supported and encouraged their husbands, brothers and fathers. For many, the persistent pressure severely strained relationships for the 151 days. At the same time, women continued their traditional roles of homemakers and mothers.

The Women's Auxiliary remained a separate organisation and, while they reported their work to the men, it seems their views were not always actively sought. Indeed, in Auckland on 12 April 1951, when one union member at a meeting moved that Women's Auxiliary members should attend committee meetings of the union, the motion was lost. There were also problems of the gender division of labour. In March of 1951 there was a dispute at the Auckland relief depot when a majority of men dispensed with the services of volunteers from the Women's Auxiliary. The men indicated that women could not do the heavy lifting, and that the language used by the men would offend them!

While some marriages did not survive the lockout, for the most part the women supported their men to the bitter end. Although initially the Ladies' Committee/Women's Auxiliary had been set up with a social agenda, it became an efficient, effective and productive organisation, successfully fulfilling the aims and objectives it had laid down. Near the end of the dispute the minutes of the Auckland branch of the union recorded a 'vote of appreciation in all mothers and wives for their patience and loyalty for the past five months'.

Shattering Dreams About
Women in the Lockout

MELANIE NOLAN

The 1951 waterfront lockout, as we have heard, was the most significant postwar industrial dispute in New Zealand's history. Under the tough emergency measures, as we know also, liberties of speech and freedom of assembly were drastically curtailed. The government was able to deregister the union, seize union funds and gag the press. Police could enter properties without warrants, 'using force if necessary', and arrest anyone offering food or assistance to a watersider's family. The unions' central organisation, the Federation of Labour, which represented about 70 per cent of unions, did not support the locked-out unionists. Nor did the Labour Party Opposition, although it tried to rally against the Emergency Regulations.

The militants were isolated. The government decided to make political gain from an industrial dispute and the FOL allowed it to happen. The watersiders suffered a complete defeat. Arguably the strongest union ever formed in New Zealand, with its own band, debating clubs and welfare organisations, was destroyed and broken up into 26 port unions. All its leaders were blacklisted and never employed in the industry again. Jock Barnes, national president of the New Zealand Waterside Workers' Union, served two months' hard labour for criminal defamation. The National Party won the snap election held just over seven weeks after the industrial action collapsed.

Jack Marshall, later a National Prime Minister, summed up the political repercussions:

Politically the gains for us were enormous. We had established our capacity to govern and had removed the threat of union domination. We had manoeuvred the Labour Party into an equivocal position, neither for nor against the militant unions, and had weakened their power base in the Federation of Labour. We had gained in public confidence, and increased popular support.
Union leaders agreed that it was one of the defining moments of New Zealand’s history. The Labour Party had a brief period in government 1957–60, but it did not govern again until 1972. The government’s attack on the nation’s left-wing ‘communist wreckers’ is part of New Zealand’s Cold War experience. Barnes is included on the mural at the New York headquarters of the socialist publisher Pathfinder Press, which is dedicated to those who have fought for equality and freedom and against injustice internationally.

The mobilisation of the watersiders, their families and the wider community was remarkable. Despite Emergency Regulation 8, which deemed it an offence to ‘make a payment or contribution’ to the union or for the ‘benefit of any workers who are parties to a declared strike’, with fines up to £100 or three months’ jail threatened, depots were set up to receive and distribute donations and union-provided relief. Families regularly received food parcels, rents and mortgages were paid for those applying for relief, and children were treated to parties as well as clothing. The relief committees organised their own cobblers to repair shoes, and dental technicians to repair false teeth. The unionists’ proud refrain was that nobody starved during 1951.

Women have not been left out of the historical record. While historians have often written about industrial action without considering women’s role, this is not the case with 1951. Conspicuously, authors have paid tribute to the women’s domestic militancy, which is said to have matched the industrial militancy of the men. Dick Scott’s 1952 account was dedicated to ‘All those Men and Women who upheld this land’s great working-class traditions in 1951; their courage roused the admiration of the world, their solidarity, devotion to principle and clear vision promise a New Zealand peaceful, fruitful and free.’

Nevertheless, while women’s role has been written into the story in principle, their contribution has not been narrated in any detail. Certainly women’s role has not been interrogated to the same extent as has been, for example, the NZWU’s strategy. As New Zealand playwright Renée found when she researched this area, it was very difficult to get beyond the oral truism that the women had been just ‘marvellous’. This blanket description has not been probed; it is assumed that women’s public role has been underestimated and that, in the invisible domestic spaces, all women struggled gallantly to ‘make ends meet’. Accounts emerging internationally about women in other industrial actions in the twentieth century similarly emphasise women’s steadfast loyalty. Historians, for instance, have emphasised two aspects about women’s role in the British miners’ strike of 1984–85: their domestic militancy and the transformative nature of their action. Mining communities’ solidarity was overwhelming. Yet a rigid gender division of labour meant that there were gendered foundations of militancy. Women did not question men’s decision to take industrial action at the coalface because they had a related struggle ‘just as sharp’ in the kitchen to make ends meet. Furthermore, the year-long strike politicised women in an unprecedented fashion. Women’s consciousness was raised and transformed and they were ‘never the same again’.

The ‘old’ complaint that the male or trade union approach to working-class history overlooks women’s experience might appear not to apply to much of the recent work on women’s role in industrial action. In the recent work, materialist explanations for female radicalisation are simple. Their radicalisation naturally occurred over bread-and-butter issues central to wages lost in industrial disputes. Women’s direct action and their raised class-consciousness does not seem to be problematic. A new complaint then might be that an approach that assumes working-class women’s domestic militancy is not much better than the approach it revises. We romanticise rather than ignore women’s role.

In this paper, I reconsider women’s role in the 1951 dispute, concentrating upon the two aspects that have been emphasised in the literature: the gendered nature of working-class responses to industrial action, and the transformative nature of action. First, the effect of 1951 on the broad category ‘women’ can be seen to be varied. Second, oral history accounts force us to reconsider the relationship between domestic and public spheres during 1951 to see transformations in ways significantly different from those assumed.

Comparisons between levels of class-consciousness among working women are not usually made because so few have been politically organised to the same degree as men in the past and there is a paucity of evidence. Historians have increasingly probed male working-class consciousness to show that there is no simple relationship between structure and consciousness. Explaining why the working class is not revolutionary has become as interesting a question as the rise of revolutionary socialism.

Most historians now accept that ‘divisions, fragmentation and intra-class politics’ have always undermined class cohesion and solidarity. Some New Zealand historians such as Miles Fairburn still assume that class has to be coherent, solid and socialist for it to exist. Indeed, there is a large body of work that denies that class is relevant to New Zealand politics, emphasising its reformist tradition, the transience of its people and the extraordinary high home-ownership rates making for a low ceiling and a high floor within society down under.
However, it is hard to argue the irrelevance of class issues to politics in the most significant postwar industrial dispute in New Zealand's history. Moreover, the 1951 industrial dispute is a window of opportunity for us to consider the actions and relations of workers who considered themselves to be working class – and particularly those of working-class women. A consideration of women's class-consciousness reveals that it, too, is fragmented, structurally dynamic and diverse. This part of the paper in many regards is 'compensatory' gender analysis. More important, I argue that women's actions during the 1951 dispute also reveal it as a period in which the gender order was under stress; that is, men struggled to provide and women had difficulty maintaining the traditional division of labour. Change resulted, albeit not revolutionary change. We miss that change if we have unrealistic notions of what 'proper' class-consciousness is, or if we look at class with blunt, static binoculars that divide it just by 'gender order'.

Historians generally agree now that 1951 was the result of both the labour process and, importantly for women's activism, labour politics. The industrial battle was between the wharfies and the industrial establishment, not between Jock Barnes and Toby Hill on the one hand and Sid Holland and Fintan Patrick Walsh on the other, as has sometimes been portrayed. While personality played a part in the confrontation process, the lockout itself was not something that Barnes single-handedly engineered.20

The wider origins of 1951 lie in the union's strength, the longstanding nature of the extreme difficulties of the watersiders' working conditions, and the workplace battle for control of the waterfront. The watersiders, like all strong unionists, preferred direct bargaining and strike action to 'labour's leg-iron', arbitration – which was a centralised wage-fixing system in New Zealand dating from the 1894 Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act. The watersiders won improvements in their working conditions in the 1940s through both direct action and industrial negotiation. A bureau system of employment in 1937 replaced casual employment on the waterfront and there were various tinkeringst to it subsequently in attempts to facilitate industrial peace.

The watersiders argued that their successes would flow on to the rest of the working class. This left-wing 'trickle down' theory resulted in their refusal to countenance the failure to pass on to them a 15 per cent increase that had been granted to all workers through an Arbitration Court general wage order in 1951. The watersiders' stance would lead to other workers winning more. However, the port employers argued that since watersiders had won a 6 per cent increase months before, only 9 per cent was due them early in 1951. The watersiders disagreed and slapped on an overtime ban. The employers interpreted this as a strike and locked the port gates. The watersiders maintained that they were locked out. This dispute precipitated the 1951 dispute, but it was never only about a 9 per cent wage increase.

Along with the workplace battle, the watersiders were occupied with a power struggle within the union movement over government policy. The Labour Party pursued corporatist policies when it won power in 1935, beginning by reversing union setbacks from the Depression. It introduced compulsory unionism for any worker in an occupation covered by a trade union registered under the arbitration system, and established the 40-hour week. This resulted in the great flood of union membership: a threefold increase between 1935 and 1938, from 81,000 to 249,000, representing a rise in union coverage from 16 to 48 per cent of workers.

Initially, these unions loved the hand that made them. Six of the largest unions donated over a third of Labour's £37,000 campaign contributions in the 1938 election, and unions provided most of the affiliation fees too. The 1936 act introducing compulsory unionism guaranteed resources but it also restricted union activities. They were prohibited from providing welfare, training or education services and could only represent members on 'industrial matters', which were interpreted very narrowly by the Arbitration Court as applying only to 'wages, hours and conditions of work'. Only strong unions were able to gain negotiating rights in wider employment issues.22
The war trimmed the unions' sails further. Prime Minister Peter Fraser came to rely for support of both the party machine and Walsh's leadership of the FOL, formed in 1937, to pursue a 'stabilisation policy' during the Second World War. Walsh was a key member of the government's Economic Stabilisation Commission, which kept inflation and unions in check. The policy was successful in that prices were held at a lower level than in other Allied countries, with inflation for the whole period of the war being held to less than 20 per cent.\

However, the cost at the end of the war was that New Zealand was one of the most highly regulated societies outside the Eastern bloc. And the watersiders, along with the carpenters, drivers and other progressive unions, came to regard the FOL as an agent of wage restraint every bit as much as employers and the government.

Women had a domestic motivation to support union opposition to government-controlled consumerism and continued peacetime rationing. When Margaret Thorn travelled the country speaking to women's groups before the 1946 election, she asked the women present why there was such a poor response when the government had implemented every promise it had made at elections within the life of each Parliament, and for six years had been harassed by a war. Almost as a chorus they clamoured: 'The rationing.'\

Few observers were surprised when Labour lost the 1949 election. Neither were many surprised by the continuing unrest on the waterfront. When the government announced it was withdrawing most of its subsidies on a number of essential commodities, most importantly coal, on 8 May 1950, costs rose and calls for wage increases rose too. The rumblings on the wharf increased; 'everyone knew something was going to happen' as the National Party and the militant unions began to circle for confrontation looking for a pretext.

In this climate, some unions assiduously courted their 'womenfolk'. The Waterside Workers' Union was one of the few unions in the middle of the century with articles in its official journal, the Transport Worker, advising the employers to consider wives, homes and the domestic implications of their employment policies. The editor claimed the union was not 8,000 strong, but 16,000. 'Mrs Watersider' had not only the dirty washing to deal with, but she had to bear the burdens of 'the long, irregular hours worked on the waterfront', 'low wages' and, above all, 'the hardship of industrial action'.

Union wives, the editor went on, had a 'sharp sense of justice', primed from the times when they could not afford a suit made from the wool their husbands handled on the wharf because of the margins of profit that went to 'the squatter'. Readers were told, in bold letters, that a wharfie's wife 'learnt her union principles without attending a stopwork meeting.' Which was just as well, as she was never invited: the union never went so far as to grant membership to wives, although prominent women activists had made public calls for this to happen.

Of course, the cynic would observe that the Waterside Workers' Union was preparing for the 'big blue', but that overlooks the fact that waterside workers' wives were integrated into the wider union community long before the 1951 dispute, especially in Auckland. The Ladies' Committee of the Auckland Watersiders' Silver Band was formed in 1944. It became the nucleus of the Auckland Women's Auxiliary of the Watersiders' Union, formed in July 1950 for 'solidarity, peace, lectures, first aid, high prices, social life and picnics'. Members such as Fuzz Barnes and Mary Strickland were staunch unionists. Mary's husband, Maurice, recalled her loyalty years later: 'My wife said if you ever weaken I'll scratch your eyes out.'

The heroic tale of women's militancy in 1951 has become well known. There were two main aspects to the narrative. First, the government attacked wives and children in an attempt to smash the union. It was a central theme in the union's publicity. Second, women responded superbly.

Women's auxiliaries were formed throughout the country at every port and inland place where related strikes occurred, such as Mangakino and Huntly. The basis of the active nucleus differed only slightly. The women's band was the basis of the Women's Auxiliary in Auckland. Fuzz Barnes was president. A meeting of 350 women in the Auckland Trades Hall unanimously supported two pro-union resolutions and formed a broader Combined Women's Committee led by Alice Cassie and Flo Humphries, stalwarts of the Labour Party women's branch. The Wellington Women's Committee was led by both Communist and Labour Party activists: Mrs Southworth, Eileen (Pat) Lenniston, Ethel Tickner and Mary Heptinstall. The Lyttelton Women's Committee comprised mostly watersiders' wives, such as Noeline McNulty.

Women's Auxiliary members expended much time and shoe leather raising and distributing relief, which was politically significant. They visited factories collecting donations and explaining the union position. They canvassed shops for goods, which were raffled to pay for the socials to which all women attending 'brought a plate'. The socials and dances were held weekly in most places. The parties they held for the children in all centres became legendary in the annals of the union. Women's auxiliaries were critical in keeping women informed and ensuring 'that they were aware of all the facilities available to them — the likes of vegetables, groceries, wood, coal, meat, clothing and footwear'. Auckland Auxiliary members organised baby food for
Mangakino mothers.\(^{46}\) The women's auxiliaries also co-ordinated sewing and knitting committees, which produced babies layettes and children's clothes.

I emphasise the political rather than the financial significance of the women's auxiliaries' work, as the 'male' finance committees bore the brunt of fundraising in the wake of the government seizure of strike-fund money. Wellington financial committee members Jack Manson, David Miller and Bill Daley organised a weekly meeting and collection of money from Rimutaka tunnel workers at Kaitoke, which was vital to the relief funds. Arch Delaway and Tom Peak raised large sums of money promoting Steve Havelock boxing matches. The pipe band raised £2,000. A number of individuals donated considerable sums, including Jock Barnes, who gave £1,000.\(^{47}\) The Australian watersiders donated £36,000 and, together with fundraising, it is estimated that £150,000 was accumulated to spend on relief, not counting the goods and services donated. That is, about 15 to 35 per cent of the wages that were estimated to have been lost, was accumulated for distribution.\(^{48}\)

While the women's auxiliaries were heavily involved in this distribution, men did much of the physical work of loading and dropping off the food. The relief system was based on a wide communal effort. The Hare brothers, for instance, were critical to the Wellington relief system. They owned a trucking company, and were 'as busy as hell' with the government housing programme. They were politically and personally friendly with prominent unionists including Chip Bailey, Tom McCann and Toby Hill.\(^{49}\) The brothers Hare - Doug, Rene, Luther and Robin - went down to the markets with the watersiders, loaded a truck with vegetables and other goods and took it out to High Street, Lower Hutt, or to the other depot in Adelaide Road, Wellington. They did it openly, did not take precautions and provided the service at no charge to the watersiders.\(^{50}\)

Women's Auxiliary members shared the speakers' platform with men at public meetings in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch, although this was less the case in the regions and nowhere was the basis equal. Certainly the Auckland Women's Auxiliary organised several mass meetings in Myers Park. At the Combined Trade Union meeting in the Auckland Domain on 3 June 1951 two of the six main speakers were women: 'Mrs Cassie' (representing women in the labour movement) and 'Miss Watene' (representing Maori). The Lyttelton Women's Auxiliary organised a Mother's Day rally on 13 May in Latimer Square, with Toby Hill as the keynote speaker.\(^{51}\)

But there were no women on the national strike committee. There was a band of about five women in the Cuba Street march that ended in violence in Wellington on 2 March, but they were not in the front row. Its paternalistic organisers believed - with some reason - that the dispute had to the potential to turn nasty at the coalface, and that this ought to be gendered. The leader of the 'scab' union in Auckland was beaten up and hospitalised, but not his wife. Just twelve women joined 1,500 men in the Auckland march on Bloody Friday in Auckland on 1 June. Fuzz Barnes, a justice of the peace and the wife of the Waterside Workers' Union's national president, was charged with inciting disorder. She had allegedly objected to the dispersal of the Queen Street procession at Myers Park saying, 'Come back, you yellow bastards, and get these cops!' But it was not her. They arrested the wrong woman.\(^{52}\)

The case is revealing for the gendered assumptions prevalent in New Zealand society. The prosecution claimed that 'it is with some reluctance that we prosecute a woman. In a matter of inciting, the female is the more deadly of the species, as men take less kindly to their courage being questioned by a woman.' The women claimed that police had pushed, shoved and punched them and referred to them as prostitutes.\(^{53}\)

Women were prominent in cottage meetings and behind the scenes in attempts to boost morale. Joan Noon organised a regular meeting place in Molesworth Street, a central Wellington location, to facilitate such work. In addition there were weekly meetings at Trades Hall in Vivian Street. Ida Thompson remembered that 'for those who were not in the front row, the auxiliary meetings were very important'. She went to these meetings, held at 7.30 p.m., when her husband Ted was able to babysit. 'I used to pop down. It was really good to be with other women, a good feeling... [although I had] a long way to go back in the evening.'\(^{54}\) Above all, there was a special 'morale' committee to help women. Noon was one of the prominent members and recalled that Special interest was taken by the committee with any wife who did not understand the need for her husband to be out of work. So we would arrange for someone to visit her and explain and get her involved in different activities and meetings and it was rewarding to see how worthwhile this was. Because they usually became active members and all because somebody took time to explain.\(^{55}\)

Eileen Doile was another member. She was a shop assistant, her husband was on the wharf, and her best friend was Daphne Burrows, Ted and Ida Thompson's niece. 'As the strike progressed a number of men became concerned that their wives were getting impatient with the whole thing. They wanted it finished. They were struggling financially.' Doile would call on these women to discuss the point of the industrial action and make sure that they knew the support they could get.
Some women were on the wider financial, hardship, publicity and action committees. Hardship committees were central to both the action and relief issues. Two women, Pat Lenniston and Ethel Tickner, Labour Party stalwarts, joined the mostly male Wellington Hardship Committee, which dealt with some distressing cases. They had to vet whether someone could get permission to work, and this was ‘very, very sparingly given’. Usually they would interview the applicants and work out what practical help they needed. They visited credit managers of furniture firms, such as Radfords, and Smith and Maple, in Wellington, and arranged the postponement of payments for the radios and gramophones that the wharfies had purchased.

Other women ‘spent as much time as possible getting our story to the public as the Emergency Regulations resulted in censorship’. Only Wellington and Auckland put out regular bulletins. As Rona Bailey relates, her husband Chip typed up the Wellington bulletin, Max Bollinger drew the cartoons, and Rona and Kay Bollinger helped to distribute the bulletins in Wellington and endured the police raids.

Bailey recalls that phones were tapped. ‘Doors were locked and you did not let anyone in. You were very careful with all papers . . . you were followed by police on the streets.’

The working Gestetters had to be moved around constantly, although one of them seems to have been housed in Ida Thompson’s front room ‘for the duration’. She lived in a hill suburb with 75 steps to the house providing good security. ‘In no time our sitting room was converted into a print shop.’

Two wharfies, ‘Spud Jackson and Jack Chapman’, ran it, ‘augmented by husband, self and all the children, who really enjoyed helping. The two men were really good with the kiddies.’

Rona Bailey and others would collect the printed piles in her little Riley car – early in the morning, 2 or 3 a.m. – and drop them off for distribution. Bailey remembers that ‘it was a very exciting time; fighting in a cause you believed in’. The distribution system was complex, involving the use of decoys, although as Bailey also notes, it did seem that the police were ‘extraordinarily incompetent’. A horde of men and women ‘passed the bulletins on’. Three women were involved in McKenzie’s department store ‘raids’ on Friday nights, asking people to ‘pass it on’. And all three were ‘petrified’.

This was the pattern of women’s involvement in most centres. Wayne Townsend goes so far as to accord women equality in their illegality: ‘. . . in their splendid work the women, equally with the men, were breaking the law’. Male unionists interviewed claimed women’s involvement was ‘just as good as men once they knew what the issues are’. This view has been memorialised in Renée’s 1986 play, Pass It On, which celebrates working-class heroines. Jeannie, like her husband, is a Communist Party propagandist. Cliff’s wife Nell shifts from an exclusively domestic focus to having some sympathy for the political struggle, ‘once she learnt what the issues were’. Indeed, Renée makes it clear that ‘the first thing the women’s committee should do is get in touch with all the wives and make sure they understand.’

Pass It On is part documentary, since it is based so squarely on oral interviews of women actively involved, and uses extracts from Prime Minister Sidney Holland’s radio broadcasts during the dispute. The exchange over the women’s committee wanting to hire the town hall comes right out of the official bulletins, when Inspector McLennan refused Pat Lenniston and others a permit for the Women’s Auxiliary to hold ‘a meeting in the Concert Chamber with Mrs M. Heptinstall, Mrs K. Bollinger and J. Barnes’ as speakers to outline the watersiders’ case to the women of Wellington.

Jeannie: ‘We represent the women’s committee of the Waterside Workers’ Union, and we want to hire the town hall to put our case before the public. The newspapers don’t seem to be doing that.’

Mayor: ‘I am sorry, ladies. I cannot grant your request.’

1st Woman: ‘Why not?’

2nd Woman: ‘It’s against the regulations. You know that!’

Mayor: ‘It’s a sad day for this country when the government starts behaving like Hitler!’

Mayor: ‘I’m very much afraid you’re being misled. I’m sure you have the best of intentions but what you don’t realise is that you’re being manipulated by the communist element in the trade union movement.’

Jeannie: ‘That’s just not true!’

Mayor: ‘My advice to you is to go home and persuade your husbands to go back to work! The sooner the better! Good day!’

Implicit in all the 1951 accounts is the view that most women were involved in the women’s auxiliaries, shouldered an equivalent burden to their men, and that all suffered equally. But it is also clear that women were not equally in the public gaze during this time. The handful of women who were, it needs to be noted, did win some notoriety. Furthermore, the hardship was not uniformly experienced. Indeed, most women’s responses were more industrial than they were political.

Were gender relations ‘on the left’ as ‘good’ as they have been portrayed, then? Certainly the women supported their men and the unions. But the postwar New Zealand union movement was profoundly male. There were few women trade unionists. Lena Purcell, secretary of the Auckland Shop Assistants’ Union, and Inga Renner and Nan Clark, officials of the Wellington
Clerical Workers’ Union, were conspicuous. As Maxine Harris, assistant to the Wellington Drivers’ Union secretary from 1947, has noted: ‘It was a masculine environment and I accepted it; trade unions were a masculine thing.’

Two points need to be emphasised. First, despite the attention given to them, as was indicated above, few women were active members in the women’s auxiliaries. Many wharfies’ wives were like Betty Allen. They accepted the union’s decisions and coped with their domestic effects. Betty’s husband didn’t want her to be involved in the Women’s Auxiliary: ‘Jack used to say that it is all men’s business.’ Betty suspects that Jack did not want her around at Trades Hall ‘spoiling’ his time there, drinking after meetings. The important point is that, in general, women seemed to agree with men about women’s limited capacity for public action. As Mary Heptinstall recollected: ‘The main Women’s Committee was opposed to activities such as women taking part in demonstrations. The one in Cuba Street, the handful of women who took part were put right at the back of the march. It was considered unladylike as much [by] the women as the men.’

Second, and related to this, the women’s auxiliaries were just that: clearly additional to the main union bodies. While having its own banner and slogans, the Auckland Women’s Auxiliary’s primary objective was to advance the direction of the New Zealand Waterside Workers’ Union. Auxiliary members were advised to ‘learn as much as possible about waterside workers’ problems and to assist the members in bringing about the better working conditions’. Activities would concentrate upon the ‘womenfolk of the union in order to present a solid face to the public in support of union policy’. Although the auxiliaries reported on their work to the men, their views were not part of the decision-making.

From time to time some of the women, particularly women associated with the Communist Party, complained about the gender hierarchy. Mary Heptinstall remembered ‘some battles [lost] to get women more involved than just on welfare committees. . . . As a seaman’s wife, I never attended a Seamen’s (Union) meeting to debate the issues under discussion.’ Indeed, in Auckland, on 12 April 1951, when one member of the union moved that Women’s Auxiliary representatives attend committee meetings, the motion was lost. Similarly, Eileen Doile, who was active in the Wellington auxiliary, ‘wasn’t told about some of the things that Bill was up to — that is any “dangerous assignments”’. Women were not to be ‘worry’d’. As Kathryn Parsons has recorded, in Auckland there was a dispute in March 1951 when the services of the Women’s Auxiliary at the relief depot were dispensed with. ‘The men argued that the women could not do the heavy lifting involved and that they would be offended by the language used by the men.’

Working-class culture was collective, mutualistic and solidaristic. But sections of it were also conservative, introverted, apolitical and defensive. Few unions defended the male breadwinner wage and female domesticity more than the watersiders. New Zealand’s arbitration system was based upon the presupposition that men needed a breadwinner wage because they were supporting a wife and children. In 1931 the waterside workers had called upon the Labour Party to abandon support for the family allowance because it could reduce male breadwinner’s wage. The 1926 family allowance undermined the rationale behind the male breadwinner wage — that women should be paid less than men because men had unwaged dependants to support — by paying women directly a small state pension for some of the costs of children. Throughout the postwar period the watersiders held the defence of a high male living wage.

Some groups of working-class women were conservative too. There was little love lost between union and communist women. There is clearly illustrated by a public meeting held in Mount Eden in the middle of August. W. H. Fortune, Minister in Charge of Police, was alleged to have asked his audience of about 150 people, ‘Who is the Combined Women’s Committee?’ An interjector replied, ‘Working men’s wives,’ and Fortune is said to have replied, ‘No, the Communist Party. It is a communist organisation.’ Fuzz Barnes sought an order to prosecute Fortune for criminal defamation. She believed his defamation was likely ‘to injure the reputation of Agnes Mary Cassie, Freda Ellen Barnes, Dorothy Ida Eyre, Moira Roberts, Isobel Watene and others of the committee by exposing them to hatred and contempt and to injure Mrs Barnes in her capacity as JP’. But she was refused leave to prosecute the minister. There was politics involved but it also shows these women’s view of communists.

Above all, 1951 does not seem to have transformed women’s political positions, as Jean Stead found for the 1984–85 British miners’ strike. One might have expected to see evidence of transformative politics in the Women’s Auxiliary’s aims to ‘present the women’s angle on any contentious matter to the menfolk for consideration’ and ‘to present to members a course of lectures to which union speakers will discuss world affairs, and union policy regarding them, and to foster speakers from our membership to address other ladies and present our case’. But the dispute itself, rather than educative aspects, dominated the activities of the auxiliaries. Among the prominent women there seems to be consistency rather than transformation in politics. Pat Lenniston and Eileen Doile were
active in Labour Party before and after 1951, while Rona Bailey and Mary Heptinstall were long-serving members of the Communist Party. Neither the Communist Party nor the Labour Party enjoyed a surge in women’s membership over 1951. Christchurch women appealed to the Human Rights Committee of the United Nations to investigate the Police Offices Bill but their activism was short-lived.

There are some examples in which 1951 was important in the biography of individuals. Tilly Hunter, active in the Victoria University Socialist Club and witness to the batoning of protesters in Cuba Street, reported that it was ‘one of the most appalling experiences of my life’. Hunter held it to be a major impulse for her involvement in unionism: she was acting Wellington branch secretary for six months in 1959, the only woman to ever sit on the executive of the Printers’ Union. But 1951 was a temporary political emergency involving no collective turn by women to unionism or left-wing politics.

There was a collective social, albeit not political, transformation nonetheless. Above all, the collective experience of the locked-out wharfies’ and strikers’ wives, in terms of numbers involved and the extent of their commitment, was paid employment. The Waterside Workers’ Union did not allow the men to work in other employment during the lockout. As we have seen, the hardship committees gave very few releases. But no one policed the movement of wives into paid employment. This was the heyday of full employment in New Zealand, when jobs were easily obtained. The wharfies’ women went out to work at a time when New Zealand had a very low rate of married women in paid employment. The figure here in 1951 was 9.7 per cent, which was less than half the comparative figure for Britain (21.4 per cent) and the United States (23.2 per cent) in 1951 and 1950 respectively. 1951 was more important as a ‘duration for employment’ than the Second World War. And it points to the complexity of the movement of married women into paid employment. The rise in married women’s employment did not have a single cause.

Ida Thompson had five young children in 1951. She and her husband had a comfortable home and small amount of savings. When the cash dried up they were ‘reduced to spending and using savings’. They never resorted to the relief depot. Ida explained that Ted and she had a ‘strong desire to be independent to the greatest degree’. Ida recycled and sewed. ‘I would go to Evans [clothing shop] to swoop on remnants for 5 shillings or half a crown and take them home.’ Ted used to have quite a reasonable garden and ‘we got by. It was good. Bought a dozen hens; every now and again he used to kill one off and we had one of those.’

But it was not easy, she remembered. ‘We had some very good friends. My husband’s former landlady who lived in Upper Willis Street was one example. My mother and father lived in Petone. They were pensioners and always gave us a little parcel of something. A Dutch woman down the end of the road, [her husband] was an electrician. A little parcel [would be] left at the letterbox of food or something.’ But the greatest source of survival was paid work. ‘A neighbour came in and asked me if I wanted to go to work—cleaning at Parliament. And I wanted to do my bit.’ Ida Thompson and most other women in her position found employment. She delighted in the idea, as she cleaned Sid Holland’s office, that the Prime Minister would have been surprised that he was helping to support a wharfie’s family so directly.

Dunedin researcher Andrea Hotere found that many watersiders’ wives from Port Chalmers sought work in Dunedin during the lockout. She felt that their employment was in keeping with the gender order. ‘Mrs Greer worked at the Tudor Clothing Company in Dunedin for about two months. She had not originally intended to go out to work.’ She described how her husband had ‘pushed’ her into it. He came home one day and said, ‘All the women in the street are working except you!’ She replied, ‘I’ve got a fifteen-month-old baby to look after!’ The result of the ‘discussion’ was her employment.
Wharfies’ and strikers’ wives had three main incentives for resorting to paid employment during 1951. First, relief to families involved goods not cash. The Auckland Watersiders’ Relief Committee cashbook reveals that the 1,044 recipients of funds between 27 April and 23 May 1951 averaged about £5 each worth of ‘meat, groceries and cheese’. Perhaps half its 2,000 members received relief, on a rough estimate. Rent was paid to the State Advances Corporation in just eighteen cases in April 1951, and various payments went to the Auckland Electric Power Board. Rose Barber remembered that the ‘union looked after us supplying food, but we never had any money.’

The reluctance of many workers to receive ‘charity’ was a second impetus for women to take up paid employment. One of the major propaganda issues for the executive was to convince workers to accept union relief. As the Auckland branch made clear:

The [Relief] Committee desires to impress on all members that this is not charity. The distribution of goods to necessitous cases is a responsibility legitimate Trade Union function. So if you require assistance, don’t let stupid false pride prevent you from obtaining it. Contact the Relief Committee immediately.

Finally, although New Zealand had poor childcare facilities in the 1950s, some efforts were made to help working mothers. Many wharfies’ wives relied on their husbands, with time on their hands, to care for children, but the Lower Hutt Women’s Auxiliary was not alone in establishing a creche.

Most of the women Hotere interviewed made the best of the dispute, but ‘they detached its immediate and personal effects on their families. As well as emotional and economic hardship, it directly threatened their ability to be competent housekeepers.’ Of course they entered paid employment to sustain, not usurp, their domestic role. But we should not discount the phenomenon on that basis alone. It also raises the issue of variance in dispute experience. The differential for families during 1951 was if there was an alternative breadwinner to the male locked out or on strike.

It is not easy to romanticise the home front in 1951. The confrontation between waterside workers and employers virtually shut down New Zealand docks for 151 days in 1951. The army and then ‘scab’ unionists worked the wharves, but it was an emergency service. Most women were affected by the shortages in some way. For instance, the industrial dispute meant that deliveries of raw materials necessary for the making of sanitary pads, such as gauze and cellulose, were held up on the docks. Despite women’s paid employment, estimates of lost income vary between £42 million and £100 million. Whichever figure is closer to the truth, this lost income resulted in great hardship and untold tragedy. There were many marriage breakups during and after the lockout. However, the hardship was not uniformly experienced. Many other accounts we have of women in industrial action assume that all suffered equally.

Most of those actively involved in the women’s auxiliaries and the hardship committees were able to survive on the generosity and goodwill of their friends and family. They had savings and many had their own homes. The women were in paid employment. Many of them did not have recourse to the relief that they themselves organised for others. Ethel Tickner cleaned houses, Rona Bailey was a physical welfare officer and Eileen Doile worked at the DIC department store. They had no debts and, with the rent paid, their households ‘pulled through’.

But some, particularly those with young families, had no savings, no home, no rent money, little furniture, no baby clothes, and the womenfolk were unable to enter paid employment. Women with young children often could not or would not go out to work. Betty Allen had a rented house but little furniture. She thought they were doing well, not only with a place of their own but a double mattress and base bought on time payment. Needless to say, a young watersider with a wife, a six-month-old son and another on the way, living in a house with hardly any furniture, was a prime candidate for assistance during 1951.

Allen recalled that the Auxiliary deputation that came to inspect her home were shocked, ‘the large woman’ observing ‘so this is how the other half lives’. ‘Well, the committee swung into action! Within days, furniture arrived’: a kitchen table, a dressing table with ‘beautiful handmade doilies’. A large box of meat and vegetables began arriving each week. The committee paid the rent and organised for the suspension of the 2s 6d weekly payments on the bed. Above all, she remembered that when the Auxiliary called her in to get some baby clothes, the woman tossed her a baby girls’ bonnet. It was wonderfully made and made Betty cry. She had never expected to be able to dress her little one in anything ‘so beautiful’.

The lockout saw some fifteen-year-olds leaving school to become the family breadwinner. Yvonne Grove and Marilyn Bowman were two of these. Bowman remembered being told: “Your mother and I have decided that you will leave college, get a job and support the family.” Oh God, if I live to be a hundred I shall never forget those words.’ She had dreamt of going to university. Instead, she shuffled around town looking for work, often being turned down when an employer discovered that her father was a watersider.
Eventually she got a job as ‘a receptionist/girl Friday’. She vividly remembered the ten-minute journey home on the train, the ten-minute run up the 120 steps, the seven zigzags and bursting in the door shouting, ‘I’ve got a job!’ ‘Tears were shed by all – after all, I was to be earning 30 shillings a week – we could eat!’

Similarly, Grove remembers her own education agenda being cast aside as a result of 1951. Her father, Toby Hill, the Waterside Workers’ Union national secretary, was blacklisted in the aftermath of 1951. After her parents’ savings were used, they shifted into a smaller house. Yvonne left school in 1954 after three years’ secondary schooling to become a bank clerk rather than go on to university as she had hoped. She went to work ‘simply because I knew if I could go to work it would bring some money into the house’. One of her brothers was contributing ten shillings’ board and she felt the need to contribute too. ‘I was twenty before things came right.’ It took the Hills seven years after the lockout ‘before there was any discretionary income in the family.’

1951 ‘shattered the dreams’ of some union activists of a higher postwar standard of living. Other dreams were also shattered. The education hopes of a number of fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds were shattered too. Andrea Hotere noted that it was very difficult to quantify how many ‘wharfies’ women and young people went to work in order to sustain their families. She concluded, however, that having a woman or a young person in the family working was often a critical means of survival.

The personal histories about 1951 are as extreme as the event itself. Jock Barnes argued at the time, and 50 years later in his memoirs, that ‘passivity is far more damaging to the union movement than defeated upsurges’. ‘Trade unionism’ had the choice to ‘fight back’ or to ‘submissively file into their industrial gas chambers’, giving fascism ‘a bloodless victory’. On the other hand, Marcia Spencer talks in her biography of the National government’s Minister of Labour, William Sullivan, of ‘wreckers motivated by far-left ideologies’. Women have been swept into a platonic schema. They were all ‘so marvellous’, whether wharfies’ or Cabinet ministers’ wives.

It is clear from the transcripts of two interviews with Ida Thompson that her responses surprised her interviewers, Cath Kelly and Kerry Taylor. She said that her family ‘came through without resort to relief’. On this issue she seemed embarrassed that her experience was not what the interviewers was expecting. She said she hadn’t been active and ‘didn’t talk to people after it finished and that was that’. She believed that contact with other wives and families was valuable, but that they were far removed from any decision-making and ‘at that time, our women views appeared [to be of] minimal influence’. Her interviewer asked her, ‘Did that annoy you?’ and Thompson became increasingly defensive in her ‘Not really’ replies.

Thompson’s responses point not only to the range of women’s 1951 experiences but also to important long-term consequence of the 1951 lockout and strikes. Indeed, when she was asked if there had been a long-term material impact for her, she was emphatic: ‘Once it was over, I got on with life ... I got stuck in ... got another cleaning job.’ After a holiday in Dunedin with relatives, as a reward for being the family breadwinner for some months, she returned to Wellington and got a job as a cleaner from two until six in the morning. She worked at that job until she retired. Thompson’s main experience – and that of a large number of other wharfies’ wives during 1951 – was that they worked in paid employment.

These women would never have entered paid employment at that time, but for 1951. Some worked just for the ‘duration’, but a significant proportion, like Thompson, never went ‘back’. The Waterside Workers’ Union had planned to ensure that the government did not have a ‘bloodless victory’, as well as to sustain the male breadwinner wage. In the process, and completely unintentionally, they had helped encourage their own married women into the workforce. They had planned to ‘protect’ their families and their domesticity, but the ensuing material hardship helped normalise married women’s paid employment in their circles. Given the watersiders’ strong defence of a traditional family wage, it was an ironic sea change.

---


10. Anna Green’s emphasis on the long-term battle for control on the waterfront between shipowners and wharfies from 1917 leading up to 1951 means, as a consequence, her account is one of those least about women.


27. Transport Worker, 10 August 1950, p. 9.


33. Parsons, op. cit., p. 3.

34. Contemporaries first presented it. See, for instance, Auckland Watersiders: Information Bulletin No. 11, 22 March 1951, ATL.


41. Auckland Watersiders Relief Committee Cashbook No. 2, Receipts and Expenditures No. 2 Book, 27 April to 23 May 1951, 94–106–11/05 Herbert Roth Papers, MS Group 1314, ATL.


44. Rene and Doug Hare interviewed by Kerry Taylor, 15 June 1995.

45. Congres News 1:7, 1 September 1951, p. 5; Christchurch Star-Sun, 12, 14 May 1951.
chapter 8. Similarly, the heyday of the women’s branches of the Labour Party was before 1939, see Liz Gordon, ‘A Place in the Sun: women in the New Zealand Labour Party’, unpublished manuscript, 1988, chapter 7.


74. Tilly Hunter interviewed by Melanie Nolan, 12 December 2000. Many of the Victoria Socialist Club’s male members had worked on the wharf in holidays. Individual leaders like George Goddard were keen supporters of the watersiders. Wellington Watersiders’ Information Bulletin, 16 March 1951, ATL.


78. Ida Thompson interviewed by Cath Kelly, 30 August, 18 October 1990.


80. Hotere, op. cit., p. 92.

81. Auckland Watersiders’ Relief Committee Cashbook No. 2, ATL.

82. Rose Barber interviewed by Gerry Evans, Evening Post, 10 February 2001.

83. Auckland Watersiders’ Information Bulletin, 5, 8, 12 March 1951, ATL.

84. Wellington Watersiders’ Information Bulletin No. 12, 12 April 1951, ATL.


90. Hotere, op. cit.


92. Ibid., p. 161.

93. Spencer, The Incoming Tide, p. 216.
