

## Strikes and labour disputes

### The 1912 and 1913 strikes

Employers soon developed a tactic to deal with the unions that ignored the arbitration system. They encouraged non-union employees to form a new 'arbitrationist' union and register it under the Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act. This happened in the gold-mining town of Waihi and the result was a long and bitter strike, the only New Zealand strike where someone was killed.

#### The 1912 Waihi strike

In March 1912 a small group of gold-mine engine drivers (who operated the machines that raised and lowered the miners in the mine shafts) formed a breakaway union under the Arbitration Act. The 1,000 members of the Waihi Miners Union stopped work in protest.

The strike became a violent conflict after an anti-union government headed by William Massey took office in May 1912. Large numbers of police were sent into Waihi, more than 60 strikers were jailed, and hundreds of strike-breakers were recruited. In October 1912 the mines reopened and strike-breakers were driven to work in horse-drawn wagons under heavy police guard.

On 12 November 1912 strike-breakers attacked the union hall, and striker Fred Evans was beaten to death. They then rampaged around Waihi, forcing the other strikers and their families to leave town.

#### War on the wharves – the 1913 strikes

The most disruptive strike in New Zealand history was in 1913. At that time many New Zealand workers were influenced by the idea, introduced from Europe and the US, of revolutionary industrial unionism. They believed that if enough workers could join together in a general strike, they could take over their workplaces and run them for themselves. Two small local disputes involving Huntly miners and Wellington watersiders spread to other ports and mines.

#### Protective clothing

During the 1913 strike, many Wellington 'special constables' had their headquarters in the city's exclusive Wellesley Club, which still operates in the downtown business district. Every night the 'specials' assembled at the club to begin nightly patrols of sites such as the government buildings and the Dominion Museum. Before heading out, some put on padded leather helmets to protect themselves against blows from strikers, resulting in 'a great deal of wry humour'<sup>1</sup> from club members.

By November 1913 about 16,000 watersiders, miners, labourers, drivers and others were on strike, mostly in Wellington, Auckland and



Breakaway union, Waihi, 1912



Black Tuesday in Waihi, 1912 (1st of 3)



1913 waterfront strike, Wellington



Specials and stonethrowers, 1913



1913 strike, Auckland

Christchurch. This was an opportunity for employers and the Massey government to force the militant unions back into the arbitration system. As in 1890, the police called for volunteers to help control the strikers and reopen the wharves. Thousands of these strike-breakers were recruited, enrolled as 'special constables' (temporary police), and armed with wooden batons. Some also used their own firearms and horsewhips. Most were farm workers who rode into town on horseback and were soon named 'Massey's Cossacks' by the strikers. Others were office workers from city businesses, who patrolled the wharves and other vital areas on foot. The strikers responded to their arrival with fierce street-fighting and sabotage.

For several weeks the country was on the brink of violent revolution. The government sent two naval ships to guard the wharves. On 5 November 1913 the special constables marched through Wellington and reopened the wharves. In Auckland, when 'Massey's Cossacks' marched down Queen Street to the waterfront, the strike committee called a general strike and most work in the city stopped for several days. After six weeks the government arrested the main strike leaders (including several future labour ministers) and the strike petered out.

#### Footnotes

1. Arthur Manning, *The Wellesley Club, 1891–1991*. Wellington: Wellesley Club, 1991, p. 57. Back

## Biographies



Ernest John Bartlett Allen, 1884–1945



Tom Barker, 1887–1970



John Cullen, 1850?–1939



Frederick George Evans, 1881–1912



Bernard Cyril Freyberg, 1889–1963



Peter Fraser, 1884–1950



Alexander Lawrence Herdman, 1869–1953



William Ferguson Massey, 1856–1925

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