



(Derby, 2010b)

Strikes and labour disputes

Wars, depression and first Labour government

During the First World War strict emergency regulations banned strikes in key industries such as mining and the wharves. Some union leaders such as Harry Holland went to jail for speaking out against the war.

In the following years, the attitudes of employers and unions towards the arbitration system varied depending on the current economic conditions. Only about 25% of workers belonged to a union. When times were good and labour was in short supply, the unions resented the Arbitration Court's restrictions on their ability to negotiate better wages. When the economy declined and unemployment rose, the employers attacked the system because it made it harder for them to cut wages and reduce working conditions.

In 1921 prices for agricultural exports dropped sharply and the Arbitration Court was given temporary new powers to set wage rates for the whole country. The Court's first 'general wage order', which lowered all adult wages, was issued in 1922. In March 1931 a further downturn resulted in a further 10% cut in wages.

The 1932 Christchurch tramways strike

From 1932, compulsory arbitration was abolished, and unions were usually powerless to resist reductions to wages and conditions. Rising unemployment during the 1930s economic depression meant there were plenty of people to take the places of striking workers.

Even so, nearly all the 300-plus members of the Christchurch Tramways Union went on strike in 1932 after their employer sacked some staff, including union president Jock Mathison. There were violent clashes in Cathedral Square as strike-breakers took over the trams, and striking workers used iron bars and stones to block their way. After a fortnight the strikers returned to work with their demands unmet. However four years later, after the first Labour government had come to power, Mathison was elected to the board that ran the trams, and the men's working hours were reduced.

The first Labour government

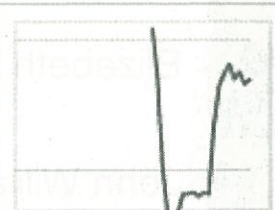
The 1935 Labour government extended the arbitration system to cover many more workers, including office workers and government employees. Nationwide unions became legal, and union membership was compulsory – any worker covered by an agreement negotiated by a registered union had to join that union. Union membership increased rapidly under this new system, until nearly half of all workers belonged to a union. Compulsory arbitration was reinstated in 1936. A new Federation of Labour was set up, since the short-lived first Federation had disappeared after the disastrous 1913 Great Strike.



Lamponing the Arbitration Court



Christchurch tramways strike, 1932



Number of registered unions



Freezing workers' stay-in strike, 1937

Hotbeds of rebellion

For staff at an Auckland meat-freezing works, work hours increased from 40 to 44 hours a week during the Second World War, but without a pay rise. In 1945 they protested by occupying the freezing works at Westfield, Southdown and Horotiu, and the cool stores on Auckland's King's Wharf. Hammocks were slung inside the Westfield works for strikers to sleep in. The country's first 'stay-in' strike won a pay increase to reflect the longer hours of work.

Workers in wartime

During the Second World War, regulations made all work stoppages illegal. Unions agreed to increase their working hours and keep wages stable for the sake of the war effort. However some union members felt that this policy of economic stabilisation protected the profits of employers at the expense of workers, and several small strikes broke out in protest.

Biographies



Alice Eleanor Cossey, 1879–1970



James Henry Edwards, 1892–1952



Henry Edmund Holland, 1868–1933



Elizabeth Reid McCombs, 1873–1935



John William Roberts, 1885–1962



Fintan Patrick Walsh, 1894–1963

How to cite this page: Mark Derby. 'Strikes and labour disputes - Wars, depression and first Labour government', Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, updated 13-May-10
URL: <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/strikes-and-labour-disputes/6>