

Editorial

ALTHOUGH the arbitration system established, thanks largely to William Pember Reeves and the 'labour members', in 1894, did not quite last a century, the centennial of its enactment is well worth acknowledging. Despite the fact that historians have long been sceptical about the capacity of laws to change social habits and practices, there has never been any doubt that Reeves's 'pet measure', the Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act, profoundly shaped industrial relations, politics, and the nature of the welfare state in New Zealand. From the beginning it was recognized as a foundation stone for 'the social laboratory'. Reformers from North America and Western Europe came to study and admire it and the New Zealand law figures in the political debates of several other countries. When the Labour Party took office, just over 40 years later, arbitration was the only Liberal reform that the new government essentially refurbished, compulsory unionism being the main innovation. Even now that compulsory arbitration has been superseded, the habits and customs which it fostered continue to shape the new system of industrial relations and the nature of the welfare state in New Zealand.

As James Holt showed in *Compulsory Arbitration. The First Forty Years* (Auckland, 1986), the 1894 law created a framework within which the country's industrial relations developed. Much of what arbitration came to mean, including the minimum award wage and blanket coverage, had not been foreseen by Reeves, nor anyone else. Holt also showed that the arbitration system had played a role in politics which often misled historians when they came to look at the arbitration system itself. For instance, the 1908 amendment Act, excoriated by the labour movement then and by most historians subsequently, actually allowed the system to survive. At the same time my study of *The Red Feds. Revolutionary Industrial Unionism and the New Zealand Federation of Labour 1908-1914* (Auckland, 1988), demonstrated the limits to the arbitration system's authority, limits which could not be inferred from contemporary political rhetoric. While the Arbitration Court and system served as the focus for debate and became a dense symbol, both for the political left and right, the labour process and unionization were more important in shaping the pattern of industrial unrest and the way in which the arbitration system developed. Contemporary perceptions of the Court and the arbitration system, long taken at face value by historians, were not accurate guides to the history of either.

The essays in this volume expose similar dissonances for later periods. John Martin's article carefully investigates the dire predictions of disaster which the unions and the Labour Party made when the Coalition government ended

compulsory arbitration in 1932. The reality proves to have been more complex, and surprisingly little changed in most industries within the arbitration system. Anna Green examines the role of the Arbitration Court in the country's waterfront industry, especially in the 20 years before the tumultuous conflict of 1951. While Martin shows that the system survived in most industries, despite the removal of the compulsory clauses, Green looks carefully at one turbulent industry, and shows that even with compulsory arbitration in place there were distinct limits to the Court's power and authority. By sensitively using oral sources she demonstrates that the history of the waterfront can best be explained in terms of the labour process. Kerry Taylor's study of the origins of the Communist Party in New Zealand reminds us, however, that New Zealand's system of industrial relations has always existed within a political context and that the 'left' of the labour movement has usually rejected arbitration since the time of the Red Feds. The decisions of the Arbitration Court may no longer be seen as the key to the history of industrial relations, but it loomed large in our political history and especially in the history of the 'left'.

The 'lockout' or 'strike' of 1951 — and the political preferences of people can still be inferred from the term they use — ushered in a new era of stability in which long-term changes slowly eroded the arbitration system. The paper by Pat Walsh provides a careful analysis of the background to and the consequences of the 1968 'Nil Wage Order'. That decision and its subsequent reversal by an 'unholy alliance' of unions and employers marked the beginning of a complex process which finally resulted in the demise of arbitration and the enactment of the Employment Contracts Act. Peter Franks's account of the clerical workers and their organizations complements Walsh's study, revealing the way in which some of arbitration's consequences gave its enemies ammunition and its friends headaches. Both papers provide an invaluable perspective on the decline and death of the arbitration system. Both papers also point back to aspects of the system which existed before the 1950s but were then less obvious, the ability of organized labour and the employers in an industry to use the system, and arbitration's crucial role in allowing the workers in some industries, such as clerical work and farm labour, to organize.

In one issue of the *Journal*, necessarily organized at relatively short notice, it has not proved possible to illustrate fully the ferment within the field of labour history. It would have been useful to have a paper looking at the impact of the arbitration system on the gendering of work and the role of the labour process in the construction of gender (we hoped for and expected two papers on gender but they did not arrive). The role of arbitration in segmenting the labour market, and of segmented labour markets in constructing 'racial' difference, also needs attention. Besides, many 'traditional' areas still need attention. There is probably room for another look at the origins of the system, placing it within the traditions of such major craft unions as the Amalgamated Society of Engineers. The role of the New Zealand Employers' Federation has been neglected for far too long and we know too little about the first Labour government and the arbitration system. This said, however, it needs to be remembered that the historical

profession in New Zealand is very small, and the number of specialists in any sub-discipline such as labour history can usually be counted on the fingers of one hand.

It is in the nature of a special issue intended to commemorate a statute and an institution that the articles will focus on institutional issues. The articles give some idea of the ferment which has swept through labour history in the past generation. Had there been more time it might have proved possible to commission articles which would reveal this ferment more fully, besides tackling some of the uncharted areas in the history of the system. As it is, enough work is in progress to ensure that labour history will continue to produce a rich harvest.

ERIK OLSEN

University of Otago

FUTURE HISTORIES . . .

BUILDING THE NEW WORLD

Work, Politics and Society in Caversham, 1890-1920

Erik Olsen

This study of the Dunedin working-class suburb of Caversham focuses particularly on work, class, skill, gender and labour politics. Olsen gives detailed and fascinating accounts of the businesses, the personalities and the working conditions in the community, but he also explores more general theoretical issues. This makes it a book about Dunedin, full of knowledge about the city's early life, but also an exciting and stimulating work of history.

\$39.95

COAL, CLASS AND COMMUNITY

The United Mineworkers of New Zealand, 1880-1960

Len Richardson

Coalminers occupy an important place in the history of industrial radicalism in New Zealand. *Coal, Class and Community* shows how the wider solidarities of class and occupation transcended the parochial concerns of the coal towns and camps, overcoming the divisive effects of isolation and local circumstances. This history of the mineworkers in New Zealand tells an important story about our industrial past, with clear identification of the central issues and attention to the colourful personalities involved.

\$39.95

AUCKLAND UNIVERSITY PRESS

PRIVATE BAG 92019, AUCKLAND