

(Roth, 2009b)



POLITICAL PARTIES

SOCIALIST (N.Z.) PARTY

The first socialist groups in New Zealand were formed in the late eighteen-nineties – Fabian Societies in Dunedin and Christchurch, a Socialist Church in Christchurch, and a Clarion Club and, later, a Socialist League in Wellington. These were primarily propaganda organisations, seeking to educate their members and the public at large by means of lectures, public meetings, and journals.

A political party, the New Zealand Socialist Party, was not formed until July 1901, following the arrival of almost 200 British socialists, the so-called “Clarion Settlers”, led by W. R. Ranstead. Branches of the new party were set up in Wellington, Auckland, and Christchurch. In January 1902 Tom Mann, the British Labour leader, arrived in Wellington and was appointed national organiser of the Socialist Party. Under Mann's guidance the party combined educational work on the long-term aims of socialism with practical work for immediate reforms. In 1903, however, after Mann had left for Australia, a more uncompromising group led by Robert Hogg gained control of the Socialist Party and introduced a policy of “Revolution, not Reform”. Sterile theoretical discussions replaced electoral activity and work in the trade unions. Membership fell and branches collapsed, leaving only a small nucleus in Wellington to keep the party alive. In 1907–08 the growing industrial unrest, which led to the first strikes in defiance of the Arbitration Court, brought with it a revival of the Socialist Party. New branches were formed among the West Coast miners, at Huntly, Waihi, and elsewhere. At the party's first national congress, in April 1908, a membership of 3,000 was claimed. Socialists were among the leaders of the new “Red” Federation of Labour and the two organisations, after 1911, shared their national organ, the *Maoriland Worker*.

Already in 1903 the Socialist Party had contested municipal elections in Wellington and Auckland and had gained a seat on the Wellington City Council. In 1911 the first socialist entered Parliament – John Robertson who won Otaki in the second ballot. The borough of Runanga had a socialist Mayor while in other mining townships party members served on councils and school committees. Despite these successes, socialist participation in elections remained half-hearted. The party never resolved the conflict between the moderates who were anxious to work for immediate reforms through Parliament, local bodies, and trade unions, and the so-called “impossibilists” who would accept nothing short of full socialism and “bloody revolution”.

The parting of the ways came in July 1913, when the Labour Unity Congress formed a Social Democratic Party. Socialists were invited to join the new party and the great majority of them heeded the call. H. E. Holland, recently arrived from Australia, P. Fraser and M. J. Savage, leaders of the Auckland branch, F. R. Cooke from Christchurch, and P. C. Webb were among the prominent socialists who joined the Social Democratic Party. The Wellington branch alone refused

to disband and maintained its old name and separate identity. During the war years, members of this branch supported the Conscription Repeal League which conducted a Free Speech campaign in 1916–17. After the war the remaining members of the branch joined in the negotiations which led to the formation of the New Zealand Communist Party in 1920–21.

A short-lived attempt to revive the Socialist Party was made in Christchurch in the early thirties. The bulk of socialists, however, remained in the Labour Party which had taken over the old Socialist Party objective of “the socialisation of the means of production, distribution and exchange”. Many of them reached high office in Cabinet, Parliament, and the Labour Party itself.

by *Herbert Otto Roth, B.A., DIP.N.Z.L.S., Deputy Librarian, University of Auckland.*

Political Science, Mar 1957, The New Zealand Socialist Party, Roth, H.

How to cite this page: . 'SOCIALIST (N.Z.) PARTY', from An Encyclopaedia of New Zealand, edited by A. H. McLintock, originally published in 1966.

Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, updated 22-Apr-09

URL: <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/1966/political-parties/16>