

(Walrond, C., 2016)

Story: Shops

Page 5. Unions, pay and working hours

(1990)

Unions

From the 1890s unions were set up for shop workers. Although unions served different groups of shop workers, their concerns were very similar – mainly the long hours worked. In 1936 in Wellington three unions amalgamated to form the Wellington Amalgamated Society of Shop Assistants. Amalgamation of unions gave workers more bargaining power.

Working hours

In summer in the late 1800s shopkeepers and shop staff worked up to 14 hours a day – or until it got dark, whichever came first. Opening hours were the focus of intense scrutiny. The public wanted shops open whenever they wanted something, but shop workers also wanted to go home at the end of the day. As early as 1850 shopkeepers agreed to close their shops at 7 p.m. in winter (1 April to 1 October, except Saturdays, which had late-night shopping). Shops were closed on Sundays.

Driven to drink

In the 1870s a newspaper columnist noted that shop assistants had it hard working from morning to late at night on Saturdays: 'Fagged and spiritless, is it a wonder the exhausted assistant, at eleven or twelve o'clock on Saturday night, flees to the first hotel to brace his dulled energies ...? Is it a wonder he stays longer than he should when he feels his body recover its elasticity and his mind its cheerfulness ...? Is it a wonder that when he awakens on Sunday, with the excitement gone, and in its place reaction and an aching head, he prefers a lounge in his room to God's sunshine?'¹

An 'early closing association' was formed in Auckland in 1856, and another in Whanganui 10 years later. In 1872 Wellington butchers went on strike to get a 10-hour day. The Wellington Drapers' and Clothiers' Early Closing Association, which formed in 1876, lobbied for 6 p.m. closing and half-day closure on Wednesdays.

In November 1885 Christchurch shop staff had a victory – shops were to close for a half-day on Thursday. This practice spread to other cities, with a half-day off on a Wednesday or Thursday – although shop assistants still had to work on Saturdays. Many worked 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. on Monday to Friday, with a mid-week half-day, and 8 a.m. to 10 p.m. on Saturdays.

In 1936 the Labour government limited Saturday retail trading to a half-day. This freed up many young people (especially women, who dominated shop-assistant positions) to participate in Saturday-afternoon sports and other activities.

Trading hours

In 1945 a law was passed that put an end to Saturday shopping altogether. Trading was limited to Monday to Friday, with one late night – usually Thursday or Friday. One of the reasons was to provide time for a family

weekend. From then until 1980, when Saturday trading was partly legalised, New Zealand's main shopping streets were deserted at weekends, perplexing many overseas visitors when they found the country 'closed'.

Shops in selected places – for instance New Brighton in Christchurch, Paraparaumu near Wellington, and tourist towns like Queenstown – could open on Saturdays. Other than this, only certain types of shop were allowed to trade, and they could only sell certain types of goods. This had some bizarre outcomes – in dairies (corner stores) at the weekend, customers could buy tinned spaghetti but not uncooked spaghetti. On Saturday mornings at timber yards they could buy wood – but not nails, screws or hinges. Trading hours continued to expand over the 1980s, and in 1989 Sunday trading was allowed.

Shop trading hours have largely been deregulated, although in the 2000s most shops were still required to close for two-and-a-half days each year:

- Christmas Day
- Good Friday
- Anzac Day, until 1 p.m.

From 2016 territorial authorities decided whether shops in their districts could open on Easter Sunday.

Footnotes:

1. *North Otago Times*, 8 March 1872, p. 3.

How to cite this page:

Carl Walrond, 'Shops - Unions, pay and working hours', Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/shops/page-5> (accessed 31 August 2020)
Story by Carl Walrond, published 11 Mar 2010, updated 16 Sep 2016