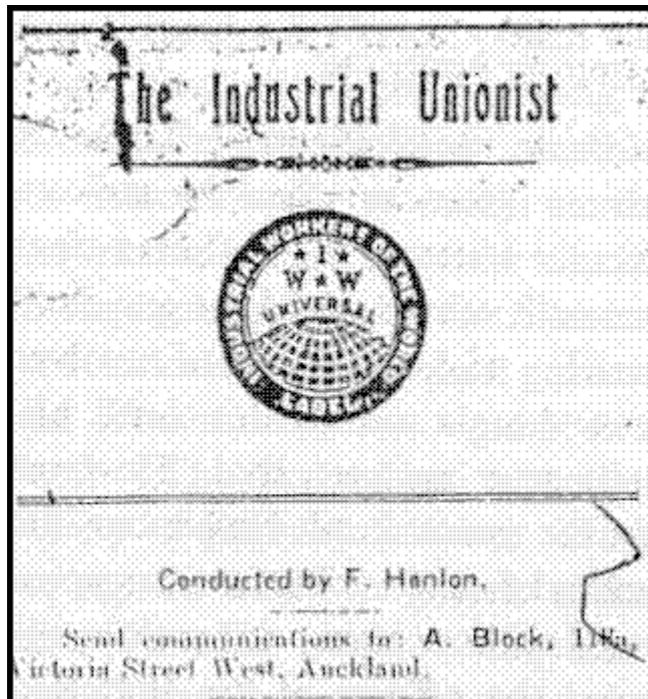


# A Country Considered to Be Free - New Zealand and the IWW



"Towards a Transnational Study of New Zealand Links with the Wobblies", an essay by Mark Derby which looks at New Zealand's relationship with the IWW.

In the 1890s a New Zealand watersiders' leader announced to his members, "We have no flag, we have no country." [1] He was declaring the internationalism of labor at a time when patriotism and imperialism then characterized the population. It was some years before his views became widespread, even within the militant end of the New Zealand union movement, and none promulgated them more strongly and sincerely than the [Industrial Workers of the World](#), the Wobblies, whose name is itself a declaration of internationalism. The early Wobblies were internationalists in practice as well as in spirit – they belonged to transitory occupations, they crossed and re-crossed the Tasman, the Pacific and much further afield, were often in danger of deportation or on the run, and in general they regarded their nationality as an accident of birth and a supreme irrelevance.

For those reasons a study of the Wobblies in New Zealand, which has been barely attempted on practical grounds, is also inappropriate to its subject. It is imposing a nationalist frame on an internationalist movement. Instead, I am addressing the wider issue of New Zealand's many links with the IWW, links which run both into and out of this country and include some of the organization's most influential figures worldwide. My research suggests that the influence and extent of Wobbly ideas in New Zealand have been seriously understated, and New Zealand's links with Wobbly movements elsewhere entirely overlooked. The Wobblies themselves left only scanty traces of their actions as they passed in and out of this country, and the partisan rewriting of history by the political parties which regarded themselves as natural successors to the IWW both co-opted and eliminated traces of their Wobbly roots.

This essay is, therefore, an initial attempt at tracing the Wobbly strain in New Zealand's political development.

The title, "A Country Considered to be Free," comes from a speech made by [William Trautmann](#) at the IWW's inaugural convention in Chicago in 1905. In accepting the post of general secretary, Trautmann informed the other delegates that he had been born in New Zealand, the son of a transient German miner who followed the gold rush to Coromandel in 1868 and was killed six years later in an industrial accident in the mine.[2] His widow and five children, including five-year-old William, returned to Germany, and as a young man William Trautmann made his way to the US and joined the fast-growing industrial unionism movement. In 1904 he wrote to labor bodies worldwide to seek support for a planned new organization to oppose the reformist American Federation of Labor (AFL) and was encouraged to found the IWW with a small group of fellow rebels the following year.[3]

In his speech to the first IWW convention, Trautmann referred in heavily qualified terms to New Zealand's political freedom, since that country was then regarded internationally as the exemplar of moderate, state-sponsored socialism based on compulsory arbitration of industrial disputes. This system had quelled union radicalism for almost two decades, but by 1905 it was coming under growing attack from the more radical end of the labor movement, especially larger semi-skilled unions such as the miners, wharfies and seamen, and from the small, combative [NZ Socialist Party](#), which aligned itself with De Leonite revolutionary industrial unionism. IWW ideas first reached New Zealand through the radical literature imported and sold by the Socialist Party. The industrial unionism message was also spread firsthand by transient individuals like the New Zealand-born miner [Pat Hickey](#), who had earlier worked in Montana with the [Western Federation of Miners](#), an IWW-affiliated union. When he returned home, in 1906, Hickey began to organize miners on the West Coast, together with other radicals from Australia. Less than a year after the IWW was formed in the US, the first strikes in 15 years took place in New Zealand mines, and by 1908 the miners' unions broke away from the compulsory arbitration system to negotiate directly with employers using the strike weapon.[4]

Meanwhile, a militant Wellington watersider named John Dowdall, a keen reader and inveterate public orator, was spreading IWW ideas from his soapbox down on the wharves. In January 1908 he formed an IWW Club, which confirmed Wellington's waterfront, then the busiest in the country, as a hotbed of activism. Two years later, another IWW Club was formed in Christchurch by militants from the anti-conscription movement. They applied to join the Federation of Labor, the new national body of industrial unions, as a New Zealand branch of the IWW and were admitted in June 1911.[5] Radical orators from abroad were an important impetus for this movement, although [Emma Goldman's](#) keenly anticipated tour in 1909 was cancelled at the last minute after her US citizenship was revoked.<sup>6</sup> In the same year the 36-year-old anarcho-feminist [Lola Ridge](#) contributed a poem, "The Martyrs of Hell," to Goldman's journal *Mother Earth*, and later became a sensation among New York's modernist avant-garde. Ridge was formerly married to a New Zealand mine manager and had spent much of her preceding years in small South Island mining towns.[7]

In just a few fiery years the left wing of New Zealand's labor movement had been reshaped from a timid collection of mainly craft unions working within the state-run arbitration system to a powerful federation of openly radical industrial unions winning their own terms of employment and confidently propagating a worker-run future for the country. The Wobblies were at the hard edge of this movement, especially in [Auckland](#), the country's biggest city, its

first port of call for overseas ships, and a town thronged with young, single men raring for excitement and confrontation. Here the Socialist Party's radical rhetoric drew huge crowds, but young militants found themselves more attracted to the anti-political Wobblies. Even the Party's Auckland secretary, a young tram conductor named [Tom Barker](#), defected to the IWW.[8]

This loose-knit band of Auckland Wobblies received a giant boost the day an overseas ship docked in late 1911. Down the gangplank walked three hardened revolutionaries from Canada, including Jack King, who had fled his own country after a strike in Vancouver. They were accompanied by two Englishmen, including twenty-six-year-old Alec Holdsworth, who had both been strongly influenced by the three Canadians during their long voyage. This small and utterly dedicated group made an explosive impact on the fertile Auckland scene. "In a very short time," says Holdsworth, "Jack was on the street expounding Industrialism (One Big Union) and Marxism in the vernacular." [9] He was backed up by at least twenty-five local Wobblies, including such striking figures as the openly gay fishmonger, Charlie Reeve, tattooed to the tips of his fingers. <sup>10</sup> Every Sunday they drew thousands to their platform down by the wharves. "We had little or no objections around the soapbox," according to Holdsworth. "Attention was good, collections were good – and we had no other source of income." <sup>11</sup> In early 1912, King left Auckland to spread the Wobbly message around North Island mining towns, eventually settling in Waihi, a company town entirely dependent economically on Australasia's largest gold mine. There he led a Marxist economics class, enrolled about 30 miners in an IWW local, and played a leading part in a huge strike which soon shut down the mine. Shortly afterwards, King represented the miners at the Federation of Labor's annual conference and convinced the Federation to adopt the first part of the IWW's Preamble, "The working class and the employing class have nothing in common," in its own constitution. His motion for a general strike in support of the Waihi miners was lost, but he won the backing of other delegates including future Prime Minister Peter Fraser who said, "With such propagandists I have no quarrel, whose work must undoubtedly advance the revolutionary working class movement." [12]

By August 1912, with the [Waihi mine still closed by strike action](#), King's activities had become so notorious that he left for Australia just ahead of the police and immediately resurrected the Sydney local of the IWW. The mine strike was finally broken after nine bitter months. Many of the strikers and their families were driven out of town by vigilante mobs, and the Auckland Wobblies scoured the countryside to provide food and shelter for them. The IWW marched as a group in the massive funeral demonstration held for a murdered Waihi striker, [Fred Evans](#). Holdsworth says, "We were industrialists, rebels on the job where we happened to be being exploited, and saboteurs if need be, and, instead of parliament, we stood for the One Big Union of the Workers of the World. We never led a strike but were always there." [13]

He and his fellow Wobblies often travelled to other towns for work, always carrying with them imported IWW literature to help in "sowing the seed" of rebellion. While draining swamps in the farming district of the Waikato, Holdsworth wrote the Kiplingesque "Ballad of the Agitator", which ends:

*There's never a place where the slave must sweat,  
Not a town of soot or sun,  
But we dared our worst and we gave our best,  
And the work was freely done –*

*Though no tear be shed o'er our martyr'd dead,  
We are ever marching on.*[14]

Although New Zealand's Wobblies were regularly accused by the popular press of sabotage, Holdsworth knew "of no occasion when it was carried out. We propounded it as a means of preventing scabbery, or dealing with it should it occur – it was a warning to both scab and employer. In America it was a different story, and we who had experience of real class war in America liked to tell of the various tricks, to those about us, never from the soapbox; and so the idea was spread." [15] In place of the saboteur's matches and dynamite, New Zealand Wobblies relied on the impact of IWW literature such as the *Little Red Songbook* and pamphlets like Marx's *Value, Price and Profit* (translated from German by the bilingual William Trautmann). [16] "All boats from America were met by one or more of us wearing our IWW badge," says Holdsworth, "in case there should be a Wobbly on board with the appropriate swag. But it was a precarious source of supply, so we set to and got out our own newspaper, the *Industrial Unionist*." [17] This, the first IWW periodical in the Southern Hemisphere, was launched as a monthly in February 1913. It supplied industrial news from around the country, reported on JB King's organizing efforts in Broken Hill, Australia, and printed letters from Hawaii by the somewhat isolated U.S. Wobbly, Albert Roe. [18]

One remarkable feature of the New Zealand *Industrial Unionist* may make it unique among Wobbly newspapers worldwide and has certainly never been matched in any other labor publication in New Zealand. From its July issue the paper ran regular articles in Maori, the language of New Zealand's indigenous people. At that time many Maori spoke little or no English, although most were literate in their own language. The New Zealand IWW appears to have had no paid-up Maori members, so these articles were a means of reaching out to the most exploited section of the population. They were written by Percy Short, a member of the paper's five-man editorial collective who worked as a house painter and licensed interpreter of Maori. [19] His articles skillfully combined traditional Maori expressions with translations of IWW propaganda. One acknowledged the devastating loss of land and resources by Maori and said that all New Zealand workers were now placed in a similar condition by the boss class. Just as Maori had violently resisted the loss of their land in the past, now all workers should form a single tribe to recover and retain their possessions. [20] Collectively, these articles amount to an embryonic Marxist economic analysis in the Maori language, using authentically Maori metaphors and cultural values.

By mid-1913 the vigorous Auckland local of the IWW was holding four or five large public meetings a week. In September the English-born [Tom Barker](#), who had taken over from JB King as the group's guiding spirit, took the message to the rest of the country, riding with the tramps on railway goods wagons. [21] Holdsworth says, "He went without money and was without price. But he had a bundle of potential rebels in his bag – a pile of *Industrial Unionists* – each one more for the Revolution". [22] Barker's first stop was Wellington, where he reported, "I had 11 propaganda meetings in 14 days." With the help of the stalwart John Dowdall, he was smuggled onto the wharves under the noses of the hostile waterfront police. "I finished on the piles down below, and talked Direct Action to the wharfies.... Wellington will be a militant place for an IWW Local in the near future." [23]

In Christchurch, the "storm centre of anti-militarism," he found enough active IWW members to form a local immediately, reporting via the *Industrial Unionist* that "They have a nice room and nicely furnished, and all rebels peregrinating are requested to call in and introduce themselves... We will have half a dozen locals by Christmas, the tendency is all in our

direction. The politicians are losing their grip, and the feeling is towards the repudiation entirely of nose counting, and the advocacy of Direct Action, Sabotage and Revolutionary Unionism.”[24] Finally Barker undertook a month-long tour of mining towns along the South Island’s West Coast, “the home of the fighters,” where he sold out the last of his stock of radical literature.[25]

His return journey was interrupted at Wellington by the outbreak of a long-awaited [waterfront strike](#). Barker promptly organized a nonstop program of speakers and music in the public square opposite the wharves and led guerrilla attacks on large parties of mounted strikebreakers recruited from the rural districts. The strike soon spread to other industries and other cities and became the greatest industrial conflagration in New Zealand’s history. The *Industrial Unionist* now appeared every two or three days, urging workers throughout the country to make this a general strike which would bring down the ferociously anti-union government. Short’s articles told Maori workers, “This is the same government which confiscated your lands and killed your ancestors,” and urged them to join the strike.[26] Perhaps in consequence, very few Maori joined the thousands of strikebreakers, although they had been prominent in helping to break the Waihi strike the previous year.

As the strike grew more violent and widespread, the *Industrial Unionist* claimed a print-run of 5000 an issue. Barker himself sold 700 copies in a single morning, before being arrested along with other strike leaders and charged with sedition (which carried the death penalty). These arrests and the government’s recruitment of more than ten thousand strikebreakers and “special constables” finally broke the strike and forced the Wobblies to scatter far and wide to avoid retribution. Many left for Australia, including Barker, who jumped bail, and Reeve, who was badly beaten as he boarded his ship. There they both reunited with JB King and reinvigorated the Sydney IWW. Others headed for remote New Zealand communities where they were not known, often becoming active in the shearers’ and other rural unions.

The outbreak a few months later of World War I legitimized continuing persecution of the Wobblies. Some served long jail sentences for opposing conscription; others set up an escape route for conscientious objectors, smuggling them in the coal bunkers of ships to Australia, where conscription was not imposed.[27] However, a nationwide outburst of patriotism, and harsh emergency powers which outlawed strikes in essential industries and banned the importation of “seditious publications” (including the entire output of the IWW) shattered the strong movement which Barker and others had built up.[28]

Slowly, from about 1920, the remnants of New Zealand’s Wobblies began to reassert themselves. A One Big Union (OBU) Council, opposed to the parliamentary ambitions of the newly formed New Zealand Labour Party, began meeting above the shop of a sympathetic Auckland tailor. Its literature secretary, Leo Woods, said, “our activities were modeled along the lines of the IWW and consisted of public speaking and the dissemination of literature.”[29] Much of this printed matter was still banned and smuggled in on ships from Sydney; however, the OBU did not long survive the formation in 1921 of the New Zealand Communist Party, which assumed the leadership of the extreme left and opposed syndicalist views almost as strongly as the Labour Party.

Since then, founding Wobblies like Tom Barker and JB King reappeared occasionally in New Zealand, but their organization was never rebuilt, and the Wobbly strain in the labor movement was confined to determined individuals. One of these, Tom Gale, was a seaman from the Isle of Man who joined the IWW after witnessing police attacks on young female

strikers in the silk-weaving plants of [Paterson, New Jersey](#). He arrived in New Zealand in 1922 and had a long career as a rigger in the state railways. Railway workers were then represented by four different unions, and Gale's attempts to form One Big Union on the railways failed when the four sets of paid officials could not agree on which of them would lose their jobs. In 1932, a period of massive unemployment and spreading fascist influence, he joined the New Zealand Communist Party and was elected to the executive of its Auckland branch, but left after refusing to sign correspondence with slogans such as "All Hail to Comrade Stalin." [30] Another veteran of the 1913 Paterson silk-weavers' strike was Alex Scott, the editor of a local newspaper who was convicted of "aiding and abetting hostility to the government." Although not an IWW member, he was regarded as a valued ally by the U.S. Wobbly paper *Solidarity*. Arriving in New Zealand in 1922, Scott worked as a crusading journalist and helped establish large cooperatives in the working-class Hutt Valley into the 1940s. [31]

One of the more improbable New Zealand links with the worldwide Wobbly movement was Len de Caux, born in 1899 to a minister of religion serving a wealthy rural congregation in Hawkes Bay. He studied at elite private schools in New Zealand and England and entered Oxford University on a scholarship in 1919. This scion of privilege was radicalized during summer holidays in Europe. One of those, to [Turin](#) in 1920, coincided with a workers' takeover of the auto factories. De Caux read of this in the newspaper *L'Ordine Nuovo*, in articles by the young Antonio Gramsci. Immediately after graduating, he "brushed from me the cobwebs of Oxford and emigrated to the United States...I'd come to join the working class in a country where class struggle was more brazenly brutal than in England or New Zealand." [32] Soon de Caux was writing on-the-job articles for the IWW paper *Industrial Solidarity*, on Great Lakes shipping, Chicago packinghouses and Detroit steel mills, and dodging shotgun-wielding guards in order to ride freight trains to the Midwestern grain harvest. He became one of the leading labor journalists in the US and publicity director of the CIO until he was purged as a communist and blacklisted by the House on Unamerican Activities Committee (HUAC). De Caux did not return to New Zealand until 1959, when he saw an old photograph from the turn of the century of the small West Coast mining town where he was born. "It was so startlingly similar to Western American towns around the same period, where the IWW had its start that I realized for the first time that the Wobblies might have had roots in like pioneering conditions in both countries." [33]

It is this recognition of the universality of labor and its travails that has given the IWW its greatest strength and influence. Resisting all appeals to national pride or ethnic division, the Wobblies worked wherever they could be most effective, and I am persuaded by my research that their impact on New Zealand politics was much wider than has been acknowledged to date. For example, the IWW was greatly admired by those further to the center of the labor movement, who sympathized with the repression the Wobblies faced. In the early 20s a moderate laborite wrote a song called *The Popular Scapegoat*:

*If a boiler blows up or a steamer goes down  
Or somebody curses the Cross or the Crown  
To find out the culprit, no, don't let it trouble you  
Put it all down to the Eye Double Double -You.* [34]

A small number of the original Wobblies resisted joining either New Zealand's Labour or Communist Parties and never departed from their IWW views. Bill Potter was an activist in the Wellington IWW and a militant in the 1913 strike, who later escaped to Australia where

he took part in anti-conscription campaigns and the 1917 Brisbane tram strike. After returning to New Zealand he had a long career as a rank and file unionist, maintaining his IWW philosophy to the end.[35] That's all I know about Potter, and I know even less about most of the others who have espoused and enacted the Wobbly strain of far-left politics in New Zealand, those spectral, semi-mythical figures whose humor, iconoclasm, commitment to working-class culture and dedication to democratic principle can still provide inspiration for actions in the present and hopes for the future.

*Mark Derby is a writer and researcher in Wellington, NZ. He is currently editing a history of the New Zealanders who took part in the Spanish Civil War.*

## ENDNOTES

1. H Roth, *Trade Unions in New Zealand*, AH and AW Reed, 1973, p. 31
2. Proceedings of the First Convention of the IWW, 1905
3. William Trautmann, *Fifty Years War*, Book #2 1905-1920: The Rise and Fall of the Industrial Workers of the World, Trautmann collection, Walter Reuther Library, Detroit. I am indebted to Dr Jay Miller for drawing this important source to my attention, and permitting use of his PhD dissertation *Soldier of the Class War - the life and writing of William E Trautmann*, Wayne State University, Detroit, 2000.
4. For the formation of the NZ Federation of Labor, see Erik Olssen, *The Red Feds – revolutionary industrial unionism and the NZ Federation of Labour 1908-1913*, Auckland 1988. For an important contemporary account, see, Pat Hickey, *Red Fed Memoirs – being a brief survey of the birth and growth of the Federation of Labour from 1908 to 1915 and the days immediately preceding it*, reprinted Wellington Media Collective, 1980, f.p. 1925
5. Olssen, *The Red Feds*, p. 34 et passim
6. Emma Goldman, *Living My Life vol. 1*, Alfred A. Knopf Inc. 1931, Ch. 34
7. Michelle Leggott, *The First Life: A Chronology of Lola Ridge's Australasian Years*, 22 April 2006, [www.nzepc.auckland.ac.nz/features/bluff06/leggott.asp](http://www.nzepc.auckland.ac.nz/features/bluff06/leggott.asp)
8. Erik Olssen, 'Tom Barker', NZ Dictionary of Biography, online edition, [www.dnzb.govt.nz/dnzb](http://www.dnzb.govt.nz/dnzb)
9. A. Holdsworth to H. Roth, 'Biographical notes – Tom Barker', MS-Papers – 6164-007, Turnbull Library, Wellington
10. Verity Burgmann, *Revolutionary Industrial Unionism – the Industrial Workers of the World in Australia*, Melbourne 1995, p. 39, 95
11. Holdsworth, *ibid.*
12. H Roth, 'New Zealand 'Wobblies' – the story of the Industrial Workers of the World', *Here and Now*, March 1952, p 6-7
13. Holdsworth, *ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*
16. William Trautmann, *Fifty Years War*, p. 158
17. Holdsworth, *ibid.*
18. 'Sandwich Islands', *Industrial Unionist*, 1 May 1913
19. H. Roth, 'Biographical notes – Percy Short', MS-Papers-6164-092, Turnbull Library, Wellington
20. 'Ki nga kaimahi Maori', *Industrial Unionist*, 1 July 1913
21. 'New Zealand notes', *Industrial Unionist*, 1 August 1913
22. Holdsworth, *ibid.*
23. T. Barker, 'Around NZ – Organiser's Notes', *Industrial Unionist*, 1 October 1913

24. Ibid.
25. T. Barker, 'NZ organiser', *Industrial Unionist*, 1 November 1913
26. 'Ki te Iwi Maori Katoa', *Industrial Unionist*, 13 November 1913
27. See, eg. *Maoriland Worker*, 21 September 1921, re departure of former Auckland IWW member Bob Heffron to Australia (where he later became Labor Premier of NSW).
28. H Roth, *Trade Unions in New Zealand*, AH and AW Reed, 1973, p. 42
29. Leo Woods to H. Roth, 'Biographical notes – Woods, Leo John,' MS-Copy-Micro-0714-26, Turnbull Library, Wellington
30. Len Gale, personal communications with author, 2006-7
31. Scott, Alexander, MS-Papers-0209, Turnbull Library, Wellington
32. Len De Caux, *Labor Radical – from the Wobblies to the CIO*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1970, p. 27
33. L. De Caux to B. Turner, 24 August 1979, MS-Paper-1981, Turnbull Library, Wellington
34. JB Hulbert, 'The Popular Scapegoat,' in *My Garden and Other Verses*, Wellington, 1922
35. Nadine LaHatte (nee Potter), to Mark Derby, email 1 June 2007