

The 1951 waterfront dispute

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The immediate cause of the 1951 waterfront dispute was the post-war economic situation. After years of restrictions and shortages, the economy was booming. As the cost of living soared, workers demanded higher wage increases.

In January 1951 the Arbitration Court awarded a 15% wage increase to all workers covered by the industrial arbitration system. This did not apply to waterside workers, whose employment was controlled by the Waterfront Industry Commission. The mostly British-owned shipping companies that employed the wharfies instead offered 9%, claiming that earlier waterfront wage increases should be taken into account.

The Waterside Workers' Union protested by refusing to work overtime from 13 February. The shipping companies in turn refused to hire them unless they agreed to work extra hours. When no agreement could be reached, union members were locked out. The nation's wharves soon came to a complete standstill.

A state of emergency

Hear the state of emergency declaration

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Hear this radio broadcast from Prime Minister Sidney Holland. See a transcript and reference for this file.

Arguing that New Zealand's vital export trade was under threat, the National government declared a state of emergency on 21 February. The following day Prime Minister Holland warned that New Zealand was 'at war'. On the 27th, troops were sent onto the Auckland and Wellington wharves to load and unload ships. Draconian emergency regulations imposed rigid censorship, gave police sweeping powers of search and arrest and made it an offence for citizens to assist strikers – even giving food to their children was outlawed.

Despite the restrictions, the wharfies enjoyed the support of a well-organised relief network. Connie Birchfield recalled how:

Somebody produced a slaughtered sheep to share. I got the impression it was stolen but now I know there were friendly farmers who donated sheep, and market gardeners who gave vegetables, and tradespeople who provided other goods and services for nothing.

Fighting back

Watersiders and their sympathisers also managed to evade government censorship by producing illegal newsletters and dodging police raids to distribute them through clandestine networks. Supporters even tried to set up a 'freedom radio' station with a transmitter hidden deep in the Wellington hills. As well as attacking the government, watersiders' propaganda denounced Fintan Patrick Walsh and other Federation of Labour leaders as rats who had betrayed the workers' cause.

Other unionists, including coal miners, freezing workers, seamen, hydroelectric power workers and some drivers and railwaymen, went on strike in protest at the government's action. At the height of the dispute around 22,000 workers were involved. Although the waterfront was an overwhelmingly male world, women played an active role. Some wharfies' wives entered the paid workforce for the first time to support their locked-out husbands. Jock Barnes's wife, Freda (Fuzz) Barnes, organised the wharfies' Auckland Women's Auxiliary, which helped co-ordinate the relief effort for workers' families.

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