

This article traverses the difficulty of churches being prophetic in the waterfront dispute when public and pew opinion was overwhelmingly fixed in favour of one side of a two-sided dispute. It also explores two aspects of the "pathetic" side of the waterfront dispute. Was there warm-hearted pathos to help the families of locked out workers? Or was the response of the churches, both in terms of prophecy and of pathos, only pathetic?

1951 was a crucial year in New Zealand's industrial relations. In February 1951 perennially sour waterfront relations climaxed in an all-out showdown. Whether the situation should be termed a strike or a lockout is a matter for dispute. The government by regulation declared it to be a "strike". "Lockout", however, seems the better term, for the watersiders were willing to work a 40-hour week, but because they were collectively refusing to undertake overtime until their wage demands were satisfied, their employers barred them from work.

The confrontation lasted for 151 days, with 8,000 watersiders idle and at least another 7,000 miners, seamen and freezing

workers on strike in support. The government approached the situation with war-footing efficiency, banning any public show of support for the "strike", criminalising any aid provided to the "strikers", and bringing in the military to keep the wharves operating. What led to this extraordinary state of affairs?

One factor was the economic situation. The postwar economy was booming. As is commonly the case, this was accompanied by spiralling inflation, consumer prices jumping about 4.5% annually in the period 1946 to 1949. Inflation fuels wage demands; wage increases in turn fuel inflation. There is thus pressure to increase wages and also counter-pressure to restrain wages. Industrial disputes are unsurprising in such a context. This was especially the case in the waterfront industry where there was a powerful and militant union. In 1949 alone there were 28 strikes on the wharves.<sup>2</sup>

The 1951 waterfront confrontation had had a remarkably long gestation. The waterfront had been a major site of industrial dispute for decades. Surprisingly, even the main collective trade union body, the Federation of Labour (FOL), had become deeply opposed to the national waterfront union.

Partly this was a matter of personalities. The head of the waterfront union in 1951 was Harold "Jock" Barnes, nicknamed "the bull". Trade union historian Bert Roth explained, "He earned his nickname, "The Bull" by charging the enemy ferociously, be it ship-owners or what he regarded as traitors to the union cause.... Compromise was not in his nature".3 The key figure in the FOL was the notorious hard man, Fintan Patrick Walsh, an ex-communist who had become a bitter enemy of communists and the left wing of the labour movement.4 Barnes had apparently once indicated that he aspired to be head of the FOL.5 Walsh, then vice-president of FOL, had the same aspiration. The two were, in the words of Gerry Evans, "like two bull elephants that would fight to the death".6

A second shaper of FOL attitudes was union politics. The waterside union, located at the radical end of the trade union movement, had led a walkout at the FOL conference in 1950, followed by the

establishment of the rival Trade Union Congress. While the waterside leaders were not communists, the Trade Union Congress was

affiliated with the communist-controlled World Federation of Trade Unions. Public opinion was thus likely to perceive the industrial struggle as a battle against an "omnipresent Communist menace". Walsh evoked the phobia of cancer, warning fellow unionists shortly before the waterside worker walkout: "Trade unionists will have to decide whether the movement can suffer greater harm from the malignant cancer within the Federation of Labour than it would suffer by sharply cutting out the cancer."

Prime Minister, Sid Holland, acknowledged FOL support early in the dispute: "[T]he FOL has been very helpful to the government in several respects".9 Walsh ramped up the rhetoric soon after, warning of a "revolutionary conspiracy" and even potential "civil war". He concluded his inflammatory address: "We therefore call all watersiders to reject the persons who have led them into their present impossible

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<sup>1</sup> Redmer Yska, "Spies, Lies and Red Herrings", in David Grant (ed.), The Big Blue: Snapshots of the 1951 Waterfront Lockout, (Christchurch: Canterbury University Press, 2004), 22–29 at 23.

<sup>2</sup> Bruce Brown, "The Lockout and Walter Nash", in Grant, *The Big Blue*, 101–108 at 102.

<sup>3</sup> Bert Roth, Wharfie: From Hand Barrows to Straddles: Unionism on the Auckland Waterfront, (Auckland: REM, 1993), III.

<sup>4</sup> Gerry Evans, "The Big Blue", NZ Listener, 10 February 2001, 30–34 at 32.

<sup>5</sup> Obituary of Barnes by Dean Parker,  $\it Otago\ Daily\ Times$ , 4 June 2000, C7.

<sup>6</sup> Gerry Evans, "The Big Blue", 32.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Bassett, Confrontation '51: The 1951 Waterfront Dispute, (Wellington: Reed, 1972), 87.

<sup>8</sup> Otago Daily Times, 27 April 1950, 6.

<sup>9</sup> Evening Post, 1 March 1951.

situation, to abandon their Communist-dominated misleader" and re-join their fellow-workers and the FOL.  $^{\text{\tiny 10}}$ 

The first Labour government might have been expected to be somewhat sympathetic to worker aspirations but by the later 1940s it had had (in popular parlance) a gutsful of watersider intransigence. In 1947 Bob Semple, Minister of Railways, called Jock Barnes "a wrecker". Around the same time Prime Minister Peter Fraser similarly claimed that the watersiders "threaten the whole fabric of social justice." Tension between government and the waterside union was at such a height in 1948 that the *Otago Daily Times* suggested that "a state of war" existed between the two bodies. <sup>12</sup> After the election of a more conservative government (National) in 1949 a show-down became even more likely.

Public sentiment had also largely had a longstanding gutsful of the wharfies. In 1948

a *NZ Herald* editorial accused the watersiders of "monstrous selfishness", declaring that they "hold the community to ransom", and that "the patience of the people is stretched

almost to breaking point".<sup>13</sup> Alun Richards, editor of the Presbyterian *Outlook*, who was to write a crucial mediating editorial during the 1951 waterfront dispute, expressed public sentiment bluntly during waterfront turmoil in 1950:

If the refusal of the Watersiders' Union Executive to take part in the Waterfront Royal Commission Enquiry does not further harden public opinion against them, it will only be because it is already triple-baked. Watersiders, as individuals are, as often as not, estimable people. Despite all their oftquoted advantages of "spelling" and whatnot, very few of us envy them their work.... The real reason why they stink in many fellow-unionists' nostrils is their Union's anti-social policy of exploiting a monopolistic position by giving short value for money and by irresponsibly using their economic power for political ends. 14

The international situation added anti-wharfie fuel. Britain was still "mother" and "home" for most New Zealanders in the period after the recent Second World War. Economic recovery was still in

10 NZ Herald, 9 March 1951, 6.

II Bassett, Confrontation, 25.

12 Otago Daily Times, 1 July 1948, 4.

13 "These Men Betray Their City", NZ Herald, 9 July 1948, 6.

14 Outlook, 25 October 1950, 3.

process for much of Europe including Britain in 1951. In that year a visitor from London indicated to the Catholic newspaper *Zealandia* that rationing still persisted in Britain and "there was a great need to send food parcels". <sup>15</sup> At this time around 70% of New Zealand's exports went to Britain, with 90% of these exports coming off the land, the greater part being meat and dairy products, i.e. food. So any attempt to shut down the wharves and so restrain our exports could be seen not only as an attack on the New Zealand economy but also as heartless food-deprivation of our recuperating mother.

Even more significant on the international front was the fact that New Zealand had become involved in the Korean War from mid-1950. A country at war is commonly less tolerant of dissent; unity is prized. In this period there was heightened fear of "reds under the bed" throughout the West, finding most notable expression in McCarthyism in the United States from 1950. All this fostered the

common association of the 1951 wharfie stance with communism. When the waterfront dispute erupted in February 1951, Prime Minister Holland was quick to link the dispute with the

Korean War:

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There is another war – the menace from the enemy within who is just as unscrupulous and poisonous, just as treacherous as is the enemy without. The enemy within works night and day. He gnaws away at our very vitals. He works inside and he constantly weakens our preparations for defence which are so necessary for the peace of the world.<sup>16</sup>

Any individual or group of individuals who stands in the way of the country's preparations for defence to ensure peace... by limiting the handling of goods... is a traitor, and should be treated accordingly.<sup>17</sup>

William Sullivan, Minister of Labour also displayed the red card: "this is not a fight between the Government and responsible citizens. It is a fight between the Communist-dominated section and all decent people." 18

The waterfront union from early days had clearly had powerful leverage in its industrial negotiations and direct action. New Zealand was an island nation, heavily dependent on its shipping. Speedy turn-around of ships was vital for cost-

<sup>15</sup> Mrs Frank Tippler, interviewed by Zealandia, 15 March 1951, 7.

<sup>16</sup> Evening Post, 22 February 1951, 10.

<sup>17</sup> NZ Herald, 17 February 1951, 8.

<sup>18</sup> Otago Daily Times, 10 April 1951, 4.

effective transportation of exports and imports. The waterfront labour force could expedite this goal, or it could be a bottleneck. In public opinion the wharfies had abused their strategic role and were a self-centred bottleneck. Hard bargaining in the past had gained the wharfies the right to "spelling". After working for an hour or for some other period of time they would then have equivalent rest-time as a spell. This often meant only one-half to two-thirds of the men working at any one time. 19 The men could easily rig the right to spelling, such that numbers of them might go home well before their paid hours were completed. In addition monthly stop-work meetings during normal work hours had become the norm.20 Watersiders were vilified in the court of public opinion for their lack of productivity – hence a quip at the 1950 Baptist Assembly: "the watersiders in New Zealand are not the only ones who want a lot of money for a little work."21

Wharfies featured in people's estimation in the

way the proverbial used car salesman does today – stereotyped and scorned. The *NZ Baptist* asserted in January 1950: "The new Government can be sure of the support of the mass

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of the people if it tackles industrial wreckers."<sup>22</sup> An *Auckland Star* editorial declared at the commencement of the 1951 dispute: "The public... is heartily sick of the antics of the watersiders."<sup>23</sup> It is particularly significant that while radical socialist John A. Lee offered the wharfies advice and defended them against the "Red Smear", he also concluded privately that they had taken industrial action "to defend the right of loafers to loafing plus rich dividends."<sup>24</sup>

Yet there is another side to the wharfie story, often little told. Watersiders were on call, with only a guaranteed part-week wage. Most times they were expected to work extensive overtime, 50 hours per week being typical at the Auckland and Lyttelton wharves prior to the 1951 dispute. <sup>25</sup> The wharfies were sometimes involved in very dirty work. Lampblack (a form of carbon black used in tyre manufacture) was

19 Report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Waterfront Industry 1952, 20–21.

20 Royal Commission, 34.

21 NZ Baptist, December 1950, 362.

22 NZ Baptist, January 1950, 5.

23 Auckland Star, 20 February 1951, 2.

24 Erik Olssen, John A. Lee (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1997), 204.

25 Grace Millar, "Families and the 1951 New Zealand Waterfront Lockout", PhD thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, 2013, 32.

a particular bane, especially as it came in bags that were sometimes torn. Its stain was extremely hard to remove from clothing or exposed skin. Wharfie work was also dangerous. In 1949, for example, 26 wharfies from Auckland and 45 from Wellington were admitted to hospital because of work-related injuries. <sup>26</sup> In all, 723 men at Auckland sustained injuries (one fatal) from April 1948 to March 1949 out of a 2000-strong workforce. <sup>27</sup> When military servicemen took over the wharf work for twenty weeks during the 1951 dispute, two of them died of work-sustained injuries and a number of others were injured. <sup>28</sup> Wharfies did need a strong union.

The immediate precursor to the 1951 dispute was an Arbitration Court general order setting a 15% wage increase. While the court ruling was not definitive in relation to waterside pay, it did suggest a benchmark increase. However, the watersiders were then offered only a 9% increase on the basis that they had gained a 6% increase the previous July. This led

to the watersiders refusing overtime and the employers then locking out workers who refused overtime from 15 February. Thus began the 151-day dispute. The government quickly

stepped in, calling for compulsory arbitration, over against waterside union insistence on direct negotiations. The government cancelled registration of the national union on 28 February, subsequently leading to a balkanisation of the union into 26 local port unions.

The government was able to put the nation in lockdown against the watersiders by stretching the Public Safety Conservation Act 1932 to its limits. The Act, which had its birth in the 1932 unemployment riots, permitted the Governor-General to declare a state of emergency if "public safety" or "public order" were imperilled, or if provision of the essentials of life for the community was threatened. This provided the sanction for the Waterfront Strike Emergency Regulations, gazetted on 22 February 1951.

One draconian section of the regulations effectively blacked out any pro-union publicity, ensuring that only government and employer voices could be heard during the dispute. It declared that every person commits an offence who "prints or publishes any statement, advertisement or other matter... that is intended or likely to encourage,

<sup>26</sup> Royal Commission, 160.

<sup>27</sup> Roth, Wharfie, 111.

<sup>28</sup> Bassett, Confrontation, 136-37.

incite, aid or abet a declared strike or the continuance of a declared strike."<sup>29</sup>

Another draconian section sought to deprive the workers of material support, declaring that every person commits an offence who "makes any payment or contribution to or for the benefit of any workers who are party to a declared strike."<sup>30</sup> So under the regulations minds and mouths were to be gagged, and strikers and their dependents were to be starved into submission.

The regulations largely shut down any press debate. Very few letters defending the watersiders were published.<sup>31</sup> The press shied away from major comment on the dispute. The monthly magazine *Here and Now* noted in March 1951: "we are unable to comment on what appears to us to be the most important issue of the day – the "strike" or "lockout" of the waterside workers."<sup>32</sup> The *Auckland Star* similarly noted that "news and opinions which may encourage the strike cannot be published."<sup>33</sup>

In Wellington, where some Victoria College [University] students were sympathetic to the

watersiders' cause, police banned the annual capping procession.<sup>34</sup> Similar action was taken in Auckland by the Auckland City Council, its mayor, Sir John Allum, declaring that they should take "no chances".<sup>35</sup>

Pressure against speaking out applied even to politicians. The leader of the opposition, Walter Nash, was warned by a police inspector at Hamilton that he must not speak about the emergency regulations at a public meeting there.<sup>36</sup> The Auckland City Council declined a regional Labour Party booking of the Auckland Town Hall, at which Walter Nash was to speak: there would be no bookings for political meetings "during the operation of the present emergency regulations".<sup>37</sup> Nash then went on to speak at a several thousand strong, open-air meeting at the Auckland domain.<sup>38</sup>

29 Waterfront Strike Emergency Regulations, 1951, regulation 4.

35 NZ Herald, 2 May 1951.

36 New Zealand Parliamentary Debates (NZPD), 295, 1951, 265.

38 Dick Scott, 151 Days: The Great Waterfront Lockout and Supporting Strikes February 15 – July 15, 1951 (Auckland: Reed, 1952; 4<sup>th</sup> edn 2001), 134.

The watersiders were essentially gagged in the public arena. In clandestine fashion they ran off large amounts of information, appeal, and propaganda bulletins and pamphlets. Ex-communist and radical journalist, Dick Scott, a significant participant in the dispute, estimated that this material might have run to around 1.5 million items altogether.<sup>39</sup> However, these would have reached the hands of relatively few people.<sup>40</sup>

This did not mean that the newspapers said nothing. Rather, their statements overwhelmingly supported the government and attacked the watersiders. Thus the *NZ Herald* published Minhinnick's cartoon, depicting rat-catching dogs of "public opinion" held back by Holland, but keenly seeking to attack "strike waterfront" rats.<sup>41</sup> The *Evening Post* asserted that watersider rejection of the government ultimatum to resume normal working hours meant that the wharfies had "declared war on the rest of the community".<sup>42</sup> And though the

Auckland Star might have felt gagged in relation to pro-watersider sentiment, it did not hold back in relation

to anti-watersider perspective. In an editorial in May 1951 commenting on an assault on a president of a newly formed waterside workers' union the newspaper declared:

A final warning should be issued, and it should take the form of a ban, in the meantime, on any gathering in the vicinity of the wharfs. The Government should announce that crowds on the waterfront will be dispersed without hesitation, and that in view of what has already happened the police will be armed. And the Government should make it known, before any further incidents occur, that should individuals or groups defy the ban and challenge the authority of the police, the police will shoot.<sup>43</sup>

The matter of prohibiting aid to a striker raised ethical issues. Even giving food to a neighbour who was the spouse of a striker might be a criminal offence. Apparently though, there were no prosecutions of this type.<sup>44</sup> However, at one point the police attempted to close the wharfies' food depots in Wellington.<sup>45</sup>

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39 Scott, 151 Days, 179.
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<sup>30</sup> Waterfront Strike Emergency Regulations, 1951, regulation 8.

<sup>31 &</sup>quot;Notes", Landfall, 5, 3, September 1951, 163–64; Bassett, Confrontation, 114.

<sup>32 &</sup>quot;Passed the Censors", Here and Now, March 1951, 20.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in "Passed the Censors", Here and Now, March 1951, 20.

<sup>34</sup> Evening Post, 3 May 1951.

<sup>37</sup> Bassett, Confrontation, 171.

<sup>40 &</sup>quot;Notes", Landfall, 5, 3, September 1951, 163–64.

<sup>41</sup> NZ Herald, 23 April 1951, 6.

<sup>42</sup> Evening Post, 27 February 1951.

<sup>43</sup> Auckland Star, 1 May 1951, 1.

<sup>44</sup> MP Thomas Shand, NZPD, 294, 29 June 1951, 62.

<sup>45</sup> Walter Brookes, "Notes on the Wharf Situation", Landfall, 5, 2, June 1951, 139–42 at 142.

In all of this what did the churches do? There seems to have been two areas inviting involvement: first to protest the excessively draconian aspects of the emergency regulations, secondly to provide humanitarian aid to suffering, unemployed families. This essentially meant those involved in the waterfront dispute, as the total number of New Zealanders on unemployment benefits in 1951 was the amazingly low number of 10.46

In terms of prophetic protest the church newspapers were almost completely silent. Likely this was linked with the draconian muzzling of independent comment. A search of Anglican, Methodist and Baptist newspapers reveals virtually no comment at all.<sup>47</sup> The *NZ Baptist* was quite explicit in essentially avoiding the issue, apart from speaking more generally about fair wages and fair prices:

We have nothing to say about the political aspects of the waterfront dispute, but we are

concerned to say something about the Christian and his responsibilities to the

community. That great Baptist, John Bunyan, had strong and true things to say about wages and prices. He contended for both just wages and fair prices.<sup>48</sup>

Similarly the Public Questions Committee of the Methodist Church of New Zealand failed to raise any voice in public (apart from its association with a Presbyterian delegation to the Prime Minister discussed later in this article):

After exhaustive examination, it was decided that the Committee should not make public comment during the continuance of the acute stages of the dispute.... [T]he Committee believed that during the heat of the controversy, any statement would be liable to grave misinterpretation.<sup>49</sup>

Nicholas Reid, biographer of James Liston, Catholic bishop of Auckland, has noted Liston's silence and that of his diocesan *Zealandia* newspaper on the waterfront dispute, suggesting that this was because of the growing anti-communist feeling of

46 Margaret McClure, A Civilised Community: A History of Social Security in New Zealand 1898–1998 (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1998), 132.

47 The first reference I have found in *NZ Methodist Times*, for example, is an editorial on 16 June 1951 when the dispute was largely over. It is significant that in the call of the article for reconciliation, it also stated: "For too long the inefficiency of the work done on the wharves has been a scandal" (p.99).

48 NZ Baptist, April 1951, 99.

49 Minutes of the Annual Conference of the Methodist Church of New Zealand 1951, 72.

that era.50 The other major Catholic publication, NZ Tablet, was not so reticent, writing at least two editorials on the waterfront issue.<sup>51</sup> These editorials identified "the communists" as "the most dangerous section of the community", identified "the present trouble" as having "all the hall marks of being part of a world-wide Moscow inspired war of nerves on the Western democratic countries", and weighed in on the government side: "It is a straight out test between government and anarchy."52 This provoked reaction from pro-wharfie readers, with one calling for justice and stating: "There seems to be a tendency these days to 'support the Government right or wrong', and consequently governments have only got to call their opponents 'Communists' in order to steam-roll all opposition."53 Other readers, however, supported the editor. H. Toohill, for example, suggested that the wharfies had "leaders who take their directions from the Kremlin".54 Overall, the NZ Tablet was not a significant voice for justice, humanity and freedom

in the complex waterfront dispute.

The one striking exception among church

newspapers was the Presbyterian *Outlook*. A major editorial on the water front struggle on 10 April 1951 was fairly positive about the government position. Its editor, Alun Richards, praised both Prime Minister Holland and Minister of Labour Sullivan "for the moderation, conciliatory factualness and matter-of-fact unemotionalism of their public statements". The limited objectives of the government (set out by Sullivan as seven points), rather than unlimited "war", were especially praised. Richards, was, however, critical of the degree of censorship: "are New Zealanders really so lacking in judgment that we must not be allowed to hear one word which may suggest that the government is less than 100 per cent right in this case – or in some other?" 55

The tenor of another editorial five weeks later was not too different in tone. It was critical of Barnes, attributing militancy on his part to an inferiority complex, suggesting that he was "a pathological person more to be pitied... than hated". It continued to provide significant affirmation of the government.

IN ALL OF THIS WHAT DID THE

**CHURCHES DO?** 

<sup>50</sup> Nicholas Reid, *James Michael Liston: A Life* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2006), 230.

<sup>51</sup> NZ Tablet, 7 March 1951, 8; 18 April 1951, 3–4; see also 7 March 1951, 38.

<sup>52</sup> NZ Tablet, 18 April 1951, 3.

<sup>53 &</sup>quot;Leo", letter to the editor, *NZ Tablet*, 13 June, 1951, 11. For other pro-wharfie letters, see *NZ Tablet*, 16 May 1951, 5; 30 May 1951, 6.

<sup>54</sup> NZ Tablet, 30 May 1951, 6; see also NZ Tablet, 27 June 1951, 13. 55 Outlook, 10 April 1951, 4.

In asking what could be learnt from the present dispute it stated:

First, undoubtedly, we need to express sympathy with the government. Mainly Christian men sincerely trying to carry the community heavy loads in slippery places, they deserve better than the continuous sniping that governments usually get.

Richards was also positive about the moderation of most of Holland's broadcasts. However, Holland had by this time moved beyond the seven-point proposal of Sullivan and was insisting on an eighth point – the disbandment of the national waterside union, and he was now expressing himself more confrontationally. Richards was deeply critical of this more abrasive tone and claimed that Holland's words "positively dripped the self-satisfaction and self-righteousness that are besetting sins of our community".56

A burst of letters came in response, virtually all

slating the editorial. It was the words "self-satisfaction and self-righteousness" that particularly grated. One correspondent seemed to place Holland above reproach – we are called to honour those who rule over us. Several of the letters

indicated that though they had been long-standing subscribers to the newspaper, they would now be cancelling their subscriptions. One letter, calling the editorial of "questionable taste and ill-timed", asked why the newspaper and presbyteries hadn't raised their voices instead "against the holding of a mass political meeting on the Sabbath [a reference to an Auckland domain meeting addressed by Walter Nash, leader of the opposition]?" One particularly vitriolic letter called the 15 May editorial a "disgrace", and asserted: "In a time such as this, when wreckers have been at large it is time all decent people rallied to the government. To cast a slur on the Prime Minister is too foul for words".<sup>57</sup>

Richards had sought to steer a middle line in his editorial dealing with the waterfront dispute. He had had words of both affirmation and criticism of the government. If anything, he had been more negative of the waterside union, finding little to affirm on that side. Once the dispute was over, he ran a variety of viewpoints on the dispute, including the views of two lawyers taking opposing sides with regard

56 Outlook, 15 May 1951, 3–4.

to the emergency regulations.58 Yet a number of Richards' readers could not grasp his comprehensive and balanced viewpoint. Perhaps this came because the regulations had further fuelled a one-sided perspective, leaving society brain-washed that there was only one way to view the dispute. Or perhaps the Presbyterian-reader reaction came from a longformed and one-sided political persuasion. And perhaps this reaction reflected the fact that many people see things in a reductionist fashion – black or white – and are dismissive of "on the one hand... and on the other hand" discussion. This highlights the difficulty of churches and their leaders directly articulating a Christian viewpoint on contentious public issues of the day. Should they speak supportive of societal consensus, never rocking the boat? Or should they speak words of Christian gospel, of justice, fairness, reason and compassion, fomenting internal dissension in the process?59

It was not only the Christchurch-based

Presbyterian newspaper that provided an independent voice in the showdown. A number of Wellington Presbyterian ministers, including Ian Dixon, Lloyd Geering and Jack Somerville, also got involved, both in providing

humanitarian relief and in topical preaching. Their concern largely began through personal involvement with locked-out worker families in their congregations (a grass-roots source of their public involvement). <sup>60</sup> Ian Dixon, Presbyterian minister at Naenae, recalled fifty years later:

My daughter, Judy, remembers my saying to the family, "At the present time I am breaking the law. We shouldn't break the law, except if you think that the law is unjust and wrong. I might get into trouble, and I might even get arrested for what I am doing and the meetings I am holding. We are trying to help the people who haven't got enough to eat. Don't get worried about it, because if I do get into trouble it won't last very long. They might put me in gaol

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<sup>57</sup> *Outlook*, 5 June 1951, 12–13; 26 June 1951, 12; 17 July 1951, 14; 31 July 1951.

<sup>58</sup> *Outlook*, 24 July 1951; 31 July 1951; 14 August 1951.

<sup>59</sup> More generally on this issue, see Allan Davidson, "Chaplain to the Nation or Prophet at the Gate? The Role of the Church in New Zealand Society", in John Stenhouse and G.A. Wood (eds), Christianity, Modernity and Culture: New Perspectives on New Zealand History (Adelaide: ATF, 2004), 3II–3I

<sup>60</sup> Ian Dixon, "The 1951 Waterside Strike – An Untold Story", 2001, http://www.nzine.co.nz/features/waterside\_strike.html accessed 16 July 2014; Lloyd Geering, Wrestling with God: The Story of My Life (Wellington: Bridget Williams, 2006), 101; Somerville, Jack in the Pulpit (Dunedin: John McIndoe, 1987), 133.

for a week or two, but it won't be more serious than that." $^{6_{\mathrm{I}}}$ 

Apart from providing humanitarian relief and personal support, the involvement of these ministers drew in the wider Presbyterian Public Questions Committee (then based in Wellington), which in turn had discussions with the Methodist Public Questions Committee. After meeting with the leader of the opposition and the Minister of Labour, a joint Presbyterian-Methodist delegation eventually met with the Prime Minister on 14 May, seeking a lifting or modification of the emergency regulations and offering some level of mediation in the dispute. Somerville's memory was stark: Holland's reaction was "fairly brutal", lecturing them against interference in a "peremptory tone". Dixon's memory expressed itself in even stronger language: Holland turned on a "rage", haranguing them in a "tirade" that "lasted interminably" (twenty or thirty minutes).62 Why the reaction? Dick Scott records Holland asserting

that questioning aspects of the government stance was aiding the other side: "It would be far better if some

of the churches kept out of things... the Communists will use the churches". <sup>63</sup> Ian Dixon, Jack Somerville and the Presbyterian Public Questions Committee all later viewed the meeting as leading to the government easing or lifting the regulations a day or two later. <sup>64</sup> Is that wishful, after-the-event, mythmaking? Perhaps. Certainly there was no formal alteration or removal of the regulations until two months later. <sup>65</sup>

On the whole churches did not speak out on the waterfront issue. The Inter-Church Council on Public Affairs decided on 27 April 1951 that the time was "not opportune" to make a statement. A month later it reiterated that "a statement at the present juncture was inadvisable". Jack Somerville, a Presbyterian representative on the Council, continued to press for a combined church statement but a draft statement prepared by him and a committee was not accepted at the council's June meeting. 66 The church as a

61 Dixon, "The 1951 Waterside Strike".

62 Somerville, Jack in the Pulpit, 132–33; Dixon, "The 1951 Waterside Strike".

63 Scott, 151 Days, 201–202.

64 Dixon, "The 1951 Waterside Strike"; Somerville, *Jack in the Pulpit*, 133; Report of the Public Questions Committee in Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand, 1951, 150.

65 Millar, "Families", 171.

66 Minutes of the Inter-Church Council on Public Affairs, 27 April 1951, 25 May 1951, 29 June 1951: Alexander Turnbull Library, Minute books 1941–1973: MS-Group-0017, MSY-1837 (1946–1952).

whole had no united and prophetic voice on this dominating public issue.

The Christian church also faced the issue of humanitarian concern for the hungry. Numerous individuals and groups were recorded as having given aid to the locked out workers. Christian individuals and groups were not markedly been singled out, though trade unionist Frank Barnard remembered the main depot for food distribution in Auckland being "situated in an old church at Arch Hill, Great North Road" (very likely the Catholic Church there). And Salvation Army help was recalled by two waterside-family, oral-history interviewees. 88

Walter Nash, leader of the opposition was unabashedly Christian. Nash's biographer, Keith Sinclair, an academic unsympathetic towards Christianity, nevertheless drew attention to Nash's faith, and recorded that Nash attended an early morning parish prayer meeting out of the public

> eye each day of the lockout, praying for industrial peace.<sup>69</sup> While Nash tended to equivocate earlier in the waterfront struggle,<sup>70</sup>

declaring at the Auckland domain meeting that he was neither for nor against the waterfront workers,<sup>71</sup> he later came to hone in on the draconian regulations and their stifling of humanitarian action: "clothe the poor and feed the hungry was a higher law than any Government law", he declared at a public rally in Christchurch towards the end of May 1951. The *Evening Post* also noted from that rally:

Mr Nash said clergymen from the Anglican, Presbyterian and Methodist Churches had come to him saying they did not know what to make of the regulations. One of them said they were a breach of a much higher law. Another who had children of watersiders in his parish said he would do anything he could to help them if they were hungry, but he was liable to imprisonment.<sup>72</sup>

Apprehension about helping the watersiders was a real one. Although Nash himself wanted to provide practical help to locked-out families in need, he did so indirectly by getting Ian Dixon, the Presbyterian minister at Naenae to provide the help, and then

67 Auckland 1951 Reunion Committee, '51: 50th Anniversary Waterfront Lockout and Supporting Strikes (New Plymouth: Greenleaf Press, 2001), 11.

68 Millar, "Families", 68-69.

69 Keith Sinclair, *Walter Nash* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1976), 18–21, 286.

70 Auckland Star, 30 March 1951; 8 June 1951, 4.

71 Scott, 151 Days, 134.

72 Evening Post, 28 May 1951, 8.

ON THE WHOLE CHURCHES DID NOT

SPEAK OUT ON THE WATERFRONT

ISSUE.

reimbursing him £21.0.0 after the dispute was over.<sup>73</sup> Likely it was not the personal risk of facing a criminal prosecution but more the political risk of facing the wrath of a one-sided public that caused Nash to take this indirect approach.

One group that gave significant support was the Wellington Home of Compassion (aptly named). At a fifty-year reunion of the waterfront dispute in 2001 it was noted: "To this day the watersiders' union maintains an annual donation to the Home of Compassion in appreciation for the support given workers' families during the 1951 lockout."<sup>74</sup>

Sandra Lee, born in 1952 and Alliance Member of Parliament until 2002, noted at the 2001 watersiders' reunion that her father, grandfather and great-grandfather, all living in the same house in Molesworth Street, Wellington, were all locked out in 1951. In relation to the dire need of the family she stated:

During my childhood, both my parents recounted time and again how kind people were to our family during the dispute. I've never heard a wharfie's kid who experienced '51 say they ever went hungry. Most mornings in our house, for example, a box of vegetables would appear at our family's doorstep in Molesworth Street, where all my family were stacked up like sardines. And we always knew it came from "dear old Harry Wong's" fruit and vegetable shop next door. Years later we moved to Johnsonville, and Harry and his business moved out there too. My mother would walk the whole length of Johnsonville to shop in his shop, because she never forgot his kindness.<sup>75</sup>

When I have related Sandra Lee's story in Christian circles, I have commonly been asked: "Was Harry Wong a Christian?" The short answer is, "I don't know." However, is the question the best one? After all, was the Good Samaritan a "Christian"? Is the better question, "Who was a neighbour to the wharfies and their families?" And then we might hear a returning echo, "Go and do likewise."

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<sup>73</sup> Dixon, "The 1951 Waterside Strike"; Sinclair, Walter Nash, 286; Bassett, Confrontation, 185.

<sup>74</sup> Chris Kenny, "The Wellington Waterfront from the 1960s", in Grant, The Big Blue, 139–45 at 140.

<sup>75</sup> Sandra Lee, "All in the Family", in Grant, *The Big Blue*, 124–130 at 125

<sup>76</sup> Luke 10.25-37.