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BIOGRAPHY

Millar, John Andrew

1855–1915

Seaman, trade union leader, politician

By Herbert Roth

Biography

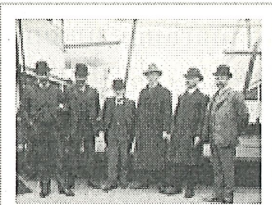
John Andrew Millar was born on 8 July 1855 in India, and baptised at Jullundur, Punjab, on 6 August 1855. He was the eldest son of Eliza Sarah Hawthorne and her husband, John Craufurd Millar, a lieutenant and later major general in the British Army. His father fought in the relief of Lucknow in 1858, but at the close of the war in India the family returned to Edinburgh, Scotland, where the young Millar received his education. At the age of 15 he was sent to an uncle in Otago, New Zealand, to learn sheepfarming, but on the voyage out he decided on a seafaring career.

Millar arrived at Dunedin on the *James Nicol Fleming* in October 1870. Soon after, he was apprenticed to P. Henderson and Company of Glasgow, managing agents of the Albion Shipping Company. He served his apprenticeship and sailed on overseas ships until 1881, when he switched to coastal steamers. On 18 February 1882, at Wellington, he married Sarah Lilian Ross, the daughter of James and Eleanor Ross Lisnaskea, Ireland. The same year John Millar gained his mate's certificate and two years later his master's certificate, while working on small vessels of the Black Diamond Line trading in and out of Wellington.

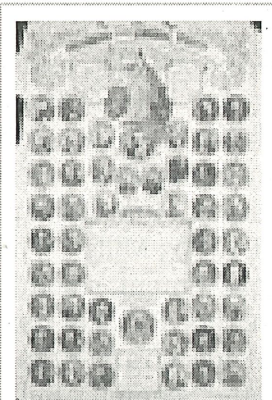
It was not unusual at this time for ships' officers to belong to the seamen's union. Millar later claimed that he joined the labour movement in 1882, and in April 1887 he was elected as the first full-time general secretary of the 1,000-strong Federated Seamen's Union of New Zealand. As the union's headquarters were in Port Chalmers, Millar and his family now moved to Dunedin. Within weeks of taking office he was able to show his mettle. The Northern Steam Ship Company in Auckland had cut overtime payments, and replaced seamen who objected with non-unionists. Instead of the traditional response of strikes and pickets, Millar proposed that the union launch its own shipping line and run it in competition with the company. It was a bold move, but it was successful. The union established the Jubilee Steam Ship Company, chartered three steamers and undercut its rival. Both sides lost heavily but after 16 months, in November 1888, the Northern Steam



John Andrew Millar



Ministers in Joseph Ward's government, 1908



Members of parliament, 1910

3rd

Company was ready for peace. It agreed to re-engage its men at the old pay-rates and to employ only unionists. The union closed down its shipping line.

Millar's prestige rose high after this victory, but he had become aware during the conflict that the seamen lacked the support of other workers. In October 1889 he succeeded in forging an alliance – the Maritime Council, combining seamen, miners and wharf labourers – which was soon joined by the railwaymen's, wharf carters' and mercantile marine officers' unions. Although there were trades councils operating locally, the Maritime Council functioned as a federation of key national unions and quickly gained recognition as the central voice of organised labour. Millar, the council's secretary, became the acknowledged national spokesman for the unions.

Millar was not an original thinker, nor did he often put pen to paper. He defined socialism as the practice of true Christianity, and spoke of the future as a brotherhood of man, based on love, care for one's neighbours, and Christ's teachings. What socialists wanted, he told the Dunedin diocesan synod in 1893, was equal opportunities for all, equal laws for all and work for all who wanted it, but none should eat who did not work except for the aged, the sick and the children. It was in this spirit that Millar helped to establish the first trade union for women, the Tailoresses' Union of New Zealand, in Dunedin, and took office as its first secretary in July 1889. Giving evidence to the royal commission on sweating in February 1890, Millar expressed great concern about the exploitation of child labour and advocated the establishment of a board of arbitration, presided over by a permanent judge paid by the state, to settle industrial disputes. Strikes, he told the commission, were not in the interests of employed or employers. At the same time Millar was able to quote Karl Marx and he held a strong belief in the solidarity of labour. He told a meeting in Oamaru in September 1890 that he looked forward to a 'great grand commonwealth where all would be employed by and paid by the state.'

In August 1890 the Maritime Council declared a general strike of its affiliates in sympathy with Australian maritime unionists, with whose central body the council had affiliated. This maritime strike, which involved an estimated 8,000 unionists, was the first major nationwide labour dispute in New Zealand. It was broken in early November by the use of non-union workers. As leader of the strike, 'King' Millar, as he became known, was vilified throughout New Zealand as a dictator and paid agitator. He was the subject of hostile cartoons and ditties in the daily press. Yet he took a moderate line during the dispute, and on one occasion even enrolled seamen as special constables and succeeded in preventing a violent confrontation on the wharves. A friendly correspondent to a newspaper described him as having 'a decidedly gentlemanly appearance, with a countenance expressive of deep thought and careful deliberation; his manner is calm and courteous, and his disposition kind and sympathetic in the extreme.'

In the December 1890 parliamentary elections Robert Stout nominated Millar for the Port Chalmers seat, held by James Mills, the managing director of the Union Steam Ship Company of New Zealand. It was a symbolic contest between the two main protagonists in the maritime strike, and Millar lost by 874 votes to 647. He continued in office as the seamen's general secretary, but the Maritime Council fell apart after the strike defeat and the seamen's union too was near collapse. In 1893 Millar, who had meanwhile been appointed a justice of the peace by the new Liberal government, stood again for Chalmers (previously Port Chalmers), with the endorsement of the Workers' Political Committee. Mills had retired, and this time Millar, who proclaimed himself a radical rather than a liberal, was successful. In his maiden speech in Parliament on a Shipping and Seamen's Bill, which he had helped to draft, he impressed fellow members with his practical knowledge of the industry.

In Parliament Millar formed part of the so-called 'labour party', an informal grouping within the Liberal government majority. When the electoral boundaries were redrawn in 1896 he stood for one of the three City of Dunedin seats, and continued to represent Dunedin in Parliament for the next 18 years. In 1896 unionists elected Millar to the Otago and Southland Board of Conciliation, an office he held until 1901, and to the Westland board, where he sat for two years despite his

Residence in Dunedin.

As a member of the board of conciliation Millar obtained an intimate knowledge of the conciliation and arbitration system. In Parliament he paid special attention to industrial and shipping matters, gaining appointment in 1899 as chairman of the Labour Bills Committee. He loyally supported the Seddon administration, opposed attempts to form a separate labour party and instead helped to promote the Liberal-Labour Federation, which sought to mobilise worker support for the government. In 1890, on 28 October, the anniversary of the founding of the Maritime Council, Millar had initiated Labour Day demonstrations in support of the eight-hour working day. These annual celebrations gained statutory recognition with the passing of the Labour Day Act in 1899. The following year Millar was appointed to the Royal Commission on Federation, which took evidence on the desirability of federation with the new Commonwealth of Australia.

In July 1903 the government appointed Millar chairman of committees, where he distinguished himself by his firm but fair rulings and his intimate knowledge of standing orders. When Joseph Ward formed a new cabinet in August 1906, after the death of Richard Seddon, he gave Millar the portfolios of labour, marine and customs. Millar gained much praise for piloting a complicated customs tariff through Parliament in 1907, but he quickly antagonised the trade unions when he blamed Australian seasonal workers for slaughtermen's strikes. The 1907 Annual Conference of Trades and Labour Councils condemned Millar's 'uncalled for, offensive and contemptible' remarks. The split between Millar and the industrial labour movement widened when Millar proposed changes to the Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act 1908 which would tighten penalties for striking. The amendments, which became law the same year, included the replacement of the ineffective boards of conciliation with conciliation commissioners. Millar has been credited with saving the arbitration system from collapse, but even in his home town the Otago Trades and Labour Council resolved that the minister had 'forfeited his right to be classed as a representative of Labour' and invited him to 'proclaim himself what he has proved to be - the champion of the capitalistic class.'

With a growing number of strikes in defiance of the arbitration laws, the Liberal-Labour alliance was now falling apart, and in the 1908 election Millar for the first time faced a socialist opponent. In a cabinet reshuffle in 1909 he lost the labour and customs portfolios and was given railways instead, but he was reappointed minister of labour within five months.

Friend and foe alike compared Millar in these years to John Burns, the leader of the London dock strike of 1889, who had taken a seat in a Liberal cabinet 15 years later. 'The agitator has belied expectation by becoming a statesman,' a commentator wrote of Millar in 1909; 'the advocate of a class has won the confidence of all classes.' But in the 1911 election Millar was forced into a second ballot to retain his seat. The Liberal party lost its majority and retained power only with the support of four Labour members and the casting vote of the speaker.

When Ward resigned as Liberal leader in March 1912 Millar was widely tipped to succeed him. But he had made too many enemies among prohibitionists (he was reputed to be a heavy drinker), freeholders (by his support for leasehold land tenure) and above all the Labour members. His name did not even go to the ballot and he was not included in the new Mackenzie ministry. The new administration soon fell, however, in a historic no-confidence vote on 5 July 1912, when several Liberals crossed the floor to vote with the conservative Reform Party. Among the defectors was an embittered, vengeful Millar. He had recently suffered a stroke but he rose from his sick-bed to enter the House clad in dressing-gown and pyjamas, took his seat on the opposition benches, and followed the Reform leader, W. F. Massey, into the voting lobby.

In 1913 Millar moved to Auckland after marrying a second time. Sarah Millar had died in November 1906, and on 16 April 1913, at Wellington, John Millar married Mary Nathan, a widow and the daughter of Emma and George Siddells (a master mariner). During the waterfront strike of that year Millar voted with the Reform Party and spoke in support of its Labour Disputes

Investigation Bill. In 1914 he was again chairman of Parliament's Labour Bills Committee. When he did not stand for re-election that year, Massey appointed him to the Legislative Council in June 1915. But he was able to attend only once, to be sworn in. His health had failed again, and he died at Auckland on 15 October 1915. He was buried in Dunedin. He was survived by his second wife and two daughters and a son from his first marriage.

Millar was a capable, ambitious politician and a keen debater, though his speeches, delivered in a hoarse and rasping voice, were said to lack polish and humour. It was ironic that the opposition of Labour members cost him the opportunity to become prime minister, for Millar still claimed, as late as 1913, that he had the same sympathy for labour as he had had 30 years earlier. An obituary writer in the Dunedin *Evening Star* defended him against the charge of having deserted labour, but to representatives of the organised labour movement and their followers he was the very embodiment of a renegade: the radical leader of the 1890 maritime strike who had given his support to the harsh suppression of another major waterfront conflict in 1913.

How to cite this page: Herbert Roth. 'Millar, John Andrew - Biography', from the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography. Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, updated 1-Sep-10
URL: <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/biographies/2m47/1>