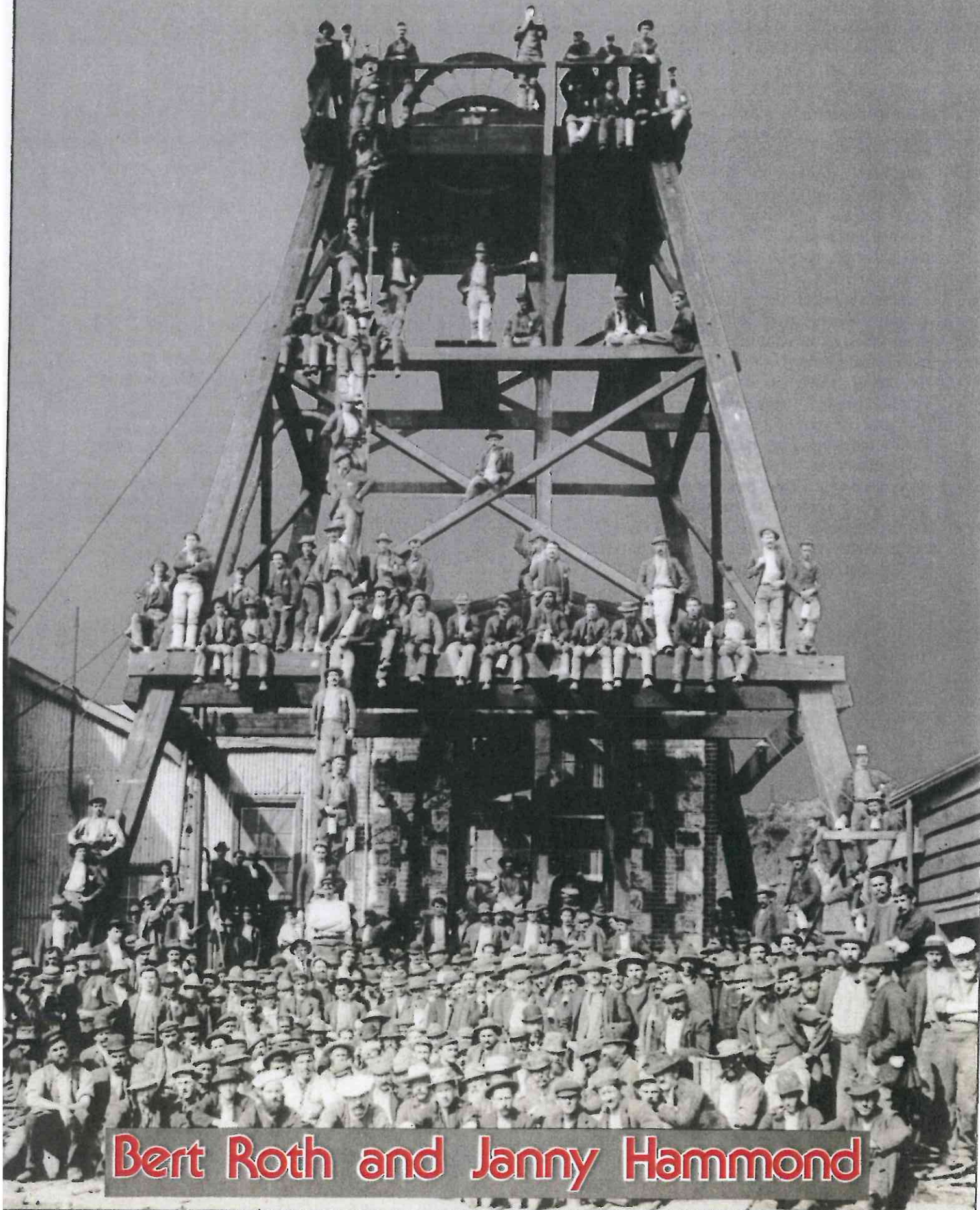


*Excerpts from:-*

# TOIL AND TROUBLE

The Struggle for a Better Life in New Zealand



**Bert Roth and Janny Hammond**



# The Slaughtermen's Dispute

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In February 1907, barely three months after the Auckland tram strike, slaughtermen at the Petone and Ngahauranga freezing works walked out when their employers refused to raise wages from 20s to 25s per 100 sheep killed. The men were careful not to involve their union in the dispute: a union meeting the night before the walkout was closed by the chairman before the strike proposal was put to the vote, so that the resolution would not appear in the minutes. The union secretary, Bert Cooper, arranged to be out of Wellington when the strike started; he affected great surprise when tracked down by journalists.

After a week on strike, the men accepted an employers' offer to raise the rate to 23s. Meanwhile other slaughtermen throughout New Zealand joined the strike, some in works where no union existed. Altogether 517 men took part and all gained the 23s rate. Over 21,000 working days were lost.

Government spokesmen blamed Australian agitators ("birds of passage", they called them) for instigating the dispute. One of the chief causes of the strike however, was delays in the arbitration system, which meant that the

court would not have delivered an award until long after the killing season was over. The strikes were illegal, and the men were prosecuted and fined £5 each — a considerable sum in those days — though as late as 1912 a quarter of the fines were still uncollected.



1. Albert H. Cooper (1874-1958), bootmaker and union secretary. (J. Hutchison, *The Wellington Bootmakers' Union*, 1885-1917, 1917)

2. Striking slaughtermen pose for the photographer outside the Supreme Court buildings in Christchurch. (*Canterbury Times*, 13 March 1907)



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# The Stay-in Strike

The Labour Government introduced a 40-hour working week, but left it to the Arbitration Court to insert this clause without loss of pay in awards, where practicable. The court took a conservative view and excluded some occupations, such as drivers, gas and laundry workers, and the seasonal food industries. Auckland freezing workers in January 1937 were up in arms when their new award retained a 44-hour week, without any compensatory pay

rises. They adopted a go-slow policy, but when the companies threatened to dismiss them, the men occupied the works at Westfield, Southdown and Horotiu, and the cool stores on King's Wharf, and settled in for the night.

This was New Zealand's first stay-in strike, inspired of course by the wave of similar strikes in France after the Popular Front Government took office. The companies asked the police to eject the men, but this was countermanded from Wellington. Tim Armstrong, the Minister of Labour, hurried to Auckland for negotiations. He promised to arrange a conference with the employers, and to use legislation if necessary, to enforce the government's wishes. The men resumed work, but the employers proved obdurate and refused to concede either shorter hours or better pay.

Armstrong then imposed a settlement by directing that the men should be paid a flat rate bonus of threepence an hour above the award rate. There were howls of protest from farmers' organisations and in the daily press, but the government's prestige rose high among its union supporters. At the general elections of 1938, the Labour Party was returned with an increased majority.



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1. Labour Party poster for the 1938 elections, one of a set of four. (Roth Collection)

2. Outside the Westfield freezing works young women stand talking to their boyfriends on strike. (New Zealand Herald, 14 Jan. 1937)

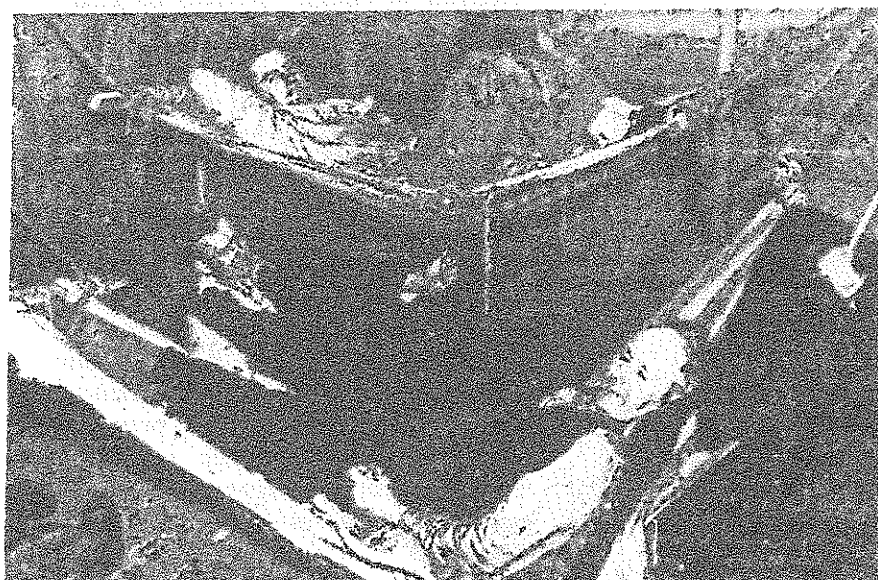
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3. Westfield strikers play cards by candle-light. (*New Zealand Herald*, 14 Jan. 1937)

4. Improved hammocks in the Westfield fellmongery department. (*New Zealand Herald*, 14 Jan. 1937)

5. A singsong at Westfield. The favourite songs were "Tipperary", "Mademoiselle from Armentieres" and "John Brown's Body". (*New Zealand Herald*, 14 Jan. 1937)



# The Right to Picket

New Zealand law does not recognise a right to picket, peacefully or otherwise. On the contrary though the word "picket" does not appear in any act, there are various statutes under which picketers can be prosecuted on charges of trespassing, intimidating, obstructing, or watching and besetting. These laws however have been rarely used. Picketing became accepted as a normal part of industrial conflict, and unionists assumed that they were exercising a legal right.

There was great indignation therefore when 33 picketers were arrested in Dunedin on 17 February 1981, and charged under an obscure clause of the Police Offences Act. The men, members of the Meatworkers Union, had been demonstrating outside the Ravensdown fertiliser works in protest at the dismissal of a colleague. The employer alleged that they were denying access to maintenance staff and complained to the police who arrested the picketers, including the local union secretary. According to the Chief Superintendent of the Dunedin Police District, there was no violence at the gates but the police

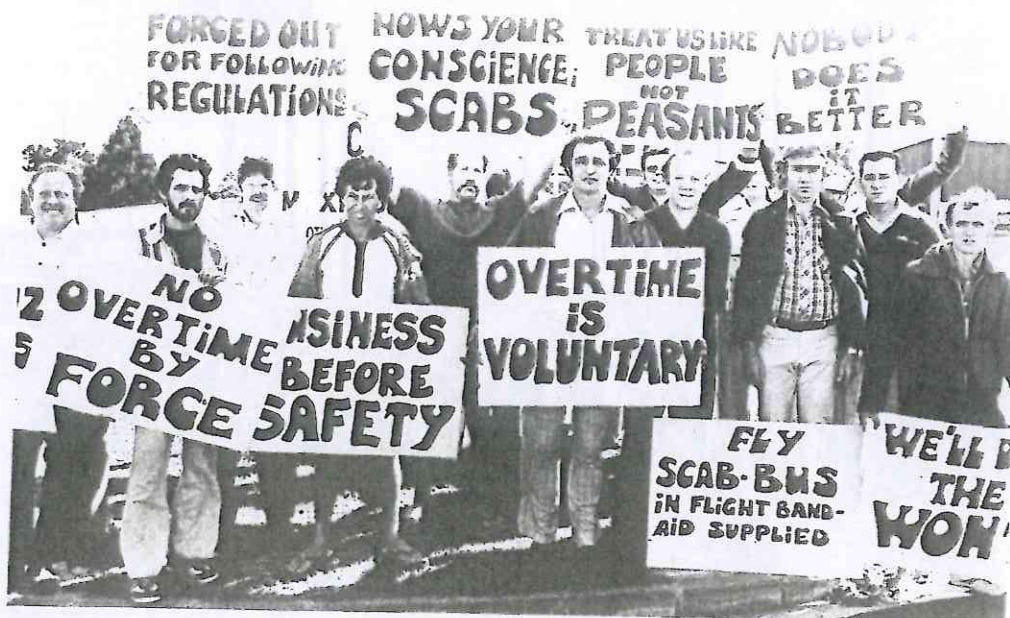
"feared there might well have been some interference between the different parties, which may well have provoked a breach of the peace, possibly involving assault and obstruction charges". The men appeared in court the following day and were remanded at large. They then returned to the picket line.

Thousands of members of the Meatworkers Union walked off their jobs throughout New Zealand in protest against the company's "violence" in calling the police. Other workers struck in sympathy. The Federation of Labour asked the government to amend the law under which the men had been charged, and to "do something" about the charges. There were no further arrests at Ravensdown, and on 19 February a settlement was reached, whereby the company agreed to give the dismissed man the choice of reinstatement or of taking a lump sum of \$1500 (he chose the latter), to pay \$200 each to the strikers, and to ask the Attorney-General to drop the charges. The union lifted all bans and pickets and normal work resumed.

1. 20 February. Striking engineers picket the main entrance to Auckland Airport.  
(New Zealand Herald photo)

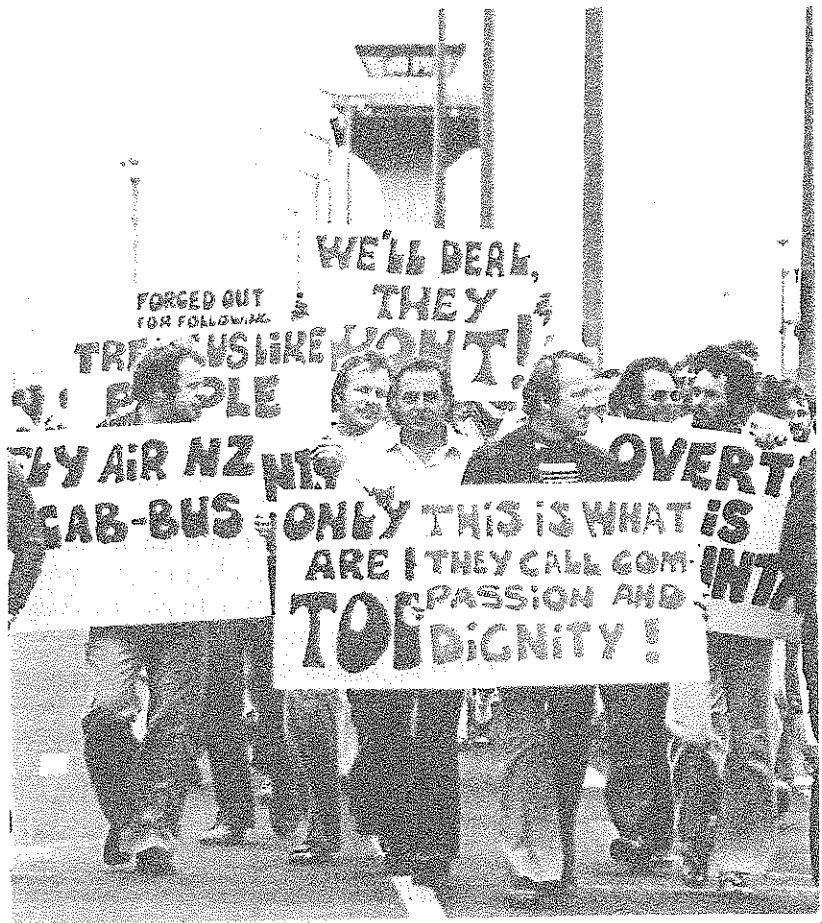
2. 23 February. Shop stewards lead a march to the airport gates.  
(Auckland Star 23 Feb. 1981)

3. 23 February. The engineers' protest march has entered the airport.  
(New Zealand Herald photo) ... 1



Within a week the police again arrested picketers, this time at Auckland's airport. This dispute arose out of award negotiations between Air New Zealand and its ground engineers. When the talks broke down, the union gave the required fortnight's notice of intention to strike and imposed an overtime ban. From then on events escalated rapidly: the company dismissed men who refused overtime, about 1200 union members ceased work in sympathy, the company then used non-union labour to keep the planes flying, and the engineers picketed the airport. On 24 February a mass picket of hundreds of engineers effectively stopped Air New Zealand from operating, but 48 picketers were arrested on charges of trespassing under Civil Aviation Regulations. They were remanded on bail but Jim Butterworth, the Auckland secretary of the Engineers Union, and five other union officials refused bail and went to prison.

Again, as in the case of the Ravensdown arrests, thousands of workers struck in sympathy, mostly in the Auckland area. The Engineers Union



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called out all its members in the Northern Industrial District, and the Auckland Trades Council issued a call for widespread stoppages. Transport, the waterfront and most major industries came to a halt. The Federation of Labour once more pressed the government to drop the charges and amend the law so as to establish a right of peaceful picketing.

On 26 February, Jim Knox addressed a meeting of 3000 union delegates in Auckland called to implement the

general stoppage. It was 30 years to the day since an earlier National government had threatened to use emergency regulations against the watersiders' union. That afternoon, when the Attorney-General rejected all requests to interfere with the pending prosecutions, another confrontation far exceeding in scale the 1951 dispute seemed to be shaping up. At this point however, the Federation of Labour executive decided to seek a compromise solution. It offered a return to work if



4. 23 February. "This base is black".  
(Auckland Star photo)

5. 24 February. Picketers link arms to close the airport gates.  
(Auckland Star 24 Feb. 1981)



the government agreed to hold discussions on changes to the picketing laws. Cabinet accepted the deal and the strikers, including the airport engineers, returned to work on 3 March.

The week's turmoil ended with a union march and a massive counter-march in Auckland's Queen Street. The unionists were heavily outnumbered. "We must pull together, not apart", was the message, but the conflict brought to the surface the deep-seated contradictions in New Zealand society.

"You're all low class", a heckler shouted at the unionists, and the *New Zealand Herald* noted how "one well-dressed woman had abandoned her shopping to run along the footpath yelling at the marchers. 'I think the unionists are disgusting,' she said."

Jim Butterworth, however, was unmoved: "I'm not employed by the public," he said. "I'm employed by the Engineers Union. If Air New Zealand uses scabs again, we'll shift them again."



6. 24 February. A police inspector warns the picketers that they are trespassing in a security area. (*Auckland Star* 24 Feb. 1981)

7. 24 February. The first arrests: Jim Butterworth waves as he is led away. (*Auckland Star* 24 Feb. 1981)