar.

Venue: Loaves and Fishes Hall, Wellington Cathedral, Hill Street, Thorndon, Wellington (opposite Parliament).

Approximate Prices, which include lunch: \$40 waged; \$30 students, unwaged, etc. (exact prices still to be confirmed).

Topics and speakers confirmed so far:

- 1968 in France — Lisa Sacksen
- the 1968 Nil Wage Order in NZ — Peter Franks
- the student-worker alliance in NZ in 1968 — Toby Boraman

— Barry Lee and Keith Locke will talk about their experiences in the events of 1968 in New Zealand

Please send expressions of interest in presenting at the seminar, or in attending the seminar, to Donald Anderson.

E-mail: donald.anderson.nz@gmail.com

For updates on the seminar programme, see:

www.tuhp.org.nz

WORK IN PROGRESS

Pat Hickey

Wellington historian Peter Clayworth is working on a biography of home-grown labour activist and Red Fed agitator Patrick Hodgens Hickey (1882-1930), prominent in the Blackball strike and the industrial struggles of 1912 and 1913. Peter would value contact from anyone with any information on Pat Hickey (especially regarding his time in the USA and in Australia). Contact Peter at: peterclayworth@hotmail.com

Elsie Locke

'Looking for Answers: A biography of Elsie Locke' by Maureen Birchfield is scheduled for publication by Canterbury University Press in 2009. The book's publication was delayed following the sudden death of CUP Publisher, Richard King, earlier this year. The later publication date has enabled Maureen to add some interesting new material from files released by the New Zealand Security Intelligence Service, following an appeal to the Ombudsman. Files related to Elsie start in 1933 when the Police Special Branch kept its eye on her. Regular reports on Elsie continued until the early 1960s, and from 1957 were made by the newly established NZ Security Service (NZSS), which became the NZSIS in 1969. Contact: m.birchfield@paradise.net.nz



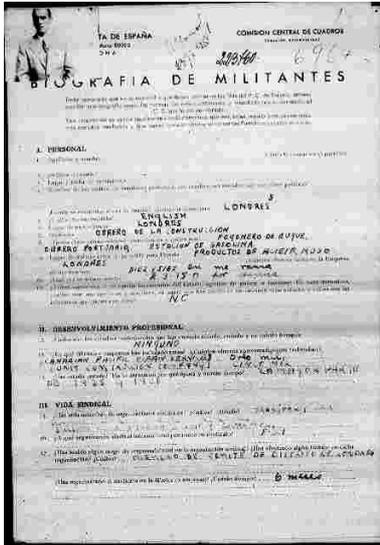
Jack Kent, 'the Taranaki Tiger'.

New Zealand and the Spanish Civil War

The TUHP seminar on New Zealand and the Spanish Civil War, held in November 2006, continues to spark fresh historical material and activity.

Mark Derby has edited the seminar presentations into book form for the Canterbury University Press, which is aiming for a launch in advance of Anzac Day 2009. The book's introduction is by Marcos Gomez, Spanish Ambassador to New Zealand. Mark recently supplied an article based on the book's findings to *El Pais*, Spain's leading liberal newspaper. The article is accompanied by photographs of New Zealand volunteers such as Jack Kent, a wrestler known as 'the Taranaki Tiger' who died near Barcelona in May 1937.

Other information which has come to light since the 2006 seminar includes the war record of US International Brigades volunteer Bob



Ford who, after the civil war, came to live on Auckland’s North Shore with his wife Augusta. His postcards from the Madrid front, together with his military ID card, were uncovered recently in the Auckland Museum.

Editor Mark Derby was especially pleased to meet the family of the British international Brigader Jim Hoy, a Liverpool seaman who served in Spain as a scout with the Anglo/American Artillery Unit. He arrived in New Zealand in 1955, married a local woman, Maureen, and spent the rest of his working life on the Wellington waterfront, becoming branch secretary of the Waterside Workers’ Union. One of his daughters is named after Dolores Ibarurri, ‘La Pasionara’, the most famous woman leader of the civil war.

“Dear Friend”



One of the highlights of the recent centennial celebration of the Blackball strike was Choir, Choir, Pants on Fire, the women who enlivened the event on several occasions with classic and unfamiliar union songs, and some powerful originals.

During the weekend, Choir member Judith Jones learned of a letter written in 1939 by Lucy Gospodnetich, the wife of a miner from the nearby township of Denniston, to the then Prime Minister, Mickey Savage. The miners were then out on strike in protest at the introduction of bigger coal trucks (the wheeled bins to carry coal inside the mine). The strike lasted fifteen days before the miners won their case.

TOP: Jim Hoy’s record of service in the Spanish Civil War.

ABOVE: Choir, Choir, Pants on Fire performing at the mine entrance. Photograph: Simon Nathan.

In her letter, Lucy says:

To the Prime Minister of New Zealand

Dear Friend,
 Please pardon my mode of address but that is how we all think of you. Well you were saying over the Wireless you would like us all to see the exhibition. Well this mine is out on Strike this is the 3rd week so if the Mine does not start we will be lucky if any of us have a meal to eat for Xmas. The trouble is the Manager here has put a number of big boxes on for the coal, and the truckers say they are too big to handle and that they are liable to strain their hearts or rupture themselves and if they do either they do not get compensation as the Insurance companies do not pay out on such things. ...The thing is we have no money, after the depression we had back bills to pay everything had to be renewed in the house we had to have new clothes so that the position is the Stores are going to go Cash and I suppose we will have to starve children included.... The Weather is cold with a good deal of rain one feels as though they would be better out of it altogether. I am sending you this letter in hopes that you will try and do something for us it is going to be a miserable unhappy Xmas for all concerned on this Hill if something is not done.

Thanking you
 (Mrs) Lucy Gospodenetich



Playland Centennial Poster

The Exhibition Lucy refers to was the great Centennial Exhibition in Wellington, marking a hundred years since the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi.

Judith says, "I was so compelled by hearing the words of the letter — it gave me goosebumps, and I wanted to know more. I was really amazed by the Sunday (at Blackball), I had no idea so many people were working to do history about all this."

Researching the Exhibition later, Judith learned that a song, 'Come to the fair', was played every morning during the exhibition by the onsite radio station, 5ZB. She remembered hearing this song as a child, "a rollicking thing my mum sang to me when I was little". She wrote the lyrics for a song which incorporated both 'Come to the fair' and parts of Lucy's letter to the PM. "You have to imagine it half said, half sung for the letter part - and then lusty, Salvation Army sort of vigour for the other part."

Judith describes her song as "a work in progress... and as yet no music sorted except what I can hear in my head.... and I do know it for the 'Heigh ho' part because the National Library music people helpfully found me the sheet music." She adds that, "I also found out in the Exhibition they had a 54 stone (343kg) Mexican Girl, 'the world's fattest girl' in the side shows. I was kind of horrified — she must have a story to tell! Other attractions included a tank of live sharks, the 'Daredevil International lady stunt Motor-Cyclists' Pat Gamble and May Wong, and the Odditorium with its 'human freaks', such as Mexican Rose and Bush Bluey, an 81cm-tall African Pygmy."

"Dear Friend"

Letter: slow, finishing each bit with a pause as though thinking,

Denniston, Burnett's Face
21 November 1939
To... the Prime Minister of New Zealand
Michael Joseph Savage

Starts to be fully sung...

Dear.... Friend

Faster, like an anxious thought

Please pardon my mode of address
But that is how we all think of you.

Now into a steadier way

Well, I heard you on the wireless
You said Come one, come all
To our centennial celebration
of the achievements of our nation

Different voices- verse of the song with altered words

The sun is a shining to welcome the day
Heigh ho - come to the fair.
The folk are a singing so merry and gay
Heigh ho - come to the fair.
There's towers and exhibits as fine as can be
Model cities and railways so pretty to see
So it's come then, New Zealanders all

To the fair that's the pride of the nation.
With the rides and the sideshows in Playland to play
With a heigh ho - come to the fair.

Letter

But me, my man and my children

Change tempo

We...can't... come.

Well this mine is out on strike
And we're into miserable week three.
The weather is cold, we're all out of coal.
If the mine does not start we'll be lucky
If any of us has a meal for Christmas.

The manager's put on big boxes
The truckers say they're too big...
They'll strain their hearts or rupture themselves
The manager says he's determined
And the men say they won't budge.

Well, I heard you on the wireless
You said Come one, come all
To our centennial celebration
of the achievements of our nation.

Different voices

So it's come then, New Zealanders all
To the fair that's the pride of the nation.
With the rides and the sideshows in Playland to play
Heigh ho come to the fair.

Letter

But me, my man and my children

Change tempo

We...can't... come.

Letter

The thing is we have no money
What with the depression and all
And the stores are going to cash.
With the cost of living as high as it is
I suppose we will all have to starve.

Well, I heard you on the wireless
You said Come one, come all
To our centennial celebration
of the achievements of our nation

Different voices

So it's come then, New Zealanders all
To the fair that's the pride of the nation.
With the rides and the sideshows in Playland to play
With a heigh ho come to the fair.

Letter

But me, my man and my children

Change tempo

We...can't... come.

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