

Domestic Workers' Unions

1890 – 1942

Cook, 1993

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Theme: Employment

The history of domestic service unions is brief and confused. Repeated efforts to organise what was, until 1936, the largest group of women workers all ended in failure: none of the unions drew substantial support, none lasted for more than a few years, and none was able to negotiate an award with employers.

Although their fundamental demands were apparently innocuous – a limit on the number of hours worked each week, and regular time off—the nature and circumstances of the work made domestic workers particularly difficult to organise. Nearly 90 percent were the sole household help, following a repetitious round of boring, arduous duties for low wages, and isolated from one another in the homes of their employers. The job was live-in, so workers were effectively on call seven days a week. In many cases they could not leave the house without asking permission. Not surprisingly, other jobs were preferred, and 'the same old story of utter dislike on the part of the girls for domestic work and of the attractions of factory life' was well known. [1]

The first known attempt to unionise servants took place in Dunedin in 1890. The New Zealand Domestic Servants' Union, with Harriet Morison as president, vanished within the year. Four years later Aileen Garmson tried unsuccessfully to start a domestics' union in Christchurch. In 1898–99 both Kate Evans (Kate Edger) and Marianne Tasker made attempts to set up unions in Wellington, but neither was effective.

In 1906 the Wellington Domestic Workers' Union was formed. At the initial meeting – chaired by Tasker, who was elected president – some twenty domestic servants engaged in sometimes heated argument with Mrs Hislop, wife of the mayor and an employer of servants. While she advised them that efficiency was the road to good wages, the assembled workers spoke of not being given enough time off to wash themselves, of sleeping in rooms like 'dog boxes', and of the low status of domestic work. [2] The newly formed union was registered under the Arbitration Act, noted as having 38 members, and affiliated with the Wellington Trades Council, which encouraged the formation of similar unions in other cities.

The Wellington union came closest to success, meeting twice with employers, and gaining their agreement to a 68-hour week. When the matter of holidays and the allocation of hours worked on particular days could not be agreed upon, the dispute went to the Arbitration Court; it was still there when the failure to put in an annual return led to the cancellation of the union's registration (without which the court could not arbitrate) in 1908. An attempt to re-register was rebuffed on the grounds that domestic work was not an industrial occupation, and was therefore outside the scope of the Arbitration Court.



Information about New Zealand for domestic servants issued by the High Commissioner for New Zealand, London, c. 1912. ATL, Eph-A-IMMIGRATION-1912-01-cover.

In early 1907 an attempt was made to organise in Auckland, and a union formed in Christchurch registered in 1908 as the Canterbury Domestic Workers' Union. However, employers refused to meet with it, and the Arbitration Court subsequently ruled that domestic workers could not be covered by the Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act, as employers gained no profit from servants' work. By 1911 the Canterbury union's membership had dropped to nineteen, from a high point of 59, and its registration lapsed.

All these attempts at organisation followed the same pattern: generated by people outside the domestic workforce, they started with a small membership which consistently fell until the union faded away. The organisers were politically active in other areas: Morison headed the Dunedin Tailloresses' Union; Garmson and Tasker both held positions in the New Zealand Workers' Union. At an organisational level, men were involved: the Canterbury union was initiated by H.R. Rusbridge, president of the Canterbury Trades and Labour Council, and R. T. Bailey. Rank and file membership was probably entirely female and Pākehā, based as it was in the main centres where few Māori then lived.

Deeply entrenched beliefs regarding the nature and value of domesticity and the work necessary to maintain it lay behind the exclusion of domestic workers from protection under the Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act 1894. An almost entirely female workforce, doing what another group of women did uncounted and unpaid, was not part of the recognised industrial or commercial world. 'The housewife,' said *The New Zealand Times* in 1907, 'for so long shielded from contact with the rough laws of industry, is to be dragged down from her seat in the gallery and forced into the arena of industrial conflict.' [3]

Two later attempts to organise domestic workers were only slightly more successful: the Christchurch Domestic Workers' (1936–40), led by Jane Souter, achieved the record number of members – 160; and the Auckland Domestic Servants' Union, led by Emily Gibson, managed to survive for seven years (1936–42).

There were no further attempts. A 1936 analysis in *The Working Woman* summed up the central problem:

While so much of domestic work is done by unpaid mother-housewives, unions of domestic workers will not solve the problem...unless, perchance, the 'blacklegs' can be persuaded to join the union too...they are both the victims of an unorganised, perhaps unintentional, largely unresented, but nevertheless an entirely real exploitation. [4]

The number of women categorised by the census as 'domestics' rose until 1901, when it reached 27,852, then declined slowly to just under 18,000 in 1921. The Depression pushed it back up to a peak of 29,262, but by 1945 numbers in three other categories of female employment surpassed it. [5] Women voted with their feet, moving away from domestic service to what they regarded as pleasanter factory, shop and office work.

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Notes

[1] *Lyttelton Times*, 4 January 1907, p. 5.

[2] *New Zealand Times*, 20 September 1906, p. 5.

[3] *New Zealand Times*, 14 February 1907, p. 4.

[4] 'B.B.' *Working Woman*, Vol.3 No. 13, November 1936, p. 7

[5] New Zealand Census, Department of Statistics, Government Printer, Wellington, 1891, 1901, 1911, 1921, 1936, 1945.

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