

Warning

This information was published in 1966 in *An Encyclopaedia of New Zealand*, edited by A. H. McIntock. It has not been corrected and will not be updated.

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RIOTS

The Depression Riots, 1932

A series of riots in New Zealand occurred early in 1932, during the world-wide economic depression. On Saturday, 9 January, a procession of unemployed, many of them women, marched to the offices of the Otago Hospital Board in Dunedin to demand relief. When the Board's officials refused assistance, the enraged crowd rushed to Wardell Brothers' grocery store nearby where they were met by a cordon of police. The store's windows were smashed but the police stood their ground. The situation remained tense, with large crowds milling through the streets and occasional fights breaking out, but the excitement subsided after a special distribution of 800 food parcels for the weekend had been arranged. An Emergency Relief Depot was opened after the riot, but on 9 April there were new unemployed disorders in Dunedin, again following a refusal of assistance by the Hospital Board.

The most serious riot of the year took place later that week, on 14 April, in Auckland. Postal employees had called a demonstration and public meeting to protest against the 10 per cent cut in salaries imposed by the Government. As their procession moved up to the Town Hall it was joined by thousands of unemployed marching behind the banners of the Unemployed Workers' Movement. Outside the Town Hall the unemployed were refused admittance by a strong force of police. The crowd surged forwards and there was some scuffling and shouting. J. H. Edwards, the leader of the unemployed, rose to address his followers but was struck down by a police baton, and this incident became the signal for a general melee in which the enraged crowd attacked the police with pickets which they had broken off a fence near by.

Hundreds were injured in the fighting and, while the police were hemmed in near the Town Hall, looters ran through Queen Street smashing shop windows and raiding jewellery and other stores. Sailors with fixed bayonets were marched through town, but public order was only partially restored that night. There was more window smashing the following day in Karangahape Road, when mounted "specials" charged the crowds.

The Government hastily introduced a repressive Public Safety Conservation Bill but it failed to prevent yet another serious riot, this time in Wellington, on 10 May. Following a demonstration outside Parliament Buildings and an unsuccessful deputation to the Government, the unemployed rushed through Lambton Quay, Willis, and Manners Streets. Many shop windows were smashed and again some looting took place. There were many prosecutions arising out of these disturbances and sentences were heavy. Christchurch alone, of the four main centres, saw no unemployed riots during the depression, thanks largely to the efficiency of its relief services.

Next Part: [The Battle of Manners Street, Wellington, 1943](#)

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