

Story: Strikes and labour disputes

## Page 2. Early labour disputes

(Derby, M., 2016)

The first recorded wage dispute in New Zealand was in the Bay of Islands in 1821. Māori timber-workers stopped work because they wanted to be paid 'for their labour in Money, as was the case in England, or else in Gun Powder'.<sup>1</sup> They were probably being paid with food and other goods, and felt this was unfair. The outcome of their strike is not known.

### Eight-hour day dispute

New Zealand's most famous early labour dispute was in 1840 when a London-born carpenter named Samuel Parnell was asked to build a house in Petone, near Wellington. He insisted on working no more than eight hours a day. There were only three other carpenters in Wellington at that time, so Parnell's employer had little choice but to agree. After that, tradesmen arriving in Wellington were warned that if they worked more than eight hours a day without being paid overtime rates, they could be ducked in the harbour.

Workers in Canterbury, Dunedin and Auckland later claimed the same hours of work, making New Zealand one of the first countries in the world to demand a standard eight-hour working day. But there were no trade unions, no union awards (legally set pay rates and conditions) and no laws to enforce them, so for many years the eight-hour day relied on either a united workforce or agreement from employers.

From 1890 New Zealand workers have had a holiday on Labour Day, the fourth Monday in October, to celebrate the eight-hour working day.

### More disputes

Later, as unions were established, there were many more strikes in various towns and different industries, usually to try and win better wages or working conditions. In the late 1880s even schoolboys went on strike to protest being given too much homework. Almost 40% of workers were members of a union. However, the workforce was small and scattered, so striking workers seldom managed to overcome resistance from their employers.

### Wet wool walk-out

In 1893 all 28 shearers at Benmore Station in the Mackenzie Country went on strike because they said rainy weather made the sheep too wet to shear. They accused the station manager of trying to disguise the wool by 'shandy-gaffing' (mixing wet wool with dry ones). The strikers

### 1890 maritime strike

New Zealand's first big nationwide strike began as a matter of principle in support of Australian unions. In August 1890 John Millar, the head of the Maritime Council, which united the seamen's, wharf labourers', miners' and railwaymen's unions, asked the Union Steam Ship Company to stop trading with Australia while a union dispute was raging there. The company refused, and employed non-union labour in Sydney Harbour to unload its ships. New Zealand crews then walked off the job in protest. Other seamen, watersiders and miners joined the protest.

then guarded the roads leading into the station to keep out strike-breaking shearers (labelled 'blacklegs' or 'scabs'). The men stayed out on strike for a week until some strike-breakers reached the station by a back route and took their jobs.

action. About 8,000 workers were on strike at ports around New Zealand.

The strike caused enormous disruption to the country's trade and transport networks. However, there was remarkably little violence, even when hundreds of farm labourers left their jobs to carry out the strikers' work. In Dunedin, striking wharfies even served as special constables (temporary volunteer police) to help maintain order. After almost three months the strike was called off, in a total

defeat for the seamen and the unions allied with them.

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**Footnotes:**

1. Bert Roth and Janny Hammond, *Toil and trouble: the struggle for a better life in New Zealand*. Auckland: Methuen New Zealand, 1981, p. 14.

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