

# New Zealand 'Wobblies'

*The story of the Industrial Workers of the World*

By H. ROTH

AT EASTER 1906, at the annual conference of the Trades and Labour Councils of New Zealand, Arthur Rosser, one of the Auckland delegates, ridiculed the idea that the workers of New Zealand would ever again have any use for 'that old barbaric weapon—the strike.' Indeed, there had not been a single strike in New Zealand for twelve years, since the passing of the Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act in 1894; but seven months later, in November 1906, Rosser's own union, the Auckland Electric Tramways Industrial Union of Workers, broke the spell with a three hours' walk-out. They were out again—for four-and-a-half days—in 1908, and in 1911 the Auckland trammies obtained wage increases totalling £10,000 a year by a mere strike threat. That year they cancelled their registration under the Arbitration Act and joined up with the 'Red' Federation of Labour.

Rosser was a liberal-labour man of the old school, but he was pushed forward by the militant element in the union, led by a young conductor named Tom Barker. Barker represented the Tramways Union on the Auckland branch committee of the 'Red' Federation of which Michael Joseph Savage (Brewery Workers) was chairman, and Peter Fraser (General Labourers) was secretary. Barker was also an active member of the NZ Socialist Party and, under the pseudonym 'Spanwire', was Auckland correspondent of the *Maoriland Worker*. Early in 1912, he succeeded Savage as secretary of the Auckland Socialist branch.

The Auckland Socialist Party was in the doldrums that year. Scott Bennett, their lecturer, had left on a tour of Australia and the weekly lectures in the Opera House were cancelled. The monthly publication *Social-Democrat* ceased publication, and Savage himself thought of returning to Victoria. In despair many SP members joined the new IWW Club, founded by a recent arrival from Canada, J. B. King. Barker was one of them.

The Industrial Workers of the World, or 'Wobblies' as they were popularly called in the States, had reached New Zealand as early as 1907. Some New Zealand miners had attended their Chicago inaugural congress of 1905, and the IWW revolutionary preamble had been endorsed by the New Zealand Socialist Party and the 'Red' Federation of Labour. Both these

organisations advocated industrial unionism as opposed to craft unionism, and industrial action against the employing class. J. B. King, however, represented that more intransigent Chicago faction of the IWW which repudiated political action in every form and openly preached sabotage and direct action to overthrow the existing order of society. 'Fast workers die young' and 'A little sugar in the concrete will make a few more jobs for the unemployed' were two of their more popular slogans.

King agitated among the Auckland watersiders and Huntly and Waihi miners, and he became an active member of the Auckland General Labourers' Union, which he represented, with Peter Fraser, at the 1912 conference of the 'Red' Federation. Fraser, although he never joined the IWW, showed himself sympathetic to them at this time. When, during the Waihi strike, the Federation of Labour thought it prudent to dissociate itself from the activities of the IWW, Fraser openly voiced his protest: 'With such propagandists I have no quarrel', he wrote with reference to the members of the IWW, 'whose work must undoubtedly advance the revolutionary working-class movement.'

After the defeat of the Waihi strike, King and other IWW men left for Australia, but the Auckland IWW club continued to prosper. In January 1913 the club started its own monthly paper, *The Industrial Unionist*, which delighted in aphorisms such as 'Or the job is a good place to agitate, the boss pays for the time too', or typographical experiments like:

HUSH!

*Don't say a word about sabotage.*

IT ISN'T RESPECTABLE..

The editorial committee consisted of five 'wage-slaves' with a hearty distrust of politicians. They even distrusted themselves, apparently, for each issue carried an advertisement: 'Members of the organisation are expected to see to it that this paper is run on the lines intended by the organisation, and that it is kept properly under control.'

The IWW had by this time completely broken with the 'Red' Federation, which they held responsible for the Waihi defeat; and they vigorously attacked the new unity proposals put forward by the Federation

which led to the formation of the Social-Democratic Party (which later became the Labour Party) and the United Federation of Labour in July 1913. IWW pamphlets and leaflets were published in their thousands during 1913. Barker was appointed national organiser, and a second local was formed (or rather revived) in Christchurch. This activity reached a peak during the 1913 waterfront strike when *The Industrial Unionist* appeared almost every second day. It ceased completely with the collapse of the strike, coupled with the arrest of Barker for what the Crown Prosecutor (Mr Ostler) called 'one of the most dangerous speeches made in the history of the industrial trouble and probably in New Zealand.'

Many IWW members again left for Australia, among them Charles Reeve, the secretary-treasurer of the Auckland IWW Club, who was assaulted by specials and 'free' labourers when embarking for Sydney. The charges against his assailants were dismissed for want of evidence. Barker himself left for Sydney after his release in January 1914, and with his departure the short history of the IWW in New Zealand came to an end.

In Sydney Barker became editor of the IWW paper *Direct Action*, and the acknowledged leader of the Australian IWW, which played a prominent part in the struggle against conscription. In August 1915, he was prosecuted by the New South Wales Labour Government for publishing a poster reading:

### TO ARMS!

*Capitalists, Parsons, Politicians,  
Newspaper Editors and other Stay-at-home Patriots,  
Your Country Needs you in the Trenches!*

WORKERS, FOLLOW YOUR MASTERS!

His sentence was quashed by the Appeal Court, but a year later he was again prosecuted and sentenced, this time for publishing a cartoon showing a soldier crucified on a field-piece with a number of top-hatted persons collecting the dripping blood of the soldier in bowls. The caption, giving an excerpt from a war loan prospectus, pointed out that the interest was far higher than in normal times.

Reeve and J. B. King were among the accused in the 1916 conspiracy trial of twelve Australian IWW leaders. They all received extremely harsh sentences, but a Royal Commission four years later found that the Crown case had rested largely on the evidence of 'liars and perjurers', that six of the men had been wrongly convicted, and that of the remainder five had been excessively punished. These eleven men were immediately released.

Late in 1917, Barker was again arrested and, after six months' imprisonment, deported to Chile with an

escort of three Commonwealth policemen. A year later he appeared in Buenos Aires as secretary of the Marine Transport Workers of South America: then he went to the United States, was deported to Russia in the 'twenties, met most of the prominent Soviet leaders of the time, and was sent to Britain as head of Russian Oil Products, a Soviet trade agency. In 1933, he paid a short visit to New Zealand and was present when the first Russian oil ship arrived in Wellington—truly, an astonishing career for a man who twenty years earlier had punched tickets on the Auckland trams.

The important role of the IWW in the history of the Australian labour movement is generally acknowledged. Professor V. G. Childé called the establishment of the IWW 'the most momentous event in the political industrial history of Australian labour since . . . 1890.' 'No body', he continued, 'has exercised a more profound influence on the whole outlook of labour in Australia.' Less known is the fact that a leading part in the Australian IWW during its most successful years was played by New Zealanders—'refugees' from the Waihi strike and voluntary exiles after the collapse of the 1913 waterfront strike, foremost among the latter Tom Barker, of Auckland, 'the heart and brains of the IWW in the Commonwealth.'

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