

# UNITY

A Marxist journal for all grassroots activists

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**STRIKE!**  
the workers'  
big weapon

# UNITY

A Marxist journal for all grassroots activists

Published quarterly by

## **SOCIALIST WORKER**

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PO Box 13-685, Auckland, New Zealand

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June 2006

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### Postal subscriptions

Four issues a year

(March, June, September, December)

Inside NZ: \$25 for one year

Offshore fastpost: \$NZ40

Make cheque out to 'UNITY'

Send to PO Box 13-685, Auckland, NZ

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# **STRIKE! – the workers’ big weapon**

## **C O N T E N T S**

- 6        A new and better way of being human  
          DAPHNE LAWLESS and GRANT MORGAN, editors of UNITY
- 12       Beat the brands: SupersizeMyPay part one  
          JOE CAROLAN, Unite Workers Union & Socialist Worker
- 26       Revival of workers’ struggle in Aotearoa  
          GRANT BROOKES, Socialist Worker, and GRANT MORGAN
- 34       French revolts in 1968 & 2006: ‘When students & workers take  
to  
          the streets, they win’  
          GRANT BROOKES
- 45       Can Aussie workers repeat French victory?  
          SUE BOLTON, Democratic Socialist Perspective (Australia)
- 47       Mapping a French revolt in Aotearoa  
          GRANT MORGAN
- 50       Northern Ireland: United struggle beats bosses & bigotry  
          DAPHNE LAWLESS
- 52       Workers’ green ban at Bastion Point  
          LEN PARKER, Socialist Worker
- 56       Nine good ways to win a strike  
          DEAN PARKER, Workers Charter
- 58       NZ class collisions 1913, 1951, 1991: It takes two wings to fly  
          CHRIS TROTTER, NZ Political Review
- 69       A right yet to be won – our freedom to strike  
          DON FRANKS, Workers Party
- 76       1934 Minneapolis Teamster Rebellion: ‘Nothing moved without  
          union permission’  
          FARRELL DOBBS, US unionist & Trotskyist
- 90       Lessons from 1905 Russia: ‘Create battle organisations or go  
          under’  
          BRONWEN BEECHEY, Socialist Worker

- 
- 95 Rosa Luxemburg & Russia's mass strikes  
DAPHNE LAWLESS
- 102 Strikes change societies & minds  
VAUGHAN GUNSON, Socialist Worker & union activist
- 108 The politics that workers need  
DAPHNE LAWLESS
- 110 Why we need a revolutionary party  
JOHN MOLYNEUX, Socialist Workers Party (Britain)
- 112 Feedback  
PAT O'DEA – A report that never was from a union that never was  
PETER BOYLE – Socialist Alliance's key role in Aussie fightback  
OMAR HAMED – The TXT generation & anti-capitalist struggle  
VAUGHAN GUNSON – Labour less PC as party embraces ruling class  
GRANT BROOKES – Labour becoming a business party like National  
National  
HEATHER LYALL – Labour's joke on kiwi kids

## **UNITY welcomes two types of contributions**

- **FEEDBACK.** We invite your letters (500 words max) on debates in UNITY or issues dear to your heart.
- **ARTICLES.** We invite your viewpoint (no word limit) on the debate to come in UNITY. Our next edition, out in September 2006, will be on the challenges to corporate imperialism coming from Venezuela and around Latin America (unless something else huge arises).

Our correspondence email is [daphlawless@randomstatic.net](mailto:daphlawless@randomstatic.net). The editors reserve the right to edit for brevity, clarity and libel while keeping your core message intact. All serious contributions, from whatever left viewpoint, will be considered for publication. Silly or sectarian stuff will be binned with a grin.

## Political profiles of your UNITY editors

### **DAPHNE LAWLESS**

Born in Lower Hutt 1974. Left activist since early teens. Foundation member of NewLabour Party 1989. Studied literature at Victoria University. Doctoral degree for Marxist-feminist thesis on early New Zealand women's popular fiction 2003. Worked as teacher, researcher and library assistant 2002-6. Joined Socialist Worker 2002. Central committee of Socialist Worker 2003 to present. Delegate for Association of University Staff 2003-5. Co-founder of Campus Left at Victoria University 2004. Editor of Socialist Worker Monthly Review 2004-5. Co-editor of Socialist Worker journal UNITY 2005 to present. Moved to Auckland 2006. A singer-songwriter with CDs released on Random Static Music 2001 and 2002.



Hamilton rugby pitch to stop Springbok match 1981. General secretary of CPNZ 1987-95. Editor of CPNZ paper People's Voice (later Workers Voice) 1988-95. Central organiser of anti-compact campaign to stop state capture of unions 1988-90. Moved to Auckland 1989. Central organiser of rank-and-file campaign against Employment Contracts law 1990-1. Led de-Stalinisation of CPNZ 1991-3. Publicist for SHAC (State Housing Action Coalition)



1991-9. Arrested in hospital occupation to stop ward closure 1992. Fronted evolution of CPNZ into Socialist Workers Organisation (later Socialist Worker) 1994-5. Secretary of Socialist Worker 1995 to present. Occupied Auckland University registry to stop student fee hike 1996. Arrested in SHAC state unit occupation to reverse market rents 1999. Central organiser of RAM campaign against corporate control of Auckland Regional Council 2003-4. Joined Unite Workers Union 2004. Began moves by broad left to launch Workers Charter 2005. Co-editor of UNITY 2005 to present. A maker of fine fruit wines.

### **GRANT MORGAN**

Born in Hamilton 1949. Railworker 1974-87. Delegate and trustee for National Union of Railway Workers. Started job delegate network at Hamilton goods yard 1976. Joined Communist Party of New Zealand 1976. Invaded

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# CHANGES, ALWAYS CHANGES...

## UNITY goes quarterly...

From this issue, UNITY will be produced each quarter, rather than monthly. The reasons are twofold. First, to allow our editors time for other important political and union commitments. Second, to boost the size and quality of UNITY, consolidating its status as Aotearoa's premier Marxist journal.

The cover price has been lifted to \$5 to fund extra pages and inflated costs. A postal subscription inside New Zealand is \$25 a year (four issues). Local subscribers who've paid \$50 for the previous monthly journal will receive the quarterly UNITY for two years. A similar adjustment will be made for offshore subscribers. Any problems, contact UNITY distribution manager Len Parker, [organiser@sworker.pl.net](mailto:organiser@sworker.pl.net) or PO Box 13-685 Auckland.

## Monthly E-Zine starts...

To help socialists analyse breaking issues, integrate with struggles and debate key problems, Socialist Worker has begun publishing an Operational E-Zine. It's emailed to Socialist Worker members and sympathisers once a month, or sooner if events dictate. If you don't have email, we can post you a paper copy.

If you consider yourself a sympathiser of Socialist Worker, and wish to request a free subscription to our Operational E-Zine, apply to Socialist Worker secretary Grant Morgan, [gcm@actrix.co.nz](mailto:gcm@actrix.co.nz) or 021-2544 515.

## **A new and better way of being human**

by **DAPHNE LAWLESS** and **GRANT MORGAN**

The previous two editions of our new-look UNITY dealt with the more political side of workers' struggle. One looked at the exciting global trend towards the formation of broad-based grassroots challenges to corporate politics, including Workers Charter in New Zealand. The other examined how New Zealand Labour and other social democratic parties around the world are embracing a system of corporate imperialism hostile to workers' interests.

The theme of this UNITY is workers' big weapon, the strike. Most often, strikes are seen as an economic, rather than a political, challenge to employers. And it's true that almost all recent strikes in this country have been around the employment contract claims of individual sections of workers, making them economic in nature. Yet if you go back in New Zealand history, and also look overseas right now, you will see plenty of instances of political strikes. From time to time a whole region or country has been transformed by mass political strikes, which pose the question of who should rule society. See UNITY's articles on France in 1968 and 2006, Minneapolis in 1934, Russia in 1905 and New Zealand in 1913, 1951 and 1991.

Marxists see the international working class as the only social agency able to transform the whole world. This viewpoint doesn't come from moral outrage about workers being at the bottom of capitalism's social pyramid, even though we should feel angry about such institutional injustice. Rather, it comes from the practical reality that the value exploited from workers' unpaid labour, usually known as "profit", is the fuel that keeps global capitalism running. Because strikes cut off this fuel supply at source, workers acting together have the potential power to humble and tumble the whole system.

New Zealand saw a rebirth of workers' activism following the 5% pay campaign launched in February 2005 by the Engineers Union, as an article by Grant Brookes and Grant Morgan details. The number of strikes is on the rise and unions report a growth in membership, revealing the linkage between militancy and organisation. Joe Carolan's look at Unite's SuperSizeMyPay campaign shows how young workers are discovering the virtues of union traditions, sometimes giving them new forms. Long live the Hooning Picket invented by Unite Westies!

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How has Helen Clark's government reacted to this revival of workers' activism? Sourly. Modest union pay claims have been cold-shouldered by Labour MPs, who are almost never to be seen on workers' picket lines. Instead, Labour is holding fast to the harsh anti-strike clauses in their Employment Relations Act. This law forbids NZ workers from striking over unfair sackings, government policies, other strikes, unjust wars, racism or sexism, ecological crises, dishonoured contracts, mass redundancies, price rises, community concerns or anything else falling outside two narrow areas: first, settlement of your own collective employment agreement, and second, escape from an urgent health or safety threat. As Don Franks points out in this UNITY, the right to strike has yet to be won in Labour-run Aotearoa.

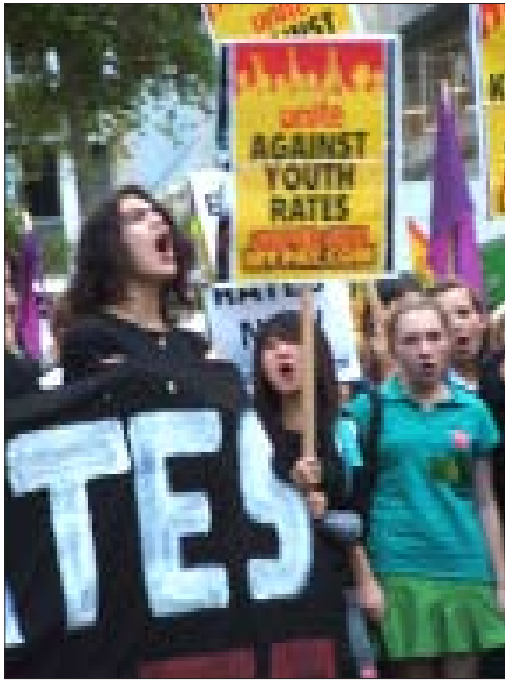
The Labour government's refusal to legalise our right to strike has a dual motivation: hate and fear. These privileged politicians hate the way strikes disrupt the system of exploitation which Labour has pledged to manage as "responsibly" as National. And they fear the way strikes give workers a sense of collective power, since capitalism's officer corps will soon face mass mutinies once they lose the consent of their dispossessed army of producers.

Over the last decade a series of mass mutinies in France have battled



Bronwen Beechey waves the first Workers Charter paper, launched at this picket of Queen St McDonalds on 10 February 2006





2006 May Day march in Auckland. The collective actions of grassroots people change minds as well as societies.

government moves to impose welfare cuts, privatisation of state assets, student fees, anti-worker laws and other neo-liberal policies. The latest war in March-April 2006 saw waves of student occupations and general strikes kill off the CPE law which axed the rights of workers aged under 26.

A UNITY article by Grant Brookes outlines the reasons for success this time round in France when several previous revolts had ended in failure. This time the initiative lay with consistently militant student delegates, rather than often timid union leaders. Opposition to the CPE law was so broad that massive numbers were ready to down their tools and books and join strikes, occupations and marches. Influenced by this grassroots pressure, all French unions supported the movement from go to whoa, rather than heading in different directions as they had done in the past.

These keys to victory in France tell us all about the importance of militant leadership, mass mobilisation and workers' organisation. The same elements brought success in other struggles examined in this

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UNITY. Belfast posties recently beat their boss by ignoring union leaders unwilling to fight, and healing sectarian divisions by marching together through both Catholic and Protestant areas of their city. Several decades ago the New Zealand government was beaten at Bastion Point when a brave Ngati Whatua occupation won huge public sympathy, the bulldozers were stopped by a workers' green ban, and protesters refused to let leadership go to union officials fearful of the state. In 1934, Minneapolis drivers broke the fanatical union-busting campaign of bosses and police by exceptional strike organisation, staunch socialist leadership, a broad alliance with other workers and unions, and astute avoidance of the business unionism preached by their union president.

It might seem strange that a common theme in these successful grassroots struggles was the sidelining of union leaders who were conservative, bureaucratic and fearful. But it simply reflects the huge importance of a militant workers' leadership able to operate intelligently in both the political and industrial arenas. When that type of leadership is lacking, it's almost impossible to win even when there's a monster workers' mobilisation enjoying middle class support. That's illustrated in this UNITY by Chris Trotter's analysis of New Zealand's 1991 General Strike That Never Was against National's Employment Contracts legislation. He writes:

*Six years of neo-liberal economic blitzkrieg had readied the New Zealand working class to fight for their rights in 1991, but 40 years of political inactivity had sapped them of both the knowledge and the confidence to struggle independently. Instead, they waited for their "leaders" in the Council of Trade Unions and the Labour Party to issue a call to arms that never came... Working people can never afford to lose control of either the industrial or the political wing of the labour movement.*

But how do workers create the trade union and political party leaderships needed to successfully challenge the ruling elite? The grassroots revolts that rocked Russia in 1905 and 1917 and Germany in 1918 provide many answers, as UNITY articles by Bronwen Beechey and Daphne Lawless explain.

The Russian tsar's massacre of peaceful petitioners in 1905 was the trigger for industrial workers in Europe's most backward police state to organise a gigantic wave of mass strikes. Out of these mass strikes arose the world's first workers' councils (or soviets), the core of grassroots self-government. This spontaneous workers' revolt forced

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the Bolsheviks to revise their sectarian theory that workers couldn't rise higher than "economic" union struggles without being led by a revolutionary party composed mostly of intellectuals. Vladimir Lenin began urging the Bolsheviks to "throw open the gates of the party" and admit strikers even if they weren't familiar with Marxism.

Rosa Luxemburg, a Marxist leader in Germany, drew on 1905 Russia's mass strikes to show there was no unbridgeable division between "political" and "economic" struggles. Each could grow over into the other, acting as a circuit-breaker for workers. Luxemburg showed how mass strikes could erode the influence of union leaders wanting to limit workers' action to small "economic" issues which left state power in the hands of a pro-capitalist elite. They could also erode the influence of reformist MPs wanting to limit workers' politics to parliamentary campaigning which left economic power in the hands of big bosses.

But Luxemburg's well-justified faith in workers' spontaneity led her to underplay the importance of an independent Marxist party in converting a spontaneous uprising into a victorious revolution. In the absence of such a party, workers can still be pulled backwards by their old union and parliamentary leaders, thereby dooming any prospect of building a grassroots alternative to corporate imperialism.

Lenin learned from Luxemburg. In 1917 his slogan "All power to the soviets" gave full play to workers' spontaneity, while the Bolshevik Party led a determined struggle against reformists who bowed down to capitalism. Out of this mix of grassroots spontaneity and party discipline emerged the world's first victorious socialist revolution.

But Luxemburg failed to learn from Lenin. Not until Germany was swept by military mutinies and workers' strikes in 1918 did she and other Marxists break away from the reformists to form their own Spartacist party. By then it was too late to overcome reformist influence among the majority of workers and turn a mass uprising into a successful revolution. Luxemburg paid the ultimate price, being murdered by right-wing officers spurred on by reformist MPs.

Luxemburg's stress on strikes altering "working people's psychology" is central to Vaughan Gunson's UNITY article on how minds as well as societies are changed by workers' collective actions. Strikes smash the dulling routine of "normal" life in the capitalist workplace, encouraging spontaneity and creativity, whereas the bosses' system needs order and subservience to survive. In each strike we can see the first flowering of a new, and better, way of being human.

**in the swirl of struggle...**



**...there's one place to go  
to fit all the bits together**

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## **Beat the brands: SupersizeMyPay part one**

**After months of recruitment and planning, the drive by Unite Workers Union to organise low-paid fastfood workers announced itself with the world's first Starbucks strike on 23 November 2005. Four months later, the union signed a breakthrough deal with Restaurant Brands, winning more pay, conditions and rights for workers in Starbucks, Pizza Hut and KFC. During these months of struggle, a new approach to union organising was tested out, one that may prove useful to union activists in other industries and countries. JOE CAROLAN, Unite organiser and Socialist Worker member, recalls the first six months of SupersizeMyPay.Com when a small New Zealand union showed how to beat the brands.**

I first read about the Unite fastfood drive on Indymedia one evening in Hamilton. Back in my homeland of Ireland I had been a unionist and socialist for over a decade, but in recent years had been more active outside the worksite in the anti-war and global justice movements. These massive movements often followed major international events, ebbing and flowing like the tide coming in and out, but had given a lot of confidence to a new left. However, the real difficulty of turning this new found energy, this “Spirit of Seattle”, to build something solid in the union movement had long eluded activists, leading many to become disillusioned or cynical. Now, in New Zealand, Unite’s bolshie campaigning looked to me like the answer.

Indymedia told how young Unite organisers had signed up 3,000 fastfood workers, and how a campaign for better pay and workplace rights was going to be launched. I sent my congratulations, saying they were organising the unorganised just like old-time Irish socialists James Connolly and Jim Larkin. Within a month, they had convinced me to stay in New Zealand and help as an organiser with the SupersizeMyPay.Com campaign.

Back home, most socialists had until recently refused to take up paid positions with unions, as most were either controlled by right-wing bureaucrats who wedded workers to “partnership” with bosses and their governments, or were adjuncts of the “afraid to be a pale shade of pink” neo-liberal Labour Party. A socialist would probably never be offered an official position by these kinds of leaderships in the first place.

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But there was another tradition of organising unions – the tradition of the New Zealand’s Red Feds, the American Wobblies, the Irish Transport & General Workers Union of Larkin and Connolly. These unions gave no privileges to their officials, who were on the average wage (or less) and stood for a fight by workers to change the world. They all reminded me of Unite.

My first few months with Unite was about learning how to organise and assist workers at the same time as finding my way around a new city, Auckland. I learned heaps from comrades like Matt McCarten, Mike Treen, Piripi Thomson, Rima Taraia, Simon Oosterman and many others.



The action that began the SupersizeMyPay campaign: In the world’s first Starbucks strike, staff walk out of half-a-dozen Auckland stores to support the total shutdown of K’Road Starbucks, 23 November 2005.

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Simon took me round visiting Starbucks stores. Until then I'd never been inside one in my life. Inside a zone that anti-capitalists had encouraged people to boycott, he showed me how we could bring the spirit of the global justice fight to workers in the stores. Expecting a degree of hostility, I was impressed with the spirit of solidarity and camaraderie he struck up with Starbucks workers. It was a revelation.

I went out with Piripi on his motorbike to KFC and McDonalds stores. Piripi was a great organiser, a young Maori working class fighter who'd experienced more than his share of hard knocks, but channelled his anger at the state of the world into building up an organisation of the working poor. He was devoted and non-stop, out on the road recruiting from six in the morning till late afternoon. Piripi helped build up the workplace army that tragically he would never see in battle. He died in a bike accident just a fortnight before the first strikes in Auckland, about to take his first holiday in months. The workers' movement was robbed of a great natural leader, and his tangi at Unite was massive. Workers all over Auckland still remember his passion as a champion for their rights. He was always standing up to unjust managers and bosses.

Looking back, Piripi's death was like a moment of truth for Unite. It brought people in the union together very strongly, and strengthened our resolve that his work would be finished as honourably as we could. Delegates from all the stronger stores prepared to take action. We would start with Starbucks, then move onto KFC and Pizza Hut.

## **The opening battles**

The K'Road Starbucks strike was brilliant, especially when started by wildcats in St Lukes, Newmarket and City Centre stores. Picking up these Starbucks lightning strikers on the Workers Charter Freedom Bus was exhilarating. The media work done by Matt, Kirsty and Simon was superb, and we won the first shots of the propaganda war. But the feel on the picket line was something else – colourful placards, loud music, free fair trade coffee, solidarity spread through a sexy website, flashmob texts and emails. These techniques of the global justice movement were at last being harnessed by its trade union cousin. After that first picket, we knew SupersizeMyPay.Com was onto a winner.

Every following strike had its own character. The first strike at

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KFC's flagship Balmoral store was electric, with even more fastfood workers and supporters turning up to a strike led by possibly the world's youngest strike committee, many in their mid-teens. Balmoral provided a model for how a staunch store goes from high membership to effective action. The strike vote meeting and their energetic strike committee were huge confidence boosters for the store's other workers, and solidarity on the day from other unionists and our allies made them feel the community was behind them. Laurent, a strike leader, recounts the experience:

*When Unite came to KFC Balmoral we were itching for action. Instantly most of the store was signed up. We now just had to wait six months until negotiations were finished.*

*The whole store was really into the union, with talk about it constantly happening on shifts. This familiarised new staff with the union and gave them the ability to make a decision about it before we asked them to join. Most did join. The two delegates, Briar and me, attended the world's first Starbucks strike. It was fricken choice! We talked with the union, had a strike committee meeting and, on 2 December, KFC Balmoral led all the other KFC's into strike mode.*

*The KFC Balmoral strike lasted two hours, and we were joined by heaps of brilliant supporters and some staff from the Die Hard Lincoln Rd store. During the strike we all had great fun. The initial guts in your mouth passed really quickly once we got into it. After the strike, a number of staff made comments that they now felt empowered or had a voice.*

In many stores, management used a subtle (and sometimes not-so-subtle) division between ethnic groups which our union needed to take head on. A lot of stores have problems with the multicultural divide and mind games that bosses play – for instance, most brown workers in the union, most Chinese workers loyal to Chinese shift managers. Often we had to win unity between workers of different backgrounds on the store floor first before moving on to fight the boss.

So, outside Royal Oak Pizza Hut on 17 December 2005, placards in German, French, Spanish, Chinese, Arabic, Maori, Samoan, Tongan and English were held up by workers from Asian, Indian, Pasifika, Maori, European and other backgrounds, graphically demonstrating the wide range of nationalities and races that the campaign brought



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together. In the pouring rain eight days before Christmas, the workers of the world united in this suburb of Auckland.

### **‘You’d better be clever’**

With the approach of Christmas, Unite was under pressure to blitz the company with a spectacular. Many stores were up for action, and strikes on Christmas Day, New Years Eve and New Years Day would have hit the company really hard, both financially and brand-wise.

As a union representing low-paid workers, however, we knew that most couldn’t afford to strike for days, not to mention weeks. The Irish resistance to the British Empire had a saying: “If you’re not strong, you’d better be clever.”

Our weapon was unpredictability, a tactic of industrial guerrilla warfare – the no-warning lightning strike. As one fastfood worker commented: “If multinationals won’t give us secure hours, then they shouldn’t get them, either!”

The first lightning strike hit Lincoln Road KFC on 21 December. The Lincoln Road Unite crew were hardcore – they walked out in solidarity with every strike throughout the struggle with Restaurant Brands. With a staunch Maori leadership headed up by Susan Tainui, Lincoln Road had a multicultural membership who were standing up to bullying by a manager whose petty vindictiveness made him our greatest recruitment officer.

Jennifer Carmichael, a Starbucks strike leader and Unite volunteer



The Big Pay Out parade up Queen St, Auckland, on 18 March 2006. 1,000 marchers were led off by four young McD strikers who’d been in Unite for under an hour.

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organiser, explains how the strikes empowered the workers:

*I attended almost all of the big strikes and some smaller ones. They were exciting, courageous and uplifting in the sense that people were working together for what they knew was right and just. Afterwards people held their head high because they gained power, hope and unity. Friendships were built, minds were changed and learning was in place so they know their rights for the future.*

*Workers need to know their rights. Too many times managers have tried to give warnings to strikers. This is unjust. Workers shouldn't be afraid to stand up for their right to strike.*

*I recommend strikes because they are a powerful thing. When bosses don't expect people they take advantage of to go on strike, then they realise they can't go on treating people like they do.*



Excellent media work by Kirsty and Simon got Unite's story on all TV channels as well as in the print media. Countering Labour's weak promises, we were arguing that 2008 was "Far too late!" for \$12 an hour minimum wage. KFC were trying to brand themselves "Kiwi For Chicken", but were being rebranded by our well-publicised pickets as hiring "Kiwis For Cheap".

Morgan Spurlock's documentary film "Supersize Me" had cost McDonalds megabucks by rebranding their food as unhealthy, indeed dangerous. In the popular mind, Unite's SupersizeMyPay campaign was rebranding fastfood management practices as anti-worker, supporting a regime of poverty wages and super-exploitation. It was, after all, the truth.

By this stage, Restaurant Brands were starting to see that we were aiming at their brand identity by high-profile, media-savvy actions. They began to realise it would be in their longterm interest to minimise the damage. Just before Christmas they offered a fresh round of negotiations, begging us to call off the lightning strikes lined up for the Yuletide period.



Placards in nine languages with just one message – “Workers of the World, Unite”. The scene outside Royal Oak Pizza Hut, 17 December 2005

Many Unite activists had doubts about any Yuletide ceasefire, worried it would interrupt the momentum built up in the weeks before. But our union was legally obliged to negotiate in good faith with Restaurant Brands. We suspended the lightning strikes and went back to the bargaining table.

### **Ceasefire of a sort**

The Yuletide ceasefire at Restaurant Brands gave Unite the space to do two things. The first was bolstering Unite’s store delegates and strike committees, since rank-and-file democracy is the lifeblood of a fighting union.

The second initiative was to build support with groups outside the union for off-site political campaigning as well as industrial activism. Green MP Sue Bradford’s bill to abolish youth rates had been picked out of the parliamentary hat, giving impetus to a united front around SupersizeMyPay’s core demands. The Post-Primary Teachers Association stepped up, followed by other unions.

Potu, Ini and Rachel, Unite activists at Queen Street McDonalds, defied considerable pressure to lead New Zealand’s first McStrike on 10 February 2006.

Two days later came Unite’s 800-strong meeting in the Auckland Town Hall. MPs from the Green and Maori parties spoke in support, along with leaders from the Council of Trade Unions, National

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Distribution Union and Service & Food Workers Union. Pennants from unions and campaigns draped the balconies, with the Workers Charter banner holding pride of place.

NZ Pop Idol Rosita Vai, a former KFC worker, joined Pasifika hip hop group Olmecha Suprema and a ska band fronted by Starbucks strikers, Geneva. Left-wing comedians ridiculed the greed of the corporations we were fighting.

The most impressive Town Hall session featured fastfood strikers such as Briar, Nick, Laurent, Claire, Hayley and Susan. They spoke out against low wages and management bullying, signalling their wish to spread the strikes far and wide. It was exhilarating.

All this energy fed into the reconstruction of a campaign leadership composed of delegates and organisers, operating parallel with a campaign forum open to a mix of members, supporters and organisers.

### **Westies invent Hooning Picket**

At a separate strategy meeting of delegates from Restaurant Brands, the company's Christmas offer was rejected. We then moved fast. Valentines Day saw a strike at Botany Downs KFC under the slogan "Make Love, Not Profits". Customer support for the young strikers was massive. 51 out of 58 cars refused to pass the drive through picket. On 17 February, pickets went up outside KFC Whangarei. The day after, Starbucks was rocked when most Central Auckland stores took action, including total shutdowns at Queen St and K'Road for two hours.

A youth rates day of action on 22 February saw a rolling strike disrupt business at four KFC stores – Manukau, Massey, Lincoln Rd and Balmoral. The Workers Charter Freedom Bus was jammed full of young flying picketers. Again, most customers refused to cross picket lines of young minimum wage workers, upsetting KFC managers. One manager threatened us with the police and courts.

Here's an eyewitness report from Unite supporter Danny Strype:

*As an anti-corporate activist for ten years I've seen my share of pickets outside fastfood multinationals like McDonalds and KFC. However, joining the KFC workers on the picket line was a novel, inspiring and educational experience. It was incredible to see these young people, many of them high school students, so*

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*fired up about fighting for a better deal and so confident that their actions could make a difference.*

*The Unite strategy of organising a Solidarity Bus to carry the willing workers from one picket line to support the next striking workplace meant that numbers, excitement and energy levels built up noticeably through the day. The day of action ended on an amazing high as the sun went down, and I felt truly honoured to have been part of the strikes and the SupersizeMyPay.Com campaign.*

Before the fastfood corporations could draw breath, they were hit again with a whole series of firsts:

- The first of many strikes at the Restaurant Brands call centre for KFC and Pizza Hut, which is their Achilles Heel.
- The first regional strike in West Auckland where Unite Westies invented the Hooning Picket – drive throughs picketed by mobile carloads of strikers, honking and cheering.
- The first Burger King strike at Lincoln Road.
- The first Wellington strike at KFC Porirua.

Kathryn Tucker, Unite's Wellington organiser, recalls a telling incident from the Porirua picket:

*At the start of our Porirua KFC strike all the workers came out onto the footpath. Somebody mentioned that there was one worker left inside who wasn't allowed to come out. So me and Grant Brookes decided to go in and confront the ten or so managers in there. The lower North Island were having a managers' dinner and had been tipped off about the strike, so they all decided to turn up.*

*We approached the area manager and said, "there's one left and we're leaving nobody behind". The area manager quickly approached the counter yelling, "Natasha, Natasha, you have to go outside". The worker came out and all was well.*

## **Opening the second front**

It was clear to all that management was losing control, with the mood for strikes spreading like Spanish flu. There was a corporate reaction. McDonalds had long harassed union members while

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frustrating negotiations by delay after delay. But when McDonalds began a frontal attack on Unite members by paying non-union workers 75 cents more an hour, we knew it was time to open the second front.

In addition to a successful court challenge against the company's union-busting pay discrimination, 3 March was designated McD Day. "What's disgusting? Union busting!" echoed throughout Auckland as Golden Arches in Pt Chev, Royal Oak, Manakau, Wairau, Glen Innes and Glenfield went out on strike, joined by solidarity action in Starbucks Parnell and 220 Queen St and the Restaurant Brands call centre. All strikers converged at McDonalds flagship Queen Street store, where they were greeted by another 150 picketers.

Unite organisers began to realise the anger had reached such a peak that political demonstrations by unionists and community supporters could become the next step forward.

Here's how Omar Hamed of Radical Youth saw things:

*SupersizeMyPay.Com was great to be a part of. There was an incredible atmosphere that, if people worked hard enough, then anything could happen. Strikes, pickets and marches all made people feel like something was actually happening, that people were learning how to take action and create change. I remember one night when McDonalds went out on strike and a about a hundred of us cruised up and down Queen Street chanting slogans and singing songs, and this English backpacker came up to me and was like, "fuck, yeah, this is wicked". And then he picked up a placard and got really involved in it. I think rebuilding a youth union movement in Aotearoa in the way SupersizeMyPay has is one of the top priorities for social justice activists. I hope that SupersizeMyPay was just the beginning.*

## **Politics of the streets**

Our side always has the best songs, and 18 March saw over 1,000 Unite supporters mix politics with music in the Big Pay Out. McDonalds had rostered off as many Unite members as it could, knowing the union meant business from all the stickers and posters covering poles and walls across Auckland.

So we went recruiting in McDonalds stores early that morning. Four workers who'd been in Unite for less than an hour led the

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strike at McDonalds Downtown, sparking off a huge march (and charges!) along the main street. There were sitdowns in front of major restaurants, with hundreds chanting, “3, 5, 7, 9, never cross a picket line!” Afterwards, Unite threw a free concert in Myers Park, with reggae, hip hop and hardcore acts like 8 Foot Sativa.

The Big Pay Out helped organised hundreds of young students within the Radical Youth network, led by a new generation of activists like Meto, Omar, Nesta, Joe, Sam, Jack and Mengzhu. They asked Unite to provide buses for a school strike on 21 March.

One thousand students left their colleges and took over Queen St, chanting slogans against youth rates. Heavy-handed policing saw several arrests, but public opinion swung behind the students following statements of support by Unite, the Greens and the Council of Trade Unions.

The school strike made headline news on TV networks and in major papers. Commentators made the link with the youth uprising that was shaking France.

What began with one young Starbucks striker walking off the job had become a mass movement giving working class youth a positive experience of union organisation. I have no doubt that many will become the union leaders of tomorrow.

### **Winning the first war**

On the back of the Big Pay Out and the school strike, hundreds more activists were brought into the campaign. Plans were made to escalate action nationwide. At this point, Restaurant Brands tabled an offer which was seen as a major breakthrough by most Unite activists.

All adult workers at KFC and Pizza Hut would get a rise of almost 8%, with Starbucks workers receiving 75 cents an hour more across all scales. There would be a similar rise in 2007. The call centre workers would get between 11.5% and 14.9% more. Shift supervisors would win increases on top.

The company accepted that youth rates could no longer be justified. As a first step, they would move the pay scale for those under 18 years to 90% of the adult rate. Some young workers would get a 34% rise. Supervisors under 18 would go onto the full adult rate, giving many an extra \$3 an hour.

Restaurant Brands would give workers more secure hours. When



First strike at Balmoral KFC, the corporation's flagship store in Auckland, on 3 December 2005

additional work become available in stores, existing workers would be offered these hours equally before new staff were employed. Break times would increase from ten to fifteen minutes. Overtime rates would be introduced for those who work over eight hours a day or 40 hours a week.

Unite extended these wins beyond its members to include all non-unionists among the 7,000 employed by Restaurant Brands. In compensation, Restaurant Brands would pay every Unite member a lump sum every three months equal to 1% of their quarterly earnings, which in effect paid their union fees.

Union rights to notice boards, stopwork meetings and delegate training would be enshrined. On top of the pay rises, Unite got over 20 gains in conditions. The deal was ratified after swift consultations with a raft of Unite activists.

For the second time in a week, Unite made front page news in the NZ Herald, along with major stories on TV news. Media analysts called the Restaurant Brands deal "historic".

Ripples from this historic breakthrough were noted by Grant Brookes, a Unite volunteer organiser in Lower Hutt:

*One thing I can add from my own perspective in Lower Hutt is the change in workers' attitudes towards the union after the breakthrough deal. Apart from one fairly solid KFC store, Lower Hutt was not a really militant region. There are six Restaurant Brands outlets in Hutt City, plus two McDonalds. During the strikes, some workers were inspired to join but others just didn't*





A brave walkout from Queen St McDonald's in the face of management pressures. NZ's first McStrike on 10 February 2006.

*want to know you as a union organiser. They wouldn't talk to you. After the Restaurant Brands settlement, most of these people suddenly became more positive and open. The shift was quite dramatic.*

*One guy stands out. A KFC cook, he was a union delegate in a fish processing plant during the mid-1990s. When we signed the breakthrough deal, he joined up and talked with me for the first time. He said he got a hammering as union delegate before, and was forced out of his job. He never abandoned his support for trade unionism. But only now, I think, does he feel it's safe to express it again.*

*I had a long battle to get trusted by workers at the Hutt Central store, where the manager is extremely hostile to Unite. But the next visit after the deal was signed, three workers joined. They also started talking about problems on the job with the manager, which was a first in my experience. So in my region, winning the deal has been a boost to confidence and a launch pad for workers to unionise and start tackling problems they've been unhappy about for a while.*

### **The next McBattle**

Now the battle moves on to McDonalds, the world's biggest and meanest fastfood multinational. Unite has promised that it will fight

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McDonalds “forever” until the company agrees to a decent collective agreement with its staff.

Heni Moeke, Unite delegate at Pt Chev McDonalds, had served the legal papers on management to scupper her company’s union-busting pay discrimination. She shares her thoughts:

*The outcome with Restaurant Brands was a good one. We achieved great things, and the workers should be proud of what they achieved.*

*Our so-called executives (white collar pricks) shouldn’t put a figure on what workers do since they’ve never done the jobs given to us. Most of the workers are young, first jobs ever. They wear their hearts on their sleeves, and put all their sweat into it. But they receive no gratitude or recognition.*

*My fight has yet to start with McDonalds. All I can say is that it’s really up to us to do something. I don’t blame workers for making a stand for what they truly believe in and what is theirs. We have every right! I will try my best!*

Workers like Heni need all the support they can get. She had her hours slashed and was told that, if she didn’t like it, she could get a job elsewhere. Yet Heni is standing strong against McDonalds. Activists like her are central to Unite’s next McBattle.

Whatever happens, there will be an almighty fight, and the eyes of the world will be on New Zealand. Practical solidarity from unions in Europe, Australia, the United States and Latin America will help to defeat the global giant that is McDonalds.

As that truest of slogans puts it: “The workers, united, will never



Want to help in the upcoming McBattle and Unite’s other organising drives? You can contact Joe Carolan (pictured left), 0274-454 959 or [solidarityjoe@yahoo.com](mailto:solidarityjoe@yahoo.com).

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# Revival of workers' struggle in Aotearoa

by GRANT BROOKES and GRANT MORGAN

Everyone knows it. The papers are carrying features about it. We're hearing shrill warnings from right-wing politicians about it. Unions and strikes are back.

The mainstream media report it like a change in the weather. But grassroots activists need to know more. What's behind the revival? How have left activists and union leaders tapped into it? How is it shifting politics on the streets and in parliament?

Laila Harre, the recently-elected secretary of the National Distribution Union, told the NZ Herald that the turning point came in 2004 with the nurses' pay parity campaign.

The nurses' victory didn't come out of nowhere, but it wasn't mainly due to a recovery of numbers and strength inside the union movement. It was more a political shift to the left among the working class as a whole.



A pay bomb with the fuse lit. This placard carried by an Auckland University striker in 2005 showed how mainstream unionists saw the explosive nature of the pay revolt.

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“New Zealanders want a change of direction.” That was Helen Clark’s election night explanation for Labour’s return to government in 1999.

While Labour in office signalled no significant change in the corporate priorities of government, grassroots rejection of them spilled onto the streets. Demonstrations against the invasion of Iraq in 2003 were the biggest anti-war protests since Vietnam 30 years before. The GE-free protests were among the biggest ever against a New Zealand Labour government.

An anti-capitalist mood spread beyond the radical fringe. There was a readiness among “ordinary” people to connect America’s war with oil and empire, Labour’s involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq with a US free trade deal, and genetic engineering with an inhuman corporate power.

Maoridom’s 2004 hikoi against the foreshore law showed that a core element of Labour’s traditional support base was starting to break away.

### **Nurses point the way**

Back in 2003, a handful of nurses’ leaders around Laila Harre saw the time was ripe for a set of bold demands – a single national collective for all 20,000 public nurses, pay rises averaging \$10,000, an extra week’s holiday, subsidised super, more staff and reduced workloads.

Other nurses’ leaders, at first, doubted that these demands were realisable. But the union pressed ahead with the first nationwide stopwork meetings of nurses since the Employment Contracts Act was passed in 1991. The massive response from rank-and-file members swayed the doubters and drove the campaign forward.

A petition backing the nurses’ demands gained 125,000 signatures, while a poll found 75% public support. Everywhere the grassroots were solidly with the nurses.

When nurse negotiators threatened a nationwide strike, Labour’s ministers knew they faced a united workforce that enjoyed public sympathy. The government gave way. Nurses won their national collective and every cent of their pay claims, along with a raft of better conditions.

Although lots of other union officials saw nurses as a “special case” due to their general popularity, a few looked to repeat the success in their own unions. They saw that, as the obscene gap between rich and

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poor continued to grow under Labour, so did workers' discontent. And, crucially, workers' confidence had also risen along with the demand for labour.

Early in 2005, Council of Trade Unions president Ross Wilson predicted that "tight and greedy" employers would face "greater militancy" from workers over low pay.

### **Pay revolt detonator**

The detonator for a pay revolt came in February 2005 when the Engineering, Printing & Manufacturing Union (EPMU) went for 5% across the board. This was greeted with quiet scepticism by some key union leaders, like CTU economist Peter Conway, who told a meeting of Wellington officials he wasn't optimistic.

But EPMU national secretary Andrew Little, sensing the grassroots mood, led from the front in the trendsetting Metals multi-employer collective. The first round of 5% meetings drew 400 in Christchurch, 700 in Auckland and 1,500 in Lower Hutt, some of the biggest union gatherings in New Zealand since 1991. Little described the Lower Hutt meeting as "like a festival, with workers from one company getting together with workers from rival companies in a show of solidarity". Weeks later, two EPMU meetings in Auckland attracted 2,000 and then 3,000 workers.

The EPMU's 5% campaign was the spark which ignited workers' anger across the country. Over the next six months, according to official figures, there were 37 strikes in support of escalating demands involving over 10,000 workers. These official figures understate the number of strikes, and completely miss out all the stopwork meetings and other non-strike actions which often resulted in workers' demands being met without a full-scale walkout.

### **More say as well as more pay**

Lots of union leaders were taken by surprise. Officials at the CTU conference in late 2005 expressed amazement that workers everywhere were fighting for 5% and more. A conference workshop listed it as "something we thought would never happen".

Many of the strikes were about workers getting more say, in the form of better organisation, expanded coverage and extra staff, as well as more pay. So coal miners staged "wildcat" actions in addition



Desperate for union support in the 2005 election, prime minister Helen Clark dons a hard hat and gives a clenched fist salute in front of the Engineering, Printing & Manufacturing Union's banner. But Labour wouldn't support the EPMU's 5% campaign, while Clark called on unions to "moderate" their demands.

to "official" strikes for a single national collective as well as 6%.

It's worth listing a few of the strikes because, taken together, they give a flavour of the pay revolt in 2005.

250 Lyttelton wharfies imposed an overtime ban after rejecting an offer recommended by their negotiators. 1,000 Christchurch council workers went on two strikes for 10%. Two 5% strikes at Colgate Palmolive in Petone were the first in the factory's 50 year history.

3,000 bank staff walked out at National and ANZ for 5% plus penal rates. It was the first strike at National Bank in 20 years. Rolling strikes at bank branches continued for a month. 1,000 Air NZ flight attendants went on strike for 3.8% plus more crew on new Boeing 777 aircraft. 6,000 university staff took to the streets for a single national collective and 15% to 30% over three years.

180 Radio NZ staff walked out seven times for 5% and an extra week's holiday. Newspaper staff across the lower North Island took

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action for 5%. 1,000 timber workers from 20 Carter Holt sites walked out for 5%. 3,000 PSA mental health nurses took nationwide action for the first time in 20 years after rejecting pay offers between 10% and 35%.

A high point in 2005 was the six-day strike by 800 Stagecoach bus drivers in Auckland for \$15 an hour. Despite the extra traffic congestion, public support for their cause was overwhelming. After the strike, their stopwork meeting was a celebration of workers' power. Groups from different bus depots sang and chanted, then voted by 92% to raise their demand to \$17 an hour in response to company threats. While the final settlement disappointed many, the hammering that Stagecoach took would have been a factor in selling its New Zealand operations to another corporation.

### **Leaflets fall on fertile ground**

During 2005, Socialist Worker issued fifteen UNITY pay revolt leaflets. Tens of thousands were handed out at jobsites, stopworks and pickets with the help of many scores of workers. One political commentator felt they made a noticeable difference to the fighting spirit of Auckland workers. Union leaders referred to them in mass meetings. The impact of our UNITY leaflets showed the ground was fertile to start growing a broad left network around the Workers Charter.

The pay revolt notched up the first big wins for workers since the Employment Contracts Act. The EPMU said 85% of its settlements were for 5% or higher. According to Statistics NZ figures released in May 2006, the average wage rise in the last year for workers who got an increase was 5.4%.

Yet more could have been won by unions were it not for the pervasive influence of Labour Party politics.

In some cases, it was obvious how union leaders' loyalty to Labour held back the struggle. The settlement recommended by rail union negotiators was only a fraction of what the workers had voted for. Union secretary Wayne Butson told angry members that, if they went on strike for more, they could damage Labour's re-election chances by being portrayed as holding the country to ransom.

In other cases, Labour's influence was less obvious. The EPMU's Metals collective was settled for 5% over 15 months, not a year. While many members felt let down, it may have been the best deal possible under the union movement's strategy of not challenging Labour's

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anti-strike legislation. Since the Employment Relations Act outlaws solidarity strikes, each section of workers must either fight alone or defy Labour's unjust law. And challenging Labour and its laws isn't something most union leaders are prepared to do.

After a decade of decline, total union membership rose by 50,000 between 1999 and 2004 to reach 358,000. The 2005 pay revolt has boosted numbers again, although official figures aren't yet in. The EPMU got 4,000 new members in the first four months of its 5% campaign. The AUS university union reported "hundreds" of inquiries to join. The nurses' union gained 1,500 new members. Thousands were recruited by Unite on the back of its fastfood and other campaigns.

Along with this membership surge are early signs of what the NZ Herald called a "changing of the guard" – new, left-leaning union leaders displacing more conservative ones. The two most reported examples are Laila Harre taking the leadership of the National Distribution Union and Matt McCarten of Unite shaking up the whole union hierarchy. Below the radar screen, many unions are seeing more militant frontline organisers and job delegates taking over from people beaten down by decades of defeat.

### **Labour's strained relationship**

Among most of these union opinion makers, however, Labour retains an influence ranging from noticeable to considerable. Only a minority are totally committed to building the Workers Charter or some other left political alternative to Labour.

Even so, it's clear that Labour's relationship with a host of unionists is extremely strained, often to breaking point. According to union analyst Chris Trotter, 50 delegates to the 2005 CTU conference – around a quarter of the total – went away clutching Green Party membership forms.

The underlying reasons are both economic and political. Helen Clark poured cold water on the 5% pay campaign, calling on unions to "moderate" their demands. Labour's decision to go into coalition with United Future and NZ First, instead of the Greens and Maori Party, was taken by many union officials for what it was – a slight to the union movement. Union leaders are having to reflect their members' general discontent with a Labour government keener to serve the interests of bosses than workers.

Although insulated by the Beehive's thick walls, even Labour feels



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the mood of workers. In the 1999 and 2002 elections, Labour's winning strategy was to "talk down" workers' expectations. This strategy had to be dumped in the 2005 election. Labour only scraped back into power after a "bidding war" with National to buy the votes of workers refusing any longer to settle for chicken feed.

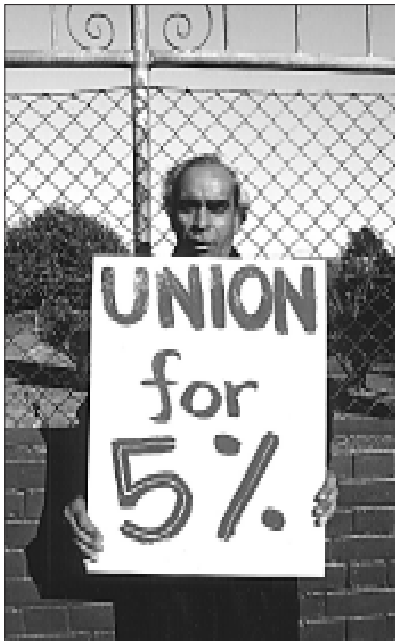
The shape of Labour's biggest bribe is revealing. While Working for Families lifts workers' incomes, it's funded out of workers' taxes, takes the heat off employers' low pay and does nothing to boost union power. This ongoing commitment to incorporate New Zealand must widen the gap between Labour and workers in the months ahead.

The rising discontent of workers in 2005, and their increasing willingness to "have a go", is still here in 2006. That's been seen most clearly in Unite's SuperSizeMyPay campaign, where young workers have gone on strike and joined protests and pickets in significant numbers.

Other unions are looking to reach workers with more bolshevik tactics, such as the National Distribution Union's supermarket drive, the EPMU's campaign against National's "work probation" bill and the Service & Food Workers Union's low pay agitation.

But Labour's hold over the union movement still remains a barrier to workers' power. As Unite director Matt McCarten put it: "Old ties with Labour hold unions back."

The revival of workers' struggle in New Zealand is creating much better conditions to build a mass political alternative to Labour. The expanding network of leftists and unionists around the Workers Charter is a big step along the way.



A simple message with a profound impact on New Zealand politics as well as the country's employers

# Heroes of New Zealand's pay revolt



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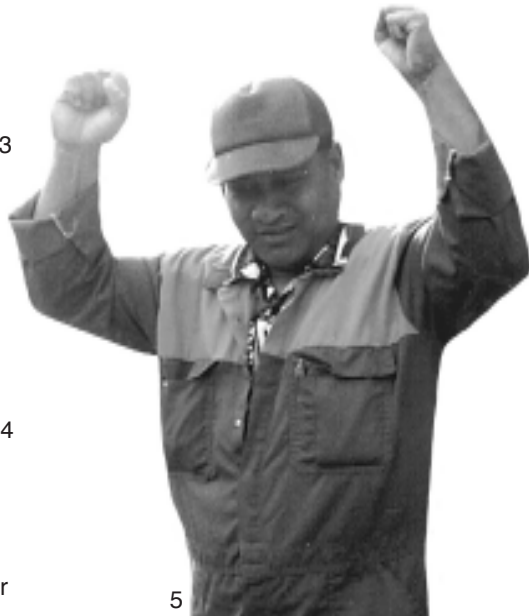
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3



4



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1. Factory workers
2. Bank staff
3. University teacher
4. Fastfood staff
5. Stagecoach worker

# ‘When students & workers take to the streets, they win’

by GRANT BROOKES

Peter Dunne was playing a dangerous game at the end of April 2006.

The United Future leader captured headlines when he announced that his party was breaking with their Labour coalition partners and “firming up” support for a private member’s bill from National MP Wayne Mapp. Mapp’s bill would allow employers to sack workers at will in their first 90 days.

Responding to the Engineers Union’s threat of a “massive public campaign” if Mapp’s bill isn’t withdrawn, a grandstanding Dunne declared: “This is not France, where industrial legislation is decided by street rioting.”

Someone like Dunne, who’s been in politics since the 1970s, knows very well that New Zealand workers on the streets have forced governments to change bills, pass laws they didn’t really want to, or turn enacted legislation into a dead letter. Some examples over the last generation are Rob Muldoon’s SIS Act, David Lange’s nuclear-free law, National’s school bulk funding bid and Helen Clark’s GE legislation.

But by mentioning the protests which forced the withdrawal of a law allowing French employers to sack workers at will, Dunne was highlighting the power of mass strikes to

defeat a government. A dangerous game, indeed.

The scale of the defeat inflicted on the government of Jacques Chirac by French workers – and the potential for their example to spread – is underscored by the violent reaction of the corporate media around the world.

## Mediafest

A headline in Germany’s Die Welt daily labelled it simply the “French disaster”.

“Spineless Jacques Chirac has caved in to the mob”, fumed Britain’s Sun tabloid.

“When faced with the threat of a difficult battle,” hissed a sarcastic Financial Times, “the government maintains the noble Gallic tradition of complete surrender to the opposition.”

“Mob rule sees off another French premier,” rued The Telegraph.

Fox News in the United States poured out its class hatred: “When you hear far-left Americans use the terms ‘economic justice’ or ‘income inequality’, you should know these are code words for socialism, a giant government that would guarantee each American a house, health care, nice wage, retirement benefits, the usual entitlement list. The French demonstrations have sent a signal to

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the world that a once-free market-place country has gone over to the entitlement side.”

The Australian spewed out similar bile. Under the headline “Hate on the streets”, its Paris stringer described protesters as driven by “the nihilism of despair and gratuitous violence”. The protesters are “racaille” (scum), said one quote carried by the paper.

New York’s venerable Wall Street Journal scorned Chirac as “neither courageous nor convinced enough to make the necessary changes”. The Journal’s normal veneer of sober commentary cracked as it described protesters as “excited juveniles”, “mobs”, “rabble”, “a horde of smashers” and “marauders” who were

waging a “jihad” against democracy. It even compared the protests with the Kristallnacht, the infamous night in 1938 when Nazi thugs rampaged across Germany and Austria torching synagogues and beating Jewish people to death.

### **United protests**

What drove the world’s corporate media into a fury was the unity of France’s working class – employed and unemployed, young and old, unionised and non-unionised, black and white – which defied every attempt to sow division and to beat them off the streets.

On 10 April 2006, after two months of escalating protests, the



Tens of thousands of Paris students denounce the French government’s “work probation” law, similar to a National Party bill that squeaked past its first of three votes in the New Zealand Parliament early in 2006

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French government caved in and withdrew the CPE (First Employment Contract).

Like Mapp's bill going before New Zealand's parliament, the CPE would have enabled employers to sack workers during a "probationary period" without giving any reason.

The French law was to apply to everyone under the age of 26 in the first two years of their employment.

The CPE's architect, prime minister Dominique de Villepin, saw the measure as a first step in rolling back workers' rights across the board, but gambled on dividing young from old by targeting them first.

When protests against the bill began on 7 February, they were organised by those directly affected – university and high school students. But the anger began to spread.

On 11 March, interior minister Nicolas Sarkozy ordered riot police to arrest students occupying Sorbonne University in Paris. Sarkozy was open about why he sent in the riot police – it was to keep students isolated from workers. "With demonstrations taking place on Saturday, we had to make sure there were no crossovers," he said.

The attempt to sow division backfired spectacularly. The violent crack-down sparked widespread sympathy among workers, who then joined the movement in growing numbers.

An ideological offensive by the government labelled student protesters as "privileged". Ministers said the CPE was designed to encourage bosses to hire the large numbers of unemployed youth, often from immigrant backgrounds, who live in

depressed suburbs (banlieues) on the outskirts of many French cities.

This thinly-disguised attempt to divide black and brown from white fell equally flat. Who in France could forget that the people now supposedly the focus of the government's care were rioting just three months earlier, when Sarkozy called them "dirty scum" who should be hosed off the streets?

### **Direct appeal**

Marie Perin, a protest organiser at Censier University in Paris, said the new law forced many students to directly address problems in the banlieues. She said:

"We organised meetings and debates on neo-liberalism, the November riots and racism. These meetings helped to win students and many workers to the idea of taking our campaign to the banlieues. The obvious route was by linking up with high schools students, but we also went into the poor areas and appealed directly to the alienated youth."

By early March, solidarity against the CPE was growing across wide sectors of French society.

University students in western France approached the Confederation Paysanne, the more left-wing of the country's two farmers' federations, for bales of straw to build barricades.

On 18 March, some 1.5 million workers and students marched in 150 protests across the country. In Paris, chants of "Students and workers, together for solidarity" rang out from a demonstration of at least 250,000.

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On 20 March, anti-CPE blockades closed 313 high schools. A day later, protest actions affected 814 high schools, almost one in every five. Debating the CPE were mass assemblies of school students drawing up to 1,500 people.

A delegation of 20 business leaders met with the prime minister on 20 March. They suggested amending the CPE by reducing the period when a worker could be sacked from two years to one, and requiring employers to give a reason – but still leaving them the right to sack young workers at will.

On 23 March, student protests around the country mobilised 450,000. Mass actions spread like wildfire. 2,000 high school students blocked train tracks at Gare de Lyon station in Paris. Others blocked a runway at Chambéry airport, stopping flights taking off.

28 March saw widespread strikes, with three million protesters pouring onto the streets of 135 towns. This, said *Le Monde*, was the biggest demonstration in recent French history. A week later, on 4 April, even more protesters took to the streets.

### **Concessions rejected**

In between, French president Jacques Chirac appeared on national television. He announced that he was signing the CPE into law, but asked the government not to apply it until certain changes were made – the same ones suggested by the business delegation.

Chirac's attempt at minimal concessions was rejected by all trade

unions and student organisations.

“What Chirac has done isn't enough,” said 18-year-old Rebecca Konforti, among a group of students who jammed tables against the door of their Paris high school to block entry. “They're not really concessions, he just did it to calm the students.”

Parliamentary leaders of the governing party, the Union for the Presidential Majority (UMP), began receiving delegations of unionists and students.

The government and its parliamentary majority were divided between those who wanted to simply withdraw the CPE, those who thought it could survive in a watered-down form and those who wanted to propose an alternative.

The highly respectable Conference of University Presidents called on cabinet “to finally pronounce the word that the students and their unions have been demanding”. That word, of course, was “withdrawal”.

The Intersyndicale, a united front of twelve trade unions and student groups organising protests against the CPE, issued a declaration on 5 April titled: “The mobilisation is neither suspended nor repealed.” The Intersyndicale announced its support for the next student day of action on 11 April, warning that “no means of action is excluded”. Before that day arrived, Chirac hoisted the white flag.

The CPE's defeat was the first time a mass movement had been able to block a governmental neo-liberal measure in France since the right came back to power in 2002.

The French government had

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forced through pension cuts in 2003 despite months of protests and strikes. In 2004, health insurance clawbacks were imposed.

The government failed this time due to three main reasons. First off, the union leaderships didn't hold the initiative. Rather, it lay with a national student co-ordinating com-

mittee based on delegates elected from universities and schools, which met every weekend to decide how to carry the movement forward.

Second, all the trade unions – the three main federations and the five smaller, independent unions – supported the movement from start to finish. One reason for the 2003 defeat



Monster student march in Paris against the CPE “work probation” law. After this photo was taken, police tear gassed the peaceful demonstration, provoking a mass fightback. This state violence helped draw workers and unions into general strikes which forced the French government to withdraw the hated law.

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was that the CFDT, the union federation supporting “social partnership” and closely aligned to the Socialist Party (French equivalent of NZ Labour), defected early on and accepted pension cuts in exchange for small amendments. As a result the CFDT lost 100,000 members. This time, everyone stayed on board.

Third, the demand for withdrawing the CPE had extremely broad support. As understanding grew about what was at stake, opposition to the CPE rose to around 70% of the population, and ever more people were ready to take to the streets.

### **Occupations spell ‘Liberte’**

Reflecting the worry that chilled ruling class hearts even in the far-flung South Pacific, the NZ Herald at first denied the CPE protests were similar to France’s last student-inspired uprising in 1968. The Herald’s headline read: “French student rallies a far cry from ’68 protest.”

Similarities with that momentous year became too great to ignore, however, after riot police stormed Sorbonne University on 11 March. For it was a student protest at the Sorbonne in May 1968 that sparked a titanic social confrontation.

Discontent had been fermenting in France’s universities during the 1960s. There was growing opposition to America’s war in Vietnam.

Students also had their own grievances closer to home. French president Charles de Gaulle’s regime wanted to modernise France through a rapid expansion of higher educa-

tion, but do it on the cheap.

Colleges, libraries and lecture halls were massively overcrowded. Students were subjected to antiquated regulations, like barring male and female students from visiting each others’ rooms in student hostels. “Free circulation” became a rallying cry.

The first demonstrations in 1968 involved a handful of students, the next a few hundred. But when authorities used the brutal riot police to crack down, young workers began to identify with the student protests, and some joined in. The numbers grew.

On the night of 10 May police closed the Sorbonne, bringing tens of thousands of students onto the streets. An eyewitness writing in British student paper Black Dwarf, Jean-Jacques Lebel, told how “thousands helped build barricades – women, bystanders, people in pyjamas, human chains to carry rocks, wood, iron”.

Next day the government retreated. French prime minister Georges Pompidou reopened the Sorbonne, hoping this concession would dampen the struggle.

But it was too late. The students’ resistance inspired workers to take up the fight. Unions called for a one-day general strike against police violence on 13 May. The demonstrations went beyond all expectations, with one million on the streets of Paris alone. Workers and students marched behind a banner which proclaimed: “Students, teachers, workers – solidarity.” They chanted: “Power is in the street, not in Parliament!”

The following day saw a union



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meeting at the Sud Aviation factory in Nantes. Three revolutionaries in the union branch had for years demanded militant action, but been ignored. This time they were listened to. An open-ended occupation of the factory began. Workers locked senior managers up for a fortnight and forced them to listen to repeated playings of *The Internationale* until the occupiers themselves couldn't stand it any longer.

### **Nantes inspiration**

Though getting little media coverage, the Nantes occupation became an inspiration. Within a week, factories and workplaces across France were occupied. On 19 May there were two million strikers, and ten million on 22 May. It was the biggest general strike in history.

France was brought to a halt as trains, buses, banks and postal services were all shut down. Red flags hung from the tower of the shipyards of St Nazaire. Posters saying "Unlimited Strike" appeared on the doors of offices, shops, banks and insurance firms. Workers at Berliet, a huge engineering plant in Lyons, rearranged the letters on the front of the factory to spell "Liberte".

Staff at museums, film studios and theatres took action. Dancers occupied the Folies Bergeres. Under the slogan "Football for the Footballers", professional soccer players occupied the Football Federation headquarters.

As events began to move in a revolutionary direction, groups of workers began talking about po-

litical power – who should rule the country?

In Nantes, western France, the whole town was administered by a trade union committee. It controlled prices to prevent profiteering and negotiated food supplies with local farmers. The unions controlled petrol supplies and set up road blocks around the town. For the last six days in May, the central strike committee was the heart of what amounted to an autonomous workers' city state.

At the end of the first week of the general strike, de Gaulle's government desperately tried to sue for peace. Union leaders agreed to a deal which meant a 35% wage rise for the lowest-paid workers. But at first workplace after workplace voted to stay on strike. The cry went up among workers for a "people's government". Union officials at a 15,000-strong meeting at the occupied Renault Billancourt plant were booed when they tried to sell the deal.

De Gaulle threatened a referendum on whether he should stay or go. But he faced the reality of working class power – no printshop in France would print the ballot papers.

Then on 29 May de Gaulle fled Paris without telling anyone where he was going. He skipped across the border to the German city of Baden Baden to hold talks with the commander of French army units stationed there.

After a day, de Gaulle was persuaded to return. French prime minister Georges Pompidou later admitted: "Thinking that the game was up, he had chosen to retire. Ar-

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living in Baden Baden he was ready to stay a long time.”

What saved the old order was the French Communist Party (CP) which, on paper, supported the overthrow of capitalism. The CP had five million voters and controlled the largest union federation, the CGT. It had thousands of committed working class activists. Devoutly loyal to Stalinist Russia, the CP was equally sure of its own parliamentary potential.

The CP was determined that student revolutionaries shouldn't influence its working class following. Student revolutionaries were slandered in the Communist press as right wing agents, middle class “sons of papa” who would graduate and become exploiters of the workers. In places, CP activists formed human chains to stop students from even talking to groups of workers.

The Communist-run CGT couldn't stop the wave of factory occupations. Instead, CGT officials took control of the movement and tried to demobilise it from within.

When de Gaulle called a general election, the CP supported him and encouraged a return to work. In the elections, the right triumphed.

### **Differences times**

For reasons which have nothing to do with the NZ Herald's world view, there are in fact differences as well as similarities between the 1968 French uprising and the 2006 revolt against the CPE.

In some ways, today's movement is less advanced than in 1968. It didn't develop anywhere near the point

where workers began to look at political power as a practical question.

State control is still secure. The strike wave involved fewer workers and didn't develop into an occupation movement.

But in other ways, the social and political conditions for ongoing unity and the growth of the struggle are more favourable now.

The French Marxist Daniel Bensaid highlighted some of today's differences in an interview with the British Socialist Worker paper:

*In 1968, the spark was a demonstration against the war in Vietnam. The present movement is directly based on a social question – the destruction of workplace regulations and the generalised casualisation of employment, which is common both to student youth and to workers. The question of the link, and not just solidarity, between the two is therefore immediate... [Back in 1968] hostility or wariness [between workers and students] was fostered in particular by the workerist spin of the Communist Party and of the CGT trade union federation, which controlled the big bastions of the labour movement. Today relations are not so closed. On the one hand, the ability of the bureaucratic machines to control things has been considerably weakened. On the other, the overall expansion of secondary and higher education means it's*

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*no longer possible to portray students as an exclusively middle class layer.*

Unlike 1968, the CP in 2006 has neither the will nor the activists to divide workers from students, or youth from the suburbs.

The major political difference on the radical left flows from the intervening collapse of Stalinism. In 1968 most of the French left still saw Stalinist Russia as the model of what they understood by “socialism”. Among the minority who rejected this, many simply replaced Russia with Mao’s China, also a Stalinist state. Today, in contrast, large numbers of young people have been inspired by the ideas of the global anti-capitalist movement.

Equally significant is the post-1968 downsizing of the Welfare State, weakening and in many cases breaking the main tie binding workers to the Socialist Party (SP).

Like the Labour parties of the English-speaking world, the SP has replaced its one-time commitment to reforms benefiting workers with an embrace of free market neo-liberalism. This, combined with the decay of the CP, makes the anti-CPE movement more open to genuinely radical ideas and groups than previous movements.

Underlying today’s revolt is the longterm refusal of French public opinion to accept what the SP has embraced – the “inevitability” of neo-liberalism.

Although ebbing and flowing, the tide of opinion has been running against neo-liberalism since the

huge public sector strikes of 1995. It’s been expressed in the growth of organisations opposed to corporate globalisation, such as Attac, which was founded in 1998 and now has 40,000 members.

In 2005, the neo-liberal Euro Constitution was defeated in a national referendum despite being backed by the governing party (the UMP), the main opposition party (the SP), the Green Party, the European Trade Union Congress and the corporate media.

### **Left parties**

The successful campaign against the constitution was organised by a countrywide grassroots network of one thousand “No Committees”. They drew together activists from Attac, the Ligue Communiste Revolutionnaire (LCR), the CP, dissidents from the Socialist and Green parties, the union movement and the myriad groups composing the so-called “social movement”.

A Liberation newspaper poll found that most people see little difference between the policies of the SP and Chirac’s right-wing UMP. Less than a week before anti-CPE protests started, the SP’s leading presidential contender, Segolene Royal, praised Britain’s neo-liberal prime minister Tony Blair and called for more labour market flexibility. And it wasn’t until just a few days before the CPE was withdrawn that the SP called on its members to join the protests.

Yet, in the public mind, the SP has succeeded in identifying itself

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with the anti-CPE movement. The SP could well be the main winner in the 2007 elections. That's because, at present, France lacks a credible and united left alternative.

The CP is only a shadow of what it was in 1968, although retaining significant influence in the organised working class. Between 1997 and 2001, the CP served in the SP-dominated "plural left" coalition government which imposed neo-liberal policies similar to those of its right-wing predecessors. The CP, already in decline, saw its support drain away leftwards. In the 2002 presidential elections, CP leader Robert Hue was beaten by two Trotskyists, Arlette Laguiller of Lutte Ouvriere and Olivier Besancenot of the LCR.

Hue's successor, Marie Buffet, moved the CP leftwards. But the party remains caught between the far left challenge and the need for alliances with the SP to hang onto CP seats in parliament and councils.

The CP's contradictory position gives the LCR a strategic role, even though it has only 3,000 members compared to the CP's 50,000 plus. LCR membership has doubled since the 2002 elections.

Besancenot, the LCR leader, is one of the most popular figures in France. He was a nationally recognised leader of the revolt against the CPE. Following the CPE's withdrawal, opinion polls predicted he would win 8% of the presidential vote in 2007, twice as much as the CP's Buffet.

In a break with Stalinist tradition, the CP approached the LCR to set up a joint working party. But

the LCR is deeply divided over what to do. A congress in January 2006 showed that the LCR majority didn't believe the conditions existed for launching a broad party of the radical left. Talking about the 2007 presidential election, Besancenot reflected majority sentiment when he said: "The conditions don't exist for a unitary candidate."

A minority saw the LCR as a catalyst in a radical left regroupment that includes large elements of both the CP and SP. But they didn't rule out LCR participation in another "plural left" government dominated by the market-driven SP, which would be bound to run up against grassroots hatred of neo-liberal policies.

### **Political currency**

The mass actions in France during February-April 2006 have echoed around the world. The social trends behind the French revolt, in particular the grassroots rejection of neo-liberal capitalism, are evident in most countries, New Zealand included.

So it's little surprise that the French revolt is being used here as political currency. One counterfeit note was posted in Wellington's Dominion Post. Its blustering headline "Mapp could teach the French a thing or two" suggested that if only they had a man of steel like Wayne the National MP, then those pesky French unions would have to think twice.

Business Roundtable director Roger Kerr also attempted to teach corporate New Zealand some French lessons. Just as the French govern-

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ment tried to divide black from white, Kerr pointed to high rates of Maori unemployment as a reason to promote Mapp's bill, labelling union opponents as "privileged".

He called on National to be much more aggressive in confronting the unions and rolling back workers' rights. Sadly for Kerr, his advice that we should follow France came just days before the French government caved in to the unions and their student allies.

### **French lessons**

New Zealand unionists are drawing very different lessons from France. Andrew Little, national secretary of the Labour-affiliated Engineers Union, announced a "mass industrial protest" if Mapp's bill went ahead, starting with a workers' stop-work and march to parliament.

"The French government tried a similar thing," he noted, "but the law has been thrown out because it was so unpopular with the public."

For the radical left, the lessons of France must include the need to build a mass alternative to Labour's corporate politics, based in workplaces and unions. The revolt against neo-liberalism is less advanced in New Zealand than it is in France. It's also less advanced in Germany, yet there the newly-formed Left Party won 54 seats in the 2005 election, 9% of the vote.

Here in New Zealand, unionists and leftists (including Socialist Worker, the publisher of UNITY) are in the first stage of building a radical left movement around the

Workers Charter. We urge united actions against neo-liberalism with others, such as activists from the Green and Maori parties, Labour-aligned unions and all grassroots organisations.

Matt McCarten, Unite national secretary and Workers Charter endorser, put it this way in his Herald on Sunday column:

*The French working class and the youth took to the streets day after day. Rolling general strikes were called by the central trade union federations. The cities were paralysed. After several weeks of huffing and puffing, the senior French politicians capitulated. New Zealanders should take note from this – of how attacks against working people can be defeated. The next generation is showing real spine. The challenge for other workers and the rest of New Zealand is, do we expect them to fight on their own, or do we support them? Like the French showed the world, when students and workers take to the streets together to send a message to politicians, they win.*

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## Can Aussie workers repeat French victory?

by SUE BOLTON

Australia has seen national days of action against the conservative Howard government's anti-union law called Work Choices. This legislation makes almost all union activity illegal. It's possibly even more extreme than the hated Employment Contracts Act which National inflicted on New Zealand workers in 1991.

Naturally, opponents of Work Choices have been looking closely at recent events in France, where a huge mobilisation of unionists and students during February-April 2006 forced the government to retract a law (called the CPE) discriminating against young workers.

Opposition built up slowly at first, then exploded into France's biggest student movement for decades. Hundreds of high schools and universities were occupied across the country. Unions were drawn into general strikes and vast demonstrations alongside students.

Despite the offer of government concessions, union leaders refused to cut a deal for anything less than total withdrawal of the CPE. After the united front of twelve union and student organisations warned that "no means of action is excluded", the French government caved in.

The victory has got a lot of Aussie workers and some union officials thinking about what we can learn from how the French movement got rid of their anti-worker law.

At the large May Day marches in Queensland, the more progressive union activists and officials

were using France as a response to the conservative wing of the union movement which says the only form of action needed against Work Choices is to vote for Labor in the next election.

The key lesson from the struggle in France is that students and workers didn't just wait for elections. They kept on protesting until the legislation was withdrawn. Even after the law was enacted, they kept on upping the ante with mass blockades as well as general strikes and mass protests, until they won.

France proves to some activists who've lost confidence in mass struggle that extraparliamentary mobilisations can win change.

The French movement was united around one clear demand: "Withdraw the CPE." This was important because it meant the government couldn't get away with meaningless small amendments.

The alliance between students and unions held solid throughout the anti-CPE campaign. When the government attempted to persuade unions to accept a compromise behind the students' backs, union leaders refused.

Students spearheaded the campaign, drawing unions into more radical actions than were carried out several years ago in the pension cuts campaign, which was defeated. This time around, victory came despite less than 10% of French workers being in unions.

In Australia, the union movement organised only three national days of action against Work Choices over the

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18 months to June 2006. In contrast, France saw four national days of action involving students and workers in less than two months.

Another difference is a belief among most of the Australian union movement that the only way to fight Work Choices is to wait until the federal election and elect the Labor Party. Yet Labor hasn't guaranteed to restore all the rights of workers that Howard's legislation strips away.

What are the chances of replicating the French victory in Australia? Many unionists say Australian workers would never conduct such a militant campaign as French workers. There are, however, some positive signs:

- The rate of unionisation in Australia is much higher than France, at 23%, with thousands applying to join unions since Work Choices was introduced. There's a solid base to campaign on.
- The two union mobilisations in 2005 mobilised far more workers than anyone anticipated. In mid-year 300,000 protested, despite no support from some unions. The protest in November 2005 climbed to 546,000. People protested in regional cities and towns as well as the capital cities. Alongside unionists were students, pensioners and non-union and unemployed workers.
- Poll after poll demonstrates that public opinion is running strongly against the government on this issue. There's no evidence that workers in Australia aren't prepared to take action to defend basic rights.
- Even after Work Choices was introduced, the May Day marches

in Queensland mobilised far more workers than officials expected. And there was a more militant feel to the contingents regardless of whether they were right wing or left wing, white collar or blue collar.

- Local suburban committees to campaign against the anti-union law are flourishing in several cities.
- Some union leaderships are clearly feeling pressure from their rank-and-file for a more determined and militant campaign.
- Fortunately, a section of the union leadership is pushing for the union movement to adopt a more militant approach, and not just wait for the federal elections.
- There's a lot of support for student action against Work Choices.

These are indicators that Australian workers are deeply angry and fearful of the government's new anti-worker laws, and are prepared to mobilise in large numbers when their union leaders call them out. However, most union leaderships have only rarely made such calls to action.

It's an open question as to how far Australian workers are prepared to go, but all the signs are that workers are prepared to take more action than is being asked of them at the moment.

The French victory shows that a serious campaign involving mass protests, blockades, occupations, strikes and other actions can involve widening sections of workers and students until the government is forced to back down.

Many workers and students in Australia want an opportunity to achieve a similar victory.

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# Mapping a French revolt in Aotearoa

by GRANT MORGAN

Slap workers in the face and call it a helping hand. Such was the strategy behind the “work probation” bill brought into parliament by National MP Wayne Mapp in early 2006.

Ross Wilson, president of the Council of Trade Unions, said Mapp’s bill meant the “complete removal of any employment rights for the first 90 days”.

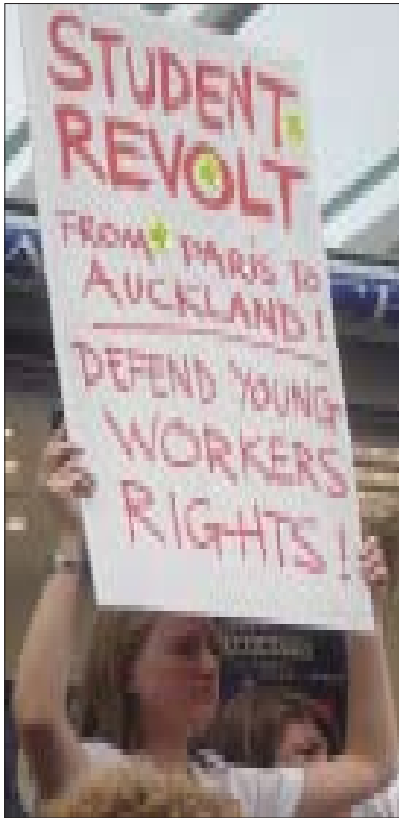
During this probation period, a boss would be able to sack a worker without giving any reason or facing any penalty. You can imagine what would happen to anyone who stood up for their rights on the job. Discrimination against active unionists, which is supposed to be unlawful, would in essence become legalised.

This was hardly being denied by the corporate sponsors of Mapp’s



High school students in Auckland protest against youth rates, 18 March 2006. The Engineers Union is campaigning against a National Party bill discriminating against newly-hired staff, which will hit young workers particularly hard. Are conditions in New Zealand ripe for a united worker-student campaign like the recent successful French revolt?





bill. In the chilling language of the Employers & Manufacturers Association. “committed employees have nothing to fear”. Skilled and competent staff could be sacked without explanation, with the only new hires to be safe being those “committed” to the boss. In plain words, suck up or ship out.

Mapp’s bill won its first vote in parliament thanks to support from two of Labour’s coalition allies, NZ First and United Future, along with three out of four Maori Party MPs.

According to Mapp, his bill would help “vulnerable” people, such as unemployed youth, because it protects bosses from the risks of hiring more staff. It was funny hearing Mapp using such politically correct language to disguise his bill’s real intentions. He is, after all, the National Party’s official “PC eradicator”.

Mapp’s corporate PC was punctured by Radical Youth, who said his bill “will make workers even more vulnerable to predatory employers”.

After organising a thousand-strong high school students’ march in Auckland against youth rates, Radical Youth issued a warning of “walkouts and strike action by young people” against Mapp’s bill.

Anyone who dismissed these words as merely “youthful heroics” would have got a jolt when a similar call to arms came from the distinctly unyouthful Engineers, the country’s largest union.

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The Engineering, Printing & Manufacturing Union is led by Andrew Little. Although widely seen as a union moderate who's tipped for a safe Labour seat in the next election, Little initiated the 5% campaign in 2005 which sparked a general pay revolt. Now Little is heading a union charge against Mapp's bill, which he slams as a "naked attack" on workers' rights.

Little promises a "massive" campaign against Mapp's bill, starting on 20 July with a union stopwork and march to parliament. Full backing is coming from the Council of Trade Unions.

When the mood of mainstream unionists matches up with the mood of youthful radicals, that's the time for sparks to fly – just like they did in France recently when millions of workers and students protesting against a similar law forced a government U-turn.

If sparks really do fly here, they may burn more than National's Mapp of exploitation. Under Helen Clark's Employment Relations Act, any union stopwork over Mapp's bill would be classed as an unlawful political strike. Unionists could be taken to court and face jail sentences and huge fines.

Would the law be used against union opponents of Mapp's bill? Maybe it won't come to the test, since the gossip in parliament's mean corridors is that the three Maori Party MPs who first backed Mapp's bill have now changed their minds.

Even if that's not so, Little doubts that any employer would be "silly enough" to use the anti-strike law against unionists.

If it did come to the crunch, however, unionists would face a stark choice: either back away from stoppages against Mapp's bill, or defy Labour's legal ban on political strikes.

Back in the dark old days of 19th century England, the world's first unions arose in defiance of harsh anti-combination laws. This gave impetus to the world's first working class political movement, called the People's Charter, which defied the law to press for universal suffrage.

So the union and political rights now enjoyed by New Zealand workers grew out of illegal mass struggles. Our rights will be defended and extended only if we're prepared to use every means necessary.

In the words of a People's Charter song of 1842:

*The people will rise with the might of the just,  
And pride and oppression shall sink to the dust.*

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Northern Ireland

## United strike beats bosses & bigotry

by DAPHNE LAWLESS

A victorious strike by Belfast posties in February 2006 showed how workers' unity can beat vicious management attacks, lack of union support and even Northern Ireland's history of distrust between Catholic and Protestant.

18 days of inspiring struggle forced bullying bosses at Royal Mail to concede almost all the posties' demands, even though the strike was repudiated by officials of their union, the CWU. And the strike has lit a beacon of hope in Northern Ireland by showing that Catholic and Protestant workers can unite and fight for their common interests.

On 7 February, 500 posties marched into the city centre through the Protestant Shankill Road and the Catholic Falls Road – streets that symbolise the sectarian division of Belfast. They crossed the “peace line” which segregates working class Protestant and Catholic estates.

One marcher described the scene: “Families came out of their houses in support and local workers stopped work to see the march. People in cars beeped their horns in support.”

The mood was of good-humoured defiance. According to Sean, a postie: “The march was a huge moral boost. It was historic. I've never even been up the Shankill before. It's over 70 years since workers have marched united on both roads. It shows the depth of feeling about the dispute.”



Belfast posties beat drum for non-sectarian workers' unity, February 2006

## Workers' anthem: 'Yes, We Have No Bananas'

Before the 2006 Belfast posties' strike, 1932 was the last time Protestant and Catholic workers had marched together through the Falls and Shankill.

Back then, 2,000 striking dole scheme workers were joined by 20,000 supporters on a protest along the divided roads. Bands from both communities came on the march. The only neutral tune both sides knew was "Yes, We Have No Bananas". That one tune was played over and over again as the march went through the Falls and Shankill.

The Northern Ireland government tried to crush the movement. It declared the next demonstration illegal and issued 4,000 rifles to the police. When the massive march went ahead it was attacked by the police. Workers defended themselves, ripping up paving stones, building barricades and digging trenches to block armoured cars.

Then as now, the bosses tried to use sectarianism to divide the workers. The media falsely claimed the IRA was behind the trouble. Throughout the day Protestant and Catholic workers fought side-by-side, running from district to district helping each other. Afraid of the movement they had awoken, the government and the city's board of guardians gave in.

Their united spirit inspired the victory of the Belfast posties 74 years later. As one postie told the 2006 protest: "Today we still don't have any

The strike began in late January when managers told a worker in the BT13 office covering the Shankill area that he had been found guilty of harassment.

Gary, the worker concerned, said: "In the office there is constant harassment over doing overtime and the like. It got so bad that I started taking notes in a diary. Management stole my diary. When I complained they put me on a harassment charge and I was given a letter of dismissal."

In response the BT13 workers walked out. A CWU official described the ripples. "When people from the Falls heard that the Shankill office was out, they came out in support and then the rest followed."

Royal Mail management responded with a nasty bid to stir up sectarian division. A week into the strike campaign, they started briefing the press that the dispute was about the union covering up sectarian harassment.

According to Paul from Mallusk: "Workers always take the lead against bigotry, not the politicians. We're on the frontline of attacks and abuse, while the politicians can hide away in their swish offices. This is working class people from all communities saying we've had enough of intimidation at work, we're not going to take intimidation from the media. In reality, sectarianism creates divisions among workers, and those divisions give the bosses and the politicians a free hand to push ahead with attacks on us."

Another worker said: "In our communities, in our sectarian ghettos, we feel isolated and powerless. But by taking action we're demonstrating something different. We're showing our power as workers – Protestant workers standing

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# Workers' green ban at Bastion Point

by LEN PARKER

Ngati Whatua, a people indigenous to the Auckland region, were driven from their lands by a system hostile to their “beastly communism” (as one colonial commentator described Maori values).

Much of this legal expropriation has happened within living memory. Around 1950, Ngati Whatua were evicted from their remaining settlement at Okahu Bay on the Waitemata Harbour. Their village was burnt, and they were exiled to what became known as “Boot Hill”, a state housing area in Kitimoana St, Orakei.

In 1976, Rob Muldoon’s National government backed a profit-driven scheme to alienate Ngati Whatua from a 60-acre block popularly called Bastion Point. Property developers were to build flash houses for the rich on this prized real estate overlooking the Waitemata Harbour.

On 5 January 1977 the Orakei Maori Action Group, having exhausted all official channels of review, led an occupation of their expropriated land, which they knew as Takaparawhau. It was to last 506 days and end in mass arrests, sparking continuing protests which finally saw the government hand Bastion Point back to Ngati Whatua.

My article isn’t intended as a history of this long and ultimately victorious struggle for justice. That’s already been well told by occupiers themselves in their commemorative book Takaparawhau, the People’s Story.

I’m going to tell a largely untold story of the significant contribution to the struggle made by the organised working class.

In late December 1976, bulldozers began clearing scrub at Bastion Point. Surveyor pegs had been laid down, but were being pulled up by protesters.

At this time a longtime Orakei resident, Jimmy O’Dea, was approached by Rene Hawke, wife of Orakei Maori Action Group leader Joe Hawke. Rene asked Jimmy if he would join a Ngati Whatua delegation to the Auckland Trades Council requesting a union green ban on the commercial development of Bastion Point. As a widely respected union job delegate, Communist Party member and Maori rights supporter, Jimmy was well qualified to add gravitas to bringing workers and Maori together.

Expecting to meet the full trades council, the Orakei delegation were surprised to find only two officials, Bill Andersen of the Drivers Union and Peter Purdue of the Carpenters Union.

Andersen, who had long been the dominant personality among local union officials, advised Ngati Whatua to go away and get good legal advice



Huge protest march to court hearings, 1978

before thinking about any occupation. In a heated exchange, Jimmy asked what good a lawyer would be when bulldozers were already starting work at Bastion Point.

Jimmy insisted that the trades council declare an immediate green ban. And that's what happened a few hours later.

But a green ban wouldn't be much good unless it was urgently communicated to workers, particularly those likely to be involved in the housing development. And that was a task the trades council officials couldn't be relied on to seriously tackle. So Auckland leaders of the Communist Party met with the Orakei Maori Action Committee for authorisation to approach workers to win support for the land occupation and the green ban.

Jimmy O'Dea and Trent Richards led the Communists' practical work in this campaign, which involved some 40 party members at its height. The Orakei Maori Action Committee elected Jimmy O'Dea and Willy Pirama to call meetings with industrial workers all around Auckland.

A priority was talking with staff at Wilson Rothery, contracted to build roads through the Bastion Point subdivision. With backing from their Maori job delegate, Bill Abraham, Wilson Rothery workers voted to support the green ban and refuse to open up the land. They also offered financial support to the occupiers. Without road builders, little else could be done at Bastion Point.

Another early meeting was arranged with NZ Breweries workers through their walking delegate, Tom McClintock. Occupation delegates visited the brewery along with trades council officials. Workers pledged financial support to the occupation, levying themselves \$2 each per week.

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Afterwards, Bill Andersen said the money would not be forthcoming. Ngati Whatua leader Joe Hawke told Andersen that only the workers themselves could reverse their own decision, and that was that. The brewery workers honoured their pledge and more.

These successes, which lifted the confidence of protesters, were replicated on a wide scale across the city, particularly among seafarers, wharfies, teachers, nurses and South Auckland's industrial workers. The help of friendly job delegates and union officials was crucial. Untold thousands of workers donated money, visited the occupation site, helped construct shelters, dropped in food, lent tents and tools and supported the cause in many other ways.

This practical alliance between workers and Maori delivered the occupation's Meeting House. Jimmy O'Dea asked his friend, Irish activist Alfie Byrne, to approach Irish contractors Green & McCahill with a \$100 tender to remove a large wooden warehouse in Wiri. The left-wing Bower brothers, who operated a small trucking firm, loaned their vehicles to transport the demolished warehouse to Bastion Point. Others with trucks and trailers helped out too. On the occupation site, unionists joined occupiers to convert the timber into a spacious Meeting House.

Meanwhile, Ngati Whatua activist Roger Rameka was taking the occupiers' message to iwi and workers around the country. In response, supporters came to Bastion Point from Northland, the Waikato, central North Island timberlands, Bay of Plenty, the East Coast, Wellington and elsewhere.



Dismantling the wooden warehouse at Wiri that was turned into the Meeting House at Bastion Point. Jimmy O'Dea is third left.

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Worried by this growing wave of support from workers, Maori and the public at large, the government demanded that occupiers leave Bastion Point.

Right after, Bill Andersen and a Maori union official met with Ngati Whatua in a caravan on the occupation site. They came with a proposal that the dispute be handed over to the Auckland Trades Council because the occupiers were “taking on the state”, and should remember what happened in the 1951 Waterfront Lockout. After consideration, this proposal was rejected by a meeting of occupiers, who decided that control should remain in the hands of the Orakei Maori Action Committee. Their collective decision was not welcomed by Andersen.

On 25 May 1978, a 600-strong army of police cleared Bastion Point of all occupiers. 222 were arrested, half of them non-Maori. The Meeting House and all other buildings were flattened by Ministry of Works scabs.

Joe Hawke called a hui which attracted supporters from around the country. A Defence Committee was set up, leaflets were distributed and protest marches held. Outraged activists crowded the first court hearing, halting proceedings and sparking a walkout by the judge. Subsequent court hearings were dogged by demonstrations until remaining charges were dropped. Numerous legal appeals were mounted.

The rest is history. In 1987, on the recommendation of the Waitangi Tribunal, the Labour government returned Bastion Point to Ngati Whatua. A trust was set up to administer the land, which has its own story to tell, some of it bad because key trustees were influenced by market forces. But nothing can take away from the historic victory by Ngati Whatua and their allies, mainly the organised working class.

“Great sacrifices were made in the struggle, including the sad death of young Joanne Hawke in a fire at the occupation,” notes Jimmy O’Dea. “But the great thing about struggle is that it’s a great educator. It makes you realise how important each person is when we all unite in a just cause.”

Real power to defend our human rights against an inhuman system lies in the united actions of workers and other oppressed people. That was shown by the mass struggle for Takaparawhau.

While Bastion Point has become a landmark in New Zealand history, its causes remain to haunt us all: the private ownership of the economy and the capitalist bias of the state. Naturally, the fight goes on everywhere.

“The real criminals in society are not the ones who fill the jails,” said US black socialist Angela Davis, “but those who have stolen the wealth of the world from the people.”



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# Nine good ways to win a strike

by DEAN PARKER

July 2006 is the 90th birthday of the New Zealand Labour Party. One figure who should be remembered, but probably won't, is E.J.B. Allen.

In 1922 he wrote a defence of Labour at the request of party leaders. They wanted to win over to Labour politics those who considered the only action worth taking was strike action.



Allen had formerly been a leading revolutionary unionist in London with no time for parliamentary parties. He'd come here in 1912 when New Zealand was attracting a great deal of interest. Unlike Australia, there was no established Labour Party of note and most energy was going into building the "Red" Federation of Labor with its goal of one big union, one big strike.

The defeat of the 1913 General Strike saw Allen alter his views. While retaining his faith in industrial unionism, he added to it the need, which he saw specifically in New Zealand, for parliamentary political action. He argued this in his pamphlet *Labour & Politics*.

But he'd also written another influential pamphlet 13 years before which spelt out the tactics of direct action. *Revolutionary Unionism* was published in London in 1909 and then reprinted in New Zealand in 1913.

So, to mark the birth of the Labour Party, let's feature Allen's earlier pamphlet where he outlines nine good ways to win a strike:

**1** "The orthodox trade unionist only knows of one form of struggle, that is, to leave the works and see which will give way first, his empty pocket and stomach or the full ones of the employer. Needless to say, it is generally the employer who gets home on this run... A prolonged strike is doomed beforehand. They have got to be determined, decisive and short or they are lost."

**2** "To give employers from one to three months' notice of intention to strike is giving them just that amount of time to push work forward, lay in supplies and hunt round for strike-breakers and other shops to get their work finished."

**3** "Success is only assured by attacking the weak spots, when the boss has a time contract and will be penalised if work is delayed, when there is a rush of orders instead of slack time."

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**4** “The more widespread, the more general the paralysis of trade, the more likely is success.”

**5** “The best strike is to strike in the shop, the workers all ceasing work at a given time, the machinery left running useless, the workers standing at the benches with folded arms until their demands are granted. If this is not successful the first time, the same policy should be followed at different intervals, just as soon as the management thinks the trouble has blown over... In the end, tired of the uncertainty and chaos, the bosses give way. This is known as the ‘irritation strike’ and is much used by revolutionary workers.”

**6** “In cases of strike by leaving the shop, scabs must be prevented from entering... Energetic measures should be taken [to prevent scabs entering the premises] even if they are not quite in accord with the accepted ideas of law and order.”

**7** “When the open strike is not advisable, either in the shop or by leaving it, there are tactics known to the French worker as ‘sabotage’. This is a course of systematic waste of material, doing faulty work, having accidents with the machinery, until the employers give way... Some navvies had their pay reduced and promptly cut a strip about an inch to an inch-and-a-half off their shovels, saying, ‘Short pay, short shovels’... The more skilled a worker is, the greater his knowledge of how to spoil work without it being immediately detected and thus blamed to him.”

**8** “There is also the weapon of the boycott, which the workers can use in their capacity as consumers, and even carry from goods to individuals when wanted, as the Irish peasants do.”

**9** “An amusing way for workers to get their own back is the ‘passive strike’, that is simply to obey all orders, rules and regulations to the very letter and take as long as possible in doing so.”

**E.J.B. Allen’s contribution to NZ unionism is covered by Erik Olssen in his book *Red Feds* (Oxford University Press) and again in the piece Olssen contributes to *Revolution* (Canterbury University Press), edited by Melanie Nolan, the recent and excellent compilation of papers given at the Trade Union History Project conference on the 1913 Great Strike.**

# It takes two wings to fly

by CHRIS TROTTER

Three great struggles, three great defeats – each one more serious than the last. The vivid legacies of 1913, 1951 and 1991 continue to sweep across New Zealand’s historical landscape like the intersecting beams of three vast searchlights. In their glare we find illuminated not only the balance of class forces prevailing at the time, but also the level of political sophistication attained by the working class movement as a whole.

Naturally, there are a multitude of lessons to be drawn from each one of these mass industrial conflicts, but the most important lesson is stark and simple. For working class people to advance their interests across a broad front they must first acquire the habits and instincts of independent political – as well as industrial – action.

The General Strike of 1913 was the culmination of seven years of escalating working class militancy – beginning in the coal fields of the West Coast and gradually spreading into the working class suburbs of the main cities, Auckland and Wellington in particular. By 1912 the movement had acquired institutional form in the New Zealand Federation of Labor – quickly dubbed the “Red Feds” by the newly-launched newspapers of an increasingly apprehensive employing class.

Through their own lively newspaper *The Maoriland Worker*, edited by radical journalist Bob Ross, the Red Feds encouraged “the workers of hand and brain” to view themselves as the only truly necessary class in modern industrial society. The employers and their hangers-on were branded parasites, an oppressor class destined to be swept away through the revolutionary collectivism of organised labour.

It was a youthful, optimistic, energetic and surprisingly naive industrial movement, which scorned the earnest theorising of Germanic social democracy in favour of the “direct action” of American “Wobblies” and Latin America’s anarcho-syndicalists. New Zealand’s cumbersome system of industrial conciliation and arbitration was derided as “labour’s leg-irons”.

According to the Red Feds, unions registered under the Liberal



Red Fed orator Peter Fraser at a strike meeting in Auckland, 1911. Beside him is another Red Fed, Mickey Savage, president of the Auckland Socialist Party. After the 1913 General Strike was crushed, Savage and Fraser were at the centre of forming Labour as a party of parliamentary reforms, in contrast to the Red Fed's credo of mass action and the abolition of capitalism. They went on to become Labour's first two prime ministers.

government's internationally acclaimed IC&A Act of 1894 were little better than agents of the state – the employers' state. The militants saw themselves as a unique, Antipodean expression of the revolutionary zeitgeist of the new 20th century. In this respect the Red Feds represented the first assertion of New Zealand's identity as a Pacific culture, rather than an Atlantic one. The contrast with the loyal, Anglophile attitudes of the traditional craft unions could hardly have been more stark.

And this, in a sense, was the Red Feds' Achilles Heel. In a colonial society that was still overwhelmingly rural and imbued with a deep and genuine attachment to Imperial Britain – the "Mother Country" – the Red Feds were regarded as a frightening and alien minority. Outside the big cities and mining towns, their constituency was almost non-existent.

The inescapable political reality, however, was that without the support of an overwhelming majority of the population, the anarcho-

syndicalist revolutionary formula could not work. In 1913, the process of winning that majority had only just begun. What's more, with the new and employer-friendly government of Bill Massey in power in Wellington, rural and urban conservatives were equally determined to bring the Red Feds' agitation to an end.

With this in mind, the Red Feds were provoked into action by a combination of mining, agricultural and shipping interests, and the long-prepared plans of the deeply reactionary New Zealand Farmers Union were set in motion. Massey militarised his rural base by swearing in farmers as "special constables". Descending upon Auckland and Wellington in their hundreds, "Massey's Cossacks" broke up the Red Feds' picket lines by brute force. Augmented by the permanent police force and secretly-seconded officers from the



Cartoon in *Free Lance*, 15 November 1913, shows how New Zealand's rulers saw the 1913 General Strike as a contest for state power

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regular army, the Special Constabulary swiftly broke the back of Red Fed resistance.

Had the syndicalist forces in Wellington acted with more decisiveness and dispatch, it's possible they could have sealed off the capital and established a revolutionary government. For a few crucial hours, as historian James Belich notes, parliament lay open and undefended before the strikers. But even had the Red Feds possessed the will to seize political power (which they did not), they couldn't have held on to it. Like the Paris Commune of 1871, a Wellington Commune in 1913 would swiftly have succumbed to the vengeance of a decidedly counter-revolutionary countryside.

The Maoriland Worker itself pronounced the political epitaph of the 1913 General Strike: "The odds against us were too great, the requisite tactics too little understood, the method of organisation too incomplete to meet the forces of the employers, the farmer scabs, and the armed and legal power of the State."

### **Labour Party's compulsory unionists**

Less than a year after the crushing of the General Strike, the age of revolutionary innocence was brought to an end by the onset of the First World War. That conflict would, in its turn, give birth to the world's first socialist state – a geopolitical fact which focused the minds of revolutionaries everywhere.

Back in New Zealand, the leadership cadre of the Red Feds – Harry Holland, Mickey Savage, Peter Fraser, Bob Semple – were not slow to absorb the lessons of the pre-war period. Industrial muscle alone, they realised, wasn't enough to win and hold state power. Political muscle, strong enough to forge a substantial majority for change, was also required. In 1916, united by their opposition to wartime conscription, the reformist and revolutionary wings of the labour movement finally came together to form the New Zealand Labour Party.

The years following the First World War were a period of severe economic stress for most working class New Zealanders – especially after 1929, when the whole capitalist world was hit by the Great Depression. Though the IC&A Act remained in force, the union movement was steadily undermined by a combination of government-employer hostility and rapidly rising levels of unemployment. Militancy became a hazy memory, something out of the good old days before the war.

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More and more, working people turned towards their parliamentary representatives for salvation. Rather than being a political movement inspired and informed by the experiences of workers in daily struggle against the capitalist economic system, the Labour Party became a vehicle for the hopes and dreams of workers crushed by its collapse. In this grim context, the violent overthrow of the ruling class became a pipe-dream. For most working families, a job and a home would be revolution enough.

As it turned out, the First Labour Government gave them all of that and more. 23 years after the defeat of the General Strike, Savage and Fraser were finally able to build the industrial and political army they had lacked by making union membership compulsory. Now, surely, organised labour had the resources to make itself invincible?

But union membership by compulsion produced a very different working class movement to the one based upon union membership by conviction. Inevitably, the masses of conscripted members – especially those working in industries that had been largely unorganised prior to 1936 – became passive adjuncts of unscrupulous union bosses and their Labour Party patrons. As a result, the Federation of Labour – reborn in 1937 – became a bastion, not of syndicalist fervour, but arbitrationist conservatism.

Once again world war intervened, but this time New Zealand was in the hands of a workers' government. Under Peter Fraser, the full potential of the political and industrial fusion dreamed of by the Wobblies was realised, although it's doubtful whether the young firebrands of 1913 would have been encouraged by the results. Lacking revolutionary objectives, and denied the democratising influence of an active rank-and-file, most New Zealand unions swiftly adapted themselves to Fraser's regulated wartime economy.

Most, but not all. On the wharves, in the mines and at the state-owned railway workshops, union militancy resurfaced. With the end of the Second World War, radicalised rank-and-file workers began to dream of resuming organised labour's forward march. In 1945, the militants forced the nationalisation of the Bank of New Zealand, and by the late 1940s Fraser and his lieutenants were under pressure to rein in the unions. Not only were their wage demands eating into the employers' regulated profits, but with the world entering the "Cold War" between Western capitalism and its erstwhile wartime ally, the Soviet Union, left-wing union militancy was a luxury Labour couldn't afford.

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## No better second time round

History began to repeat itself. In 1949, the Labour government was defeated and the employer-friendly National Party took office. Then the union movement split, with the militants walking out of the 1950 Federation of Labour conference to form the Trade Union Congress.

The TUC contained within its ranks the cream of the New Zealand union movement. The watersiders, in particular, had built a radically democratic union sub-culture and felt confident enough to risk a confrontation with the state itself. Anxious to strangle this infant TUC Hercules in its cradle, the shipping companies, backed by the National Party, provoked a confrontation with the watersiders. Within days 20,000 workers belonging to the TUC were either locked out or striking in solidarity.

Once again the historical precedents held. Like Massey before him, National prime minister Sid Holland militarised the conflict by calling on the armed forces to break the union resistance. Invoking the spectre of “communist union wreckers”, he promulgated emergency regulations which effectively suspended New Zealand’s democratic institutions for the duration of the conflict.

Guarding his back as he mugged Lady Liberty was the Federation of Labour. With its passive mass of conscripted members denied all knowledge of the unfolding conflict by Holland’s ruthless censorship of the news media, and the FoL’s conservative leadership hell-bent on



Police begin to baton a peaceful march of wharfies in Cuba St, Wellington, 2 May 1951. The traffic sign “No Left Turn” could serve as a political metaphor for the era.



## THE OVERSEERS OF UNION DEFEAT



In 1951 Fintan Patrick Walsh (left) kept the Federation of Labour from supporting the wharfies. In 1991 Council of Trade Unions president Ken Douglas resisted workers' general strike calls to kill the Employment Contracts Bill. Both times these overseers of union defeat saved the government from a hiding.



crushing their radical TUC rivals, the potential of organised labour to resist the employers' onslaught was never realised.

The Labour Party, too, could have mobilised its not inconsiderable membership in solidarity with the TUC, but years of red-baiting and an unwillingness to rejuvenate its ranks had left it morally, politically and physically enfeebled. The best its leader, the aging Walter Nash, could offer was that he was "neither for nor against" the watersiders.

It was 1913 all over again: a small but militant minority pitted against a largely unsympathetic majority. Admittedly, the state's repression of the TUC in 1951 was much fiercer, and went on for much longer, than its campaign against the Red Feds in 1913, but the outcome was the same. In a snap general election held to vindicate Holland's decision to crush the watersiders, the National Party was returned with 51% of the votes cast.

### **Union moderates strike Devil's Bargain**

The 1951 Waterfront Lockout marks one of the most important turning points in New Zealand history. Much more than militant unionism was crushed in that great struggle. Defeated alongside the watersiders were the distilled energies and visions of a generation of young New Zealanders who had come through the years of depression and war with their ideals intact. Men and women who had seen and done some terrible things in the course of the global struggle against fascism were determined that the sacrifice of so many millions shouldn't be in vain. They wanted to build a better world.

Like the Red Feds of 1913, they seemed to glimpse the outlines

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of an alternative future for New Zealand. It was a future in which New Zealanders would no longer be beholden to one or other of the great Anglo-Saxon powers, but would feel free to strike out in new directions. New Zealand would be a “pacific” nation in both senses of the word. First, as a people dedicated to assisting the peaceful resolution of international tension and conflict. Second, as a nation located geographically, diplomatically and emotionally in the South Pacific. It was time to stop thinking of ourselves as an offshore island of Great Britain.

Most historians lay the blame for the events of 1951 squarely at the door of Sid Holland’s National government. This is unfair. Holland could not have succeeded in breaking the militant unions without the active collaboration of the Federation of Labour. The so-called “moderate” unions, had they chosen to stand alongside their brothers and sisters in the breakaway Trade Union Congress, would have swiftly brought the Holland government to terms. The big question, which still echoes down the years, is: Why did the FoL stand back and let Holland smash the militant unions?

The answer is simple: they wanted to survive. National had pledged itself to abolishing compulsory unionism, and the “moderate” union leaders – many of whose members were little more than passive conscripts – feared that the demise of compulsory unionism would be followed in relatively short order by their own. And so they entered into a Devil’s Bargain with Sid Holland and his employer allies. We will allow you to destroy the radicals and the visionaries of today, and – even more importantly – we will help you to suppress the radicals and visionaries of tomorrow. In return, you will guarantee our right to continue operating as responsible “bread and butter” unions.

Such was the Faustian pact that condemned New Zealand to economic and cultural vassalage for the next twenty years. Barely two years after the lifting of the emergency regulations, Holland’s government was sponsoring that protracted orgy of “patriotism” known as the 1953 Royal Tour. “Mother England’s” apron strings had become an embarrassing (at least for the British!) fetish. Nothing was “good” unless it came from “Home”. Every morning, from Northland to the Bluff, tens of thousands of shivering children lined up in front of their schools’ flagstaffs to sing “God Save the Queen”.

And the unions? Those supposed schools of socialism simply stagnated into dingy dens of dubious deal-makers. A raft of post-1951 legislation forbade them from expending union funds on anything other than negotiating agreements. The once-vibrant union press was

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reduced to printing pallid newsletters. Red-baiting became the surest route to the top. For many years, the Wellington Engineers quizzed every prospective union office-holder with Joe McCarthy's infamous: "Are you now, or have you ever been, a member of the Communist Party?" It was illegal to so much as whisper the word "scab". Inevitably, anti-communist organisations like Young Catholic Workers moved in to occupy the ideological vacuum. By the mid-1960s, the union movement had become a bastion of social conservatism.

### **The Devil collects his due**

It was the "Nil Wage Order" of 1968 that finally broke the spell of 1951. The inflationary pressures building up under the New Zealand economy drove the rank-and-file to demand that their wages at least kept pace with the cost of living.

It was the workers in key strategic industries – freezing workers, drivers, electricians – who led the way, but by the early 1970s a strike wave of unprecedented size was sweeping the country.

The employers demanded action, but the National Party – now led by Rob Muldoon – needed the votes of socially conservative, blue collar union members to stay in office. His alternative to smashing the unions – a series of wage and price freezes – only made things worse. In 1979, the FoL felt confident enough to call the first general strike since 1913. By the early 1980s, Muldoon had run out of options. In 1983, he finally relented and allowed his minister of labour, Jim Bolger, to abolish compulsory unionism.

The Devil had come to collect his due. Thirty years of political inertia and "bread and butter" economism had left the unions utterly unprepared to deal with the loss of their conscripted membership. Desperate, they turned to the one organisation still willing to help – the Labour Party.

But the Devil had beaten them to it. All those years of driving radicals and visionaries out of the union movement meant that a new generation of young New Zealanders had signed up to the Labour Party without passing through the working class first. Kept away from union members, radicalism had found a new and receptive audience among middle class university students. It was a very different sort of "Left" that was driving the Labour Party in the 1980s – so different, in fact, that by 1987 it could hardly be called "Left" at all.

Frantically, the unions affiliated to Labour scabbled around to find a few good men and women to woo the Lange-led Labour government back from the brink. But not even the saintly Sonja Davies could

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dissuade these Thatcherites in Labour clothing from committing political suicide – and dragging the whole union movement into the abyss with them.

The victims of the fourth Labour government were the workers forced to accept sub-inflation wage deals and/or surrender hard-won conditions, and the tens of thousands made redundant or unable to find work. They turned to their unions for a way out of the slow-motion social disaster in which they were trapped.

### **A successful General Strike that never was**

With National regaining power in late 1990, it was clear that the union movement would either have to fight – or die. What a traumatised working class hadn't counted on was the shift in the balance of class forces that had taken place within the union movement itself.

The newly-formed Council of Trade Unions, unlike the old FoL, admitted civil servants and other state employees as well as private sector workers. Better educated and earning higher incomes than most of their working class comrades, these administrators, teachers and nurses were torn between their public duties and their class obligation to stand in solidarity with all those working class families about to be abandoned to the tender mercies of private sector employers.

From the very summit of the union movement the rank-and-file received not the slightest inspiration. Though they turned out in their many tens of thousands to protest against the National's Employment Contracts Bill, the leadership of the CTU steadfastly refused to move the struggle to the next level. Though mass meeting after mass meeting of workers called for a General Strike, the CTU leadership temporised and equivocated. Though the unemployed and beneficiaries were ready to make common cause with the unions, and though the campuses were ripe for action, the state sector workers and the "moderate" unions voted against a CTU co-ordinated campaign of mass industrial action.

Even at this late stage, a bold political party might have been able to rescue the situation. But Labour was riven with factional strife, and the NewLabour Party, which had split away from Labour in 1989, was unwilling to try. Only the tiny Communist Party was committed to making the General Strike happen, and they were muscled off the political stage by the ideologically confused, Moscow-aligned Socialist Unity Party. One observer quipped at the time: "The SUP would rather keep control of the losing side than lose control of the winning side."



30 April  
1991: 30,000  
Auckland  
workers  
rally to “kill  
the bill”. But  
CTU leaders  
ignored their  
calls for a  
general strike.

The true tragedy embedded in the events of 1991 is that a General Strike launched in that year could have succeeded. In marked contrast to the socially and politically isolated struggles of 1913 and 1951, the struggle against the Employment Contracts Bill was supported by practically the whole of the working class and much of the middle class. As the success of the campaign to change the electoral system was later to demonstrate, there was a massive constituency for radical political change in early 1990s New Zealand.

Six years of neo-liberal economic blitzkrieg had readied the New Zealand working class to fight for their rights in 1991, but 40 years of political inactivity had sapped them of both the knowledge and the confidence to struggle independently. Instead, they waited for their “leaders” in the CTU and the Labour Party to issue a call to arms that never came.

The central lesson common to the conflicts of 1913, 1951 and 1991 is very clear. Working people can never afford to lose control of either the industrial wing or the political wing of the labour movement. A better world will be theirs only when they allow themselves, and encourage their children, to become the radical, visionary and, above all, democratic masters of both. It takes two wings to fly.

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# **A right yet to be won – our freedom to strike**

by **DON FRANKS**

Strikes have brought workers suffering and death. They've also won money and righted wrongs. Striking involves risk, excitement and, dare I say it, fun.

A strike is a miniature revolt. For a period, the boss's words have no authority, existing rules are broken and anything is possible. While strikes are most commonly reactive and defensive, they also have limitless potential.

The communist Rosa Luxemburg noted: "The mass strike is the first natural, impulsive form of every great revolutionary struggle of the proletariat."

Generations of New Zealand workers have seen striking as their basic right. For most of our history, strikes have been severely restricted by the capitalist state. That remains the situation today.

## **Strikes in early New Zealand**

Workers' living conditions in early colonial New Zealand were appalling. Unemployment was rife in the first years of settlement and recurred regularly for the rest of the 19th century as the economy swung from boom to slump.

Conditions worsened during the long depression of the 1880s. There were no social services of any kind – no poor law, unemployment payments, old age pensions, labour laws or factories act.

These years also saw manufacturing grow in New Zealand. Manufacturers even catered for export markets. Their expansion was based on the low wages and sweated labour of women and children as well as men. Working class struggle took the form of occasional strikes, the formation of a few craft unions and petitions for unemployment relief.

Then came a great surge of workers' organisation in 1889-90. For the first time in New Zealand, unskilled and semi-skilled workers organised themselves on a large scale. Union membership leapt from 5,000 to 63,000 in the space of one year.

Organisation was strongest in the transport occupations, with the Maritime Council bringing seamen, watersiders, miners and railwaymen into a single entity. Many improvements were won in a short space of time.

The employers soon counter-attacked, provoking a strike in 1890 of all sections of the Maritime Council except the railwaymen. The strike was defeated by a shortage of funds and scab herding. The employers began cleaning out unionism with a wave of wage cutting and victimisation.

The events of 1890 woke the capitalists up to the realities of working class strength. A continuation of the "no rules" relationship between capital and labour would lead to further serious outbreaks of class struggle which threatened the interests of business. A new strategy was needed.

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## **The first 'pro-worker' government**

In 1891, the Liberal Party won office on promises of land and labour reforms. William Pember Reeves was made minister of labour – the first such appointment in New Zealand and the British Empire.

Reeves named his son Fabian, after the British Fabian “socialists”. The Fabians were reformist, pro-imperialist intellectuals hostile to revolution and workers’ independent action. The Fabian legacy was to cast a long shadow over New Zealand industrial relations.

Reeves’ 1894 Industrial Conciliation & Arbitration Act introduced compulsory arbitration in industrial disputes – probably the first such provision in the world.

The IC&A Act was summarised by NZ historian Keith Sinclair as “encouraging trade unionism and preventing strikes”.

Reeves introduced several reforms, often more substantial than any Labour offerings today. Over considerable bosses’ opposition, Reeves’ government in 1894 passed the Shops & Shop Assistants Act, closing almost all shops from midday on Saturday until Monday morning.

But the Liberals’ policy had two sides. It looked to outlaw the worst excesses of capitalist dictatorship in factories, mines, ships and offices. It also tried to moderate the class struggle by involving the state as arbiter over wages and conditions of work.

## **Working class fightback**

By 1906, after twelve strike-free years, real wages in New Zealand were below the 1894 level despite the country being in a period of prosperity.

Pressure had built up for militant action, and in 1906 the strike drought was broken by Auckland tramwaymen who took illegal action against victimisation. In early 1907 slaughtermen in Petone won a 15% increase in defiance of the Arbitration Court. More strikes followed, including the famous Blackball strike on the West Coast.

Soon a militant union organisation was formed – the “Red” Federation of Labor. Red Fed unions broke away from the IC&A Act and won many improvements in wages and working conditions by taking direct action.

Red Fed unionists were the first to demand the overthrow of the capitalist system and the setting up of a socialist society in New Zealand. They thought industrial organisation and the weapon of the general strike could do this.

This working class upsurge continued until 1912, when the employers counter-attacked at Waihi. Miners at Waihi struck to defend their union against a management-inspired scab union. The employers and their state reacted to the strike with vicious class hatred. Police and scabs poured into Waihi, the Miners Hall was attacked and one miner was killed and hundreds driven out of town.

The following year the employers attacked again, provoking a titanic

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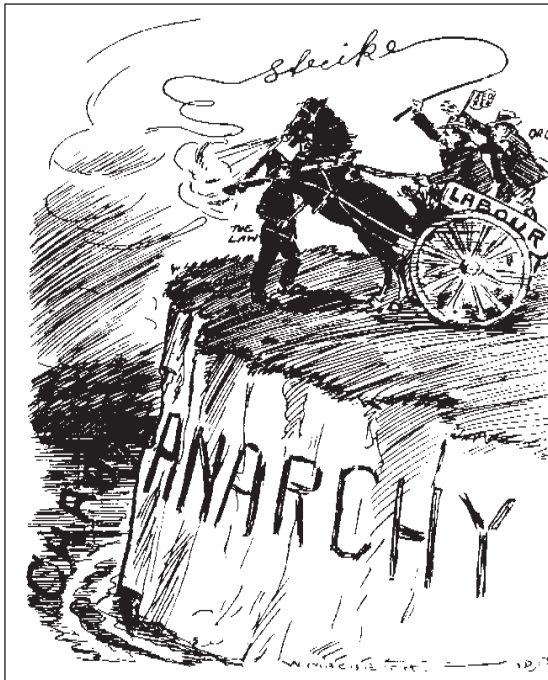
waterfront struggle. Bill Massey's new conservative government sent armed specials and troops to clear the wharves of strikers. The Red Feds went down for the count.

These industrial defeats turned workers towards politics as a means of improving their lives. In 1916 the Red Feds were central to forming the Labour Party, which talked of "socialism" but proposed reformist methods of achieving it.

### **Rise of the Labour Party**

Labour's election victory in 1935 coincided with economic recovery, allowing considerable improvements to be made in New Zealand's social welfare system.

Labour also introduced compulsory unionism. No longer did workers have to fight for the closed shop. Union membership jumped from 81,000 in 1935 to 250,000 in 1939, and a new Federation of Labour (FoL) was established. At the same time the powers of the state in union affairs were greatly increased, such as the provision for deregistration of unions passed in 1939.



Brave upholder of the law stops mad Red Fed strikers from plunging the working class into an abyss of Anarchy and Chaos. This Free Lance cartoon from 15 November 1913 is an example of the propaganda used to this day by capitalism's rulers against mass revolts by workers.



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Compulsory unionism had the bad effect of creating paper unions dominated by a few reformist leaders and with little rank-and-file participation. A powerful group of class collaborationist officials headed by Fintan Patrick Walsh came into existence. They co-operated closely with government economic policies.

By 1949 the Labour Party had turned full circle. The same men who had led the Red Feds smashed the Carpenters Union with the scab-herding methods Massey had used in 1913.

The first Labour government of 1935-49 played exactly the same role as the Liberal government of the 1890s. They moderated the worst excesses of capitalist dictatorship while binding the working class to the capitalist system and allowing big business to flourish all the more.

After the Second World War finished in 1945 there was a further wave of working class militancy. The Communist Party reached the zenith of its influence and membership.

But in 1950 the union movement made a tragic mistake by splitting between the moderate FoL and the newly-formed militant Trade Union Congress (TUC).

When Holland's National government picked a fight with watersiders in 1951, FoL leaders treacherously supported the government. Locked-out and striking TUC unions were isolated, going down to defeat after an epic struggle lasting 151 days.

Unions didn't recover until 1968 when the Nil Wage Order of the



Left-wing unionists organise separately from the moderates: Trade Union Congress march in Auckland, 28 June 1950

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Arbitration Court provoked a big and victorious outbreak of class struggle.

### **Two repressive law makers**

In recent years successive National and Labour governments have taken turns limiting workers' freedom to strike.

Under the Kirk Labour government, injunctions against the Drivers Union were issued in 1975. This was one of the first major uses of injunctions in industrial disputes.

The Lange Labour government intensified anti-worker legislation with the 1987 Labour Relations Act, making injunctions against workers and their unions a powerful weapon in the bosses' hands and allowing employers to bring huge damages claims, as in Tory-ruled Britain.

This legislation was the forerunner to National's 1991 Employment Contracts Act (ECA) which wrote unions out of industrial law and banned most strikes.

Countless tens of thousands of workers from all sectors marched in protest against National's union-busting law. There were many calls for a general strike to smash the ECA. It was a close run thing, but top-level union treachery finally stopped a general strike from happening. Communist Party members were physically prevented from putting general strike resolutions at mass meetings.

At a conference of the Council of Trade Unions (CTU), president Ken Douglas successfully manouvered to deflect the majority unionist wish for general strike action. A grateful capitalist state later rewarded Douglas with their highest honour – the Order of New Zealand.

### **Workplace Relations Bill**

During 1997 top union officials drafted their alternative to National's ECA, called the Workplace Relations Bill (WRB). The WRB proposed restoring the right of union entry to jobsites and the right to strike over multi-employer contracts. But all National's restrictions and penalties for solidarity strikes and political strikes remained in the WRB, in exactly the same wording as the ECA.

At the 1997 CTU conference, delegates were handed elaborate folders about how to promote the WRB – a document none had been allowed to see.

Writing one year on in Socialist Worker's internal bulletin, I observed:

*When Labour is elected to the Treasury benches – as seems very likely – they are sure to pass a version of the CTU's scab Workplace Relations Bill. Although the Alliance have made a few feeble noises of dissent about the WRB the record shows that they don't think it's a big issue and they are not into public attacks on it, let alone trying to rouse mass workers' opposition to the bill. Although some union*

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*leftists had negative things to say about the bill last year, they seem to have mostly caved in to pressure from the union right and now go along with the WRB for the sake of “unity”. Almost all union officials have either lied about the meaning of the WRB, or kept silent about it, so the chance of the mass of rank-and-file workers to oppose it has been almost nil – because they’ve been kept in a state of enforced ignorance on the matter. The news media, as might be expected, have been uncritical of the WRB. This is a shocking situation for the working class in Aotearoa. Because of a bureaucratic conspiracy of dishonesty, cowardice and expediency, workers face the danger of having the penalties of the old ECA enshrined in law – as “the bill that the unions asked for themselves”.*

Aware of opposition to this sellout, union officials were half-hearted about pushing the WRB. The fancy promotion kits lay unopened in union offices. Eventually the WRB was quietly forgotten, to be superseded by a Labour-CTU creation called the Employment Relations Act (ERA).

### **Socialist resistance to the ERA**

When passed by Labour in 2000, the ERA restored the right of union entry to jobsites and the right to strike over multi-employer agreements, but left the rest of National’s ECA essentially intact.

Labour got away with it through the help of top union leaders. They didn’t show the whole ERA to their members before it was passed. The best they offered were “summaries”, none of which pointed out the retention of ECA strike bans and penalties.

Instead of organising against the ERA’s anti-strike provisions, union leaders pressed form letters on their members inviting them to endorse, sight unseen, the “fair and balanced” legislation of what they called the “new era”.

A strenuous campaign against Labour’s anti-strike legislation was mounted by Socialist Worker, but the group was too small and unconnected to the union movement to rouse enough support to kill the bill. Most top union officials found our campaign little more than an irritating nuisance.

But when too many of their members started listening, they took action. The 1999 CTU conference workshop on industrial relations backed the freedom to strike by a large majority. CTU secretary Angela Foulkes stopped the idea becoming conference policy by refusing to put it to the vote.

In the Service & Food Workers Union (SFWU), Socialist Worker caused bureaucrats some anxious moments by getting freedom to strike resolutions passed in all three of their regional delegates’ conferences. Following those resolutions, SFWU secretary Darien Fenton summoned me, as a prominent member of Socialist Worker and the SFWU, to a meeting with herself and organiser Don Swan. They unsuccessfully sought my agreement that complete freedom to strike was not reasonable – for instance, “what about ambulance

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drivers?”. Finally they asked if it would make me happy if the CTU sought the right to strike over “social and political issues”. I said that would be a start. A couple of days later, this request was put by the CTU to minister of labour Margaret Wilson, who rejected it, and that was the end of that.

Socialist Worker also succeeded in getting many union officials to sign a petition demanding workers’ freedom to strike – including members of the CTU executive. But having made gestures in the direction of union principles, top union leaders proceeded with business as usual. No leftist official made any real attempt to rouse union members in support of the freedom to strike.

### **Effects of Labour’s strike-breaking ERA**

At his first Wellington union meeting as CTU president, Ross Wilson said “getting the legal right to strike around social and political issues is impossible” and “the chance of getting that right from a Labour-Alliance government is totally nil”. He also stated: “If you have a mass movement on an issue, and resort to civil disobedience, then the legal right to strike doesn’t matter”.

Months later, with legal pressure on railway workers to stop their picket in support of the Kinleith strike, no union official defied the law. Nor did the CTU president make any call for civil disobedience.

At the 2001 Wellington May Day rally, Wilson spoke in praise of the ERA. At the same time, elsewhere in the country, Carter Holt Harvey was using ERA provisions to break a struggle by the Waterside Workers Union against casualisation. Socialist Worker’s paper noted:

*This dispute is the first big test of the ERA, and from a workers’ point of view it has failed completely... The ERA’s provisions against pickets and solidarity strikes leave workers powerless. Watersiders can’t win if they abide by the ERA. But they can’t beat the ERA without a massive campaign of illegal solidarity actions from other workers.*

Today in Aotearoa, under Labour, workers can be fined and imprisoned for illegal strikes. These are some of the harshest industrial penalties in the Western world. Our freedom to strike remains to be won.

**In May 2000 the Labour government called for responses to its proposed Employment Relations law. In opposition to the legislation’s complicated anti-strike clauses, Socialist Worker made a Freedom to Strike submission which called for the law to simply state: “Participation in any strike shall be lawful.” Our submission was, of course, ignored by Labour’s politicians.**

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## 1934 Minneapolis Teamster Rebellion

A truckers' strike in Minneapolis during 1934 changed the course of US history. Workers made desperate by the Great Depression and their city's violently anti-union rulers became fused with the Communist League. This small Trotskyist group was active in Local 574, a Teamsters Union branch in Minneapolis. The result was one of the best organised and most militant strikes ever seen by the world. Local 574's stunning victory galvanised America's labour movement, leading towards mass strikes and union drives which tore major concessions from corporate bosses and politicians. **FARRELL DOBBS**, a Trotskyist strike leader, tells their inspiring story in *Teamster Rebellion*. Sections of his book follow, with slight alterations to make it more understandable to readers today.

### 'Nothing moved without union permission'

Local 574's combat leaders, acting through the organising committee, had no illusions about the gravity of the impending conflict. They were fully aware that Minneapolis bosses would try to smash the strike.

If the Teamsters Union was to win, a tremendous battle would be necessary. Under the pressures of such a fierce struggle, manoeuvres detrimental to the union could be expected from the US administration's Labor Board and from state governor Floyd Olson, a reformist politician elected on a Farmer-Labor Party ticket.

We could also anticipate weakness on the part of the city's American Federation of Labour (AFL) officialdom, which was bound to be squeamish about physical combat and prone to urge the workers to rely completely on Olson.

In the last analysis the outcome of the strike would hinge on the fighting capacity of the union ranks. Seeking to impart this understanding to the membership, the combat leaders

prepared to teach the workers the ins and outs of fighting for their rights. This circumstance made the strike quite exceptional. Fighting spirit in the ranks was usually restrained and dampened by the AFL officials, while in this case a militant struggle was being organised by what had become the key section of the top union leadership.

Seldom anywhere, in fact, had there been such a well-prepared strike. When the sun rose on 16 May 1934, the strike headquarters was a beehive of activity. Union carpenters and plumbers were installing gas stoves, sinks and serving counters in the commissary. The Cooks & Waiters Union sent experts on mass cooking and serving to help organise things and train the volunteer help.

Working in two 12-hour shifts, over 100 volunteers served 4,000 to 5,000 people daily. Sandwiches and coffee were always available and a hot meal was served whenever the commissary's resources and the circumstances of the strike permit-

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ted. In addition, arrangements were made so that key personnel could sleep in or near the headquarters for the duration.

Committees were set up to promote material aid. They solicited friendly grocers for necessities to be used in the commissary and to help out the needy families of strikers. Similar donations were also received from sympathetic farmers.

The committees fought city hall to get public relief for union members, and the facts of life were explained to landlords who pressed the workers for rent payments. Money donations from other unions helped to stock the commissary, as well as to buy gasoline for the cruising picket squads and medical supplies for the union's emergency hospital. Even governor Olson contributed \$500 to Local 574.

The union's medical staff included Dr McCrimmon and two interns from the University of Minnesota hospital who volunteered their services during their off hours. Three trained nurses headed up a larger volunteer staff that provided such efficient care that, despite the many open wounds treated, not one bad infection developed. To avoid air pollution in the hospital and commissary, picket cars were pushed into and out of the headquarters.

About a score of skilled auto mechanics had turned to, bringing their tools with them, to keep the strikers' cars in working order. The former tool crib and supply room in the building was turned into a general office where volunteers did the typing and mimeographing and signed up new members pouring into the union.

An organised guard was main-

tained in and around the headquarters to watch for police intrusions, prevent drinking, cool down temper flareups and keep order. Except at critical times, when everyone worked to the point of exhaustion, the various assignments were rotated.

Special attention was given to keeping the workers informed about the strike's progress and helping them to answer lies peddled by the bosses. Each evening a general assembly was held at the headquarters for this purpose. Reports were made by the strike leaders, guest speakers were invited from other unions to help morale through expressions of solidarity, and some form of entertainment usually followed. A loudspeaker system was installed so that packed meetings could hear what was said, as could the overflow crowds outside, which often numbered two to three thousand.

There were also regular meetings of the strike committee of seventy-five, who had been elected by the union membership. This body, which made the general decisions about strike policy, had in turn designated a small sub-committee to handle complaints. Most of the complaints had to do with requests from small bosses who asked for special permission to operate their trucks. Usually the requests were unjustified and were automatically turned down, but having a special committee to handle these matters saved unnecessary wear and tear on the picket commanders.

Another sub-committee was charged with arranging legal assistance for picketers arrested during the strike. The first lawyer obtained proved to be a shyster whose method was to make a deal with the public

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prosecutor. In return for dismissal of cases against a few picketers he would plead a larger number guilty. He did that just once and the union fired him. We didn't expect our lawyer to win every case, but at least we wanted him to fight for us. The union committee went in search of one who would.

Picket dispatching was assigned to Ray Dunne and me. This was Ray's first official function in Local 574, although he had headed the Communist League group in the union from the start of the organising drive in coal. Previously he had been handicapped by loss of his coal job which stripped him of a formal basis for union membership. However, he was able to step forward as a volunteer supporter of the strike, along with hundreds of other individual workers. Many in the strike committee were aware of his impressive trade union credentials, and he was given an important assignment accordingly.

Working beside Ray impressed upon me the experience and education one gains through membership in a revolutionary socialist party. He knew a lot about conducting a strike, and he taught me a lot about the team concept in leadership. Ray was a superb combat leader with a clear sense of purpose, backed up by strong willpower and the ability to keep a cool head in critical situations. He not only taught by the example he set, never shirking either hazardous or minor tasks, he also gave others leeway for initiative, seeking only to safeguard against serious blunders. Never a dabbler at anything he did, Ray tried to find some role for everyone who wanted to help. "Don't write people off lightly," he often said. "It's

not the mark of an organiser."

As dispatchers, Ray and I were in charge of all picketing assignments and it was our responsibility to direct tactical operations. We had a special staff at our disposal to handle the telephones and operate a shortwave radio used to monitor police calls. Teenage volunteers with motorcycles were organised into an efficient courier service. Scooting around the city under strict orders to stay out of the fighting, they served as the eyes and ears of the picket dispatchers and as a swift means of contact with picket captains.

So many cars and individually owned trucks were volunteered that we had more than enough to achieve the high degree of mobility required in the strike. Trucks were used to transport stationary picket squads and their relief shifts to truck terminals, the market area, warehouses and other places where trucks normally operated. Picket crews also kept a vigil at points where the main highways crossed the city limits.

Cruising squads in autos were assigned, district by district, to sweep through the streets on the lookout for scab trucking operations. A captain was designated for each of these squads and for each detachment of stationary pickets. At all times a reserve force with the necessary transportation was kept on hand at the strike headquarters.

In situations where large forces were involved, a field commander was appointed and a command post set up to co-ordinate activities and keep in touch with the headquarters.

Special cruising squads with hand-picked crews were constantly at the disposal of the picket dispatchers.

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They were captained by qualified leaders who carried credentials authorising them to supersede all other authority in the field. These squads were used for special assignments on their own, and they were sent into tense situations to marshal the union forces and lead the fight.

Assembling the mass forces for such extensive picketing proved to be no problem at all. As soon as the strike was called, new members poured into Local 574 from all sections of the trucking industry. In no time at all the union almost doubled its mid-April strength, reaching a figure of nearly 6,000.

The union's approach to the unemployed workers brought spectacular results. Hundreds upon hundreds of jobless poured into the strike headquarters, volunteering their services, and they fought like tigers in the battles that followed.

Unorganised workers from other industries came forward. Together with women and men from other unions, they came to the strike headquarters at the end of their day's work, ready to help in whatever way they could. Deep in the night they would finally stretch out wherever they found a place to get a little sleep before returning to their jobs.

A significant number of college students pitched in to help the union. All in all, picketers were on hand by the thousands.

A majority of the city's population proved sympathetic to the strike and soon a spontaneous intelligence service was in operation. People telephoned reports of scab activities, and other information was mailed in anonymously, often with the postage having been paid by some unknown employer. Typists, even personal

secretaries, slipped in an extra carbon to make a copy for the union when a boss dictated something they felt the strikers should know about. Material arrived that had obviously been salvaged from wastebaskets, some of it coming from the offices of the Citizens Alliance, the bosses' central strike-breaking organisation.

As matters now stood, the union had its strategy worked out, the necessary forces had been mobilised and picketing operations were planned with military precision. The next step was to begin the big push against the employers. Trucking operations had to remain tied up, despite all attempts to use scabs working under police protection, until the employers agreed to deal with the union.

At the outset the coal heavers were about the only ones who had experience in Local 574's picketing techniques – in fact, many of the picketers had little or no previous experience at all. Whenever they found a truck on the streets they escorted it to the strike headquarters. Soon the surrounding area was crowded with a motley assemblage of vehicles loaded with milk, coal, tobacco, team and coffee, pigs, cattle and diverse other things, including a few loads of hay.

Policy briefings of the green picketers soon corrected this and thereafter when doubt arose about what to do in a given situation they communicated with headquarters instead of bringing the rig in. Farmers caught in the dragnet were especially indignant, but with the help of the Farmers Holiday Association the union worked out a policy agreeable to them, except in the case of the market gardeners with whom we were to have some difficulties.



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For a couple of days there was trouble with a few filling stations that tried to operate. They attempted to play a cat-and-mouse game with picketers, closing down and then re-opening, until the special cruising squads stepped in and definitively settled the matter.

While all this was going on, talk about joining Local 574 spread rapidly among fleet drivers at the Yellow Cab Company. When the employer got wind of it he tried to set up a company union and the drivers reacted angrily. On the second day of Local 574's walkout they sent a delegation to the strike committee asking that they be allowed to take a hand in the fight being waged by truck drivers and other workers.

Despite the existence of a miniscule local union of individual cab owners and their relief drivers, the strike committee agreed to sign up the Yellow Cab drivers. Cruising squads were sent out to notify all taxi drivers of a meeting at strike headquarters that night. Upon coming together they voted to go on strike, and within hours not a cab was to be found in operation.

As this episode graphically demonstrated, Local 574 had become a power to be reckoned with. Its effective picketing activities had become stabilised. Nothing moved on wheels without the union's permission.

The scope and power of the strike had taken the trucking bosses and the Citizens Alliance leaders by surprise. While figuring out what to do, they had simply kept their trucks off the streets and the union had held sway with little opposition. Now, however, the workers were about to get a taste of the measures the capitalists resort to in a showdown – repressive force

and violence.

The capitalist press stepped up its attacks on the union, twisting and distorting the facts about the strike. Proclaiming their intention to “keep the streets open”, the bosses recruited scab drivers and thugs. At the command of the Citizens Alliance, the cops jumped into action against the union. The court records showed only 18 arrests during the first two days of the strike. On the third and fourth days, by contrast, 151 picketers were hauled into court. Fines of as much as fifty dollars were levied against them and 17 got workhouse sentences of from ten to 45 days.

On 18 May 1934, a “citizens rally” of the employing class was held at which a “law and order” committee was chosen. As reported in a Citizens Alliance bulletin obtained by the union, the committee was set up to organise special deputies, acting in consultation with the sheriff and police chief. A special headquarters for the deputies was rented and equipped with a commissary and hospital, emulating the arrangements at the union's strike headquarters.

In their first attempt to break the picket lines, the Citizens Alliance strategists resorted to a flank attack, using a peculiarity about the city market which had not received sufficient attention from the union. Small produce farmers rented stalls in the market area where they put their veges and fruit on display and corner grocers came to buy them. Since chain stores were not yet crowding out the little grocers, trade of this kind was quite brisk.

These farmers belonged to the Market Gardeners Association which had no connection with the Farmers Holiday movement. The

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union had made no direct arrangement with them and, as a result, they were unintentionally hurt by the strike. Aware that the market gardeners were quite upset about it, the Citizens Alliance strategists sought to use them as a front for a strikebreaking attack on the union.

Reports were published in the capitalist press that the “market gardeners have organised against the strike”. A convoy of farmers’ trucks was started towards the market, escorted by about 70 sheriff’s deputies. They were soon intercepted by cruising picket squads and an hour-long running battle followed along the route toward the market. Caught in the middle of a fight between the picketers and deputies, most of the farmers turned around and went home. Only three trucks got through to the market.

After this experience the union assured the Market Gardeners Association safe conduct to peddle their produce directly to small grocers throughout the town. In this roundabout way they could do business without injuring the strike and the union could keep the market closed without hurting them. The produce farmers accepted the proposal and became neutral, some even friendly, toward the strike.

Having failed in their attempt to use the farmers against the strike, the bosses came out in the open in their attack on the union. Scabs were used on the morning of Saturday 19 May to load two trucks at the Bearman Fruit Company in the market under the protection of a big gang of cops and hired thugs wielding clubs and blackjacks.

Union cruising squads were sent to reinforce the picket line and in the

ensuing battle the barehanded strikers used whatever means they could hastily find to defend themselves. A number of the picketers were badly injured, as were a few of the cops and thugs.

A written account of the fight was later given to me by one of the picket captains, Jack Maloney:

*We had quite a beef, several of us were clubbed by the police. I, for one, was dragged into Bearman’s unconscious... I was bleeding quite heavily from the head and... the cops took me out and when they let go of me at the wagon I fell down. In the ensuing melee the picketers picked me up... I was taken to the General Hospital, as were some of the other picketers. After the doctors had patched up my head I was placed in a room, waiting to go to jail. The business agent of the steamfitters union came to where I was sitting and said to the woman at the desk, “I will take this man.” We walked out into the hallway and he said, “Get the hell out of here quick.”*

Jack’s experience shows how hospitals are used against strikers. When an injured picketer is brought in they notify the police and co-operate in holding the victim for arrest. That is one reason why the union had its own hospital at strike headquarters. Whenever possible our wounded were brought there for medical care. They were taken to regular hospitals only when necessary for treatment of serious injuries. By the time Saturday’s events were over,

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every picketer understood the need for this policy and thereafter it was scrupulously followed.

In the evening of that day a deadly trap was sprung on the union. It had been set in what was called Newspaper Alley at the loading docks of the two main dailies which were housed in neighbouring buildings. Reports began to reach strike headquarters about preparations to deliver bundles of newspapers under strong police protection. As picket dispatchers, Ray and I were feeling out the situation, not wanting a repetition of the morning's experience at Bearman Fruit.

Then an agent provocateur got on the loudspeaker and asked for two or three truckloads of picketers, calling for women to pile into the trucks with the men. Up to then he had worked hard and loyally in the strike, ingratiating himself to a point where he was fully trusted. Pretending to be relaying orders from the dispatchers he sent the picketers to Newspaper Alley. It was an ambush in which they were beaten viciously by police clubs and by saps in the hands of the hired thugs.

Soon the picket trucks were back, carrying bleeding victims who were rushed into the hospital at strike headquarters. Some with broken bones, five of them women, had to be sent to a regular hospital for more complete care. A search of the provocateur and his car produced membership cards in various unions and Farmer-Labour Party clubs along with a Burns Detective Agency badge and credentials.

As word of the vicious attack got around, sympathetic chemists donated medical supplies to the union. Shocked doctors and nurses in

the regular hospitals began to help spirit picketers away after they had been treated so that the cops couldn't grab them.

Shortly after the Newspaper Alley victims had been brought in, two city police barged into the strike headquarters claiming that the picketers had kidnapped a scab driver. If he wasn't handed over, they threatened, the strike leaders would be arrested and, clubs at the ready, they started for the picket dispatcher's office. All the pentup wrath against police brutality was vented on them. Within minutes they lay unconscious in front of the headquarters where they stayed until an ambulance came for them in response to a call put in by the union.

In its Saturday evening edition, the Minneapolis Journal said, "Fierce rioting broke out Saturday as 425 special officers went into action to break the Truck Drivers strike." A common trick of the capitalist press is illustrated here. With a simple wiggle of the editor's pencil, criminal police assaults on peaceful picketers are transformed into "fierce rioting" by the victims. Also to be noted is the flat statement of the intention "to break the Truck Drivers strike".

The Sunday morning papers dealt with the strike in a similar vein, claiming that hundreds were volunteering as special police. All day long, late into the evening, radio broadcasts continued the scare campaign started by the newspapers. By the day's end, over 2,000 deputies were reported mobilised.

In reality, according to official reports obtained later by the union, only 544 deputies were enrolled as of Monday, mainly among such types as businessmen, professionals

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and salesmen, with a few workers being suckered in. These facts, of course, did not deter the authors of the published reports, which were deliberately exaggerated in order to throw fright into the strikers by making them believe that the whole town was mobilising against them.

Contrary to the bosses' hopes and expectations, the strikers were not exactly paralysed with fear at the prospect of facing an army of cops and deputies. Instead they began to show the positive side of the workers' illusions about capitalist democracy.

The negative side of their beliefs lies in the assumption that they have inviolable democratic rights under capitalist rule. It is a mistaken assumption that can remain intact only until they try to exercise such rights in the class struggle. When that happens the workers learn that they have been the victims of an illusion. Yet they still feel entitled to the rights involved and they will fight all the harder to make them a reality. A negative misconception then becomes transformed into a positive aspiration, as was about to happen in Minneapolis.

Up to now the workers had gone about their activities bare-handed. But they found that attempts to exercise their right to peacefully picket were being repressed with police clubs and blackjacks. They decided to take steps to enforce their democratic right to prevent scabs from grabbing their jobs.

It would have been a tactical blunder for members of an isolated vanguard to attempt measures such as the strikers were about to take. They would only get themselves clobbered by the police. In this case, however,

the means used in self-defence had their origin in a spontaneous mass mood that had been generated by capitalist repression. Since these measures were appropriately limited in the given situation to matching the police club for club, the tactics employed were completely valid.

All day Sunday the strikers equipped themselves for battle. Baseball bats appeared. Garden hoses were cut into short lengths, lead washers were tamped into the hollow and the ends closed with friction tape to make an improvised sap. Volunteers from the Carpenters Union sawed two-by-twos into club lengths. A sympathiser came to the strike headquarters pulling a child's coaster wagon loaded with bannister posts taken from the stairway at home, his wife steadying the load.

To make improvised helmets, heavy cardboard was stuffed inside the sweatband of hats. A fellow striker would be asked to test it out with a club, and if the result was negative, more cardboard would be added.

In the fighting that was to follow a division of labour was made. Men did the picketing where combat was involved while the women helped the strike in a whole series of ways. Most of the headquarter's functions were taken over by women. They picketed the newspaper buildings to denounce the boss press for its lies about the strike. Protest actions were conducted by them at City Hall. And they went to other unions soliciting support.

Before long, delegation after delegation from other unions began appearing at the strike headquarters asking what they could do to help. Jack Maloney gave a description that reflects the general mood in Local

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574's army:

*To me at least (and I was very young, twenty-two), the employers were ready and determined to kill if needed to maintain their control. I was determined to make them prove it and so it was with so many men at that time. They knew what to expect on Monday or the next day and they were ready to "go for broke". At Bearman's the pickets had a sample of what to expect. The cops won that battle but on Monday the pickets gave their receipt for Saturday.*

In the Monday confrontation, two organised and disciplined forces were to face each other, club against club, in a battle fought along military lines.

We didn't know how many different attempts the bosses would make to begin moving trucks on Monday, but a major effort could be expected in the market district. Perishable foods were handled there, and this gave the Citizens Alliance propaganda cover for a strikebreaking attack. In fact, the union was receiving tips from friendly sources about plans to open the market houses on Monday. Since, from the union's viewpoint, the market was a good battleground, we were not disturbed by the news. We simply concentrated on preparations for a fight there.

A coffee station for cruising pickets had been set up in the AFL building situated right at the edge of the market district. An unusual coming and going of picketers at this place began early Sunday evening. On the surface it seemed to reflect

increased cruising squad activity, but of each carload of five or six who entered the building only two or three came back out. In this surreptitious manner about 600 men had been concentrated in the AFL hall before morning, all armed with clubs.

Around 4am Monday small picket lines appeared in front of the market houses. Larger numbers of picketers, their union buttons temporarily concealed, fanned out in strategic positions around the district. An example of their ingenuity was shown by Steve Glaser, a short, stocky warehouseman who walked on a stiff leg. He looked quite harmless before the fight started. Then he jerked a big club out of his pants leg and moved around with great agility.

In addition to these forces a reserve of some 900 was kept at the strike headquarters ready to move at a moment's notice. All in all, the union had a strong army deployed for battle and it had been done in a way that would give the cops some surprises.

Several hundred uniformed cops were on hand in the market, along with comparable numbers of special deputies. The cops were on the prod, feeling cocky after their Saturday exploits. Among the deputies was a wealthy playboy garbed in a polo hat. Like the rest of his ilk, he anticipated having a bit of a lark as he went about the business of clubbing down working class sheep.

About 9am scab drivers backed six trucks up to the loading dock at the Gamble Robinson Company. Large numbers of picketers quickly gathered there and, as a loaded truck started to move out, a cop slugged a striker. The union men charged in and the fight was on.

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With the cops deployed on the assumption that they knew the union's strength, the 600 picketers waiting at the AFL hall were ordered into battle and they moved out in military formation. Fighting soon spread to three or four other market houses where preparations were being made to open for business. Cops and deputies alike were falling, amid cheers from among the many bystanders, some of whom pitched in to help the strikers.

With the workers challenging them, club against club, most of the deputies took to their heels, leaving the uniformed cops on their own. More police were rushed in from posts in the main business district. The union quickly countered this move by summoning hundreds of reserves from the strike headquarters.

In an act of desperation, the cops drew their guns, threatening to shoot. But they seemed hesitant to resort to such extreme measures, and that gave us a little time to do something about it. As matters stood they were pretty well bunched up with an open field of fire against the strikers. To solve the problem they had to be scattered among the picketers. The remaining reserves at strike headquarters were loaded into trucks, the lead truck driven by Bob Bell, a huge man and utterly fearless. He was told to rush to the markets, ignoring all traffic rules, and to drive right into the midst of the cops. Bob did just that. The picketers jumped out of the truck onto the cops who, being unable to shoot without hitting one another, had to continue fighting with clubs. After that, police chief Mike Johannes decided to call it a day.



Strikers and supporters meet cops and specials baton to baton in Minneapolis marketplace, May 1934. The union side won.

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No less than 30 uniformed cops and a number of deputies had to be hospitalised. Union wounded were taken to strike headquarters where all were taken care of, except for a few with broken bones who needed regular hospital treatment. Despite our casualties we were in a favourable position. In a three-hour slugfest the union had fought the trained police to a draw, and not a single truck had been moved.

As warfare raged in the market, 700 members of the women's auxiliary marched on city hall. Crowds gathered on the sidewalks to watch them pass with their Local 574 banner at the head of the column and many onlookers joined the procession. When they got to city hall their way was barred by nervous cops with guns. Finally, a small delegation was allowed to go in to present their demands upon mayor A.G. Bainbridge. Meanwhile the rest of the women carried on a protest demonstration outside the building.

Bainbridge refused to see the delegation but the evening papers reported their demands: that the mayor fire police chief Johannes, withdraw all deputies and stop interfering with the pickets.

Trade unionists throughout the city were enraged about the police brutality and they were stimulated by Local 574's heroic fight. This led to a highly unusual course of action in the building trades. Demands to call a strike arose in the ranks, this time not in their narrow craft interests, but in solidarity with the embattled truck drivers. The pressure became so great that officials of the Building Trades Councils recommended a sympathy strike. Craft by craft, the building trade unions voted to

call a holiday for the duration of the drivers' walkout.

One of these unions, the Electrical Workers, marched in a body to strike headquarters and put themselves at the disposal of Local 574's strike committee. This action had been inspired by two members of the union, Oscar Coover and Chester Johnson, both of whom also belonged to the Communist League.

Although sympathy strikes were more or less limited to the building trades, financial and moral support for Local 574 was voted by the executive board of the AFL Central Labor Union.

Early Monday afternoon, police chief Johannes ordered the whole police force on 24-hour duty, and he asked the American Legion to provide 1,500 deputies.

The "Citizens Committee for Law & Order" rushed a request to businessmen for help in recruiting deputies "personally known to you for their integrity". The written request stated: "Every citizen of this type possible must be deputised either as a special police officer or deputy sheriff." Having been frustrated in its first major strikebreaking attempt, the Citizens Alliance was desperately looking for more police muscle, still confident that the union could be beaten into submission.

Tuesday morning the market district was filled with people. Spectators came by the thousands, packing the sidewalks and peering from the windows and roofs of buildings, hoping to see a repetition of Monday's fighting. A local radio station had portable equipment on the scene with an announcer ready to broadcast a blow-by-blow account of the day's happenings.

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Local 574 was there in force, supported by many volunteer picketers from other unions. During the night the battleground had been studied to determine the best strategic placement of the union forces. Little more than that could be done, however, concerning overall guidance of the fighting because of the large numbers of people present. The union cause would have to rest entirely on the readiness of the strikers to give battle and the ability of their picket captains to lead them. There proved to be no cause for concern on either count.

Most of the city's uniformed cops were present as well as several hundred deputies. Some of the deputies had got a bellyful on Monday and failed to show up again, but these were replaced by new ones who had been recruited overnight. Since the deputies had run away the day before, uniformed cops had now been put in charge of each contingent in an effort to make them stand and fight. All told, the repressive force numbered over 1,500.

The morning paper had announced that the produce houses were going to move perishables, and a few scabs surrounded by cops started to load a truck. Unlike Monday's events, however, they didn't get to the point of trying to move the rig. Tension was so thick that one could almost touch it in the air and anything could trigger the pending battle. Suddenly the sound of smashing glass was heard, as someone threw a produce crate through a window, and before the echo died away a free-for-all had started.

The picketers charged the deputies first and soon noticed that many uniformed cops were tending to hang

back. Obviously these cops resented being deserted by the deputies on Monday, and they didn't seem to relish another clubbing match.

Sensing this mood among some of the cops, the picketers continued to concentrate mainly on the deputies. Soon even the bystanders were getting in licks in support of the strikers. Finding themselves mousetrapped, many deputies dropped their clubs and ripped off their badges, trying with little success to seek anonymity in the hostile crowd.

By this time the picketers were also zeroing in on uniformed cops who had got into the thick of the fight. The scene of battle spread as cops and deputies alike were driven from the market. The deputies were chased back to their headquarters, the strikers mopping up stragglers along the way.

In less than an hour after the battle started there wasn't a cop to be seen in the market, and picketers were directing traffic in the now peaceful district. For good measure all police were run out of the vicinity of the strike headquarters and they were kept away for the duration of the walkout.

Injuries in the fighting were heavy on both sides and two special deputies were killed, one of them a member of the board of directors of the Citizens Alliance.

While the struggle was going on in the market, a telegram came from Teamsters president Daniel Tobin ordering the union to seek arbitration on the dispute.

Considerable nervousness had developed in the upper echelons of the local AFL officialdom about the course the strike was taking. So they decided to make a bid for a truce



in the fighting and try to bring the situation under governor Olson's control. Toward noon on Tuesday a joint committee from the AFL Central Labor Union, Building Trades Council and Teamsters Joint Council called on police chief Johannes, asking him to call off the cops and stop trying to move trucks. He took the committee to see sheriff John Wall, and there it was agreed to call in the governor.

Olson soon arrived, bringing along general E.A. Walsh, commander of the National Guard. Representatives of Local 574 and the trucking employers were then brought into the discussion.

The meeting was told that the government's Labor Board was readying a proposal for settlement of the strike, and after some argument a 24-hour truce was agreed upon.

It provided for suspension of truck traffic and the complete closing of the market place. In return, Local 574 agreed to suspend picketing except for observers to see that the truce was carried out. Representatives of the bosses and Local 574 signed the truce.

Before the truce period had ended, Johannes announced that trucks would be moved under police protection. Local 574 quickly responded with a statement that picketing would be restarted. Mayor Bainbridge then called on Olson to mobilise the National Guard and the governor promptly did so, asking at the same time for a 24-hour extension of the truce. Local 574 denounced the calling up of the Guard as an act of intimidation and demanded that it be demobilised.

Olson was told that extension of the truce would be acceptable to the union only if there was a continued ban on all truck traffic by the struck firms. The governor decided to keep the troops off the streets, the initial terms of the truce were extended and a basis was established for some form of contract negotiations to begin.

Due to a regional peculiarity within a nation under firm capitalist rule, a local condition approximating dual power had temporarily arisen. The authorities could exercise control over the class struggle then raging only if they proceeded in a manner acceptable to Local 574 and its allies.

A combination of factors had brought about this situation. Being fearful about relying on Olson to get their strikebreaking done, the bosses had decided to depend on the local police apparatus, which was controlled by old-line capitalist politicians.

UNITE  
LABOR  
ACTION

## THE ORGANIZER

PUBLISHED WEEKLY  
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SMASH THE  
CITIZENS  
ALLIANCE

# VICTORY!

## Settlement Goes Through!

The strike against the Minneapolis Trucking Co. has been a complete success. The settlement has been reached and the trucks are back on the streets. The workers have won their fight for a 24-hour truce and the settlement of the strike. The workers have shown their strength and their determination to win. The settlement is a great victory for the workers and a great defeat for the bosses. The workers have shown that they are not to be intimidated and that they will stand up for their rights. The settlement is a great victory for the workers and a great defeat for the bosses. The workers have shown that they are not to be intimidated and that they will stand up for their rights.



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Vote for 574 in the Elections  
Make Minneapolis a Union Town

This daily strike paper was a key element in the Teamsters' victory

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However, the cops proved incapable of doing the dirty job so the mayor then tried to put Olson on the spot by demanding help from the National Guard.

This demand could not be met by the governor without raising a danger to him from another quarter. If he ordered the troops into naked strikebreaking action, it would jeopardise vital political support that he enjoyed from the labour movement. Olson was sharply reminded of the political threat from this quarter when Local 574 promptly denounced his action in calling up the Guard and demanded that it be demobilised. He decided to back away from any idea of using the troops and this kept things at a standoff in local class relations.

If a comparable situation had existed nationally, what began as a simple trade union action could have broadened into a sweeping social conflict leading toward a revolutionary confrontation for state power. As matters stood, however, the conflict did not reach beyond the city limits. On that narrow scale nothing more could be accomplished than to fight to a finish in the battle for union recognition.

Considering the existing conditions, a victory on that issue alone would be a matter of no small consequence. The oppressive open shop rule of the Citizens Alliance would be definitively broken, and the way could be opened to make Minneapolis a union town.

This perspective was advanced to the workers at a massive labour rally held on Wednesday evening, 23 May. Over 5,000 were on hand before the scheduled starting time and people kept coming by the hundreds. Those

present included women and men, young and old, employed and jobless, organised and unorganised. Together they made up a cross section of the working class. When the speaking programme began a hush fell over the throng, people straining to hear what the strike leaders had to say.

“If we don’t get full union recognition and an acceptable settlement,” branch president Bill Brown declared, “Local 574 will continue the strike and we will call upon all the workers to support us.” The huge audience roared its approval.

**Local 574 did continue the strike even after police gunned down picketers. Two unionists were shot dead and many others wounded. But the mass pickets remained strong, an influential daily strike paper was published and state pressure from governor Olson and the Labor Board was rebuffed. After three months the Minneapolis ruling class was humbled, and trucking bosses had to recognise the union and sign a breakthrough contract. The full story is told by Farrell Dobbs in Teamster Rebellion. Buy from Pathfinder Books ([www.pathfinderpress.com](http://www.pathfinderpress.com)). Or borrow from The Red Kiwi Library (email [Grantgcm@actrix.co.nz](mailto:Grantgcm@actrix.co.nz)).**

## **‘Create battle organisations or go under’**

by **BRONWEN BEECHEY**

At the dawn of 1905, Russia was in ferment. Dissatisfaction with the tsar’s feudal rule had been aggravated by Russia’s disastrous war against Japan the previous year.

On Sunday 9 January 1905 tens of thousands of workers led by a Russian Orthodox priest, Father Gapon, marched solemnly to the Winter Palace in the capital of St Petersburg to present a petition outlining their grievances. The marchers’ attitude towards the tsar (“little father” in Russian) was anything but insurrectionary. The petition read:

“We working men of St Petersburg, our wives and children, and our parents, helpless and aged men and women, have come to you, our ruler, in quest of justice and protection... We have no strength at all, O Sovereign. Our patience is at an end. We are approaching that terrible moment when death is better than the continuance of intolerable sufferings...”

The petition called for the election of a Constitutional Assembly based on universal suffrage, and ended: “Sire, do not refuse aid to thy



Factory workers in St Petersburg guard their street barricade, 1905

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people! Demolish the wall that separates Thee from Thy people. Order and promise that our requests will be granted, and Thou wilt make Russia happy.”

In response, the tsar ordered police to open fire on the unarmed and peaceful demonstration, killing one thousand and wounding many more before they even reached the palace.

The people’s reaction to “Bloody Sunday” was a wave of strikes, riots and protests that peaked in October 1905 with a general political strike in St Petersburg under the slogan “An eight hour day and arms!” The strike led to the establishment for 50 days of an elected city-wide strike committee called the Council of Workers’ Deputies (“Sovieta Rabochikh Deputatov” *in Russian*).

Moscow saw an unsuccessful insurrection in December by 2,000 armed and 4,000 unarmed workers organised by the city soviet. This body was led by Bolsheviks, a revolutionary party that until then had been regarded by mainstream liberal politicians as an irrelevant sect.

While the revolutionary upsurge began to ebb after these events, and was finally crushed in June 1907, the genie was out of the bottle. The lessons learned by the Russian workers during these two-and-a-half years of revolutionary struggle helped prepare them for a successful mass uprising against the tsar ten years later, in February 1917. Eight months later a Bolshevik-led workers’ revolution overthrew the capitalist government and ushered in the world’s first socialist state.

While the 1905 revolution built on previous uprisings, notably the 1871 Paris Commune, its unique feature was the decisive role played by the organised working class. The rapid expansion of capitalism in Europe in the years that followed the defeat of the Paris Commune paved the way for 1905 and the birth of a new form of revolutionary struggle.

Russia in 1905 experienced a strike movement without parallel in world history. In that one year there were 23 million strike days, eleven times more than the total number throughout the country over the decade before. And this in a country with a smaller industrial working class than America, Germany or France.

And for the first time, the mass political strike – as opposed to strikes in particular industries around economic issues – was a key element in the workers’ rebellion.

The international Marxist movement had largely been dismissive of mass strikes as a result of the struggle against anarchism during the late 19th century. Many anarchists rejected the need to engage in day-to-day political activity, believing that industrial agitation alone would lead to a general strike able to starve out the capitalists and lead to working class emancipation. As a result, many socialists dismissed the idea of mass strikes as an anarchist fantasy, sometimes actively opposing them

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as a threat to hard-won union organisation.

Then real-life events began to intervene in this theoretical dispute. In 1902, 450,000 Belgian workers launched a mass strike to win suffrage reform, and over the next two years Italy, Sweden, Luxemburg and Holland all experienced general strikes. This led socialists to a partial reassessment of the mass strike, but it was still seen as a subordinate tactic to defend workers' organisation or democratic rights which would be directed "from above" by union leaders.

However, the spontaneous strikes in 1905 Russia quickly grew into political strikes, organised by elected strike committees, and these workers' councils in turn became de facto provisional revolutionary governments. This happened in not just the big cities, but smaller industrial towns as well.

The first Soviet of Workers' Deputies sprang up in Ivanovo-Voznesensk, a new textile city with 70,000 workers which only a few years before had been a peasant town where chickens and pigs roamed the streets.

On 9 May 1905, the city's Bolshevik workers held a secret meeting in a nearby forest where they resolved to issue a call for a general strike. Three days later the textile hands, mainly women and children, walked off the job, soon joined by railway and metal workers. At a town rally, the strikers elected 151 of their most trusted comrades onto a centralised committee to direct the strike. The soviet had been born.

Over the days ahead, this new body set up strike, food and finance commissions. After the police shooting of workers on 3 June, the soviet also set up a workers' militia to protect strike leaders and workers' meetings and prevent scabs from entering workplaces.

From the beginning, the workers' council operated as a revolutionary government, ignoring or countering the orders of the tsar's provincial governor. It ordered factory owners to continue paying wages to strikers and forbade their eviction from factory living quarters. It made merchants give food to strikers, later setting up a food co-operative. It also closed the town's liquor shops to prevent the struggle being drowned in an orgy of drunkenness.

The general strike forced factory owners to agree to most of the workers' demands for higher wages and shorter work hours. The soviet decided to end the general strike and dissolve itself, and workers returned to their jobs on 23 July. The general strike and workers' council in Ivanono-Voznesensk lasted 72 days, one day longer than the Paris Commune which up to then was the only example of revolutionary people's self-government.

The events of 1905 came as much of a surprise to the socialist movement as to everyone else. Only a month before the revolution

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broke out, the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP) had divided into two rival socialist organisations, the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks.

Their split centred around the way to build a revolutionary party. RSDLP leaders such as Martov and Axelrod, who later became Mensheviks, had argued in 1903 for the creation of an all-inclusive, non-party workers' organisation.

The Bolshevik leader Lenin foresaw that a democratic and mass Marxist party was needed to lead a workers' revolution. But he believed the only realistic way to work towards it under the conditions of tsarist police state repression was by creating a secretive and centralised organisation of professional revolutionaries who made Marxist propaganda, agitation and organisation their life's commitment.

The 1905 uprising compelled Lenin to revise the Bolshevik theory that workers could not rise above limited, economic struggles without the intervention of a revolutionary party. Workers by themselves were creating a mass political movement, often demonstrating better judgement than those "leaders" who were supposed to guide them. From exile, Lenin urged the Bolsheviks to be more flexible and reach out to the newly-formed soviets.

His frustration with foot-dragging by local party leaders was seen in a letter to a St Petersburg Bolshevik in February 1905:

"Be sure to put us in *direct* touch with new forces, with the youth, with newly formed circles... So far *not one* of the St Petersburgers (shame on them) have given us a *single* new connection... It's a scandal, our undoing, our ruin! Take a lesson from the Mensheviks, for Christ's sake." (Emphasis in the original.)

In January 1917, Lenin gave a lecture in Zurich on why the 1905 revolution had been defeated. He cited two main reasons. First, a lack of "persistence and determination among the masses" because they still put too much trust in the authorities. And second, a hesitation among Bolshevik workers "to take the leadership into their own hands" and launch an uprising against the government.

About a month after this lecture, a new revolution erupted in Russia. This time the Bolsheviks entered the struggle with not just a few hundred relatively inexperienced members, as in 1905, but with 20,000 battle-hardened activists who had learned from the first revolution. Over the next nine months, the Bolsheviks recruited 250,000 new members who carried the workers' revolution to victory.



Vladimir Lenin

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The events of 1905 have lessons for socialists today. They show that workers' strikes at the point of production can develop into a broader political struggle, and that major political events can in turn spark economic struggles. This interaction of politics and economics mobilises much larger numbers of workers than those belonging to trade unions.

1905 showed that the working class is not only capable of taking action around political as well as economic issues, but has the power to draw other oppressed sectors of society behind it and push events in a more radical direction. To see workers as just one component of a broader struggle is to ignore the question of which class has the power and capacity to transform society. The ability of workers to paralyse the economy, their concentrated nature and common interests makes them the only class able to lead the struggle for a new world.

This can be seen in Venezuela today, where workers have occupied jobsites and set up workers' assemblies which compete with bosses and bureaucrats for control of industries and communities. As well as supporting the Bolivarian Revolution proclaimed by president Hugo Chavez, these workers' movements are pushing for a greater role in creating a socialist society.

Another current example is the struggle of America's undocumented workers. The massive marches in Los Angeles, Chicago, New York and other US cities were organised by an immigrant workers' coalition in opposition to middle class liberals who believed their proposed "stay away" from work was "too radical" and would cause a backlash. Despite these merchants of gloom, the "stay away" was a stunning success, with many businesses fully or partially closed. The US economy was shown to be heavily dependent on the exploitation of "illegals", while opinion polls pointed to a stunning rise in public sympathy for their plight.

Perhaps the most important lesson of 1905 is the need for today's revolutionaries to be flexible, to recognise the need to break with old customs and tactics when faced with new opportunities and struggles.

As Lenin warned the Bolsheviks in 1905: "You must be sure to organise, organise, and organise hundreds of circles, completely pushing into the background the customary, well-meant committee (hierarchical) stupidities. This is a time of war. Either you create new, young, fresh, energetic battle organisations everywhere... or you will go under, wearing the halo of 'committee bureaucrats'."

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# Rosa Luxemburg & Russia's mass strikes

by DAPHNE LAWLESS

In 1905 the rule of Nicholas II, tsar of all the Russias, had become shaky. A year-long war had seen Russia defeated by Japan. This rout of a European power by an Asiatic nation was a huge blow to the tsar's imperial pretensions.

While a mainly peasant country and very backward by Western Europe's standards, Russia had a small but highly concentrated working class based mostly in St Petersburg and Moscow.

Although workers' parties and unions were banned in the tsarist autocracy, there had been a rise in strikes during the years before 1905. In an attempt to demobilise and divert workers' struggles, tsarist agents were set up as leaders of "police unions". But even this tiny opening towards organisation was seized upon by Russia's workers and actually encouraged grassroots activism.

The Assembly of Russian Workers in St Petersburg was led by Father



Mass strikes in 1905 Russia inspired German socialist Rosa Luxemburg



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Gapon, a prison chaplain and protege of the local police chief. At the end of December 1904, four workers at the giant Putilov engineering works were sacked for belonging to Gapon's organisation.

On 3 January 1905 a strike broke out for the reinstatement of the four workers. By 7 January it had mushroomed into a general strike across St Petersburg. Not only did all the big factories come to a standstill, but many small workshops as well. Almost all papers stopped publication.

Gapon asked the workers to turn to the tsar for support. The idea was born of a petition and a solemn procession, carrying the tsar's portrait, holy icons and church banners.

On Sunday 9 January, 200,000 Petersburg workers headed by Father Gapon marched in a peaceful procession to the tsar's Winter Palace. The tsar refused to receive the petitioners. Instead, palace troops were ordered to fire into the crowd, killing more than a thousand and wounding countless others.

That night, an appalled Gapon addressed the crowd. "We no longer have a tsar," he cried, asking soldiers to consider themselves freed from obligation "to the traitor, the tsar, who had ordered innocent blood to be spilt".

"Bloody Sunday" sparked vast and repeated strike waves, along with mutinies in the army and navy, revolts by oppressed national minorities across the tsar's empire and growing peasant unrest.

Pushed onto the defensive, Nicolas II promised first a consultative assembly and then, after a massive all-Russia strike in October 1905, an elected parliament and a constitution.

The historian M.N. Pokrovsky summed up the way in which the massive strike movement had utterly changed the consciousness of Russia's workers:

*In January 1905, the workers thought that they could talk to the tsar in a nice, polite way and they were cruelly disillusioned. In October, they reached the idea that you had to show your fist to the tsar – only show it – and you would get something from him. It was an idea of the following stage that you had to use arms against the tsar and it was clear only to a minority of the working class.*

This change in consciousness was most clearly shown in the organisational creativity which marked the Russian movement. Activists formed new networks. New solidarities undermined old divisions of skill, sex, ethnicity, religion and the like. Workers rushed to form and join new bodies, from unions to political



Rosa Luxemburg

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clubs – and, in a world first, workers’ councils (in Russian, soviets).

### **Birth of workers’ councils**

The birthplace of workers’ councils was the grimy industrial town of Ivanova-Voznesensk. What began as a strike committee soon developed into an elected body of the city’s workers.

Over the next few months, Soviets of Workers Deputies were established in around 50 different towns. The St Petersburg soviet was the offspring of the October 1905 general strike, which was sparked off in Moscow by a small strike of printers demanding a few kopeks more per thousand letters set and pay for punctuation marks. The young revolutionary Leon Trotsky was first president of this soviet.

The soviets weren’t just an innovation of workers’ self-organisation. They were also the first democratically elected bodies ever seen in Russia. In St Petersburg each 500 workers elected one deputy, in Moscow it was 400 and in Odessa 100.

1905 ended with tsarist artillery pounding working class districts of Moscow after an armed uprising. But the sheer power of the revolutionary movement meant that even the defeat of the Moscow insurrection in December couldn’t destroy the revolution overnight.

During 1906 new waves of peasant unrest broke out together with new strike waves. Only in 1907 did the tsarist state finally suppress the mass revolts – and even then the autocracy only won temporary respite.

In February 1917, when another strike wave of Russian workers grew into an army-backed uprising that toppled the tsar, workers’ and soldiers’ councils immediately arose as forums for grassroots debate and decision-making.

### **Luxemburg’s theory of the mass strike**

Rosa Luxemburg was the most original thinker inside the German socialist party, the SPD. In 1906 she explored the lessons of 1905 Russia in her book *The Mass Strike, the Political Party & the Trade Unions*.

This was the first serious Marxist analysis of mass strikes. Before then in Germany, Europe’s most modern economy, the main advocates of mass strikes had been the anarchists.

Most SPD leaders, moving away from Marxism towards a historic compromise with capitalism, argued against the mass strike. They claimed a mass strike couldn’t succeed without being organised by a huge workers’ party, and if a party so big was already in existence it could take power peacefully through existing institutions.

Luxemburg disputed this passive, fatalist approach coming from within her own SPD party.

She also disagreed with Russian Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin. In his 1902 book *What Is To Be Done?* Lenin insisted that socialist ideas and

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organisation could only be brought to the working class by an “outside” party of mostly intellectuals.

The compromising SPD and the early Bolshevik concepts had very different starting points, the first increasingly reformist and the other staunchly revolutionary. Both, however, saw an active liberating party telling a passive working class what to do. This elitism was exploded by Luxemburg pointing to mass strikes as a vital liberating force.

Luxemburg showed how Russia’s mass strikes healed the self-defeating split in the workers’ movement between political struggles and union (or “economic”) struggles. Reformist union leaders limited workers’ self-activity to small “economic” strikes which left state power in the hands of a pro-capitalist elite. Reformist political leaders limited workers’ politics to voting for a distant parliament, which left economic power in the hands of big bosses.

These limits could be overcome by mass strikes, Luxemburg declared. Not only did Russia’s mass economic strikes rapidly pose radical political demands, but mass political strikes set off waves of economic strikes which challenged private control of industry. Both methods drew new layers into collective struggle for the first time in Russia. So mass strikes were central to workers’ revolutionary mobilisation.

The “most precious thing”, she said, was a “change in working people’s psychology and culture”. The mass strikes brought a new sense of empowerment which, for the first time, allowed workers to forsee a better world as their own collective creation.

For Luxemburg, the mass strike was the crucial bridge between the capitalist present and the socialist future. It was the means by which millions would mobilise for an alternative society, and make themselves capable of running it. Mass strikes were a grassroots alternative to the elitist conservatism of Germany’s bureaucratic union officials and reformist SPD politicians and their counterparts in other countries.

### **Influence of reformism underestimated**

While Luxemburg had penned a breakthrough Marxist book, it does contain some key weaknesses.

While correctly pointing out that mass strikes have the potential to sweep aside the conservatism fostered by union bureaucrats and reformist politicians, she wrongly concluded that such an upsurge cannot be contained.

“If once the ball is set rolling,” she said, the forces of reformism and bureaucracy “can never again bring it to a standstill.”

This badly underestimated the influence of reformism and its political leaders inside the working class. That was proven in Germany at the cost of Luxemburg’s life during the mass revolt at the end of the First World War.

November 1918 saw a revolutionary wave hit Germany that was bigger in scale than 1905 Russia. Mass mutinies in the military and mass strikes in

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the factories forced the German kaiser to flee. The old government and state collapsed. Real power passed into the hands of workers' and soldiers' councils. If ever "the ball was rolling", it was now.

However, reformist SPD leaders who opposed the revolutionary implications of the mass movement weren't immediately swept away by it. Instead they sprang to its head, being voted into the top positions of important workers' councils. From these positions they formed a secret alliance with right-wing military officers to behead the revolution. In January 1919, an officers' coup murdered Luxemburg and other Marxist leaders with the covert blessing of top SPD leaders.

The mass strikes analysed by Luxemburg in 1905 Russia were part of a grassroots revolution. But she didn't foresee a different kind of mass strike. It's also possible for even conservative union leaders – if under enough pressure from below – to decree a mass strike, oversee its organisation and call it off before it gets out of hand.

In France and Italy, for instance, union leaders often call one-day general strikes to demand concessions from government. But these mass strikes are firmly controlled from above for strictly reformist aims which in no way pose an alternative to capitalism.

### **Combined but uneven development**

The weaknesses in Luxemburg's theory sprang from not seeing that, while mass strikes make almost all workers more militant, some arrive at revolutionary conclusions more quickly than others. This is the law of combined but uneven development applied to workers' consciousness.

Most of the time only a minority of workers see the need to break from reformist ideas and leaders. This revolutionary minority must form an alternative leadership which wins the trust of the majority by helping the mass movement reach its full potential. If this vital task isn't completed, due to lack of time or awareness or both, then the majority will follow the old reformist leaders for want of any proven alternative.

In 1918 Germany, reformist SPD leaders were determined to end the revolution – and they were able to do so for want of a proven, influential and independent Marxist alternative.

Even after most SPD parliamentary deputies had voted money for the kaiser's war, Luxemburg insisted on the need for a united workers' movement. Throughout the war years she resisted any break from the imperialist-tainted SPD to set up a revolutionary party.

When her Spartacus League was founded in November 1918, at the very time mass strikes and mass mutinies were breaking out, it was simply too late. The Marxists didn't have enough time to win the independent credibility needed to pull most German workers away from SPD leaders before the officers' coup two months later.

Events in Russia, however, took a different route.

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### **Missing link discovered by Lenin**

Most Bolsheviks were at first suspicious of 1905 Russia's spontaneous mass uprisings, convinced that truly revolutionary impulses required the agency of an "outside" party. Their reaction to the foundation of the Petersburg workers' council was to demand that it accept the full Bolshevik programme before they would participate.

Lenin disagreed, but had a hard time convincing his own Bolsheviks. They were, after all, acting on Lenin's own ideas as set out three years earlier in *What Is To Be Done?*

The lessons of mass revolt were forcing Lenin to abandon many of his former beliefs. He came to realise that workers could act in a revolutionary



The body of a Spartacist, killed in January 1918 by right-wing officers with the blessing of reformist politicians, is loaded onto a cart for burial

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way independently of a Marxist party. And he began to demand that the Bolsheviks “throw open the gates of the party” to all strikers.

Lenin’s influence coupled with the pressure of events won the Bolsheviks to interactive engagement with the spontaneous rebellion of workers, peasants and military men.

But while co-operating with reformists around immediate issues, the Bolsheviks retained their Marxist independence. And that was the crucial difference with Luxemburg, who refused to break with the reformist SPD until it was too late to influence Germany’s 1918 revolution.

Lenin had discovered the missing link in Luxemburg’s theory of mass spontaneity. The political independence and influence of Marxists is just as vital as mass strikes and mutinies if grassroots revolt is to get past the inevitable betrayals of reformist leaders.

That was proven in 1917 Russia when February’s spontaneous uprising that overthrew the tsar was turned into a successful workers’ revolution in October by the growing closeness between Bolsheviks and soviets.

Reformist leaders in 1917 Russia made the same pact with reactionary officers as they did in 1918 Germany. The outcome, however, was different. Why? Because the Bolsheviks had a proven record as an independent Marxist group stretching back 15 years. They were much better placed to gain the ear of workers than Luxemburg’s Spartacus League, hastily assembled after the outbreak of the German revolution.

Spontaneous mass strikes start the revolutionary process. But its successful completion requires the working class majority to become tightly organised around their own Marxist party.

### **A powerful weapon**

The mass strike is a powerful workers’ weapon against the “outside” enemy – the big bosses and the capitalist state.

It’s also a potent antidote to the “inside” enemy – the illusion that “there’s nothing workers can do” or “we must wait for someone else to give the orders”.

Luxemburg’s great merit was her belief that, as Karl Marx put it, “the liberation of the working class must be the act of the class itself”. Socialism won’t come by gradual reforms from above, or by the actions of small groups.

Luxemburg’s great tragedy was not seeing the other side of the coin – the whole working class doesn’t become revolutionary all at once. This demands a Marxist party which links up with workers to defeat reformist trends trying to kill the revolution before it can win.

- **Get Rosa Luxemburg’s The Mass Strike free on the web ([www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1906/mass-strike/index.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1906/mass-strike/index.htm)). Or borrow it from The Red Kiwi Library (email [Grant\\_gcm@actrix.co.nz](mailto:Grant_gcm@actrix.co.nz)).**

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# Strikes change societies & minds

by VAUGHAN GUNSON

Win, lose or draw, a strike is one experience that workers remember. Being on a noisy and energetic picket, chanting slogans, sticks in the mind more than endless days of work. Strikes can be exciting.

A cleaner at Whangarei Hospital described a strike in 2005: “When we had the strike here last year it was awesome. We were out in front of the hospital at 6 o’clock in the morning. We were yelling and yelling. The girls were all shy to start off, but then we get going.”

Any strike is a challenge to the status quo, whether it’s in a single factory in South Auckland against some hardnose boss, or a mass strike across many sectors like in France recently which defeated an anti-worker employment law.

Going on strike to get better pay, or defend a co-worker from victimisation, or achieve a multi-employer collective agreement, or win a political demand, is not something that’s done lightly. Workers will come up against all sorts of challenges, both externally and among themselves.

In confronting these challenges workers can rise to new heights, getting a glimpse of our full potential as human beings. To understand why strikes can unleash this potential, we need to know how it’s denied by normal workplace life.

For most of us, the experience of working is not pleasant. Not that we mind doing work. It’s human nature to be productive and contribute to society. But how capitalism organises the way we produce things doesn’t

allow us to feel satisfaction for a job well done.

We sell our ability to work to someone else, a boss, just so we can survive – what 19th century socialist Karl Marx called “the dull compulsion of economic facts”. We may have absolutely no interest in our job other than getting a pay packet to meet the bills.

Work is often dead boring. Factory assembly lines, supermarket checkouts, data processing and capitalism’s other production techniques mean that workers’ tasks can be mind-numbingly repetitive. There’s no room to show any creativity, any human spirit, not even some anger.

Our frustrations build up inside us, and sometimes we take them out on our families, friends and workmates who are struggling under similar pressures. The minute-to-minute grind saps our physical and mental health.

It’s the boss, or bosses grouped together as company shareholders, top executives or state bureaucrats, who control our work. We’re told when we must turn up for work and when we can leave. We’re often told what we should look like, the way we dress, the way we speak. We have to obey orders. We have little or no control over the way things are done in a factory, a hospital, a timber mill, a school, a trucking firm, a fastfood outlet, a bank, a service station, a supermarket, a call centre, a construction site or almost any other type of job.

To cut costs, managers have too few workers doing too many tasks. We don’t get to decide, but we have



Strikes empower workers, as Unite's fastfood campaign is showing

to bear the burden of impossible workloads to get the job done. Often we miss our breaks because we're rushing to catch up.

The workplace produces what can seem like natural deference to authority and top-down power structures. Capitalism needs these structures to keep workers in line, to make us work harder and smarter so we increase the takings of owners, shareholders, lenders and executives.

Lots of effort goes into making sure we obey our superiors. We are bullied, often without a voice being raised or a swear word being used, and if we talk back we can be fired. This makes us feel stink about ourselves, it can crush our confidence.

Capitalism is soul-destroying. But workers have the power to resist, when we choose to do so and get organised.

Employers would like to think of workers as cogs in a machine that churn out their profits, but we live, breath and think. Just as our exploitation and feelings of powerlessness originate in the workplace, so it's there they can be overcome. Capitalism forces workers to struggle, and in the process we realise we do have power. Key to that is the strike.

Going on strike challenges the "common sense" beliefs held by most workers about their lowly place in society, about what they can and cannot do.

One of the first things that strikers



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see is the affect their action has on the bosses. Even the most ruthless employer or manager gets worried when workers go on strike. The employer thinks: How much profit will I lose? The manager thinks: Is my well-paying job at risk? Both wonder: When will it end, and who will win?

Any manager who comes close to a picket line avoids eye contact and scurries past. The usual power relationship has broken down. Workers on strike get a feeling for the power they have when they're all together. They're no longer afraid of the boss.

During a strike at Northland Polytech in 2003, academic staff marched into a meeting of the governing council. The union claims were for a multi-employer collective agreement and a small pay rise, but the strike was also about years of anger and frustration at incompetent management and inadequate government funding. This turned "mild-mannered" academics into activists gate-crashing a management meeting, challenging the normal hierarchal structures. One staff member, with a smile on her face, voiced the thoughts of others as the action ended: "I can't believe I just did that."

One of the more unusual challenges to our "betters" came during a 1932 strike of Christchurch tramworkers. Temporary constables were drawn from local rugby clubs, which were then blacklisted by the Tramways Union. When Christchurch played Merivale at Lancaster Park, the teams were booed off the park by an angry crowd who didn't come to watch the rugby. The Christchurch team included two All Blacks, who had to take refuge in a police van to

get away from the ground.

Challenges to authority come from the increased confidence that a group of workers gain from going on strike. Feelings of unity and comradeship can quickly develop between striking workers.

In 2002, teachers organised independently of the union officials and went on wildcat strikes in over 50 secondary schools. The strikes saw a growing determination to win. 75% of teachers said "no" to the government's second offer, a better one than the first offer which had been rejected by 56%.

"You don't get anywhere without struggle," one East Auckland teacher said at the time. Recognising that simple fact can be empowering. The struggle may be difficult and involve sacrifice, but workers on strike can be energised by the experience of being in control of their own destinies, as opposed to being dictated to.

Workers considering going on strike always face one basic question: How can we win? There's no point taking action unless that's the aim. The logic of struggle compels workers to see things differently, to challenge the "normal" values of capitalist society.

A key measure of workers' strength is their unity. Winning a strike in a single factory requires workers to stick together. If only half the workers go on strike, the boss has already half-won. As a Bridgestone striker in Christchurch wrote on his placard in 2005: "We need all union members to unite!"

Strikers need to win over non-strikers on their site, and often that's easier than you might think. Even a conservative worker who votes National may be pissed off at low

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pay and no say, and be open to joining a strike.

And workers' solidarity can firm up during the course of a strike. After spending 22 days on the picket line during a 2005 strike at Marsden Point's LVL Plant, a job delegate noted: "We went out as workmates, but go back as whanau".

Strikes can break down divisions within a workplace. One of the main divisions, often subtly stirred up by employers even though it's supposedly illegal, is racism. On a strike there's no place for views that destroy workers' unity. This need for solidarity can change attitudes to people from different cultural or ethnic backgrounds. It's hard to maintain racist views about someone you're locking arms with on a picket line against the threat of police intervention.

One of the wonderful things about the Unite strikes at Auckland fastfood stores is the involvement of young workers from Samoan, Tongan, Maori, Chinese, Korean, Indian and European backgrounds. Their placards have been in multiple languages. The message that multi-cultural pickets send out is one of hope – "Look, this is what we can achieve together." This message ripples out into the wider community, countering racist tensions that can grow among people battered by capitalist greed.

A strike can challenge gender discrimination and stereotypes. This was seen in the British miners' strike in 1984-85. Women weren't prepared to play a backseat role, they joined the pickets, they got involved in local and national strike committees, they spoke at public meetings. Their involvement changed the mindset

of many male miners. John Pilger recounts in his book *Heroes* that when miners from Murton in County Durham went back to work, "their brass band emerged from the mist with the women marching first. This had not happened before."

The miners had also received support from other oppressed groups, including Britain's gay community. In 1985 a Gay Pride march in London was led by a contingent of miners, which nobody would have dreamed of happening before the strike.

Often, solidarity within a single site or industry isn't enough to win. So the logic of any strike is to extend solidarity wider. Other groups are asked to support the strike, to make a donation, to "black" scab products, to respect a picket line, to make a protest, to go out on a sympathy strike.

A good example of wider solidarity was seen in 2002, when high school pupils across the country went on student strikes to support their teachers. As Grant Morgan wrote in a Socialist Worker leaflet at the time: "When students go on strike they learn heaps of new and important things. Things like the power of mass protest, democratic ways to make decisions, alternatives to top-down control, how to get organised, an awareness of self-liberation." These are things all strikers learn.

Hand-in-hand with the need for maximum solidarity goes grassroots organisation and democracy. Because it's workers who make the sacrifices when they strike, it's natural for them to want to make the decisions collectively. A strike controlled by the strikers themselves enjoys much greater buy-in from workers and embraces a much greater wealth of

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experience than one where union officials make the calls. And that means the strike has a much greater chance of success.

At strike meetings, where decision-making is open and democratic, workers start to become aware they belong to a class with interests opposed to the employing class. The mental blocks we inherit from capitalism begins to fall away.

It's workers' independent organisation and mass democracy that our rulers fear most. They recognise the threat to their self-serving structures of power and control.

The 1913 Great Strike saw the Auckland strike committee organising groceries from the Trades Hall basement. This might seem a simple and logical thing to do, but the bosses' government of the time was out to crush it.

Corporate New Zealand and its political allies always attack workers' self-activity. The total ban on sympathy strikes written into National's Employment Contracts Act in 1991, and maintained in Labour's Employment Relations Act of 2000, is there to stop workers feeling the power that comes through class solidarity and mass organisation.

Whatever name you call the people who run the country, stupid they are not. Knowing the impact strikes can have on society, like the increased confidence that workers feel, corporate bosses and politicians try to break or limit mass actions.

Grassroots organisation and democracy can only function in tandem with grassroots leadership. A strike not only increases workers' confidence, it also produces workers' leaders. Ordinary people under the extraordinary circumstances of

a strike will start to perform vital leadership roles, like speaking at mass meetings, or writing a strike bulletin, or captaining a picket line, or becoming strategists able to foresee what needs to happen.

The way people can grow into leaders was portrayed in the 2005 BBC drama *Faith: A Dramatic Tribute to the Miners' Strike*. It's a dramatisation of the 1984-85 miners' strike in Britain, spliced with documentary footage. The main character is Michelle, partner of a striking miner. She becomes more and more involved in the miners' support group, she goes to meetings and joins the pickets.

The most powerful scene comes when Michelle is asked to speak at a mass rally. She's reluctant at first, and nervous and stuttering once she begins, but the working class audience is politely encouraging. She grows in stature until she ends up giving a fiery speech that pulls everyone along with her. The film captures that spine-tingling moment when the speaker becomes a mass leader because she is at one with the multitude, expressing the fears, problems, hopes, values and solutions of all.

Such organic leaders of the working class are vital for the advancement of the labour movement.

All the things that are true of a small strike are heightened in a mass strike involving workers across different industries. Then the threat to the status quo that's in every strike really comes to the fore.

To a degree that was seen in the strike wave sparked in February 2005 by the 5% campaign of the Engineers Union. Over the following months there was a general pay revolt by bus drivers, tertiary staff,

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city council workers, factory workers, bank staff, cleaners, journalists, wharfies, kindy teachers, electricity workers, public servants, cinema staff, fastfood workers, Radio NZ staff, security guards, teacher aids, freezing workers, telecoms workers and many other sections.

Workers were willing to have a go because they saw other workers doing it. There's more chance of workers in one firm or industry getting a pay rise if bosses feel the heat of a united fightback by many different sections of workers.

The 2005 pay revolt connected with widespread anger over low wages and corporate greed. This fueled public support for the strikes, which encouraged workers more. A Stagecoach striker acknowledged this: "Public support has been huge. It's made a big difference to us."

History shows that mass strikes have shifted the balance of power. In 1905, Russia recorded 23 million strike days, with economic demands (more pay) and political demands (more democracy) feeding each other. Workers' self-belief rose to revolutionary heights. In September that year Moscow typesetters went on strike, demanding pay for punctuation marks. What started as a "small event" concerning punctuation marks, commented Russian socialist Leon Trotsky, mushroomed into an "all-Russian political strike" which brought the all-powerful tsar to his knees.

Russia's mass strikes made a huge impact around the world. A Russian secret police report from 1905 stated: "In Berlin and other big German cities there was hardly a day on which there was not a meeting at which the situation in Russia was discussed. All

end with collections for arms for the Russian people."

Russian workers saw the need for a higher form of workers' organisation and democracy than strike committees in individual factories. In 1905 they pioneered workers' councils (or soviets) of elected representatives from workplaces across entire cities and regions. Through these workers' councils, "ordinary" men and women were able to exercise their collective will, and by doing so changed history. A second phase of workers' councils in 1917 led to the world's first socialist victory in Russia.

In the song Far From Me by Nick Cave, there's a line that goes: "In a world where everyone knocks everyone else over." Cave is a miserable pessimist, but this is how the world sometimes feels. Watching the TV news every night, you can get weighed down with a sense of cruelty, injustice and chaos. It can seem like that's all there is, it's just human nature.

The strike shows us there is an alternative. In embryonic form we can see the possibilities of a different society, one that's based on co-operation, equality and workers' democracy.

We can be sure that increased strike action in New Zealand and around the world will see workers grow taller – and then anything becomes possible.

The logic of trying to win any strike encourages us to extend solidarity and co-operation outwards, to link up with ever more workers here and offshore. Socialists play an important role in helping workers do this, because we know it's workers who can change society. That's what the strike tells us.

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# The politics that workers need

by DAPHNE LAWLESS

Over recent times we've seen workers around the world show just how much power they have when they use it.

In France, several million workers went on a general strike against a law that axed the rights of young workers, forcing their right-wing government into an embarrassing backdown.

In Britain, almost as many public sector workers walked out over government plans to gut their old age pensions.

In New Zealand, a campaign by young fastfood workers scored a points victory over Restaurant Brands, owner of Pizza Hut, KFC and Starbucks, bringing some dignity to their job as well as badly-needed pay rises.

Workers are going onto the front foot for the first time in decades. After years of defeat and despair, workers are rediscovering that when we stick together, we can shift the system's powerbrokers.

Capitalism runs on labour power. When we withdraw our labour, the bosses are hit where it hurts, and governments have to take notice.

But it's not enough for small groups of workers to win better pay and conditions for themselves alone. It wouldn't even be enough for all workers to go on strike. There's also a vital political dimension to the fight for workers' justice.

At the most simple level, so much of what affects one worker affects all workers. Things which happen on a broader level than just one workplace can't be solved by action against just one boss. Poor public transport, ethnic inequality and underfunded health and education are examples of things that must be fought against on a social level.

Even at the basic level of pay and conditions, a better deal for the majority of workers won't be built by winning one factory or even one industry at a time. Some workplaces are always going to be better organised, or in a better position to win their battles, than others.

In the workplace, the bosses try to turn workers against each other – by favouring those who don't join the union, by trying to make different groups of workers distrust each other. Workers need to stick together in the jobsite and in the industry to beat the other side.

And it's the same on the wider level of the whole of society. If different groups of workers don't all stick together, some workers are always going to be left behind. And that helps bosses to turn them against better-off workers, with unionised workers portrayed as "greedy" for taking more than their fair share.

To win lasting gains for workers, we must operate on the level of the whole of society as well as on the level of one workplace or industry. This task would be much easier if one group of workers had the legal right to strike

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in solidarity with others. But it's unlawful for workers to do so under Helen Clark's industrial legislation.

The Employment Relations Act bans workers from striking over government policies, victimisation of unionists, corporate price hikes and everything else that's wider than their own contract negotiations or an urgent threat to health and safety.

The restrictive labour laws of the Labour government reflect the fears of capitalism's bosses. They're scared workers will start to see themselves as a class with common interests that conflict with those of the system's rulers.

If all workers took action together, we would be unstoppable. Imagine the huge impact of a general strike over low pay or public transport or health care or workers' rights or some other important issue. It would really show which class has power in this society, and why. And any question of class power is a question of politics.

When you say "politics", most people think of parliament. To a large extent, a vote every three years is meant to draw popular attention away from the powerbrokers outside cabinet – corporate bosses, military officers, top cops, state bureaucrats and foreign politicians, none of them elected by New Zealanders.

No doubt a workers' political movement would run candidates for parliament and/or councils. Getting our people elected would be important to defend workers' rights, establish our credibility and build our movement.

But the real power in such a movement would have to be in the real world, in the grassroots areas. To understand why, you only have to look at what's happening to the Maori Party.

2004's hikoi brought large numbers of grassroots Maori onto the streets, pushing back the political racism of Labour and National and giving birth to a new political party for Maori. Four Maori Party MPs were elected in October 2005.

Already some of the Maori Party MPs seem to have grown close to right-wing politicians. So there was the unpleasant sight of Tariana Turia addressing the Act conference. And, in its first parliamentary reading, three out of four Maori Party MPs voted for Wayne Mapp's bill to discriminate against new workers, similar to the unjust law in France that was retracted after mass demonstrations and general strikes.

Why has this happened, and so quickly? In essence, a lack of workers' power.

A workers' political movement would be based among activists in the factories, offices, transport depots, hospitals, educational facilities, supermarkets and grassroots communities.

These activists, through their connections with the wider workers' movement, would have the industrial and political muscle to demand that their elected representatives promoted workers' interests. This is the general strategy that Socialist Worker is advancing inside Workers Charter and other grassroots movements.

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# Why we need a revolutionary party

by JOHN MOLYNEUX

Global capitalism's ruling class constantly attacks union organisation, drives down wages, cuts social services, slashes jobs and undermines workers' rights. The aim is to reduce the share of national income going to the working class so profits are lifted.

Such things will eventually provoke a massive and general confrontation between capital and labour. We cannot tell when this will happen, but we can be sure that sooner or later it will. The question facing the working class is how best to prepare for this confrontation so that our side wins. Marxism provides an answer – we should build a revolutionary party.

This is neither easy nor fashionable. It means accepting (for the present) being a small minority within the working class, and it involves hard work and many difficulties. Yet it is essential for the simple reason that, without revolutionary leadership, the working class is bound to be defeated in a decisive conflict.

The enemy we face, the ruling class, is highly organised and centralised. This applies to each corporation, whose managers all follow a single strategy. And it applies to each capitalist state, whose army and police are highly disciplined and act according to a centralised plan.

To defeat such an opponent requires the working class to become centralised as well. Factory staff, drivers, nurses, teachers and all other sections of the working class around the country must follow a single strategy. Such co-ordination can only be supplied by an organisation which unites the workers who are leading the struggles in all regions and workplaces.

At first glance the obvious candidates for this role are the trade unions and the Labour Party, with their already established mass memberships. But it's a task they are incapable of performing. They cannot co-ordinate the struggle effectively because they shy away from the struggle. Top union officials out to preserve their balancing role between workers and employers, and Labour politicians wanting to win votes, fear a mass workers' struggle even more than they fear defeat by the ruling class. At the crucial moment they will betray.

This makes building the revolutionary party a priority. Unless a

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credible alternative with a sizeable base in the working class is built in advance of the general confrontation, the majority of workers will continue to follow their existing leaders who will lead them to catastrophe. This happened, for instance, in Germany in the years following the First World War (as noted by Daphne Lawless in the UNITY article Rosa Luxemburg & Russia's Mass Strikes).

A revolutionary party differs from a reformist party not only in aims and ideas, but also in its type of membership and its mode of operation. A reformist party is essentially an electoral machine. Its membership is usually large and passive. Its main jobs are fund-raising and canvassing. This requires neither political education, nor discipline, nor democracy, for no serious action by the party membership is even contemplated. It leads to the domination of the party by its MPs and bureaucracy.

A revolutionary party, however, is a combat party. Its membership is smaller (in a non-revolutionary period) but active. Its job is to fight for its political strategy in all the struggles of the working class, and in so doing mobilise the grassroots. This requires a high level of awareness, unity in action and real democracy, for the party's politics have to be carried into practice by the members.

Only a party built on these lines can give the leadership needed by the working class to win an all-out conflict with the system and create a socialist society.

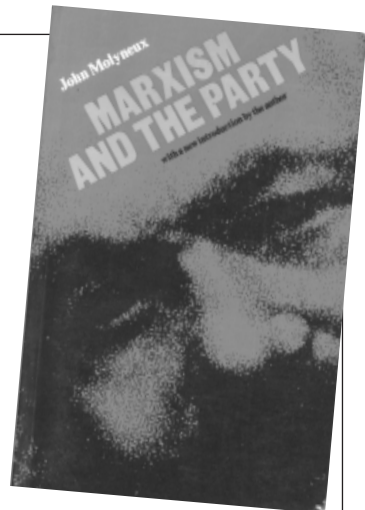
## **MARXISM & THE PARTY**

by JOHN MOLYNEUX

A detailed (190 page) look at the historical evolution of the revolutionary socialist party.

It summarises the ideas and practices of Marx, Lenin, Luxemburg, Trotsky and Gramsci on the type of party workers need to defeat global capitalism. A mind-expanding book.

The Red Kiwi Library has several copies. Want to borrow one? Email [Grant.gcm@actrix.co.nz](mailto:Grant.gcm@actrix.co.nz).





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# F E E D B A C K

Email your letter (500 words max) to [daphlawless@randomstatic.net](mailto:daphlawless@randomstatic.net)

## **A report that never was from a union that never was**

In March 2005 I started recruiting my co-workers at Independent Liquor to the Engineering, Printing & Manufacturing Union (EPMU). Until then the site had been virtually non-union. A little later I was told that, because of an agreement between the top leaders of some unions, the EPMU wouldn't cover Independent Liquor workers. Instead we would all have to join the Service & Food Workers Union (SFWU).

I said that I was happy to work with any union that would fight for us. So I started recruiting for the SFWU and was made job delegate by my workmates. The first thing that SFWU officials did was ban any mention of the EPMU collective agreements at Auckland's other breweries, which delivered better pay, conditions and rights than we had at Independent Liquor. I was hauled over the coals by SFWU officials for publicising these EPMU agreements, which was unfortunate because they had been a key recruitment tool for the SFWU.

Then the SFWU officials removed me as job delegate. When workers objected, SFWU Auckland secretary Lisa Eldret prevented them from voting on the matter. She said the union's regional executive would overturn any workplace vote that made me delegate.

After several months it was clear that negotiations for a collective agreement were going nowhere fast. Playing hardball, management had threatened to axe 30 full-time jobs. Union members voted unanimously to strike.

But a SFWU official told us that a strike would be illegal without giving two weeks' notice, which we later found out was untrue. Although the official promised to give strike notice to our employer, this was not done. We found out that the Auckland SFWU had secretly cancelled our strike vote, instead requesting mediation with Independent Liquor. Although mediation was a predictable fizzer, SFWU officials didn't allow another strike vote to take place.

This was seen as weakness by the company. Union members came under increasing pressure, and the lead delegate resigned. While SFWU officials held closed-door meetings with management, the

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workers could see no progress in the negotiations.

Then the boss gave redundancy notices to six workers who I think were all SFWU members, but I can't be 100% sure because the SFWU kept their membership list secret from the likes of me. After SFWU officials refused to challenge these layoffs, we approached Unite for assistance. Unite offered to represent the workers at a meeting with management, but was turned down by a SFWU official, who promised that the SFWU would do the job. But nobody from the SFWU fronted up on the day, leaving the workers to be sent down the road. One dismissed female fled the office in tears after being accused of "incompetence". When true, which it certainly wasn't in her case, this is a performance issue, whereas redundancy is when a job ceases to exist.

All these factors sparked a terminal collapse in union membership on our site. The Auckland SFWU had disorganised us completely. In a bid to prevent any similar debacle happening to workers elsewhere, I wrote a letter about some of these events for the last UNITY. Before it was published, the editors of UNITY sent it (with my permission) to the Wellington-based national secretary of the SFWU, John Ryall.

I was soon contacted by John, who told me that senior SFWU official Neville Donaldson had been appointed to investigate what had gone wrong at Independent Liquor. Neville, who's based in the South Island, asked me questions on the phone, which I answered, and requested supporting documents, which I sent. Neville told me that his investigation would be completed in six weeks.

Hearing nothing well after this time had lapsed, I contacted Neville. In a reply email, he said there was "no report" because the SFWU had "arranged for the EPMU" to take over the Independent Liquor site. It seems we have a report that never was from a union that never was.

In an effort to get the SFWU to confront its internal problems fair and square, I'm asking the union's national secretary to restart the investigation. I'm also asking the editors of UNITY to send him this letter before publication.

Just as a footnote, a meeting of workers at Independent Liquor voted overwhelmingly for their site to be covered by Unite rather than the EPMU after being addressed by both unions. The EPMU has accepted their decision.

**PAT O'DEA**

Veteran unionist & socialist  
Auckland

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## **Socialist Alliance's key role in Aussie fightback**

It's a pity that the International Socialist Organisation pulled out of active engagement in the Socialist Alliance precisely when the Australian left should be working together through the Alliance to foster the strongest possible resistance to the biggest attacks on workers' rights in a century.

Fortunately, most of the independent activists (those who don't belong to the Democratic Socialist Perspective, International Socialist Organisation or other socialist groups affiliated to the Alliance) have continued to work within the Alliance. They have contributed significantly to getting up a national day of union mobilisation on 28 June (see <http://www.socialist-alliance.org>).

David Glanz of the International Socialist Organisation underestimates the Socialist Alliance's role in the campaign against John Howard's anti-worker laws. Militant unionists and Alliance members Chris Cain, Craig Johnston, Tim Gooden, Susan Price, Chris Spindler, Sue Bolton and others have played a critical role in ensuring that the campaign isn't wound down to a marginal seats election campaign for the Australian Labor Party. This is what the more conservative wing of the union leadership wants. Without a concerted resistance from the militant wing, it's what the union movement will get.

Without critical initiatives from Alliance unionists, this resistance would be much weaker than it is. Surely it's the duty of the socialist left to work together to strengthen that resistance?

The Socialist Alliance has gradually advanced the organisation of its members and supporters in the trade unions. It has built campaigns around the demands of its action platform. Its united campaigning, while limited, continues to be more effective than the individual efforts of any single socialist group. In several cities, Socialist Alliance members are respected leaders of the militant union minority, enjoying the support of thousands of workers.

New branches of the Socialist Alliance have been chartered in the last year, and the Alliance membership remains overwhelmingly people who aren't members of the affiliated socialist groups. The 2005 Socialist Alliance conference adopted a proportional representation system of electing the national leadership. It's democratic and appropriate to the stage that the

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Alliance is at.

Electorally, the Socialist Alliance has to contend with the Green Party, which already has MPs and councillors in office at the federal, state and local level. The Greens command most of the left vote.

But there's still an important political space for the Socialist Alliance in the important area of extra-parliamentary mass action. It has won significant recognition and respect in the working class – more than the International Socialist Organisation or the Democratic Socialist Perspective has won to date. The Alliance often gets a positive mention from the ranks in union delegate meetings, while it is targeted by the union bureaucrats.

Karl Marx and Frederick Engels envisaged the socialist movement not as a group of people with socialist ideals, but rather as a movement of the working class. Every real step that the existing little socialist groups can take to deepen their engagement with the working class in struggle is a step forward for socialism.

I hope that in the future the International Socialist Organisation will play a more active role in the Socialist Alliance and help advance left regroupment in Australia.

**PETER BOYLE**

Democratic Socialist Perspective  
Sydney

## **The TXT generation & anti-capitalist struggle**

To be sure, there have been massive successes in organising young people. Here in New Zealand, Unite Workers Union and Radical Youth have been mobilising low-paid youth workers in strikes and pickets, including two big rallies in Auckland's Queen Street and a 1,000-strong student walkout.

In France, mass mobilisations of students and the unemployed defeated the CPE probationary employment law. In the United States there have been historic mass mobilisations in the Latino communities against a proposed immigration law.

This is all fantastic action and a huge step for young people, but I can't lie. Young people are still the TXT generation. They still spend more time sending text messages on their mobile phones

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than they do thinking, let alone acting, on political issues. What's been happening with youth over recent times is really inspiring, especially in Latin America, the Philippines, Thailand and Nepal, but is it enough?

Youth workers and students must come into the anti-capitalist struggle if we're to be effective in the long term. It's easy to get depressed as I look around my university. Corporations have put down roots in the student union buildings and it's easy to think that, rather than being in the quad, you're actually in a mall. That's because the student union lets businesses come in and set up stalls in the middle of the student area, turning a human space into a realm of capitalism. The social science departments are floundering as the business school grows and grows. Indoctrination is nearly complete. For example, a student in my sociology class said: "I can't imagine a world organised without hierarchy."

Anti-capitalist activists need to reaffirm our commitment to promoting the self-organisation of youth and students. This can be done through sharing with younger activists the skills and analysis that older activists take for granted, by providing resources for young activists and taking a diverse approach to incorporating young people into the struggle. I don't think they were organising union rallies by text message ten years ago, and I don't think many of the older generation of anti-capitalist activists grew up communicating via email either. However we as youth and students organise, one thing's for sure: the need to organise.

Michael Albert wrote on the anti-capitalist struggle and I'd like to offer it here as a vision for the next generation of activists:

*If movements for social change unswervingly seek diversity, solidarity, equity, and self-management – peace and justice – and if they do it in a manner and with a tone and with tactics all of which seek to empower the weak and to meet the needs of the poor, they/we can win this struggle... It is a struggle over who will decide the future and who the future will serve. Showdown indeed.*

**OMAR HAMED**  
Radical Youth  
Auckland

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## Labour less PC as party embraces ruling class

Daphne Lawless and Grant Morgan's article in the last UNITY, "The journey to social liberalism", attempted a much needed analysis of the NZ Labour Party. There's plenty in the article I agree with.

One of the questions I still have, however, is the connection between the new middle class – "the party's new rulers" – and Labour's promotion of social reforms and political correctness.

The article suggests that social reforms, like prostitution law reform and the civil unions bill, are "dear to the heart" of the new middle class, which is then crucial to the argument that Labour is a social liberal party.

I'm not convinced that the new middle class has a political worldview that means they're all right behind Labour's social reforms.

The new middle class includes male managers in corporate firms. People who watch TV programmes with Marc Ellis and Mathew Ridge, who identify with this "laddish" culture where sexism and homophobia abound. Is Labour's social reforms and political correctness "dear to the heart" of these people? No, I don't think so.

Rather, I'd argue Labour's social reforms are promoted most strongly by a section of the new middle class, represented in government departments, NGOs and the media, who often have historical connections to social movements like gay and women's rights.

It's these people who are the drivers of Labour's social reforms and are responsible for its politically correct image.

But there are counteracting forces that puts pressure on the social part of "social liberalism".

Firstly, I agree that the Labour Party is dominated by the new middle class, but not just the new middle class in the public sector. There's the private sector as well, where the culture of political correctness is far less prevalent.

These middle class members from the private sector dilute Labour's passion for social reforms and political correctness. At the same time, the party's withering union base compounds any weakening commitment to social issues.

Secondly, Labour's middle class leadership will want to form ever tighter bonds with sections of the capitalist class in an attempt to escape the kind of attacks, both political and economic, which could destroy Labour as a viable party of government. (Remembering the party has no meaningful base within the working class that could at least provide the possibility that the working class might defend "its" party from those attacks.)

While sections of the ruling class may have a social outlook that's shifted in response to expanded global trade and investment post-World War II, they're hardly enthusiastic supporters of social reforms and political correctness.

So the more Labour moves in the direction of the ruling class, the less staunchly "politically correct" it's likely to remain. There's already

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evidence this is occurring.

The social element will, I believe, come under increasing pressure, which will mean that the label “social liberal” ceases to be an accurate one.

## **VAUGHAN GUNSON**

Socialist Worker  
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### **Labour becoming a business party like National**

The last issue of UNITY (“Is Labour any kind of workers’ party?”) highlighted a crucial debate for the left in New Zealand.

On one level, the answer is the clear-cut response I heard from a table of unionists in a Wellington bar: “Isn’t it obvious?”

According to the government’s own figures, the gap between rich and poor has grown each year that Labour has been in office.

Finance minister Michael Cullen boasts that “company profits have increased at twice the rate of workers’ wages”.

But the devil, as they say, is in the detail. Is it obvious to workers that Labour is no longer “their” party? And if Labour is ceasing to be a workers’ party, what is it becoming?

The answer to the first question is increasingly “yes”. Last year a chunk of Labour’s traditional working class support base broke away, giving rise to the Maori Party.

The extraordinary “bidding war” with National during the election campaign, and the see-sawing polls, showed that workers will no longer automatically support Labour.

Since Labour is ceasing to be a workers’ party in the eyes of workers themselves, what is it turning into?

Last year, one of UNITY’s editors observed: “With every passing day, Labour is growing more like National. And we all know that National is a big business party.”

So it’s surprising that an article written by the editors (“The journey to social liberalism”) claims that Labour isn’t growing more like National at all.

What it’s becoming, they now say, is “not a party of unions or of business” but one “dominated by... the new middle class”.

To support this claim, they point to the influx of middle class members into the party from the late 1960s.

This group has interests of its own, apart from those of capitalists and workers, and sections of it tend towards socially liberal policies that don’t empower the working class. These have sometimes been reflected in Labour’s record.

But without the collective power of workers or the wealth of the capitalists, it lacks the social weight to “dominate” a major party of government like Labour.

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The fact that Labour has gone into coalition with United Future and NZ First and signalled an end to “political correctness” shows it’s not really dominated by the liberal middle class.

As most militant unionists (and quite a few capitalists) know, Labour is becoming a party of business like National.

As the article notes, the process of transformation is “incomplete” since Labour retains some dwindling ties to union leaders.

Despite differences over what Labour is becoming, it’s clear the emergence of the Workers Charter movement is happening at an historic time.

### **GRANT BROOKES**

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## **Labour’s joke on poor kiwi kids**

The Agenda for Children was launched in 2002. This wondrous piece of social policy, promised the Labour government, would eliminate poverty in children’s lives. What we’ve got, in reality, is lies and lip-service.

There’s not been any action based on this document since 2003. That’s unless you want to count the Working for Families package and, well, when it comes to poverty you wouldn’t want to count it.

Three in ten kiwi kids live in poverty. The 2003 Social Report says: “One in five can’t afford the doctor, one in five share a bed because of cost and one in five don’t have warm shoes or clothes”.

What kind of government do we have when these are the facts, and no real attempt to improve things is made?

The Working for Families package doesn’t come close to alleviating the problem. Working for Families is exactly that. It means if you are working you may benefit, but if you aren’t, you get nothing. Those at the bottom of the neo-liberal heap don’t count at all. They’re voiceless, faceless and forgotten.

The Agenda for Children is a joke on us. It’s Labour’s joke. They don’t have the guts or the love for kiwi kids to really eliminate poverty. They know they can’t do it because they know their real master is big business, and we all know that business doesn’t care about New Zealand kids having enough food in their bellies.

An agenda is a list of things to do. Labour have made a list of what, but not how, and I believe they never will know how because they just don’t care enough to do it.

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