

Wobblies and Cossacks: The 1913 great strike



A short history of the 1913 New Zealand general strike by Ciaran Doolin.

The industrial actions in New Zealand during 1913 marked one of the high points of the militant labour movement. The 1912 Waihi miners' strike, which was violently repressed by the police and "free" unionists, was of the primary the catalysts for the events of 1913. The driving organisational force behind the strike was the Federation of Labour, often referred to as the "Red Feds", who were greatly influenced by the US-based [Industrial Workers of the World \(IWW\)](#), or "Wobblies". The strike was decisively defeated in the end, and the majority within the labour movement turned their focus away from radical unionism and towards the ballot box. Despite the subsequent ascendance of political labour, there was a small but vigorous core of unionists who rejected this move and continued to employ the weapon of direct action. It was to this sector of the labour movement that the 1913 Great Strike offered inspiration and hope.

Rumblings and antecedents

The 1890 maritime strike was the first major industrial confrontation in New Zealand. While the workers were defeated, they emerged with a new understanding of the power they could wield by united action. It was on the crest of this wave of class consciousness that the first Liberal government took office in 1891. In 1894 the government introduced a raft of new laws to protect and improve workers' wages and living and working conditions. Among these was the historic Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act 1894 (IC&AA) which established an independent court to arbitrate industrial disputes. Unions were encouraged to register under the Act, which meant giving up the right to negotiate directly with employers or engage in direct action. With unions flocking to register under the IC&AA, a period of relative industrial peace was achieved between 1894 and 1905. Although the policies of the Liberals did deliver substantial improvements for the working class, as the new century dawned some unions were starting to complain that Arbitration Court decisions were failing to keep wages in line with rising living costs, as well as doing little to improve working conditions like hours and safety. In 1906 the court stated finally that it did not settle wages on a profit-sharing basis. "The onus of proving the necessity for any increase in the standard rates was thrown upon the union," wrote economist J. B. Condliffe. "It was recognised that the cost of living must be allowed for, but the Court gradually drifted into the position of calculating nominal wages at the standard of the years

about 1900 in terms of cost of living." Therefore real wages were not rising, in fact between 1901 and 1906 they declined. By contrast, during the first years of the Court wages had increased enough that they outdistanced the cost of living. An American industrial relations expert who visited the country in 1909 expressed surprise that wages had not risen, considering the worldwide increasing wage trend during this period. The stagnation of wages was occurring against a back drop of economic boom from which employers were making record profits. Conflict was inevitable. The utopian picture of harmony between capital and labour – the "workingman's paradise" – was punctured in 1905 by the brief but successful Auckland tramwaymen's strike.

In 1908 the Trade Unions Act (TUA) was passed advancing more rights to unions that chose to remain outside of the IC&AA, including the right to strike. In quick response to the passage of the TUA and following on the heels of the success of the Blackball miners' strike earlier that year, a conference of West Coast miners met in Greymouth to form the New Zealand Federation of Miners. The purpose of the organisation was to present a clear alternative to arbitration (a system referred to pejoratively as "labour's leg-iron") based on class struggle and direct action. The objects and preamble of the conference borrowed closely from those of the American Western Federation of Miners and the IWW. In 1909 the name of the organisation was changed to the Federation of Labour to better represent the much larger and broader membership, which now included most unions of watersiders, general labourers and shearers. The Federation cut its teeth in the 1912 Auckland general labourers' dispute and later the same year in the Waihi miners' strike. Both actions resulted in defeats, with the Waihi strike ending in a medieval-style drama when a strikers' meeting at the Trades Hall was invaded by a mob composed of a mix of police and some union members loyal to the company. A striker, Fred Evans, was severely beaten and mortally wounded, and the "Red Feds" along with their families were chased out of town.

While the actions themselves produced few material gains for the workers concerned, the spirit of struggle they engendered in workers across the country was electric and contagious. By the end of 1912 the Federation's membership totalled a quarter of all organised workers in New Zealand, and its journal *Maoriland Worker* was prolific in all centres with a circulation of about 10,000. In January 1913 a unity conference was held which brought together erstwhile opposed moderate and militant unions. This proposed the foundation of two new workers' organisations: the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the United Federation of Labour (UFL). The UFL, like its predecessor, was a revolutionary organisation taking the overthrow of capitalism to be its ultimate objective. The constitution declared the organisation's function would be "[t]o organise systematically and scientifically upon an industrial union basis, in order to assist the overthrow of the capitalist system, and thus bring about a cooperative commonwealth based upon industrial democracy." The scene was thus set for the Great Strike.

1913 the year of tumult

The actions of 1913 began rather unobtrusively in March through a dispute between Wellington shipwrights and the Union Steam Ship Company (USS Co.) over the failure of the latter to pay workers for travelling time or provide transport to the company's new workshops. In May the shipwrights cancelled their registration under the IC&CA and joined the UFL-affiliated Wellington Waterside Workers' Union (WWWU). On October 17, after protracted negotiations, the employers rejected the shipwrights' claims, and the following day the shipwrights went on strike. On the 22nd the watersiders had a stop-work meeting to consider the grievances of the shipwrights. Their employers declared the stop-work meeting a strike and replaced the unionists with other workers. The watersiders then handed the control of the dispute to the UFL. The next day mass meetings and pickets began. On the 28th a conference of employers and unions chaired by Prime Minister William Massey concluded with an offer to the shipwrights to reinstate the old collective agreement, provided the union put up a £1,000 bond. While the UFL accepted the proposal the WWWU rejected it. The

ship owners then handed the control of their side of the dispute to the Employers' Federation. At this point Massey decided to involve the military. Colonel Hewer, Chief of the General Staff, urged that the command structure of the territorials be used to recruit special constables from the civilian population, advice that was swiftly actioned. The specials were later to acquire the name "Massey's Cossacks" and became infamous for their baton-swinging horseback charges on demonstrating strikers.

On October 29 Auckland and Westport watersiders went out on strike in sympathy. The next day the first contingents of mounted specials arrived in Wellington. Marines from the HMS Psyche were marched through the streets of Wellington, setting up barricades complete with machine-gun nests at strategic locations. By the end of October Otago, Greymouth and Oamaru watersiders had joined in the strike, and miners throughout the country began to join. On November 3 over 2,000 watersiders and supporters gathered at the intersection of Taranaki and Buckle Streets in Wellington and confronted the specials. The specials repeatedly charged the strikers causing numerous injuries, some serious. Following this confrontation negotiations between the UFL and employers were broken off, with the latter insisting that any agreement must be registered under the IC&AA. The employers then called on "free" labour to man the wharves, a call backed by Massey who said specials would be provided to protect those "lawfully carrying on their business". By this time there were 1,000 mounted specials and 500 foot specials patrolling Wellington. On November 6 a new watersiders' union was formed in Wellington and its members started loading. Meanwhile, specials were flowing into Auckland, with 2,000 having set up camp in the Domain. Two days later the specials occupied the waterfront. This set off a general strike in Auckland; by noon 4,500 workers in 14 different unions had joined the watersiders on strike, including brewery workers, bricklayers, carpenters, drivers, labourers, painters, seamen, and timber, furniture and hotel workers. Within a few days 10,000 workers were on strike in Auckland, and a number of other unions refused to do any work for the specials and offered financial support to the strikers.

By mid-November strike action was starting to lose momentum. The UFL call for a general strike in Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin was met with a tepid response. The moderate United Labour Party leadership and the Christchurch Strike Committee spoke out publicly against it. Nelson reopened its ports with company unionists, goods were being trucked through Wellington by a new drivers' union without interference, and some Auckland unions returned to work. At the point of origin of the dispute, the Wellington docks, the new union membership had risen to nearly 600. However, by this stage, the employers were concerned not with the resolution of the dispute through negotiations but instead with the destruction of the UFL. Indeed, their obstinacy was cause for consternation within their own ranks; on November 13, with business in Auckland paralysed, 300 shopkeepers and businessmen petitioned Massey pleading with him to bring pressure on the local Employers' Federation to "not allow their stubbornness to ruin our trade".

Nonetheless workers continued to struggle. On November 16 roughly 7,500 Auckland strikers marched to Victoria Park where they met thousands of others who swelled their numbers to 12,000. Clashes between specials and workers continued throughout the country, with the Wellington Employers' Committee brazenly declaring on November 21 that "until the funeral obsequies of the Federation are complete ... the time is not right for further negotiations". The following day the Auckland Strike Committee called off the general strike for all workers except watersiders, seamen, drivers and tramwaymen. With that, the strike in the main centres across the country had effectively been broken. However the miners on the West Coast and in the Waikato continued to strike. With company union membership continuing to grow, on November 26 the UFL proposed binding arbitration by the Arbitration Court, but the Employers' Federation rejected this and continued to refuse to negotiate with the UFL.

In early December a ray of hope punctured the gloom when the Australian union conference resolved not to handle cargo to and from New Zealand. Unfortunately the trans-Tasman sympathy strikes were too late to halt the decline. On the 20th the UFL declared the strike over for all workers except the miners (whose strike ended nine days later). Some unions returned to work on versions of their pre-strike agreements, others through the new company unions, and an unfortunate few, like the Huntly miners, were blacklisted. In the immediate aftermath of the strike the UFL was a shadow of its former self and barely limped along during the war years. However, after the 1917 Russian Revolution radical unionism experienced resurgence. In 1919 the UFL became the Alliance of Labour and fought the Labour Party for the loyalty of the workers, arguing for industrial over political action. Falling export prices in the late 1920's followed by the Great Depression in 1929 intervened, bringing mass unemployment and contributing to the decline of radical unionism. The 1935 election of the First Labour Government symbolised the triumph of political Labour.

The significance of the Great Strike

There has been considerable debate among historians over the long-term impact of the Great Strike on the labour movement. While there remains much disagreement over the nuances of this legacy there is a clear consensus that key sections of both sides of the dispute concluded that the way forward was industrial peace through arbitrationism and political labour. As social historian Erik Olssen argues, on the one hand:

The labour movement, thanks to the strike, achieved a new level of unity and consensus about the path forward....The way forward required One Big Union (strongly decentralised) and, if not revolutionary political action, then certainly very, very radical political action. If one compares the platforms of the various labour parties within the empire, the New Zealand one was certainly vastly more radical than any of the others.

And on the other:

The extent of the government's education became apparent during the war. The private papers of people such as James Allen and Downie Stewart [prominent conservative politicians] show that they did not like unions – revolutionary unions particularly, but they certainly did not want to provoke them into open warfare. The cost was too high.

There were unions who clearly operated outside this consensus. The watersiders were one example, and they, for a fleeting moment, channelled directly the spirit of 1913 during the 1951 waterfront lockout, when they dropped out of the pro-arbitration Federation of Labour and founded their own radical Trade Unions Congress committed to direct negotiation and action, and challenged the employers to deliver their much overdue wage increases and reduction in overtime.

One question remains outstanding: Was 1913 a revolutionary moment in New Zealand history? The capitalists at the time seemed to be convinced of it: the editor of the New Zealand Times asserted that the strike could lead to a "bloody civil war"; Charles Holdsworth, general manager of the Union Steam Ship Company saw it as "an incipient class war"; the Governor, Lord Liverpool, got so caught up in the events that he went so far as to suggest that the UFL had declared a provisional government. At the other polarity, as Olssen observes, "Many Australians had come to view New Zealand as the best chance for a socialist revolution. In Australia, Labour parties got in the way; in New Zealand the lines of class conflict were crystal clear, thanks to the strength of the Federation of Labour and the virtual absence of a labour party." Historian Miles Fairburn claims that "In 1912 and 1913 New Zealand came closer to class war than at any other time in its history". However, the picture of revolutionary change was illusory. The working class and its leadership were divided in both strategic vision and tactical direction which led to a failure to act decisively at crucial moments, ultimately playing into the hands of

the employers and the government “It seemed like a revolutionary moment”, Olssen concludes, although “nobody quite knew what a revolution would look like.”

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