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“Your Livelihood is on the Line”
Freezing Workers in Aotearoa/New Zealand,
1973–1994

Ross Webb

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in History
University of Auckland, 2015
Abstract

Drawing on oral histories, this thesis tells the story of a group of men and women who worked in New Zealand’s freezing works between 1973 and 1994. For much of the twentieth century, freezing workers occupied an important place within the New Zealand economy and a powerful position in the country’s trade union movement. By the 1970s, their strategic location in a key export sector, a broadly supportive industrial relations regime, and a strong workplace and union culture sustained freezing worker militancy. In a ‘blood and guts’ workplace dominated by speed, regimentation, and monotony, workers sustained a strong workplace culture; a culture that emphasised values of camaraderie and whanaungatanga (family-like relationships). This workplace culture reinforced wider community connections and underpinned a strong union culture. Freezing workers frequently challenged the prerogatives of employers and asserted their own control and autonomy on the job. Like workplace culture, union culture extended beyond the workplace, into the community and family lives of workers, especially during industrial action. In exploring workplace and union culture, and in drawing on oral histories, this thesis shows what working in the industry meant to those who did the work and what the union meant to rank-and-file workers beyond its institutional role.

At the same time, the meat-freezing industry underwent significant transformations in the 1970s and 1980s, driven by both international and domestic forces. Britain’s entry into the EEC, oil shocks, and a collapse in export prices placed significant pressures on the industry, while the deregulation of the industry and removal of subsidies for farmers spurred on a period of mass closures and redundancies. As the economic prosperity that defined the post-war years came to an end in the 1970s and 1980s, freezing workers sustained, attempted to defend, and then lost much of their power, a decline accelerated by structural changes in the economy in the 1980s and 1990s. Oral histories provide insights into the way workers responded to this period of ‘disempowering change’ in their fight for redundancy pay and the efforts of workers, unions and communities in setting up support networks after a closure. In their responses, freezing workers drew on a strong workplace and union culture.
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Introduction

On April 7, 1986, the local branches of the Auckland and Tōmoana Freezing Workers’ Union (FWU) called meetings across the top half of the North Island to decide whether or not to continue a long-running strike. For FWU secretary John Leckie, the strike, which began in late February, was ‘full on; it was a full-blown national dispute’, with ‘the fundamental working conditions of all freezing workers’ at stake.1 However, in early April, and after six weeks on strike, the FWU’s sister union, the Meat Workers’ Union (MWU), negotiated a compromised return to work, ending what was a national dispute. FWU now had to decide whether or not to go it alone. Workers from Auckland’s Westfield plant met at Mt Richmond, Ōtāhuhu, where union officials Bill Hillman and Leckie brought workers up to date on the negotiations before passing the microphone on to individual workers to have their say.2 ‘The overwhelming voice was to stay out’, recalled Leckie. ‘The general view was that nothing particularly strong had been achieved [and] the compromise didn’t reflect the strength of the issue’.3 Following the discussion and debate, Westfield workers voted to reject the compromised offer.4 Meanwhile in Hastings, FWU President, Frank Barnard, was ‘elated to walk into such solidarity’ while visiting the Tōmoana union meeting, where workers voted 1000 to 4 to continue the strike—a decision the media lambasted as ‘arrogant’ and ‘pigheaded’.5 ‘We are going to hold out’, Frank Barnard said. ‘We are not into weak-kneed deals’.6 For a total of eight weeks, workers at Westfield and Tōmoana survived without wages, creating strike committees and ‘nerve centres’, collecting money and food for workers and their families, and setting up picket lines. ‘What we did learn’, said freezing worker George Rarere, ‘was to survive’.7

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1 John Leckie interviewed by Ross Webb, 1 November, 2013.
4 Auckland and Tōmoana Freezing Workers’ Union, Work Meeting Minutes, 07/04/1986, p.138
6 Hawke’s Bay Herald Tribune, April 7, 1986, p.1.
7 George Rarere, interviewed by Ross Webb, 2 September, 2013.
The thesis explores this militant tradition, which drew on a strong workplace and union culture, in the context of significant economic and political change. For much of the twentieth century, freezing workers—those who worked in New Zealand’s meat-processing or freezing industry—occupied an important place within the New Zealand economy and a powerful position in the country’s trade union movement. By the 1960s and 1970s in particular, freezing workers exercised massive industrial power, accounting for more than half of the nation’s strikes and stoppages and gaining a ‘well deserved’ reputation for militancy. As a result, government and media reactions throughout the twentieth century helped mould a public perception of freezing workers as a workforce disengaged from their work, strike-prone, overpaid, and greedy. In 1981, Prime Minister Robert Muldoon described freezing workers as ‘intransigent’, with ‘no loyalty’, and ‘over-paid’, and in

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8 The term ‘freezing works’ and ‘freezing worker’ is unique to New Zealand, where the meat is both processed, refrigerated, and exported. The equivalent is other part of the world is an ‘abattoir’, ‘slaughterhouse’, and ‘packinghouse’, manned by ‘meat workers’, ‘packinghouse workers’, or ‘slaughterhouse workers’.  
1988, the editor of the *New Zealand Meat Producer*, Anita Busby wrote that freezing workers ‘are generally regarded as the real villains’ and cast as an ‘illiterate, unskilled lout who is out to grasp everything for himself and to hell with everyone else’.\(^\text{10}\) Because meat-freezing remained New Zealand’s key export industry, strike action by freezing workers posed a direct threat to the so-called ‘national interest’, and thwarted the hard work of the farmer, popularly understood as the ‘backbone of the economy’.\(^\text{11}\) In historical writing on the meat industry, too, freezing workers are presented as stubborn, un-compromising, and unwilling to adapt to change.\(^\text{12}\) Thus, freezing workers garnered the ire of farmers, the public, and the state, inspiring calls for anti-union legislation and leading to several instances of state intervention to clamp down on wildcat strikes and bring an end to protracted disputes.

The 1986 strike was no exception, reflecting both the militant tradition of freezing worker unionism, as well as some familiar rituals in the industry’s tumultuous industrial relations: strike action over the National Award, the active involvement of members, the creation of ‘nerve centres’ and support networks by and for workers and their families, union division at a national level, farmer outrage, and a hostile press. But the 1986 strike was not only a reflection of freezing worker militancy. Occurring against the backdrop of economic and political change, the dispute came at the end of a two decade period of transition in the meat industry, sparked by both international and domestic forces.\(^\text{13}\) In 1973, Britain joined the European Economic Community (EEC), cutting off free access to the British market, while new hygiene regulation impacted the profitability of the meat industry. The insecurities for workers in the meat industry caused by the recession was intensified by structural changes within the economy, including the deregulation of the meat industry in 1981 and the removal of Supplementary Minimum Prices (SMPs) for farmers in 1986. Closures, mergers and redundancy hit the industry on a massive

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scale, alongside attacks on working conditions and pay, the enforcement of new discipline, and the introduction of new technology in the workplace. The period witnessed at first an upturn in strike action by freezing workers in an attempt to protect themselves against the erosion of their wages and maintain autonomy in the workplace. But this militancy failed to survive into the late 1980s and 1990s as plants closed across the country and the state dismantled the ‘broadly supportive’ system of industrial relations.\(^{14}\) Between the 1970s and the 1990s, then, freezing workers sustained, attempted to defend, and then lost much of their power. The 1986 award dispute reflected the culmination of these issues and, while negotiations of the award were a familiar ritual in meat industry industrial relations, this time the outcome was different. This time the parties were irreconcilable.\(^{15}\)

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While the popular image of the freezing worker for much of the twentieth century was that of a greedy and uncompromising workforce, oral histories tell a different story: one of camaraderie and community, of union pride and solidarity in the workplace and of community support during long strikes and hard times. This thesis tells the story of a group of men and women who worked in New Zealand’s freezing works in the last quarter of the twentieth century. For the many men and the few women who worked in the freezing industry during this period, workplace culture and camaraderie, alongside union militancy, were central elements to their working lives. In a ‘blood and guts’ workplace dominated by speed, regimentation, and monotony, workers encountered and sustained a strong workplace culture; a culture that emphasised the values of camaraderie and whanaungatanga (family-like relationships). This workplace culture extended into the community, family, and social life of workers at the same time that it underpinned a powerful workplace unionism or union culture. Both workplace culture and union culture—and the community, family and social ties that it reinforced—played a major role in workers’ ability to sustain themselves and each other, as well as their families and communities, through drawn out strike action. In later years, too, workplace culture


\(^{15}\) Bruce Jesson, ‘The Freezing Works Strike’. The events of this strike are explored in further detail at the end of chapter 3.
and union culture underpinned the creation of support networks after closure. But workplace and union camaraderie did not come without its tensions and difference: long strikes caused conflict in the workforce, the community and especially within the family, while the major political issues and movements of the day—the antiapartheid movement, Maori protest and feminism—played out in the workplace itself often dividing freezing workers and posing challenges to their long-held workplace cultures and attitudes.

In this way, this study tells a number of stories. It tells the story of the workforce, the workplace culture and the centrality of ‘the works’ to the community. It tells the story of a militant union operating in the backdrop of political and economic change. It tells the story of how workers, their unions and communities survived during drawn out industrial action and it tells the story of how closure devastated communities and how, once again, workers, their unions and communities responded, and survived. In telling these stories, and drawing on oral histories, this thesis provides insights into an understudied workforce held a key position in the New Zealand economy and the labour movement.

**Historiography**

Despite the importance of meat-freezing industry to New Zealand, its workers to the labour force, and its unions to the labour movement, freezing workers are strangely absent in the historiography. While militant workforces such as miners, waterside workers and seamen all have their historians (some have several), no overview history of freezing workers and their unions exists. In 1989, Anna Green wrote that freezing workers ‘await their historian’. Since then, several studies have provided an insight into those who worked in the industry. John Leckie’s Masters thesis on a redundancy dispute at the Westfield freezing works in Auckland examines the response of workers, management, and the role of women in industrial conflict.

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Leckie’s position as ‘participant observer’ and his use of oral testimonies provides insight into the ‘influence of those closely associated with workers: their partners and families’, who were ‘bound up inevitably in the process of “being on strike”’.19 Stephanie Claire Herring’s Honours dissertation on women in the Mataura freezing works looks at the experience of women, again drawing on oral testimonies, in what was (and remains) a male dominated workforce.20 Most recently, Cybèle Locke’s inspiring book, *Workers in the Margins*, uses the freezing workers’ unions as a case study in her history of union radicals in the post-war period.21 This thesis draws heavily on Locke’s work, expanding on and adding to many of the arguments developed in her book. But Locke’s study is specifically focused on union radicals and activists; this study focuses on rank-and-file and the dialectic between rank-and-file, the union officialdom and political activists. Moreover, while Locke intentionally provides a national overview, this focus at times overlooks the local contexts of the freezing workers and their workplace cultures and communities.22

This thesis builds on and adds to this scholarship, drawing upon the rich oral histories of those directly involved, with an eye to local context and culture, while also placing these in the broader context of changes in the industry and the economy. In doing so, this thesis contributes to a growing literature that explores the fate of trade unions and working-class communities in the recessionary 1970s and 1980s.23 The ‘shadow of the Great Recession’ of the twenty-first century has inspired interest in past economic crises, as has understanding among historians that the present crisis has its origins in the crisis of the 1970s and the economic and political

21 Locke, *Workers in the Margin*.
22 ibid., p.15.
responses by politicians and business leaders in the 1980s. In New Zealand, while there is a vast literature covering the political and economic history of those decades, there is little social history exploring the how working people responded to times of ‘disempowering change’. This study puts the narratives of freezing workers at its centre, and acknowledges and explores the agency of workers. It provides a window into the lives men and women who, instead of being ‘simply objects acted upon by larger social and economic forces’, acted, reacted, and made choices under difficult circumstances. Indeed, commentators often discuss the radical economic transformations that swept New Zealand in the 1980s as ‘inevitable’ and ‘necessary’. Melanie Nolan suggests that labour historians can challenge such narratives by placing ‘workers, and a defence of social justice and human agency’, back into a business- and policy-elite narrative of ‘seemingly inexorable economic and political developments’. This thesis takes up that call. Oral histories provide an account of this period from the perspective of those hit hardest by the changes; a story usually dominated, as Nolan suggests, by business- or policy-elite in which the closure of freezing works are viewed as an unfortunate but necessary outcome of the structural changes.

At the same time, this study aims to strike a balance between ‘what workers have done and what has been done to them’. Acknowledging workers’ agency, their acts of resistance, their cultures and their community is important; but so too are broader political and economic processes. In this way, this thesis reflects what labour historians now call the ‘new institutionalism’. Paul M. Taillon describes this approach as the combination of ‘the new labour history’s emphasis on culture and community with analysis of the labour movement in the context of the larger political economy and in relation to other institutions’. This approach focuses on unions,

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28 ibid.
‘because they mattered’. As Taillon writes ‘trade unions as institutions had a greater impact historically than did workers individually or even as groups of individuals. Moreover, institutional forces shaped the relationship among workers, as well as between and among workers, unions, employers and the state’.31

This approach is particularly relevant for a study of New Zealand labour, given the state’s ‘early, extensive and centralised regulation’ of labour relations, and, more specifically, for freezing workers, who worked both within and outside the protections provided by the state.32 For much of the twentieth century, freezing workers made advances in wages and conditions through both an industrial regime—the Arbitration System—that secured the right to negotiate with employers for an ‘Award’, as well as engaging in direct bargaining with employers outside the formal structures of the Court.33 At a workplace level, too, freezing workers exercised a degree of autonomy; wildcat strikes were common, as were disputes with management at a shed level. Thus, an understanding of work and industrial relations in the meat industry requires both an analysis of the informal practices of the workers, the culture of the workplace and the labour process as well as an understanding of the role of law and the state as central to the standing and fate of trade unions.34 This study privileges the perspective and agency of workers at the same time that it recognises the larger political and economic processes that limited workers’ agency.

In placing workers at the centre of the narrative, this thesis explores the social and cultural dimensions of the workplace and union; hence the use of the terms ‘workplace culture’ and ‘union culture’. In its use of the term ‘workplace culture’, this study draws on Patricia A. Cooper’s definition as ‘the patterns of daily work into which any newcomer would become initiated after a time—the unwritten rules, the ways of doing the job, and how one thought about his or her work’. Workplace culture, according to Cooper, consisted of a ‘coherent system of ideas and practices...

31 ibid.
33 Barry and Walsh, ‘State Intervention and Trade Unions in New Zealand’, p.56
through which workers modified, mediated and resisted the limits of their jobs’.  

This study also draws on Melissa Matutina Williams’ recent work on the workplace cultures of Māori migrants in post-war urban Auckland. Using the concept ‘workplace-whānau’, Williams suggests that the meanings underpinning the concept “whānau” ‘extended beyond kinship to include ethnic, gender and occupation-based bonds in the workplace’. Māori workers transformed physically demanding, monotonous and impersonal workplaces ‘into bearable, sometimes fun and culturally familiar spaces of community engagement’. Workplace culture in the freezing works functioned in a broadly similar manner, serving to offset the monotony of the work and transform what was a highly unpleasant environment into a site of camaraderie and whanaungatanga. This workplace solidarity and camaraderie flowed over into workplace unionism. Freezing worker militancy drew on a strong union culture that emphasised autonomy and control over the job as well as the collective interests of workers against management. This study demonstrates how freezing worker union culture did not emerge from an ideological perspective, but rather made sense to workers in the context of their workplace culture and community.

Several crucial elements shaped workplace culture in the freezing industry: the nature, conditions and experience of the work itself; the largely male workforce; and the ethnic diversity of workers, including the large proportion of Māori. Thus, this study addresses the categories of class, gender and ethnicity. Ruth A Frager suggests that historians need to explore the ‘interlocking hierarchies’ of class, ethnicity and gender and suggests that much historical work simply reinforces the ‘compartamentalisation’ of these categories. In the oral narratives of freezing workers, these categories of analysis intertwined and worked in complex and fluid ways; they were at once central to how freezing workers viewed themselves at the same time that the common identity and occupation of the freezing worker dissolved such distinctions. Often defined as ‘man’s work’ because of the brutal nature and

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37 Williams, ‘Back-home’ and Home in the City’, p.181.

physicality of the tasks freezing workers carried out, the freezing industry workplace was most certainly a masculine space and was dominated by men; it was a ‘man’s world’, according to many freezing workers.39 Where women were accepted into this male workplace, it was as ‘one of the boys’. Internationally, historians have long demonstrated how workplaces serve as key sites for the construction of masculinity and male identity.40 In the New Zealand historiography, however, much of the focus is on leisure, sport and war as sites of masculine identity.41 Historical writing on workplace culture is limited in New Zealand, with only a few historians making it the focus of their inquiries.42 In a review of Jock Phillips’ *A Man’s Country?*, Deborah Montgomerie suggests that ‘it is surprising that more attention was not given to paid work and work-based culture as a defining ritual of male culture’.43 More recently, the rush to study leisure has led to the relative neglect of work and the workplace, a central aspect of life for most people.

In exploring workplace and union culture, in conjunction with ethnicity, this thesis contributes to what some historians suggest is the most significant gap in New Zealand labour history: ‘a discussion of the role played by tangata whenua’.44 Māori have a long history of labour in the freezing industry, part of the concurrent narrative of colonisation, land alienation, urbanisation, and economic deprivation.45 Māori

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began working at the freezing works in the early twentieth century as the pace of land alienation increased and the meat freezing industry expanded into areas like the Northland, Waikato, Taranaki, the East Coast and Hawke's Bay. Following World War II, Māori moved to the city in massive numbers, and employment in factories like the freezing works remained a key driver. Because of their concentration in workplaces like the freezing works, where intergenerational employment was common, Māori workers ‘developed workplace whānau that functioned as cultural support networks’. At the same, this ‘occupational clustering’ meant that Māori were amongst those hit hardest by the economic transformations of the 1980s and 1990s. However, as the authors of the recent *Tangata Whenua* write, these narratives were ‘consistently underwritten by Māori stories of resilience and fortitude, persistence and insistence’. This thesis describes the impact closures had on Māori as well as exploring the importance of Māori to the freezing works and workplace culture. This thesis is not a history of Māori and the freezing works (a topic that requires further research and analysis), however, but it does explore inter-ethnic workplace engagements between Māori and Pākehā and, to a lesser extent, Pacific Island workers.

Indeed, the meat-freezing workforce has always been ethnically diverse, providing a perfect case study for exploring inter-ethnic relationships in the workplace. Māori men, in particular, have long been associated with the industry. This thesis demonstrates how Māori freezing workers shaped their workplaces, making them both ‘fun spaces’ and whānau-oriented sites of community and social life and even adopting Pākehā workers into this culture. What we might call ‘Māori working-class masculinity’, then, played an important role in defining the workplace culture in the freezing works. At the same time, while most of those interviewed

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50 This concept is discussed briefly in: Brendan Hokowhitu, “Educating Jake”: a genealogy of Māori masculinity’, in Marion Bowl, Robert Tobias, Jennifer Leahy, Graeme Ferguson, Jeffrey Gage eds., *Gender, Masculinities, and Lifelong Learning*, New York, 2012, pp.47-57. In her discussion of Māori masculinity in the oral histories of Panguru Māori migrants in Auckland, Melissa Williams writes: ‘they may not have been
recalled that Māori maintained a strong presence in the works, both in terms of numbers and the culture of the workplace, many workers also suggested that ethnic difference did not exist within the confines of the work. In other words, alongside the recognised presence of ethnic identity and difference, workers’ common occupation, work process and workplace culture dissolved differences; class or occupation and gender underpinned the strong bonds between workers. The idea that freezing workers were all ‘just mates’ and ‘all the same’ despite ethnicity was a recurring theme in the oral histories and is consistent with Richard Boast’s argument that in post-war industrial centres ‘a sense of working-class identity’ transcended ethnic boundaries among both Māori and Pākehā.51 This is not to suggest that ethnic and regional identities were not important, but rather, as historian Patricia Cooper writes, that the ‘work itself forged identities at least as strong’.52

**Oral History**

The voices of freezing workers inform much of this study. For labour historians, oral history promises both the possibility of exploring the experiences of the rank-and-file of the labour movement as well as the means to establish relationships with working-class communities.53 Indeed, for some practitioners, the primary aim of oral histories is the ‘empowerment’ of individuals or groups ‘through the process of remembering’, allowing the active engagement of those previously marginalised in the making of their own history.54 But such an approach has not come without scepticism. The focus on discourse, representation and culture that accompanied ‘the linguistic turn’ encouraged a new focus on how human beings ‘endow their world with meaning’ and construct their own memories.55 As a result, historians now approach oral history in a theoretically sophisticated manner that stresses narrative, the reconstructive elements and the subjective dimensions of memory, as well as how oral narratives fit

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52 Cooper, *Once a Cigar Maker* p.6.
within public discourse and cultural narratives. For labour historians too, the ‘linguistic turn’ challenged the traditional emphases on ‘agency’ and ‘experience’ in exploring working life. Thus, historians now explore how race, ethnicity and gender played a central role in how working people understood themselves.

The intention of this study, however, is not to interrogate the oral narratives of workers and attempt to fit their narratives into ‘pre-existing cultural representations or psychoanalytic templates’, nor does it treat oral history as a ‘window onto objective social reality’. Instead, this study approaches oral history as a method of reconstructing elements of the past. For example, the ways in which freezing workers made sense of and negotiated their working lives, union engagement and responses to hard times. Rather than using oral histories as an opportunity to explore questions of collective and individual memory and subjectivity, this study places freezing workers’ stories at the centre of its analysis and treats the interviewees as collaborators in interpreting the past. I wanted the final project to have what Melissa Matutina Williams calls ‘integrity beyond the university institution’ and be shaped less by the need to fill an historical lacuna (though this thesis does do this) and more by those whom I want to read it: those who provided this thesis with its stories.

In his recent book, Doing History from Below, Staughton Lynd writes that ‘participants in making history should be regarded not only as sources of facts but as colleagues in interpreting what happened’. In his oral history of the mining community Harlan County, Kentucky, Alessandro Portelli writes that ‘the most important things I had to offer were my ignorance and my desire to learn’. Indeed, in the interview process, the interviewee becomes the teacher and the

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57 Lenard R Berlanstein, Rethinking Labor History: Essays on Discourse and Class Analysis, Chicago, 1993.
60 Williams, “Back-home” and Home in the City’, p.30.
historian/interviewer, the student. Admittedly, such an approach is problematic. As Portelli concedes, ‘the control of historical discourse remains firmly in the hands of the historian... [It is the historian] who contributes to the shaping of testimony’. Nevertheless, the oral testimonies shaped many aspects of this thesis (its foci, arguments, interpretations, and even its structure and narrative), while the interview process treated participants as both subjects, collaborators, and teachers.

Above all, oral history was crucial in this study’s exploration of workplace culture and union culture. As Green writes ‘[t]he often unrecorded private dimensions of family, working and community relationships become more accessible in oral accounts’. Indeed, in exploring workplace culture, oral histories provide insight into the rituals and practices important to workers; the workplace culture and camaraderie; the importance of singing, and the practical jokes workers played on one another. Similarly, in its exploration of questions of ethnicity, gender, class and of community and family life vis-à-vis the workplace and union culture, oral history has the capacity to underscore ‘horizontal linkages’ in a person’s life, and, in so doing ‘prevent analytic compartmentalisation’ of work from community, home from society and the separation of ethnicity, class and gender from one another’. Moreover, oral histories also provide a more complex story of rank-and-file engagement with the union, exploring what the union meant to workers beyond its institutional role, as well as the connections between unionism and the home and community. Freezing workers remembered the personalities of union meetings and the joy of walking off the job in a wild-cat strike; what it meant to live without wages during an eight week strike; collecting food in the family garage for other workers and their families, the emotional impact of closure and the grassroots community response. Throughout this thesis, oral accounts are supported by archival material, including newspapers, official union documents and union minute books. The balance between these sources differs between chapters. The focus in Chapter Two on workplace culture, for

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example, relies almost solely on oral accounts, while Chapter Three and Four rely on both archival and oral accounts.

I interviewed fourteen individuals in both Auckland and Hawke’s Bay for this thesis. From the outset, my aim was to interview as many rank-and-file freezing workers as possible, reflecting Portelli’s argument that ‘oral history is more intrinsically itself when it listens to speakers who are not already recognised protagonists in the public sphere’. The ability to locate ex-rank-and-file freezing workers was difficult, however. Following redundancy, freezing workers have scattered across many localities and workplaces. Union officials are more prominent in the official records and therefore easier to trace today. Nevertheless, most interviewed were ex-rank-and-file freezing workers (George Rarere, Henare O’Keefe, Peter Gosche, Maurice Davis, Kevin Amanaki), whom I located through oldfriends.co.nz (a social networking website aimed at linking old friends from work, school or social and community clubs), and through a process known as the ‘snowball’ effect whereby active participants provided information about the project to other potential participants.

Four of those interviewed were union officials who were previously rank-and-file workers (Bill Hillman, John Leckie, Graham Cooke, and Bruce Stobie). As discussed in Chapter Three, union officials were voted from the ranks of the workforce, so the traditional division between the rank-and-file and officialdom at a workplace level was not as pronounced as other workplaces. John Leckie, now a member a University of Auckland History Department, pointed me in the direction of other officials in the union. Two participants I interviewed were members of the Socialist Action League (James Robb and Helen Mulrennan), an activist political party that placed its members in the freezing works as part of its ‘turn to industry’ strategy. Robb approached me at the beginning of the thesis and our communications in some ways shaped how I approached the topic. In addition, I interviewed one managing director (Michael Saunders), one company meat-grader who worked on the chain alongside rank-and-file freezing workers (Jean Te Huia) as well as the daughter of a freezing worker (Tracey McIntosh). McIntosh provided both vivid memories of the freezing works passed on by her father, at the same time giving

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insight into the ways in which workplace and union culture flowed into the home and community of a freezing worker. Of the fifteen interviewed, roughly half worked at Tōmoana, while the other half at Westfield. Three of the fifteen were women; six Māori; seven Pākehā, and two Pacific Islanders. Some of those interviewed were employed in the freezing works for much of their working lives. Bill Hillman, for example, started at Westfield in 1957 and remained there until its final closure in 1989. Tracey McIntosh’s father, Eric McIntosh, started at Westfield in 1948 after leaving the J-Force and also remained there until the closure. George Rarere and Henare O’Keefe worked at Tōmoana for over twenty years. Others worked for short periods of time and on a seasonal basis.

Interviews were conducted in the homes, workplaces and communities of participants. The interviews were largely informal and conversational. While I wrote a list of questions to ask participants, these were often put to the side and only used to prompt further discussion, though many needed no prompting at all. I brought along many of the images reproduced in this thesis to the interviews, which sparked memories and often laughter. Indeed, humour played a major role in the interviews, as did sadness and regret. But for the most part, interviewees enjoyed discussing their time in the freezing works and many spoke eloquently, openly, and at length about their experiences. As Stevan Eldred-Grigg writes, ‘working people inherit a strong and distinctive culture of their own… based on “custom, habit and word of mouth”. The world of working people is supple and informal, growing out of personal links’.68 Eldred-Grigg’s conclusions ring true for freezing workers, for whom memory making and storytelling was, and is, a collective process. ‘In those lunch rooms, they were always telling stories’, recalled Tracey McIntosh, while today freezing workers still run into one another and ‘reminisce about the old days’, as Peter Gosche told me.69

In order to explore workplace and union culture at a local level, it was necessary to narrow my research focus. Thus, this study focuses specifically, but not exclusively, on two freezing works (or sheds as they were known): Westfield, in Auckland, and

Tōmoana, in Hastings. It does so for two major reasons. First, by narrowing in on two ‘sheds’, the thesis is able to capture the local and specific flavours of each shed, while at the same time avoiding a preoccupation with the local histories of each. In other words, this thesis is able to explore the connections between the workplace, community, and unionism in a local setting, while making broader claims about freezing workers and their unions in New Zealand. Second, Westfield and Tōmoana provide a perfect case study because, despite their geographical separation, they share a common history. Both were owned by the same multinational company (The British Vestey Company) and shared a union: the Auckland and Tōmoana Freezing Workers’ Union (FWU). Differences certainly existed between the urban Auckland works and the semi-rural Hastings works, but what is more striking—and unexpected—are the similarities. At times, the thesis will refer to other freezing works, either to demonstrate a point of similarity or difference, or because a worker interviewed for this thesis transferred between sheds. In 1973, both Tōmoana and Westfield employed several thousand workers. Freezing workers remembered both “sheds” as a ‘good place to work’ and as a ‘second home’; they remember a strong workplace culture and the social life that accompanied it; they remember the sustained on-the-job resistance and control over the work that underpinned the strong and militant union, as well as a pride in the identity and occupation of the freezing worker. Two decades later, both Westfield and Tōmoana closed their gates, a huge blow to the communities built around the freezing works.

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This thesis is divided into four chapters. Chapter One lays the foundations for the subsequent chapters, providing a brief national history of the rise of both freezing worker unionism and the meat industry. It provides a narrative of the emergence of the meat freezing industry, the formation of its early craft unions, the introduction of the ‘chain’ system, and the formation of industrial unions. It then explores the ethnic and gendered make-up of the work force, and broader changes in the political, economic and industrial relations landscape. By the 1960s and 1970s, the meat freezing industry emerged as New Zealand’s key export sector, with a militant union, and an increasingly ethnically diverse workforce. Chapter One ends with an analysis of the bargaining framework developed by unions like the freezing works, a
discussion of the centrality of the freezing works to towns and communities around the country, as well as the economic context of the 1970s, as the growth and prosperity that characterised the 1950s and 1960s gave way to economic instability, high inflation, declining terms of trade, and growing unemployment. While Chapter One provides a national history, the following three chapters focus on the Westfield and Tōmoana 'sheds'. Chapter Two explores the social and cultural world of freezing workers in the context of their workplace, community and social life. It argues that workplace culture functioned as means of alleviating the monotony of the work, initiating workers onto the job and building bonds of solidarity between workers. After an exploration of the rituals and practices that sustained this workplace culture, it explores questions of ethnicity and gender and how workplace culture fed into and underpinned the community, family and social lives of freezing workers.

Chapter Three focuses on ‘union culture’. After offering an overview of the political economy of freezing worker militancy, it looks at the role of the union in the workplace and union culture. It also explores how political currents of the 1970s and 1980s swept through the workplace, and how they played out in the workplace. Lastly it explores the organisation around long strikes before returning to the 1986 National Award Dispute, discussed at the opening of this introduction. Chapter Four offers a narrative account of the closures that swept the freezing industry in the 1980s and 1990. Between 1981 and 1991, the government deregulated the meat industry, removed subsides for farmers, outlawed the practise of ‘second tier bargaining’ and then removed the Award and legal protections for unions. After providing an analysis of the political and economic context in which freezing workers operated in this period, it reveals how workers and their unions responded to the closures: it explores Westfield workers’ strike for redundancy in 1988 and the community response to the sudden closure of Tōmoana in 1994. In these efforts, freezing workers drew on the workplace culture and union culture described in the previous chapters. Lastly, this thesis concludes with a discussion on memory and the legacies of the freezing works. It makes a case for further research into the social history of the period and discusses the current efforts of unions in the industry to fight growing insecurities of work and anti-union employers.
Chapter 1
‘Built the Hard Way’
Freezing Workers, Unionism, and the Meat-Freezing Industry,
1882–1973

This is your organisation. It was built the hard way, as all good unions were... We learned the hard way that “the Union” is not something separate and apart from us. The Union is us.

- ‘The Union Makes Us Strong’, Pamphlet, 1955.¹

Those who entered the freezing industry workforce and its unions in the 1970s were the inheritors of almost a century of union organising and changes in the meat industry. They were heirs, also, to longstanding conflicts between workers and management, and in some cases the state, over the conditions of work and control over the job. ‘Solo’ slaughtermen, whose power revolved around their crucial skill in a key export sector, organised the earliest unions in the industry, which were largely regional and craft based, reflecting the hierarchies of skill, regional variation, and the limits imposed by late nineteenth century industrial legislation. 2 The introduction of the ‘chain’ system of slaughtering in the early 1930s, a defeat for these skilled ‘solo’ slaughtermen, broke down the hierarchies of skill in the industry but laid the groundwork for industrial unionism. Meanwhile, the election of the First Labour Government in 1935 bolstered the institutional power of trade unions. New Zealand’s arbitration system, established in 1894 and strengthened in 1936, institutionalised and attempted to incorporate the labour movement into the apparatus of the state. 3 However, for much of the twentieth century, freezing workers refused to completely reconcile their structures and bargaining to the system, instead favouring a ‘two tier’ system of negotiating, gaining concession formally through the Arbitration Court, as well as pursuing collective bargaining and strike action. 4 By the 1960s, freezing workers acquired and sustained a great deal of power, reflecting both their strategic position within a crucial export sector as well as the labour movement’s strong position in the post-war political order, propped up by compulsory unionism, full employment and economic growth. 5 However, as the long post-war boom came to an end in the last quarter of the twentieth century, freezing workers operated under very different circumstances and struggled to maintain their position of strength.

This chapter provides a broad survey of the history of freezing workers, unionism and the meat-freezing industry from the 1880s to the early 1970s. It does so on the basis that the system and conditions under which freezing workers operated in the years after the 1970s had much to do with what came before. A large part of the focus in this chapter is focused on conflict between workers and management and, in some cases, the state. Industrial disputes, played a central role in the unionisation process. Labour historian Erik Olssen has long argued that historians need to focus on the ‘political struggle that took place on the job’, rather than simply considering union activists and industrial conflict. But in the freezing works, the nature of work, struggles for control over the job, organising activity and industrial conflict were intertwined. Carl Winslow writes that strikes are central to understanding the development of the labour movement, industrial relations, the balance of forces in the industrial world, and they provide a window into ‘the lives, beliefs, and aspirations of workers’. But the rise of a powerful and militant union did not occur in isolation from external developments. Economic booms and busts, the reshaping of international markets, technological changes, transformations in the ethnic and gender make-up of the workforce, and shifts in state policy and industrial relations are all part of the story which follows.

The meat industry, slaughtermen, and craft unionism, 1882–1920s

After a decade of depression, the New Zealand economy entered a long period of prosperity in the 1890s, which would last until the 1920s. Underpinning this prosperity was, amongst other developments, the emergence and expansion of the meat-freezing industry. Following the advent of refrigeration, the breaking up of large sheep runs by the Liberal Government during the 1890s, and the introduction of more scientific methods of agricultural production and mechanisation, the meat-freezing industry emerged as New Zealand’s key export sector. As James Belich writes, the industry was ‘fully fledged by the 1890s; crucial by the 1900s; became

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dominant in World War One; and remained so to the 1970s’. In the first forty years after 1882, the industry experienced rapid and volatile growth, with 63 new freezing works or meat-processing plants opening across the country. The post-World War I slump combined with the poor location of plants (in relation to stock, ports, rail, and competitors), resulted in 16 closures between 1918 and 1922, before the industry entered a period of stability. From 1922 until 1964, eight plants closed, while only three new plants were built. By 1892, there were 21 freezing works, and by 1945, there were 38. These freezing works—New Zealand’s first large scale industrial plants—provided the capacity to both slaughter and refrigerate meat before exporting products to overseas markets, and included wool scouring, tanning and fellmongery operations.

While many of the early freezing works were ‘local concerns’, the industry soon attracted foreign investors, causing concern amongst local farmer co-operatives about the ownership of the early industry: local capital now competed against overseas ‘trusts’. On top of this, local farmer co-operatives faced a number of challenges, including under-capitalization, making it difficult to keep up with technological advancements, as well as rising freight bills. In 1917, Parliament established a committee to investigate the apparent unfair practices of the British Vestey Corporation and the American Armour & Company. While no action was immediately taken, once prices fell in 1921, both farmers and the Government found a ‘ready scapegoat for their troubles’: the ‘Meat Trusts’. As a result, the Government established the Meat Producers Board the following year to provide local producers with ‘greater control of their own destiny’ and negotiate for lower freezing, insurance,

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9 Belich, Paradise Reforged, p.68.
rail and shipping charges. Nevertheless, while after 1900 the tendency moved from overseas ownership to farmers’ freezing works (between 1900 and 1912, for example, farmers’ freezing companies were formed in Auckland, Wellington, Gisbourne, and Patea), between 1920 and 1935 saw the trend towards farmers’ companies reversed. In 1921, for example, the British Vestey company bought the Tōmoana freezing works in Hastings. By the 1970s, a Vestey’s subsidiary (first as W&R Fletcher, then as Weddel Crown) owned five freezing works across New Zealand, including Tōmoana and Westfield. International ownership remained a key feature of the industry until the late twentieth century and had the effect of integrating the primary sector, from farming to financing, processing and shipping, largely into the British market. Indeed, access to the British market underpinned the meat-freezing industry’s central place within the economy for much of the twentieth century. Until the 1970s, Britain remained the largest market for New Zealand exported goods. By the early 1950s, more than 90 per cent of New Zealand’s exports consisted of meat, wool and dairy produce, and nearly two-thirds went to the Britain. For much of the twentieth century, New Zealand’s agricultural prosperity relied heavily on access to the British market.

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Hundreds of men, organised and divided along lines of skill, pay and department, worked in the early freezing work ‘sheds’. That women were not employed in the meat industry was a given in the first fifty years of the industry; the freezing industry was a ‘male bastion’. The work was seasonal, spanning a maximum of six months in the year. Locals who found work in the industry formed communities within and outside the freezing works based on kinship and ethnic ties, while itinerant slaughtermen travelled the country and followed the seasons between the North and

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21 Needham, p.2.
South Islands of New Zealand, and Australia. While many of the earliest workers were largely European, Māori provided a ‘parallel source of labour’ to itinerant Pākehā workers; wages from seasonal employment in the freezing works and other industries supplemented the traditional Māori economy. The flexible nature of seasonal and casual employment allowed Māori to maintain traditional links and obligations to iwi and hapu.  

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, according to Michael King, Māori were ‘a rural proletariat’, who, alienated from their land after confiscation, joined the wage labour force in greater numbers in the twentieth century. Indeed, while wage labour remained a minor part of Māori economic activity, it became a growing feature as the pace of land alienation increased.

Before the 1930s, the slaughterman remained the most important position within the freezing works; they were also dominant in the union and, according to Sheridan Gundry, had ‘mana in the works and community’. Slaughtermen were skilled workers—it took four to five years to become competent—in an industry where poor conditions and accidents were common. They supplied their own gear, including knives, steels, pouches, and the famous black singlet which became a ‘status symbol’ for those working in the industry. Each slaughterman worked before a ‘hook’, from which the animals hung throughout the process of killing the animal, stripping away the pelt, disjointing the hooves, beheading the carcass, disembowelling it, and trimming off any excess fat and ligaments. Generally, workers completed this process every 4.2 minutes, but the pace of work was determined by an experienced worker, known as ‘the clock’, with whom other butchers were expected to keep up. 100 animals per day was the normal tally. The almost complete control over the labour process from beginning to end warranted these workers the title of

24 Gundry, Making a Killing, p.57.
25 Needham, p.3.
‘solo’ slaughtermen or ‘solo’ butcher, giving them enormous autonomy in the workplace and a ‘monopoly on a skill crucial to the country's exports’.\textsuperscript{28} But autonomy over the job did not mean that slaughtermen did as they pleased. Rather, as Erik Olssen has noted of railway workers in the early twentieth century, ‘they retained control over what needed to be done, how to do it, and how long it took’.\textsuperscript{29} Labourers, on the other hand, were largely local workers, with less clout in union and workplace affairs. Paid wages or hourly rates, their job was to marshal the sheep, clean up after the slaughtermen and place the carcasses in muslin bags before freezing.\textsuperscript{30}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Figure3.png}
\caption{Group portrait, Freezing Workers, Tōmoana, 1901, Collection of Hawke's Bay Museums Trust, Ruawharo Tā-ū-rangi, 16404}
\end{figure}

In their desire to maintain craft control, and to protect or enhance working conditions, slaughtermen were the first in the industry to organise unions.\(^{31}\) There was little effort among the early craft unions of slaughtermen to organise their unskilled co-workers, however. Craft unionism did not engender solidarity across the hierarchies of skill; as Erik Olssen writes, ‘cultures of craft were much more important than the culture of class’ at the turn of the century.\(^{32}\) At the same time, however, the slaughterman’s mobility, lack of local attachments, and contact with imported ideologies of syndicalism and socialism in their trans-Tasman labour migrations made some receptive to radicalism.\(^{33}\) Indeed, a minority of unionists saw the necessity of organising a national union beyond craft lines, a push that coincided with a general upsurge in organising activity and the emergence of what scholars call the ‘new unionism’.\(^{34}\) Syndicalist and industrial unionist ideology among organisers shaped the earliest attempts to create an industrial union at the national level in the early twentieth century.\(^{35}\) In 1890, for example, the secretary of the Auckland slaughtermen told his members that

> The Wellington Butchers Union have informed us that they have marched northwards as far as Wanganui and planted the flag of unionism there, They ask us to advance southward and give them the hand halfway, A month hence, gentlemen, should see this done; and in another month our noble flag – the marrow bones and meat clever – should float over the whole North Island.\(^{36}\)

But this upsurge proved short lived, following the defeat of the 1890 Maritime Strike. Moreover, the Liberal Government’s Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act (ICAA) of 1894 reinforced the regional and craft-based unionism with the intention, according to its architect William Pember Reeves, of putting an end to ‘the evils of industrial war’.\(^{37}\) The Act made unions ‘creatures of the law’, whose main function was to file disputes, give evidence before the board of Conciliation and

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\(^{31}\) ibid., p.130; Gundry, , p.140.  
\(^{33}\) ibid; James Bennett, ‘“Rats and Revolutionaries”: The Labour Movement in Australian and New Zealand, 1890–1940*, Dunedin, 2004, p.154.  
\(^{34}\) Needham, p.1.  
\(^{36}\) Quoted in, Roth, *Trade Unions*, p.11.  
police ‘Awards’, a legally binding set of working conditions. Strikes were outlawed in favour of compulsory arbitration. While the Act did oversee the enhancement of working conditions and recognition of unions, it inhibited any attempts to amalgamate and unite freezing workers in the industry nationally. Those registered under the Act could gain coverage for single industrial districts as defined by the court and particular sections of the workforce, separated by skill, reinforcing the separation of union by both department and region. Thus, while unions benefited from the protections offered under the compulsory arbitration, the system also kept most unions ‘organisationally and industrially weak’.

But despite both the absence of a national industrial union and the limits imposed on union activism by the ICCA, slaughtermen developed into a militant workforce. Impatient with the limits of the arbitration court, and well aware of their important skill, slaughtermen turned to direct action. The first recorded strike in the meat industry occurred in February, 1907. Next to the Auckland Tramway workers strike, it was one of the first strikes of any group of workers against the arbitration system and threatened the country’s reputation as a ‘country without strikes’—a record sustained for 12 years after the passing of the ICAA. The immediate cause of the dispute was pay, but it also reflected broader workplace issues over conditions, hours, and the speed and amount of work. The strike began at the Petone and Ngahuauranga plants in Wellington, where slaughtermen walked off the job, following a refusal on the part of employers to increase wages. Inspired by this action, Christchurch slaughtermen walked off the job demanding a shorter working day, the removal of extra duties usually done by assistants or labourers, and the abolition of the fine system for damaged carcases or pelts. By March, however, the strike was over and many workers were ordered to appear before the Arbitration Court, where they faced penalty fines for striking. While the strikes themselves were short lived, their implications were quite serious, according to James Holt,
Figure 4. In 1907, Slaughtermen staged one of the first strikes against the Arbitration Court, threatening the country's reputation as a 'country without strikes'. Observer, March 9, 1907.
because they undermined ‘both the letter of the Arbitration Act and the spirit of the arbitration system’.45 Defending the system, Reeves claimed that the strike was provoked by Australian slaughtermen, a comment which emphasised both the trans-Tasman work migration patterns that occupations like slaughtering encouraged as well as the tendency of politicians to blame ‘outside agitators’ for workers’ discontent.46

In 1913, many of the country’s slaughtermen again walked out over conditions and pay, and demanded a ‘living annual wage’. 47 Freezing companies were prepared for the strike, however, and organised strike breakers, many of whom retained their jobs after the slaughtermen admitted defeat.48 Occurring within the context of the defeats of militant unions in the ‘Great Strike’ of 1913, the slaughtermen’s dispute provided ‘a graphic demonstration of the case for industrial unionism’, according to Erik Olssen, as farmers and ‘learners’ quickly took their place.49 Organisers learnt from these strikes, and continued to push for a national union. In 1917, for example, an Australian meat worker unionist, Anthony Ogden, toured the country, finding that 4,243 workers in the meat industry were separated between 30 different unions.50 The aim of his tour was to organise a national organisation of freezing workers in New Zealand.51 As a result of the tour, Ogden and delegates from around the country arranged a conference in Wellington, where workers voted for the formation of a national organisation, ‘to be known as The New Zealand Freezing Works and Related Trades Industrial Association of Workers [or New Zealand Freezing Workers’ Union]’.52 However, this was not a national union, which remained illegal under the ICAA, but a federation. And despite its creation, sectional, craft unionism continued to dominate in the industry.53

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46 Bennett, pp.95–96, 183.
50 Bennett, p.95.
52 McLeod, p.2. A detailed report on the conference can be found in the *Maoriland Worker*, 4 April 1917, p.5; Needham, p.3.
53 Needham, p.5.
Slaughtermen’s local struggles over pay, conditions and control over the process of work continued to characterise much of the conflict in the industry until the 1930s. Between 1921 and 1930, the meat industry underwent a ‘steady’ expansion. ‘Works were enlarged, the kills were increased, and the scope of its operations widened’, Trevor Fallwell writes. At the same time, these were also ‘difficult years’ marked by ‘intervals of depression and labour disputes’.\(^{54}\) The New Zealand Freezing Workers’ Union was now affiliated with the Alliance of Labour, following the collapse of the ‘Red’ Federation of Labour in 1913. The Alliance, like the ‘Red Feds’, had little sympathy with the Arbitration Court and ‘favoured instead a policy of aggressive collective bargaining’.\(^{55}\) During the 1921-22 season, butcher’s walked off the job in Hawke’s Bay, refusing to work under a new Arbitration Court award rate. In 1926, a far more serious dispute affected freezing works across the entire country. At the start of the killing season butchers refused to work without a 10 per cent increase in wages. Companies refused the demand and hired ‘free labour’. Two months later, butchers went back to work after company and union agreed that a joint application should be made to the Arbitration Court for a new award. Union workers adopted a ‘go-slow’ until non-union workers were dismissed.\(^{56}\) In 1927, Judge Frazer awarded a wage increase to freezing workers, citing the ‘prosperity of farmers’—a decision that ‘unleashed concerted attacks on the Court by farmers’.\(^{57}\) Thus, slaughtermen gained concessions through both direct bargaining as well as through the Arbitration Court. Their ability to both contravene as well as benefit from the system came down to their essential skill in a vital export industry—a problem that employers attempted to solve in the early 1930s by reorganising the labour process.

‘A strike-breaking panacea’: The Great Depression and the ‘chain’ system

The Great Depression left trade unions in a vulnerable state, while the campaign by employers and farmers against compulsory arbitration found sympathy in the Coalition Government, election in 1928.\(^{58}\) Historians debate the impact of the


\(^{55}\) ibid., p.200.

\(^{56}\) ibid., pp.200-202.

\(^{57}\) Martin, *Honouring the Contract*, p.177.

removal of compulsory arbitration on wages, some claiming that wage reductions would have taken place either way, albeit more slowly.59 Most agree, however, that freezing workers ‘suffered the worst disaster’; in the meat-industry the removal of compulsory arbitration became ‘the signal for wholesale wage cuts’.60 According to freezing worker unionist Alex McLeod, the combination of mass unemployment and the removal of compulsory arbitration ‘gave the employers a free hand to raid workers’ wages and working conditions’.61 During the 1932-33 season, employers announced pay rates which amounted to wage cuts of between 16 to 66 per cent.62 Freezing workers responded with strike action. Almost immediately, however, management replaced workers with non-union labour.63 Following a lack of support by other unions across the country combined with the fact that large numbers of workers gradually ‘drifted’ back to work, the remaining strikers called off their action. The strike was a major defeat for slaughtermen; according to historian Bert Roth, union leaders ‘badly misread the times and led their men into defeat and isolation’.64 Between 1932 and 1936, the companies held control in the plants, according to McLeod, giving themselves the right for their officials to address stop-work meetings ‘when and where they desired’, and refusing union officials access to the workplace. Unionists were refused work, while new company-sponsored unions appeared in most sheds. The old unions of the industry, including the national federation, ‘lingered on’, Roth writes, ‘watching helplessly from the sidelines’.65

The single most important outcome of the strike, however, was a fundamental reorganisation of the labour process. Employers used the opportunity created by the strike, the empty workplaces, and the large pool of unemployed labour to introduce the ‘chain’ system of slaughtering. This system displaced the position of the ‘solo’ slaughterman, introducing scientific management to meat production ‘as relatively ‘deskilled’ slaughterers repeatedly performed discrete cuts along a conveyor-like ‘dis-assembly line’.66 As a result, mass production replaced individual craft.67 While the

60 Roth, pp.51-52.
61 McLeod, p.10.
63 Auckland Star, 18 October, 1932, p.8.
64 McLeod, p.12; Roth, *Trade Unions*, p.52.
65 ibid.
66 Barry, p.77.
67 Gundry, pp.56, 60.
‘chain’ system ultimately failed to increase production in the short term (one manager claimed that the implementation of the ‘chain’ resulted in ‘the longest go-slow in industrial history’), it did allow management to wrest control of other aspects of the employment relationship from its newly ‘deskilled’ workforce. According to U.S. historian Roger Horowitz, the ‘chain’ was a ‘revolutionary innovation’ because it gave management considerable control over the pace of the slaughtering operations. Indeed, the introduction of the ‘chain’ system undercut the almost complete control over the labour process that “solo” butchers maintained, acting as a means of breaking collective action. As one freezing works manager explained:

...it was sheer necessity to break the power of the solo butcher... they were highly paid, itinerant workers with no loyalty... so the chain was introduced as a strike-breaking panacea... Management were determined that they would never again be subject to the vagaries of the solo butcher.

Solo butchers understood this. One claimed that the introduction of the ‘chain’ ‘was an opportunity to break up a strong union, and they succeeded’.

On the surface, the ‘chain’ system appears to be a perfect illustration of Harry Braverman’s theory of managerial drive for control through “deskilling”, whereby a worker becomes deskilled when he or she loses control over the labour process. While the ‘solo’ butcher took four years training to become competent, several weeks would suffice for a slaughterman on the ‘chain’. However, while the introduction of the ‘chain’ system broke unions comprised mainly of solo slaughtermen, in the long term it encouraged the creation of an industrial union in the industry. It also strengthened these new unions in unexpected ways. Companies now hired local, ‘unskilled’ labour, as opposed to itinerant and skilled slaughtermen. In short: freezing works’ labourers were now defined by their sheer numbers and their geographical stability; general work-group solidarity came to replace craft-based

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68 Cited in: Curtis, p.145.
69 Curtis, p.145.
71 Inkson and Cammock, p.153.
72 Quoted in: ibid., p.154.
unionism.\textsuperscript{75} The creation of a more stable workforce, drawn from the local community, would also have implications in the developments of a workplace culture and union culture, (discussed in Chapter Two and Three). It encouraged workplace unionism amongst workers because, as Horowitz writes, the ‘chain’ system provided ‘regular lines of communication that could be tapped to support each other in conflicts with management’.\textsuperscript{76} The introduction of the ‘chain’ system did not, then, destroy the militancy of those working within the industry in the long term, though

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure5.jpg}
\caption{The ‘chain’ system of slaughtering, 1938. This image also appeared in New Zealand Herald, December 1, 1938. According to the Herald, the image shows ‘members of the office staff and country buyers’ who manned the chain during a strike. NZMS 1803-414230.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{75} Inkson and Cammock, ‘Labour process theory’, p.133.
\textsuperscript{76} Horowitz, p.213.
the issue of organising and representing an unskilled and casual workforce remained—an issue that unions addressed in the 1950s and 1960s with new methods of controlling and regulating the labour market.

Meanwhile, the election of the First Labour Government in 1935, the creation of the Federation of Labour, and the introduction of Compulsory Unionism greatly boosted efforts to build an industrial union and recover from ‘the sustained offensive mounted by employers’. Compulsory unionism played a major role, with some industries—meat-freezing among them—increasing their union membership by between 40 and 70 per cent. As a result, wage cuts suffered during the 1932-33 strike were restored to their 1931 levels. In 1936, an amendment to the Arbitration Act permitted the registration of national unions and, in 1937, at a conference arranged by the Federation of Labour, freezing workers decided to conduct a ballot on the question of forming a national organisation. However, despite the efforts of organisers, freezing workers voted for a continuation of a national federation as opposed to a national union—once again a reflecting the desire to maintain independence at a regional or shed level. Nevertheless, freezing worker unionist Alex McLeod wrote in 1939 that the freezing workers’ unions were ‘indebted to the Federation of Labour for having been, in some measure, the means of bringing about reconciliation of the hostile and bitter feeling that for the past few years has existed in the freezing industry’. A 1955 pamphlet produced by the New Zealand Freezing Works and Related Trades Industrial Association of Workers claimed that after 1936, freezing workers ‘moved out of darkness and into light again’. But the relationship between freezing workers and the Labour Party was not always cordial and was tested in 1937, during the Second World War, and once again in the 1980s (see Chapter Four). Indeed, the state’s—including the Labour Party’s—continued support

77 Curtis, ‘Producers, Processors and Markets’, p.139.
79 Roth, *Trade Unions*, p.52. Fallwell, p.244.
81 McLeod, p.23.
of the arbitration system often brought it into conflict with militant ‘anti-arbitration’ unions.83

‘Out of darkness and into light again’: Industrial Unionism, 1937–1960s

With this new-found strength, freezing workers continued a strategy of pursuing concessions through both industrial action and the Arbitration Court, and quickly reaped the benefits. In 1937, the Labour Government introduced a 40-hour working week, but the new Award for freezing workers retained a 44-hour week without compensatory pay rises. In response, Westfield freezing workers adopted a ‘go-slow’, and, after threatened dismissal, occupied the factory—replicating the ‘sit-down’ strikes in both France and the United States, and overcoming the common problem of being replaced by ‘scab’ labour.84 Workers at Southdown, King’s Wharf and Horotiu quickly followed suit, before Minister of Labour Tim Armstrong intervened. Furious, Armstrong sent a telegram to the workers:

Government is of the opinion that in a small country there is room for only one government, and if you have decided on a show-down we might not be long in deciding who is to govern.85

Eventually, however, Armstrong directed the employers to pay a threepence an hour bonus over and above the Arbitration Court Award. In short, Armstrong settled on the workers’ demands and was put in an awkward position of seemingly giving in to union pressure.86 The press criticised Armstrong’s decision not to instruct the police to forcibly remove the workers from the factory and substitute striking workers with free labour.87 The New Zealand Farmer’s Union sent a resolution to the government condemning their response to freezing workers who had ‘illegally occupied’ the works and suggested that government was condoning militant action.88 New Zealand’s first ‘stay in’ strike proved successful, representing the emergence of the freezing workers as an increasingly strong and militant sector of the workforce, a sharp contrast to the defeats earlier in the decade.

83 Barry and Walsh, ‘State Intervention and Trade Unions in New Zealand’, pp.60, 62.
86 Roth, Trade Unions in New Zealand, pp.55-56.
87 Auckland Star, 4 February 1937, p.6.
Figure 6. Freezing workers at Westfield and Southdown during the 1937 'stay in' strike.
New Zealand Herald, January 14, 1937
With the beginning of the Second World War in 1939, the government immediately issued emergency regulations and the British Government commandeered New Zealand’s primary produce, ‘placing pressure on rural New Zealand to produce food’. As in Europe and the U.S., the demands of the war-time economy required unprecedented efforts to maintain production, resulting in a clamp down on strikes and stoppages. The Strike and Lockout Emergency Regulations expanded the definition of a strike to include ‘go-slow’ and refusals to work extended hours or overtime. The Government also established ‘the Efficiency Committee’, designed to facilitate the settlement of disputes during war. But from the outset of the war, freezing workers’ unions objected to the curtailment of workers’ rights, and in 1942 pledged themselves ‘to resist strenuously any attempt to lower the standards of living of workers’. Under these emergency regulations, strikes were heavily penalised. During a strike at the Westfield freezing works in Auckland, for example, the Government deregistered the union and large numbers of strikers were imprisoned. Jock Barnes of the Waterside Workers’ Union recalls these events in his memoirs:

In the freezing industry, appalling working conditions were constantly being worsened by profiteering employers using the pretext of the war effort to squeeze out still more production ... after a trial in the Auckland Town Hall 213 [striking freezing workers] were imprisoned in Mount Eden... It was disgusting, filthy and unfit for animals, let alone human beings.

Using the rhetoric of loyalty and service during the time of war, Labour Prime Minister Peter Fraser made an appeal to ‘every loyal citizen’ to volunteer to take the place of striking freezing workers ‘who have deserted their posts’. Fraser claimed that the strike was an ‘attack upon our war effort... Meat and butter and cheese are required for our brave men’. Police guarded the gates of Westfield as volunteers

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92 A.E.C. Hare, Industrial Relations in New Zealand, Wellington, 1946, p.266.
94 Martin, Holding the Balance, p.225.
96 Evening Post, 17 March 1942, p.6.
arrived to avoid conflict with striking workers.97 As was the case during the 1937 sit-down strike, the Government gave a stern warning to freezing workers that ‘the government and not the freezing workers that was going to run New Zealand’.98

Freezing workers remained militant in the years after World War II. In the immediate post-war period, unions’ disgruntlement with economic stabilisation and compulsory arbitration led to ‘seemingly endless go-slows and stoppages’, while longstanding tensions on the waterfront led to one of New Zealand’s longest and most bitter industrial disputes.99 From February to July 1951, 8,000 New Zealand waterside workers were locked out of work.100 The National Government, prepared for showdown with the militant watersiders, quickly declared a state of emergency,

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suspended civil liberties, deregistered the union, and sent troops to work the ports.\footnote{Carlyon and Morrow, \textit{Changing Time}, pp.15-16/}

Though freezing workers remained divided about joining the waterside led Trade Union Congress (the militant rival to the Federation of Labour), many across the country walked off the job in support of the watersiders, and against the severity of the Emergency Regulations.\footnote{Michael Bassett, \textit{Confrontation ’51: the 1951 Waterfront Dispute}, Auckland, 1971, p.93, 103.} At the peak of the lock-out, nearly 7,000 freezing workers across 21 sheds were off the job in protest, out of a total of 22,000 workers out of work.\footnote{Bassett, p.103. Martin, \textit{Holding the Balance}, p.282.} However, as the lock-out of watersiders continued, and in a climate of fear and potential for defeat, freezing workers gradually voted to return to work. The exception was the Wellington District Freezing Workers, who were subsequently deregistered on 26 March.\footnote{Bassett, pp.123, 125, 127-128.}

The 1951 lock-out had a devastating effect on freezing workers. Companies and the government did not only use the opportunity to attack the watersiders, but militant unionism more generally.\footnote{ibid. p.189.} In Wellington, the Government registered twelve new freezing workers unions in place of Wellington District Union, and in Nelson, 25 freezing workers were told that there was no work for them. Some of these Nelson workers had been employed for between 14 and 28 years; 11 were ex-servicemen.\footnote{ibid., p.129.} However, freezing workers’ union gradually recovered from the loss. By 1958, the Wellington District Union reformed and registered again and, as Cybèle Locke demonstrates, many watersiders involved in the lockout, and subsequently blacklisted from the ports, eventually found work in the freezing works and climbed the ranks of the union, including later union presidents, Frank Barnard and Frank McNulty.\footnote{Locke, \textit{Workers in the Margins}, pp.36-44.} Despite the loss, freezing workers emerged powerful by the 1960s, displacing miners, watersiders and seamen as the ‘bastion’ of militant blue collar unionism.\footnote{Rotherham, p.17; Tom Bramble and Sarah Heal, ‘Trade Unions’, in: Chris Rudd and Brian Roper, eds., \textit{The Political Economy of New Zealand}, Auckland, 1997, p.131.} Their rise occurred because the buoyancy of the economy in the post-war period and freezing workers’ continued centrality to the export sector.
But outside of the 1951 Waterfront lock-out, relatively low levels of strike action characterised the post-war period. Belich suggests that in the decades after Second World War, a certain amount of ‘sectoral harmony’ existed between workers, farmers, and business with the state ‘and—to some extent—with each other’. This ‘sectoral harmony’ was, to some extent, underpinned by the continued growth in New Zealand’s exports. The meat freezing industry continued to expand, employing a greater amount of workers in the manufacturing sector. By 1964, there were 33 freezing works in operation across the country, employing over 21,500 workers. More generally, in the 1950s, the economy expanded and the country sustained a high standards of living, full employment, and economic growth. Historians have called this New Zealand’s ‘golden weather’: a period of political stability, consensus and acquiescence. The large international demand for New Zealand products sustained this economic growth and prosperity, and, while new international markets and products emerged on the post-war period, Britain remained the country’s major market, accounting for 66 per cent of New Zealand’s exports in 1950.

By the 1950s, employers in the freezing industry had completed the implementation of ‘chain’ system in sheds across the country. Under the new system, workers were organised along departmental lines, all of which were supervised by a foreman. First, animals were transported and unloaded into the stockyards where they were sorted before entering the slaughterhouse. Work in the stockyards involved unloading the trucks, preparing, cleaning and penning the stock and ‘feeding the production line; feeding the chain’. Stockyard workers, or ‘stockies’, loaded the cattle or sheep into ‘the killing box’ where a worker cut the throat of the animal and a labourer placed it on a hook, ready for the start of the chain. In the slaughterfloor, divided between the mutton and beef chains, animals were skinned, gutted, legged, weighed and graded by workers on the chain. The skilled knife work

109 Franks and Nolan, ‘Rescuing the Federations of Labour’, p.35.
110 Belich, p.314.
112 Burridge ‘The Location of Meat Freezing Works in New Zealand’, p.72.
114 Belich, pp.309-310.
116 ibid.
was undertaken by the slaughterman or butcher, the new ‘elite’ of the freezing works and its unions.117 The preparation of the carcass on the slaughterfloor was carried out by ‘chains’ of about fifty workers, each expected to take on a fresh animal every seven to eight seconds.118 Alongside slaughtermen, labourers also worked on the floor, though the traditional occupational division between ‘slaughtermen’ and ‘labourer’ of the ‘solo’ butcher era was less pronounced. After the slaughter floor, the carcasses then entered the cooling floor, where they were bagged and despatched to the freezing chambers or the ‘freezers’, manned by freezing chamberhands, or sent to the boning room, where boners, trimmers or packers processed the meat. The meat was then loaded out to the freezers either as a carcass or in boned and processed form, while the left-over material from the carcasses (the blood, guts and skins) were despatched to ‘by-product’ departments for processing and rendering into a range of other products.119

Under this new work arrangement, unions faced the challenge of organising a deskilled and largely casual and seasonal workforce. In the 1950s and 1960s, the ‘killing season’ in New Zealand was commonly referred to by workers as the ‘100 day season’—the shortest internationally.120 Seasonality also resulted in discriminatory and preferential hiring and firing by employers between the seasons, which, ‘sapped the internal strength of the unions whose elected representatives could be excluded from employment’.121 In response, unions sought to control the labour supply by introducing rules of ‘seniority’. The seniority system, initially organised on an informal and local shed basis, was eventually formalised in the National Award of 1958. Seniority gave workers who had previously been employed the right to work at the beginning of the new killing season and the guarantee of being laid off last at the end of the season. Seniority also allowed discipline of union rules, while transgressions of such rules could result in loss of the enforcement of seniority.122

The combined impact of compulsory unionism and seniority meant that the

119 Turkington, Industrial Conflict p.35.
121 ibid., pp.144-145.
122 ibid., p.145.
managerial control gained by the chain system slipped in the post-war years. Under the 'solo' butcher system, unions held the ability to withhold skilled workers; under the chain system, the union could withhold labour and regulate local labour markets in the meat industry as well as rely on an organised and unionised workforce. Moreover, the desire of employers to kill and process ever-increasing numbers of perishable stock in an expanding industry gave workers bargaining power and the ability to gain valuable concessions, particularly at the peak of the 'killing season'.

While the ability to organise an industrial union opened up due to the new organisation of work and the changes to the Arbitration Act, regional and shed solidarity and identity remained important. In 1946, Industrial Relations scholar A.E.C. Hare described what he saw as 'semi-autonomous local union branches based on the place of work' where a “Board of Control”, made up of the union officialdom and union department delegates, negotiated directly with the management. This union localism remained consistent in the post-war years, and its legacy was still felt into the 1970s and beyond. Nevertheless, freezing workers’ unions did make further steps towards national unity. In 1971, workers across the country voted for the creation of The Meat Workers Union (MWU), though many sheds remained outside the national union, including the three Auckland sheds and Tōmoana in Hastings; Tōmoana would later join the Auckland Freezing Workers’ Union to form the Auckland and Tōmoana Freezing Workers Union (FWU).

Thus, two unions existed within the industry by the 1970s: MWU, representing the South Island and the bottom half of the North Island. The second union, the FWU, represented workers in the top half of the North Island. The reasons behind the continued separation between MWU and FWU are unclear. MWU President Frank McNulty suggested that the 'parochial attitudes' among Auckland workers explained the division, while FWU President Frank Barnard claimed that political differences underpinned the separation, as did fears of domination by Christchurch unionists. The differences

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123 Barry, p.77.
124 Hare, p.266.
125 Locke, *Workers in the Margins*, p.44.
also reflected the legacy of ‘legislated fragmentation into industrial districts’ fostered by the ICCA in 1894.\textsuperscript{127}

Despite low levels of strike action across the board during the ‘golden weather’, freezing workers emerged as the most strike-prone workers in New Zealand by the 1960s.\textsuperscript{128} According to Cybèle Locke, the power of traditionally militant unions went into decline as ‘oil replaced coal and airlines and trucks replaced ships and trains during the economic boom years of the 1950s and 1960s’.\textsuperscript{129} Thus, while miners, watersiders and seamen remained the most active elements of the union movement in the first half of the twentieth century, freezing workers emerged in the second half as perhaps the strongest and most militant of the blue-collar unionsLooking back, Sir Alan Hellaby, head of Hellabys Meat Company, claimed that ‘we started to really lose control within the plants’ in this period.\textsuperscript{130} In a 1963 memorandum to the Industrial Association of New Zealand Meat Freezing Companies, F. Stanley of Alliance Freezing claimed ‘I believe that unless we are prepared to do something about unifying our ranks we are going to continue being the defensive party in the industrial war we are engaged in’.\textsuperscript{131} Between 1945 and 1955, workers in the meat freezing industry accounted for only 8.3 per cent of working days lost through strikes. During the 1960s, more than 25 per cent of all strikes occurred in the meat industry and in the period between 1963 and 1973, the industry accounted for more than 50 per cent of the total working days lost in New Zealand.\textsuperscript{132}

**Broader Changes in the Post-War Period**

The rise of freezing workers as a powerful force in the country’s trade union movement occurred against the backdrop of fundamental transformations in the political, economic, and social landscape of Aotearoa New Zealand. As Jim McAloon writes, ‘economic confidence crashed just as many other dimensions of the postwar world were also changing’.\textsuperscript{133} The ethnic make-up of the freezing works changed

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{127} Curtis, ‘Producers, Processors and Markets’, p.125.
\item \textsuperscript{128} Locke, *Workers in the Margins*, p.39.
\item \textsuperscript{129} ibid., p.49; Roth, pp.160–162.
\item \textsuperscript{130} Cited in Curtis, ‘Producers, Processors and Markets’, p.148.
\item \textsuperscript{132} Locke, *Workers in the Margin*, p.39; Curtis and Reveley, p.146.
\item \textsuperscript{133} McAloon, *Judgements of all Kinds*, p.150.
\end{itemize}
gradually from the 1930s onwards; a change accelerated after World War II, and in particular in the 1950s and 1960s following the massive internal migration of Māori from rural to urban centres, and the immigration of Pacific Islanders to New Zealand’s cities, especially to Auckland.134 In other areas, such as Hawke’s Bay and the East Coast, however, the ethnic make-up of the workforce changed only slightly; Māori already made up a substantial number of the seasonal workforce in these areas, while Pacific Island immigration was minimal compared to Auckland. During the War years, the state appealed to both women and Māori in particular to work in industries such as the freezing works, while the Māori War Effort Organisation formed in 1942 to assist with manpower and recruiting.135 In some cases, according to Claudia Orange, freezing works ‘could not have operated without [MWEO’s] assistance’.136 At the Westfield works, single Māori workers recruited to work were housed in a military camp near the plant.137

In the post-war years, Māori entered the urban centres in large numbers. By 1936, 17 per cent of the Māori population lived in urban areas, rising to 27 per cent in 1945 and 75 per cent in 1975.138 Employment opportunities in factories like the freezing works were often a key factor behind the decision of many Māori to move to the city. James Belich claims that there is evidence of ‘occupational clustering’ of Māori in industries like the freezing works, while Mason Durie describes Māori

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137 Auckland Star, 29 February 1944, p.2
‘capturing’ certain sectors including meat processing plants which were ‘largely staffed by Māori butchers and labourers’.\textsuperscript{139} A survey conducted in May 1964 of the Southdown and Westfield plants revealed that 22.3 per cent of the workforce was Māori.\textsuperscript{140} During the 1951 waterfront lock-out, propaganda produced by the waterside workers presented the archetypal freezing worker as Māori, while freezing worker union publications during the strike provided columns in Māori.\textsuperscript{141} In 1964, G.J Burridge claimed that a significant feature of the Auckland works was the ‘importance of Maori labour’, while in Hawke’s Bay, he described the ‘heavy dependence’ on Māori labour.\textsuperscript{142} Similarly, Pacific Island workers made up a significant, but less substantial bulk of the freezing industry workforce in the post-war years.\textsuperscript{143}

Māori involvement in industrial disputes during the first half of the twentieth century variously challenged and confirmed the view among employers and many Pākehā freezing workers that Māori were natural strike-breakers and were not ‘good unionists’.\textsuperscript{144} During a strike at the Tokomaru Bay freezing works in Gisborne in 1927, for example, Māori workers took part in a drawn-out industrial dispute following the dismissal of a Pākehā worker. The company assumed that Māori workers, 70 per cent of the union membership (meeting were conducted by the branch secretary in both te reo Māori and English), would easily be persuaded to return to work and arranged meetings with the Māori union secretary in an effort to achieve this, but had no success.\textsuperscript{145} During the dispute at Westfield in 1942, Māori freezing worker, Koi Tarawa sent a telegram to Auckland based Labour MP Tapihana Paikea disassociating himself and others with the strike: “We, the Maoris, as a section of the Westfield workers, do hereby send our protest of the notice for action taken by the majority of workers”.\textsuperscript{146} Two days later, however, the Auckland Star reported that Koi Tarawa ‘never showed up to work and with the big majority of the

\textsuperscript{139} Belich, p.474; Mason Durian, Ngā Tai Matatu Tides of Māori Endurance, Melbourne, 2005, p.21.
\textsuperscript{141} Millar, p.19.
\textsuperscript{142} Burridge ‘The Location of Meat Freezing Works in New Zealand’ p.48.
\textsuperscript{144} Stevan Eldred-Grigg, New Zealand Working People, 1890-1990, Palmerston North, 1990, p.87.
\textsuperscript{145} Tom Murray, Kerry Taylor, Joe Tepania and Nora Rameka, ‘Towards a History of Maori and Trade Unions’, in: John E. Martin & Kerry Taylor, eds., Culture and the Labour Movement, Palmerston North, 1991, p.57. Also notable about the dispute was the fact that meeting were conducted by the branch secretary in both te reo and English.
\textsuperscript{146} Evening Post, 18 March 1942, p.6.
Maoris is standing solidly behind the union and its fight'.147 While Māori joined the strike, abating union concerns about Māori strike-breakers, concerns that woman workers would act as strike-breakers during the Second World War were ‘sometimes well founded’, according to Deborah Montgomerie.148

But in comparison to the changes in the ethnicity of workers in the freezing industry, changes in the gendered make-up of the workforce were modest. Despite the fact that women entered the paid workforce in massive numbers in the post-war years, women entered the freezing industry in only limited ways following the deskilling of the workforce in the 1930s and the expansion of ancillary ‘follow on’ departments—departments seen as ‘typical’ and ‘feminine’.149 Indeed, while negotiations between union and management provided conditions and protections for women, it also placed restrictions on where women could work. The New Zealand Freezing Workers’ Award 1938 covered females over the age of 16, ‘who may be employed in the preserving departments and bag rooms on suitable work, and for the calibrating of casings’. The Award set the condition ‘no female worker shall be required to handle raw meats or to handle any weight in excess of twenty pounds’.150

As women entered the works in greater numbers during the war, the union recognised the need to recruit them.151 In fact, this desire to recruit women to the union led to industrial action in 1942, as management told women workers to join a union outside the freezing workers’ union and denied the union permission to interview women working in the cannery departments.152 In the post-war period, women moved out of these ancillary positions, though still remained within isolated departments. When the canning departments closed, for example, women moved into the small good departments of the freezing works, such as the offal departments and casings, as well as some sections of the ‘chain’. By the 1972-1973 season, the industry’s average labour force was 27,317, of which 95.4 per cent were male and 4.6

148 Montgomerie, The Women’s War, pp.75-76.
152 For more on this conflict, see, Taylor, The Home Front Volume I, pp.380-391; Montgomerie, The Women’s War, p.75
per cent were female. In 1976, Don J. Turkington concluded that ‘while female employment has grown faster than male employment, the distribution of the labour force as between the sexes has changed only slightly over the last decade or so’.153

Changes in the economy and the nature of work continued in the 1960s and 1970s. While the economic boom of the 1950s and 1960s led to growing prosperity for a large proportion of New Zealanders, changes in the domestic and international economy would fundamentally reshape both New Zealand’s relationship with the world and its domestic economy in the 1970s. In 1957, under the Treaty of Rome, six European countries formed the European Economic Community (EEC) with the aim of bringing about economic union among the European nations. In 1973, Britain finally joined the EEC, threatening the meat industry’s ‘traditional prosperity’.154 Between 1965 and 1989, the proportion of New Zealand’s total exports to Britain fell

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153 Turkington, p.31.
Figure 10. Worker in the ‘cooling floor’, 1958, NZMS 1803-41492, Sir George Grey Special Collections, Auckland Libraries.
from over 50 to 7 per cent—what Belich calls a ‘revolution in terms of trade’. 155

Britain’s entry into the EEC and the need for market diversification also meant that meat-freezing companies now had to adhere to stricter hygiene regulations in order to export to European Nations as well as the United States. 156 All employers now needed to sit medical tests, wear protective clothing and headgear and constantly sterilise equipment, while Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (MAF) inspectors enforced these hygiene regulations. 157 The traditional black singlet and the practice of smoking while on the ‘chain’ disappeared, replaced by white overalls and white gumboots and more discipline. 158 The introduction of these hygiene regulations, its increasing strictness and the associated costs, caused conflict between workers and management in the decades after the 1970s. 159

Post-war Industrial Relations and Bargaining in the Freezing Industry
Throughout the post-war period, freezing workers continued to circumvent the wage-fixing elements of the Arbitration Court and bargain directly with employers, again coming into conflict with the state. In 1959, for example, freezing workers rejected the arbitration system award rate and pursued strike action instead, leading to renewed promises by Keith Holyoake’s National Party to introduce voluntary unionism. 160 But freezing workers did not entirely reject the wage-fixing elements of the Arbitration Court. Rather, unions negotiated both formal and informal agreements in a “two-tier” bargaining system, which included deals made at both the national and local level. 161 In 1955, a Union Pamphlet described this system: ‘Some time ago one of our older experienced delegates made the wise remark’, it read, ‘that we have two awards, the one that is printed on the wall, and the one that is made day in and day out by negotiations in works and factories all over the country. 162 While the state responded harshly in 1951 to the preference of militant unions to operate outside the system, in a period of low unemployment, low levels of strike action and

157 Barry, ‘A Bone of Contention’, p.84.
158 ibid.
160 A move opposed by union and employees alike (the latter fearing ‘industrial instability’), but supported by farmers, see: Barry Gustafson, *Kiwi Keith: A Biography of Keith Holyoake*, Auckland, 2007, p.323.
162 “The Union Makes Us Strong”, p.17.
prosperity of the 1960s, militant unions and employers ‘quietly agreed’ upon this multi-tiered wage system, according to Melanie Nolan.163 For unions generally, ‘second tier’ bargaining increased significantly following the ‘nil’ wage order of 1968.164 The 1973 Labour Relations Act, which incorporated elements of free bargaining into the legislative framework, reflected the first statutory recognition by the state of collective bargaining and a multi-tiered wage system.165

The first tier of bargaining involved industrial awards and agreements negotiated through the Arbitration Court. Despite the separation of workers into two unions, representatives from both MWU and FWU negotiated ‘the Award’ on a national basis; the two unions ‘combined their efforts’ to produce a single, all-inclusive Award, referred to as ‘the National Award’.166 Awards were negotiated with an employer association, the Meat Industry Association (MIA), and secured minimum hourly rates and piece rates.167 The ‘second tier’ or ‘above award’ involved bargaining outside the court, usually at a regional or workplace level, to gain further concessions from the employer. This form of bargaining relied on ‘workers’ strategic location, high levels of membership solidarity and commitment, and effective leadership’, according to Tom Bramble and Sarah Heal.168 Through this two-tier system, workers gained favourable pay and conditions. As Cybèle Locke explains, before 1973, ‘markets expanded, profits were high, employment was assured and unions won significant increases in wages and conditions through direct bargaining with employers’.169 But freezing workers’ powerful position was also based on the premise of economic growth and state support for a generally supportive industrial relations regime. In the 1970s and 1980s, as economic growth faltered, putting significant pressure on the post-war political order, freezing workers and their unions operated under very different circumstances.

166 Curtis, ‘Producers, Processors and Markets’, p.125; Curtin and Reveley, p.146.
167 Barry, p.74.
169 Locke, Workers in the Margins, p.48.
This chapter has provided an historical survey on the rise of freezing workers as an industrially militant sector of the blue collar workforce, from the craft unions of ‘solo’ slaughtermen to the industrial unions of freezing workers. The rise of freezing workers as a militant union occurred alongside the significant growth of the meat industry, as well as significant transformations in the social, political and cultural landscape of Aotearoa New Zealand. The industry’s workforce became increasingly multi-ethnic in the post-war years, as ‘a once white urban working-class now became culturally diverse’. Māori and, to a lesser extent, Pacific Island workers increasingly making up a large proportion of the freezing-industry workforce. Women, too, entered the industry, but in far less dramatic numbers and the freezing works remained a ‘male bastion’. By the 1960s, meat-freezing ranked as New Zealand’s largest sector of manufacturing and the country’s most important source of foreign income, contributing about 40 per cent to the total export revenue of New Zealand. The industry employed the largest number of workers of any sector of manufacturing. Indeed, a freezing works was a ‘familiar landmark’ in many areas of the country, providing employment for entire communities. The freezing works at Westfield, Auckland and Tōmoana, Hastings, were among the largest in the country. Westfield, situated on Great South Road, and was one of three freezing works in the Ōtāhuhu industrial area. In 1964, G.J. Burridge claimed that their size and contribution to the national economy made Auckland’s freezing works ‘the most important industrial plants in New Zealand’. Similarly, by the 1960s, the Hawke’s Bay remained a ‘major powerbase for both the meat industry and New Zealand’, with strong-knit communities forming around the Whakatu and Tōmoana freezing works. This chapter has provided a national overview. The following chapters focus on the workplace and communities of freezing workers at Westfield and Tōmoana.

However, as this chapter has demonstrated, the prosperity of the freezing industry relied heavily on access to the British market, as did the post-war political

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170 McAloon, Judgements of All Kinds, p.150.
171 Watson, ‘Crisis and change’, p.231.
172 Barry, pp.69-70.
economy, and the place of trade unions within in. The years after 1973 proved to be a more challenging time for freezing workers and their unions. The world economy put enormous strains on New Zealand: the oil shocks, high interest rates, crippling rates of inflation, the collapse of agricultural commodity prices, and Britain’s entry into the European Economic Community (EEC) in the early 1970s hit the New Zealand economy hard. It marked the end of the ‘golden weather’ and a movement away from stability and consensus to a ‘politics of volatility’. The growth and prosperity that characterised the 1950s and 1960s gave way to economic instability, high inflation, declining terms of trade, and growing unemployment. The new international economic environment put strain on industries—especially manufacturing—to be more competitive and in turn to cut costs and mechanise. As a result, the ‘historic compromise’ between employers, the state, and trade unions, or what Belich calls ‘sectoral harmony’, broke down under the pressure. Venturing into a period of economic instability, and in an increasingly-threatened primary industry, with large numbers of workers with a militant history, this thesis explores the challenges freezing workers faced in the 1970s and 1980s. Understanding freezing worker militancy requires not only an analysis of the industrial relations framework under which freezing workers operated, but also an analysis of the work process, workplace culture and the centrality of ‘the works’ to the community. It is to that focus that this thesis now turns.

179 ibid., p.385.
Figure 11. Tōmoana Freezing Works, Hastings, 1976. The photo gives a sense of scale of the freezing works. In the background is the suburb of Hastings. Whites Aviation Ltd Photographs. Ref: WA-73509-F. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.
Figure 12. Westfield Freezing Works, Otahuhu, Manukau City, Auckland, including Mangere Inlet, 1977. Whites Aviation Ltd Photographs. WA-74213-F, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.
Chapter 2
‘The Camaraderie Was the Biggest Thing’:
Work, Culture, and Community, 1970s-1980s

The inside of the freezing works is like a premonition of hell. Machines clack and shouts echo eerily from the metal rafters; steam hisses and melts into the damp air; blood spurts and spatters across clinically white garments; animal carcasses swinging on their hooks roll slowly past, throats cut, heads dangling grotesquely, while the men sever and slash with their razor-sharp knives.¹

- J. H K. Inkson

Laughing and singing... seemed to make the work clean.²

- Patricia Grace, Tu.

Figure 13. From the early 1970s new hygiene regulations meant that white overalls replaced the famous black singlet. Image from: The Meat Industry in New Zealand, New Zealand Freezing Companies Association. (Date and Location unknown)

² Patricia Grace, Tu, Wellington, 2012.
Henare Ngaera O’Keefe began work at Tōmoana freezing works in Hastings, a semi-rural town in the Hawke’s Bay, in November, 1971. For O’Keefe, the freezing works was the ‘University of Life’: ‘I went in there a boy and came out a man. I came out of there with a PhD in relationships’.3 At the age of sixteen, O’Keefe and his family migrated from Ruatōria, Gisborne because ‘there wasn’t a hell of a lot going on in our home town. So we all moved to the urban areas and went into the freezing works’. Arriving outside the gates at the beginning of the ‘killing season’, O’Keefe recalled, ‘you just stood there [in a queue] until you got a job and inevitably they would hire you’. O’Keefe worked his way through different departments, eventually ending up as a slaughterman on the mutton chain, the heart of the freezing works. The work was hard, physically demanding, and also ‘bloody boring’. At the same time, however, the work and the workplace had its redeeming qualities:

Best thing about it was the people, of course. I loved the culture there. I loved the camaraderie, the whakawhanaungatanga, the closeness, the intimacy of it all... The camaraderie was the biggest thing. We worked together, we slept together, we socialised together—and there was 2,000 of us... It was a real family: an absolute, total family.4

Like O’Keefe, Maurice Davis moved from Otorohanga in the King Country, to Auckland—‘from the country to the smoke’—to work in the urban Westfield freezing works in Ōtāhuhu. Davis, too, waited outside the gates. ‘I just stood in a queue’, Davis recalled. ‘Those were the days without CVs... I was a sprightly, nineteen-year-old boy who thought he was a man’. Despite their geographical separation, both O’Keefe and Davis reflected on their time in the freezing works in a strikingly similar manner. ‘I went on the job and I loved it’, Davis claimed. ‘I loved it. I loved the culture. I loved the people.... I loved the camaraderie’.5

The work narratives of O’Keefe and Davis were common among those who worked in the freezing industry in the 1970s and 1980s, for whom noise, extremes of heat and cold, physically hard work, and boredom were the defining aspects of the job. But an equally strong aspect of the oral histories was the workplace culture, underpinned by expressions of camaraderie, masculinity and the ‘family’ nature or


5 Maurice Davis, interviewed by Ross Webb, 8 May, 2014.
whanaungatanga of the workplace. This chapter begins by exploring the employment practices and work conditions at the Westfield and Tōmoana freezing works. The casualised nature of the job, intergenerational employment, and the seasonality of the work significantly shaped the rhythms of freezing worker life and the attitudes of the men and women in the industry, as did the brutal nature, physicality and monotony of the work. The chapter then looks at workplace culture and the various rituals that shaped and sustained this culture. While workers gained little satisfaction out of the work, they shaped the culture of workplace to suit their own needs and carved out a space for themselves that reflected agreed upon values, rituals and traditions. Workplace culture served to alleviate the monotony of the work and transform the unpleasant workplace into a more bearable and fun space. But this workplace culture was not always inclusive and required a period of sometimes brutal initiation. Moreover, ethnicity and gender played a role in the expression of this workplace culture at the same time that the workplace culture and occupational solidarity dissolved such distinction. Lastly this chapter reveals the ways in which the community flowed into the workplace culture and how workplace culture flowed out into the community.

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Getting a job in the freezing works was not a complicated process. Like O’Keefe and Davis, new workers lined up outside the gates at the start of each ‘killing season’ while foremen or company workers chose from those among the crowd—a tradition that most of those interviewed remembered clearly. 6 John Leckie began working at Westfield in 1977 and lined up outside the pay office with other new workers where they were ‘assigned on the spot… Westfield was a big shed and it took on large numbers of people at the start of the season’.7 Helen Mulrennan started at Tōmoana in 1978, and recalled that getting a job ‘consisted of hanging around the employment office, with many other hopefuls, hoping to catch the eye of the foreman …there was no CV, no interview, no references…. you’d just rock on up there and they’d come out the office and say [pointing] “you, you, you”’.8 Some lied about their age or skill in

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6 This process was known on the wharves as ‘the auction block’. Anna Green, British Capital, Antipodean Labour: Working the New Zealand Waterfront, 1915–1951, Dunedin, 2001, p.38.
8 Helen Mulrennan, interviewed by Ross Webb, 5 August, 2013.
order to secure a job.9 ‘People in the line would say: “just say you can do something, say you’re a skilled knife hand because once you’re in the door you’ll be okay; they’ll stick you on the broom”, explained Mulrennan.10 Similarly at Westfield, Maurice Davis remembered: “The guy said to me “can you handle a knife?” and I said “I’m from a farm, mate.” [But] it was all bullshit!’11 Workers with seniority, on the other hand, received telegrams, calling them back to work for the new season.

Familial recruitment and intergenerational employment was a common practise, particularly for Māori.12 At Westfield, John Leckie remembered that ‘with many departments, there were family connections and friends. Often they’d gather there’.13 Kevin Amanaki’s father helped him gain employment at Westfield, while Bill Hillman had both his sons work at Westfield during the school holidays. ‘Once you’re in the works, you could bring your sons in’, he explained.14 Jean Te Huia found acquiring a job at Tōmoana difficult because she had no immediate family employed there. ‘It was quite an elitist occupation... If you don’t know anybody or you didn’t have any family ties it was quite difficult. You had to be known to get in there’.15 It was only after working for some time that Te Huia realised that many of the workers were indeed related to each other.

After a while working there and after getting to know the people that I worked beside, you realise that the person working beside you was the daughter of the guy on the other side, and there was the sister and brother of the person who worked on the detain rail; the guy down on the floor sweeping was her brother; his wife was on the other side; their mother was the cleaner; their father was the board walker and the union delegate. And you realise actually that it really was a family affair.16

Once Te Huia had made these connections, however, she came to understand the family aspect of the works as underpinning both the ‘community’ of workers, as well as workers’ pride in their occupations and identities as freezing workers.

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9 Teina Nanai, personal communication, 4 July, 2013.
11 Maurice Davis, interviewed by Ross Webb, 8 May, 2014.
15 Jean Te Huia, interviewed by Ross Webb, 3 September, 2013.
16 ibid.
‘Generations of families worked there and were proud of their jobs and really put their heart and souls into it’, she explained. ‘It was a community’. On the job, family members also helped one another when it came to up-skilling on the job, even if it meant risking their position on the chain. For example, labourers who wanted to become butchers would be helped along by ‘a relative or a father’, though this was done ‘sneakily’ and occurred out of sight of the foreman—because ‘if you got caught, you got chucked off’ the chain for the day.

The seasonality of the work significantly shaped the rhythms of the freezing workers’ life, workplace and union culture. For most interviewed, the work was seasonal, with the ‘killing season’ spanning from around October to April. Helen Mulrennan explains that ‘generally it was six months on, six months off. But it could be less than that or more’. Robb remembered that on the off-season, ‘everyone was totally scattered. Most people you wouldn’t see until you got rehired the next season’. In analysing the causes behind the ‘strike proneness’ of the industry, industrial relations scholars at the time pointed to the seasonality of the work in creating ‘casual relationships between workers and employers’; a lack of loyalty of workers towards company and company towards workers. Frank McNulty of the Meat Workers’ Union argued in 1974 that the ‘economic insecurity arising from the effect of seasonal employment is one of the major factors in bad industrial relations in the meat freezing industry’, while another anonymous senior union official asked ‘how can you owe responsibility to an industry when it doesn’t ensure a man a living’? In a 1989 interview, one freezing worker claimed that while you made ‘damn good money’, there was ‘no real easy way out of the freezing works nightmare... you get trapped into this cycle of rich – poor – rich – poor. It happens to guys’.

But while the seasonality of the work could have a disruptive impact on families, especially when many members of the same family were laid off together,
others came to like the seasonal nature of the work, particularly younger workers. ‘You’d work hard, earn a lot of money, and then get the fuck out of there for a few months and have a rest and take a break from it for a while’, explained James Robb.\(^{24}\) For Mulrennan, the seasonality was the ‘plus side’ of the work. ‘You’d get laid off, leave for a while and coming back was always nice. You’d see everybody again, after you’d been away from the place’.\(^{25}\) Even those with family accommodated the seasonality of the work. Jean Te Huia and her husband (also a freezing worker at the neighbouring Whakatu works) ‘got used to the life-style’. ‘We used to save as much as we could during the season, pay all our bills in advance, and then in the off season you never knew when you’d be back at work, so you’d just live out on your money until you ran out’. The seasonality of the work also gave Te Huia time to spend with the family throughout the winter. ‘It was winter you were off, so you could spend time with your children, stock up on your firewood and squirrel away for the winter’.\(^{26}\) For others, including Henare O’Keefe and George Rarere, work was all year around.\(^{27}\) When there was ‘downtime’ or a shortage of mutton, O’Keefe worked in forestry or on the wharves. Both O’Keefe and Mulrennan explained that ‘in those days’ (the 1970s) it was ‘easy to get a job’ if you were laid off.\(^{28}\) Despite—or perhaps because of—the seasonality, a job in the freezing works paid well. Many remembered the ‘good money’. For Jean Te Huia, ‘the money was always better than anywhere else’.\(^{29}\) George Rarere said that Tōmoana freezing works ‘paid my mortgage, it bought me a boat, it bought me a caravan... Our kids had everything’.\(^{30}\) But the good pay also made up for the tough conditions of the work.

‘Filthy, soul-destroying, boring and dangerous’: The Work

The conditions of work and the work process defined a set of prerequisites for those employed in the industry: the ability to deal with blood and guts, speed, and physical

\(^{24}\) James Robb, interviewed by Ross Webb, 22 June, 2013.

\(^{25}\) While at Tōmoana, Mulrennan worked in the Hawke’s Bay horticultural industry in the off season. Later, during the off season at Westfield, Auckland, she worked at a biscuit factory and at Tip-Top. Helen Mulrennan, interviewed by Ross Webb, 5 August, 2013.

\(^{26}\) Jean Te Huia, interviewed by Ross Webb, 3 September, 2013.

\(^{27}\) Henare O’Keefe, interviewed by Ross Webb, 1 September, 2013; George Rarere, interviewed by Ross Webb, 2 September, 2013.


\(^{29}\) Jean Te Huia, interviewed by Ross Webb, 3 September, 2013.

\(^{30}\) George Rarere, interviewed by Ross Webb, 2 September, 2013.
strength. The work was hard, fast and, by its nature, stomach churning.\textsuperscript{31} Unionist and meat worker Frank Barnard called it ‘filthy, soul-destroying, boring and dangerous’.\textsuperscript{32} In addition, freezing workers operated in conditions of either extreme heat or cold. Patrick O’Neill claimed that at Tōmoana, freezer hands worked in ‘corridors filled with ice mist, moving carcasses along overhead rails into the freezers, where the temperature is more than twelve degrees (C) below zero’, while those on the mutton floor worked in ‘hot, steamy, noisy and often stinking’ conditions.\textsuperscript{33} Heat could be an issue for safety on the job as well as hygiene. The introduction of new hygiene regulations in the early 1970s, required windows to be closed and the use of hot water for cleaning and sterilising knives, which ‘turned some workplaces into a sauna in the summer’, the peak of the killing season.\textsuperscript{34} However, under the Meat Inspectors’ Award, MAF workers could not work over a certain temperature, a clause freezing workers took advantage of. ‘Everyone would start calling out to the meat inspectors when it got too hot’, remembered James Robb, ‘they’d say “too hot! too hot!” If it got too hot, work ended for the day’.\textsuperscript{35} George Rarere remembers that ‘you couldn’t work over a certain temperature. Humidity made you sweat and your knives became slippery’.\textsuperscript{36}

Beside the extremes of cold and heat, the environment of the workplace was not particularly pleasant, though some freezing workers expressed a masculine pride in being able to handle what Frank Barnard called a ‘hard, blood and guts industry’.\textsuperscript{37} While Helen Mulrennan remembers that ‘there was blood everywhere, and smell, and it was very noisy’, she ‘never felt squeamish’ about the work. ‘That didn’t worry me. The killing and the animals and the carcasses... It didn’t take long to get used to.’\textsuperscript{38} But not everyone could handle these aspects of the job. Frank Barnard claimed that ‘if you are a softie in the stomach, you don’t go for it’.\textsuperscript{39} Jean Te Huia explained that ‘not everybody could stand the job. Being in an environment when you were standing on the chain day in and day out with dead carcasses going past your face all

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{33}Patrick O’Neill, interviewed in \textit{Socialist Action}, February 9, 1979, p.6.
\bibitem{34}Calder and Tyson, \textit{Meat Acts}, p.73.
\bibitem{35}James Robb, interviewed by Ross Webb, 22 June, 2013
\bibitem{36}George Rarere, interviewed by Ross Webb, 2 September, 2013.
\bibitem{37}\textit{Auckland Star}, 8 October, 1989.
\bibitem{38}Helen Mulrennan, interviewed by Ross Webb, 5 August, 2013.
\bibitem{39}\textit{Auckland Star}, 8 October, 1989.
\end{thebibliography}
day—and the smell sometimes was quite yuck’.40 According to John Leckie, the killing box—where the animals’ throats were cut before entering the chain—represented ‘the sharp end of the freezing works... Over the years, there was many a fulla who would turn up for his first job [on the killing box] and last ‘til morning tea or smoko’.41

The work itself was hard and fast and, for those working on the chain, it required constant coordination between workers. Unlike the days of the ‘solo’ slaughtermen, labourers and the slaughtermen on the beef and mutton chains worked directly alongside one another and with one another. ‘It was a coordinated thing’, Leckie explained. ‘The chain is inexorable and you’ve got to do your job and keep up and follow the sequence’.42 Many of those interviewed remembered the need to keep up with other workers and ‘keep your knife sharp’. ‘For most people it was constant work’, according to James Robb, and especially difficult for new workers:

There was also that pressure of time. You never quite had enough time to do everything [and] if you’re slow, you’re crowding the next person down the chain... so there was pressure... And it’s difficult, especially when you’re learning, because it’s hard to keep your knife sharp.43

As a butcher, Helen Mulrennan remembered that ‘you’d have to desperately try to keep up! And keep your knife sharp’.44 In addition to the speed, the work was also physically demanding. ‘You worked; you really worked’, Maurice Davis emphasised.45 For Peter Gosche, unless you could keep your knife sharp, ‘your arms would ache every morning’. Gosche resented what he saw as the smug assertion that freezing workers were paid well for doing nothing—a familiar motif in the press’s attitude towards the militant workforce. ‘They always said that freezing workers made good money’, Gosche recalled, ‘but you only made good money while you were working, and you had to work bloody hard’. Gosche worked as a ‘pelter’ on the mutton chain, which involved ripping the skin off the carcass (Figure 13). ‘It was pretty heavy work. It’s a wonder we didn’t get RSI. All the tendons in your wrist

40 Jean Te Huia, interviewed by Ross Webb, 3 September, 2013.
42 ibid.
44 Helen Mulrennan, interviewed by Ross Webb, 5 August, 2013.
45 Maurice Davis, interviewed by Ross Webb, 8 May, 2014.
would ache'.46 Bill Hillman recalled that when he started as a learner mutton butcher, he was ‘so absolutely buggered’ at the end of the day that he would sit down in the shower after work because he was too tired to stand.47

But despite the pressure created by the speed of the chain, the noise, the heat or cold and its physically strenuous nature, the work was also monotonous. Jean Te Huia recalled that the work ‘was really dreary’. ‘There was never a change. When you’re on the chain killing thousands of sheep day after day after day, nothing changes... The work on a chain is broken down so much, so you’d do eight a minute and do one particular job eight times a minute’.48 For Kevin Amanaki, the combination of physical and monotonous work on the mutton chain made the job

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48 Jean Te Huia, interviewed by Ross Webb, 3 September, 2013.
difficult. ‘The work was physical and most jobs were of a repetitive nature... the repetitive work structure was the most challenging of all, eight hours a day of repetitive work was mentally a long day’. For Mulrennan, ‘the jobs were quite monotonous, particularly labouring jobs... you’d just stand there all day’.

‘You had to be part of the culture of it’: Workplace Culture
While workers gained little enjoyment or satisfaction from the work itself, ‘the people’, ‘the family atmosphere’ and the ‘camaraderie’—the workplace culture—dominated the oral history narratives and transformed the narratives of freezing workers into positive stories. This workplace culture transformed the monotonous and often unpleasant environment of the workplace into a fun and perhaps more bearable space. Labour historians locate workplace culture in the labour process and the dynamics of the workplace itself. Patricia Cooper claims that work culture was ‘forged in the context of the work process’. Similarly, in his study of Dockworkers, Colin J. Davis suggests that because workers relied on one another in the production process they maintained what he calls ‘a communal sense of work and responsibility to one another’. This was very much the case for freezing workers who worked alongside one another on the chain. At the same time, however, workplace culture drew on local cultures specific to time and place. Workplace culture was not separated from cultures outside the workplace; it spilled over into the community and social life and community and social life in turn reflected and reinforced the workplace culture. For Māori workers, whānau pride and whanaungatanga formed an important aspect of the workplace culture, reinforced by intergenerational employment. For the men, generally speaking, the social life centred around the pub and sports field. The increasing presence of women in the works in the late twentieth century did not challenge or change this working-class masculine subculture, but nor were women entirely excluded from it.

49 Kevin Amanaki, interviewed by Ross Webb, 14 September, 2013.
50 Helen Mulrennan, interviewed by Ross Webb, 5 August, 2013.
In her analysis of the use of nick-names on the waterfront, Anna Green found that nicknames served to both ‘cement bonds of friendship among the men while also being used to put individuals in their place’. In the freezing industry, workplace culture functioned in a similar way, combining a sense of egalitarianism and exclusivity. To become a part of this workforce required a period of sometimes brutal initiation into both the job and the culture of the workplace. Mulrennan recalled that walking onto the mutton slaughterboard for the first time ‘was a pretty overwhelming experience….the place would just go silly when the newbies came on the chain’. Freezing workers banged their knives on the steel ‘which would make an incredible racket—but that was sort of a tradition’. Bruce Stobie recalled that in his first week, ‘I bugged one [carcass] up and [my tutor] said to me: “get your skinny white arse out of here and don’t come back for a week”. They liked to do it right. They were proud of their work and they wanted you to do the same thing’. But as Stevan Eldrid-Grigg points out, to be a ‘good worker’ did not mean working for the employer, but rather ‘being supportive towards other workers’.

Like the initiation process, practical jokes—or ‘shit-stirring’—also served the same purpose. Humour was a ‘commodity highly valued’ in the workplace, and workers often played practical jokes on one another, ‘particularly if you were new’, claimed Mulrennan. Both Jean Te Huia and James Robb remembered workers playing tricks on one another.

Jean Te Huia: One day I walked along the chain…and all along the chain, I was either subjected to bits of fat put on my hat, things tied to my apron strings, whistles and cheers and banging on the steel bars, so as you walked along the chain, this horrific noise accompanied you. And it was because they were bored. It was something to break their boredom and you became the butt of the joke. So you just kind of laughed, tolerated it, and moved along as quickly as you could.

James Robb: There was playful bullying that sometimes got a bit too serious… Cutting off a sheep’s cock and putting it on someone’s hat. I remember seeing a guy almost reduced to tears because people were laughing at him and he had

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54 Green, British Capital, Antipodean Labour, p.77.
57 Eldrid-Grigg, New Zealand Working People, p.203.
59 Jean Te Huia, interviewed by Ross Webb, 3 September, 2013.
As Peter Gosche explained, ‘All the jobs there are really boring, mundane, [and] repetitive. So you had to find other ways of amusing yourself, otherwise it’d drive you nuts’. However, Robb explained that this kind of teasing had its limits. ‘If it got beyond those limits, people would step in and put a stop to it’. Helen Mulrennan recalled that it was ‘nothing sort of nasty; it was always good humoured’. Playing practical jokes functioned as a way of both putting someone in their place as well as initiating new workers to the works itself or a particular department. When Robb decided to train as a ‘legger’, a more skilled job on the chain, he came across what he saw as ‘an elite’ that objected to his training. The group bombarded Robb with water bombs until Robb ‘just said “ah fuck it” and stopped the chain and walked off... I said [to the foreman] “you provide me with a workplace where I don’t get bombarded with water the whole time and I won’t be walking off”. For Helen Mulrennan, the teasing and tricks that workers played on one another was ‘all good natured’, but took some getting used to: ‘As I got up on the chain, I developed a thicker skin’. But once workers ‘earned their stripes’, they became a part of the workplace culture. Workers would ‘cover up [for] their mate who wasn’t on time’, while others would take over while a fellow worker had a ‘quick cigarette’. Indeed, despite the apparent harshness of the initiation rituals, a culture of camaraderie and collectivity pervaded much of the workplace engagements.

Conversation on the job also served to offset the monotony. Kevin Amanaki remembered that ‘[t]he day went a lot quicker when you had someone to talk to with similar stuff in common; a mix of conversation with a good sense of humour helped lessen the impact of the boring, repetitive work’. Helen Mulrennan explained that the best jobs in the works were those that allowed you to talk with fellow workers. ‘Working on the broom was always good because you could wander right up the

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60 James Robb, interviewed by Ross Webb, 22 June, 2013.
64 James Robb, interviewed by Ross Webb, 22 June, 2013.
chain and talk to people and you weren’t tied to the chain’.\(^{68}\) James Robb explained that ‘most jobs you’re working close to somebody and you could just talk all day, if you’re not struggling to keep up with the work’.\(^{69}\) Jean Te Huia remembered how the ‘people made it fun’ and, through conversation and humour, transformed the workplace into spaces of community, social and family life.\(^{70}\)

there were days where it was so boring, day after day, and so you found ways of keeping yourself interested and occupied on the chain. Lots of things were going on, even though it was a freezing worker chain and it was a kill chain, people were selling raffle tickets, people were having love affairs, guys were singing and dancing, people were telling jokes; women were showing off their latest jewellery items or talking about their night out. And so there was a whole range of activities going on at one time to overcome the boredom—because it could get pretty damn boring. People made it fun. On every chain, there was a couple of jokers who kept the whole chain laughing.\(^{71}\)

At the same time, gossip was a large part of the conversation, as Te Huia explained. ‘If you wanted to keep your business to yourself, you told nobody. It spread like wildfire’.\(^{72}\) Thus, through conversation and gossip, as Te Huia’s testimony makes clear, the ‘supposedly separate worlds of work and home life’ intersected, helping to build bonds of solidarity and community between workers.\(^{73}\) As Te Huia recalled, ‘[i]t became a lifestyle thing where people became very personal to you; you knew about people’s lives and their connections with each other’.\(^{74}\)

Singing on the job was recalled with pride by nearly all those workers interviewed, who saw it as an expression of workplace camaraderie. George Rarere recalled that at Christmas time, ‘in a room that has six chains operating with a lot of noise, you’d hear Christmas carols over the top of that and it would send a little chill down your spine because of how wonderful it sounded’.\(^{75}\) Rarere remembered that even the general manager of the works would ‘wander the chain during Christmas just to listen to the singing’.\(^{76}\) O’Keefe led the singing: ‘I’d just break out into song

\(^{68}\) Helen Mulrennan, interviewed by Ross Webb, 5 August, 2013.
\(^{69}\) James Robb, interviewed by Ross Webb, 22 June, 2013.
\(^{70}\) Robertson, ““It was Just a Real Camaraderie Thing””, p.114.
\(^{71}\) Jean Te Huia, interviewed by Ross Webb, 3 September, 2013.
\(^{72}\) ibid.
\(^{73}\) Robertson, ““It was Just a Real Camaraderie Thing””, p.114.
\(^{74}\) Jean Te Huia, interviewed by Ross Webb, 3 September, 2013.
\(^{75}\) George Rarere, interviewed by Ross Webb, 2 September, 2013.
\(^{76}\) ibid.
really and everyone would follow. Just choose a song and everyone would get into it. Soon the whole place would erupt’.\textsuperscript{77} Similarly, Labour Hawaikirangi recalled that there was ‘nothing better to hear than six hundred men singing “Merry Christmas” on Christmas Eve... it’s beautiful and really brings everyone together’. ‘Christmas time was a good time, with everyone singing Christmas Carols on the chain’, explained Maurice Davis. ‘I remember a Rarotongan guy and his brother, they used to use their knives and these big plastic bins and use them as drums; you know, these Cook Island drums. It was magic’.\textsuperscript{78} For Jean Te Huia, the singing was one of her most vivid memories and reflected for her the community and whanaungatanga in the works:

They’d sing Silent Night and it would start right down the sticking pen and it would just come through the whole works and everyone would join in. They’d sing the whole chorus right through. And when they’d finish there would be about 30 seconds silence and then there’d be a huge cheer and they’d bang their knives on the chain... The singing reflected a form of community and whanaungatanga that made you feel as one with everyone. You weren’t a butcher, you weren’t a labourer, you weren’t a company person, not male or female—you were just one.\textsuperscript{79}

Singing, an expression of collectivity and whanaungatanga among workers, was just one of many ways that freezing workers shaped their workplaces, reclaiming a portion of their time from employers, and ‘appropriating workplace spaces for non-work purposes’.\textsuperscript{80}

Smoko and lunch breaks, too, reinforced this workplace culture. Lunches were one hour and provided ‘a chance to get outside’: there was a running group; some played touch rugby, and ‘there was always a group of [workers] laughing and cackling and carrying on’.\textsuperscript{81} Workers at Tömoana, in particular, had the ‘most glorious feeds’, remembered Te Huia. ‘The lunches and food they had was amazing.... They’d have anything and everything. That was the culture of it. Food was part of the culture’.\textsuperscript{82} Unsurprisingly, freezing workers enjoyed and valued what time they had off the job.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{77} Henare O’Keefe, interviewed by Ross Webb, 1 September, 2013.
\item \textsuperscript{78} Maurice Davis, interviewed by Ross Webb, 8 May, 2014.
\item \textsuperscript{79} Jean Te Huia, interviewed by Ross Webb, 3 September, 2013.
\item \textsuperscript{81} Jean Te Huia, interviewed by Ross Webb, 3 September, 2013.
\item \textsuperscript{82} ibid.
\end{itemize}
Te Huia claimed that some tables in the canteen were shared by particular whānau who ‘brought in Primus cookers and stoves and electric frying pans; they had their kitchen set around their tables... Every table with their own whānau had their own cooking facilities. It was a family thing’. At the same time, workers insisted that smoko rooms were for workers only. Helen Mulrennan claimed that ‘the bosses weren’t allowed in the smoko rooms... it was the workers’ smoko rooms’. At Westfield, Chamberhands union delegate Wayne Ripikoi expressed concern at a union meeting about a foreman entering the workers’ smoko rooms. Workers at the meeting passed a resolution ‘to restrict access by foreman to the amenities during smokos and meals’ following ‘the provocative actions of foremen entering as a group at this morning’s smoko’.

Indeed, workplace culture had subversive elements, as freezing workers exerted what Anna Green calls ‘informal control over the work process’; the strong workplace culture and union encouraged and allowed for this kind of control. While management (with foreman as their workplace representatives) decided on the arrangement of the workplace, workers also made informal ‘arrangements’ about who did what work. ‘If you’re on the gut block’, James Robb recalled, ‘you’d do half an hour for each job and then swap around. Those were arrangements that the workers came to themselves’. Moreover, alongside informal upskilling, intergenerational employment, and ‘covering’ for fellow workers, ‘perk culture’ was a common aspect of a job in the freezing works and served two functions. As Green writes, it remained a part of the broader struggle for control over the workplace, while Grace Millar writes that it served as ‘a way of shaping the workplace to the needs of the home’ (discussed below).

Most interviewed recalled the theft of meat. ‘It was just something you could do and get away with, explained James Robb, while Helen Mulrennan recalled that meat could be ‘raffled off at the pub’. That the meat was raffled at the pub suggests that such stealing was open and largely accepted by workers. Indeed, the union, too, made light of ‘perks’. In 1969, the New Zealand

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83 ibid.
84 Helen Mulrennan, interviewed by Ross Webb, 5 August, 2013.
86 Green, British Capital, Antipodean Labour, p.97.
Meat Worker, a union journal, published the following poem entitled ‘Workers Lament’: ‘Mary had a little lamb/She sold it to the works/Where daddy cut it into chops,/And nicked it home as “perks”’.89 For the company, regulating such behaviour proved futile, as Jean Te Huia explained:

…it wasn’t worth saying ‘whose are these?’, because no one would own up anyway... there were times where you turned a blind eye because there was just nothing you could do about that.

Many also remember workers cooking stolen goods in the knife steriliser. Nobody interviewed admitted to cooking in the steriliser, but many remembered that it was a common practice. For Mulrennan ‘[c]ooking in the sterilisers [was] bloody awful. I couldn’t do it. And every now and then the boss would come around and pull the plug on the steriliser’.90 Indeed, limits did exist on this control, however, and workers could be and were fired for breaking particular rules.

‘They were all kind of the same’: Class, Ethnicity and Gender

The multi-ethnic nature of the workplace also significantly shaped the workplace culture. Once again, freezing workers regularly evoked ‘camaraderie’ to describe this culture, though camaraderie came with difference and tensions. Employment in the freezing works brought Māori, Pākehā, and Pacific Islander workers together in one workplace. Henare O’Keefe remembered the diversity of the workforce: ‘you had Tongans, Samoans; you had Greeks, Italians; you had all races, creeds and colours’. Some ethnic groups clustered in certain departments while others scattered throughout the works. John Leckie recalled that at Westfield ‘the core of the rendering department was Pacific Islanders [and] the [union] delegate was a Cook Islander’.91 However, on the chain ‘you’d find everybody there’ and in the stockyards ‘it was a complete mixture’.92 In both Auckland and Hawke’s Bay, Māori made up a large proportion of the workforce, while at Westfield, Pacific Islander workers also made up a significant proportion of the workforce. While, unfortunately, we have no occupational data for the Westfield and Tōmoana plants, Southdown’s ethnic make-up gestures at what the proportion of the workforce may have been, especially for the neighbouring Westfield works. By 1981, 53 per cent of Southdown’s workforces were

90 Helen Mulrennan, interviewed by Ross Webb, 5 August, 2013.
91 Henare O’Keefe, interviewed by Ross Webb, 1 September, 2013.
Māori, while 30.8 per cent Pākehā and 14.5 per cent Pacific Islanders. Peter Gosche claimed there were ‘more brown people than white, all up’ at Westfield. George Rarare estimated that the workforce at Tōmoana was almost half Māori and half Pākehā, with about six to eight per cent Pacific Islander. ‘I’d never worked in a workforce like Tōmoana’, recalled James Robb, ‘where the vast majority were Māori, about two-thirds’. Robb explained that Māori workers made up most of the younger workers: ‘There were a lot of older guys there who’d been there for twenty to thirty or even forty years and the older workers were much higher percentage Pākehā, but the younger workers were almost all Māori’. Moreover, Jean Te Huia recalled that ‘the

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95 George Rarere, interviewed by Ross Webb, 2 September, 2013.
European guys or girls were related [to Māori], through intermarriage’. Indeed, many of those interviewed were of mixed (Māori-Pākehā, Samoan-Pākehā and Niuean-Pākehā) ethnicity.98

The oral narratives of workers suggest that Māori culture had the most dominant influence over workplace culture in the sheds. For Hape Huata, the freezing works was a ‘home away from home’ for iwi everywhere. ‘It had the prestige, the mana, the wairua. It was a way of life. We all looked forward to going to work because it was whānau’.99 And for many Pākehā, the freezing industry was their introduction to Māoridom.100 The 1960 Hunn Report predicted that Māori employment would provide the ‘catalyst agent for dissolving social distinctions’ between Māori and Pākehā.101 However at the freezing works, Māori and Pākehā relationships reflected what Melissa Williams describes as a sort of ‘reverse-integration’. In a case study of the Power Board, Williams found that the company’s ‘dependence on a Māori workforce left it little choice but to accommodate and participate in the cultural customs of its employees’.102 At the Whakatu freezing works in Hawke’s Bay, the company often felt it important to ensure the needs of Māori workforce were met; labour and materials were donated for the upkeep of the local marae.103 But beyond this, it is difficult to gauge company accommodation, resistance, or obliviousness to Māori cultural customs at Tōmoana and Westfield. Rather, this ‘reverse-integration’ occurred on a workplace level on the ground in the day-to-day relationships between Māori and Pākehā and in the ways Māori shaped workplaces, making them ‘culturally familiar spaces of community engagement’.104

97 Jean Te Huia, interviewed by Ross Webb, 3 September, 2013.
99 Huata, quoted in Mana: The Maori News Magazine for All New Zealanders, no.41, August/September, 2001, pp.54-68.
100 James Robb, interviewed by Ross Webb, 22 June, 2013; Jean Te Huia, interviewed by Ross Webb, 3 September, 2013.
102 ibid., p.190.
103 Tainui Stephens (Director), (1991), Black Singlet Legacy, [Documentary]
104 Williams, “Back-home” and Home in the City”, p.181.
Hape Huata claimed that ‘the Pākehās become Māori when they come into the freezing industry’. \textsuperscript{105} There is some truth in this statement, as far as freezing workers themselves recalled. Jean Te Huia recalled that ‘the majority of workers were Māori and there was a huge need to be part of a group so Pākehā adopted their ways, adopted their language, adopted their humour and everyone got on and they were all kind of the same’. Pākehā workers fit in, according to Te Huia, if ‘they played rugby just as well, played guitar just as well, sang just as well, could joke just as well’. \textsuperscript{106} ‘[For Pākehā] it was the introduction to a culture’, claimed Te Huia, ‘because you shared your food, you shared your love of each other, you became whānau, you were part of that family and you were adopted into it’. \textsuperscript{107} For James Robb, a Pākehā worker, Māori ‘were so much a part of it, and predominated in the whole place... You don’t quite come out Māori, but that’s not a bad characterisation... The Māori aspect was special’. \textsuperscript{108} Teina Nanai, a Cook Island worker at Tōmoana, considered himself ‘one of the bros’—by which he meant Māori—‘because I was brought up with the Māori guys at school, at home, at work’. \textsuperscript{109} Frank Barnard claimed that in working alongside other ethnic groups, ‘you learn the other side of life... I know I’m a better man than if I’d just worked in my own honky world’. \textsuperscript{110}

At the same time, many claimed that occupational and class (and, indirectly, gender) solidarity trumped ethnic differences. For George Rarere ethnic differences ‘didn’t matter’ and for Henare O’Keefe, they ‘didn’t exist’ within the confines of the freezing works. \textsuperscript{111} ‘You were Pākehā, I’m Māori.... You were my workmate... You didn’t see colour. You just saw your mate’. \textsuperscript{112} Many claimed that there was no racism within the confines of the workplace and, if there was, it was self-regulated by workers. George Rarere explained that ‘[i]f you [were racist] you were out. The union wouldn’t tolerate that sort of thing... Or if the union didn’t control it, someone would control it. Families would control it and deal to it’. \textsuperscript{113} Jean Te Huia claimed that you

\textsuperscript{105} Quoted in Tainui Stephens (Director), (1991), \textit{Black Singlet Legacy}, [Documentary]
\textsuperscript{106} Jean Te Huia, interviewed by Ross Webb, 3 September, 2013.
\textsuperscript{107} ibid.
\textsuperscript{108} James Robb, interviewed by Ross Webb, 22 June, 2013.
\textsuperscript{109} Teina Nanai, personal communication, 4 July, 2013.
\textsuperscript{111} George Rarere, interviewed by Ross Webb, 2 September, 2013; Henare O’Keefe, interviewed by Ross Webb, 1 September, 2013.
\textsuperscript{112} Henare O’Keefe, interviewed by Ross Webb, 1 September, 2013.
\textsuperscript{113} George Rarere, interviewed by Ross Webb, 2 September, 2013.
‘wouldn’t survive’ in the works if you were racist.\textsuperscript{114} This dissolving of distinctions among workers within the workplace also extended to gangs. O’Keefe and Rarere both remembered that at Tōmoana, gang members from Mongrel Mob and Black Power worked in the freezing works, and ‘even they were united’.\textsuperscript{115} This solidarity remained strictly within the confines of the freezing works, however. ‘It wasn’t until you got out of the freezing works and onto the street that those demarcations would appear’, remembers O’Keefe.\textsuperscript{116} Rarere remembered that gangs at Tōmoana ‘did not dare wear a patch onto the plant. But you’d put it on as soon as you get to the gate. And they did. [But] they respected that rule at work’.\textsuperscript{117} Similarly, Maurice Davis explained that at Westfield, ‘we used to have all the gangs come in. But there was no trouble on site. Their business was their business somewhere else. You do your business down the road, but on site you were there to work’.\textsuperscript{118}

For many, the breakdown of these distinctions and differences in particular, and the camaraderie of the workplace culture in general, originated in the work process itself. For Bill Hillman, ‘You learnt very early that if you stuck together, you’d do better. Even as a team workwise. You soon found out that you couldn’t operate individually’.\textsuperscript{119} ‘I guess it comes down to what you did. You worked alongside each other, relied on the next person on the chain to do their job to make your job easier. So everyone just respected each other in those ways’, remembered Kevin Amanaki.\textsuperscript{120} Similarly, John Leckie claimed that ‘[t]here wasn’t a distinction or a separation. It was partly because you were working alongside and relying on one another’.\textsuperscript{121} O’Keefe claimed that it came down to the fact that ‘we were there to work; help your mate, you help yourself. And you made good money’.\textsuperscript{122} Gosche, too, remembered that ‘everyone got on. Whatever colour you were... you’re all mates’.\textsuperscript{123} In this sense, there are two co-existing and competing narratives in the memories of freezing workers. One the one hand, workers’ recognised differences and understood and

\textsuperscript{114} Jean Te Huia, interviewed by Ross Webb, 3 September, 2013.  
\textsuperscript{115} Henare O’Keefe, interviewed by Ross Webb, 1 September, 2013; George Rarere, interviewed by Ross Webb, 2 September, 2013.  
\textsuperscript{116} Henare O’Keefe, interviewed by Ross Webb, 1 September, 2013; George Rarere, interviewed by Ross Webb, 2 September, 2013.  
\textsuperscript{117} George Rarere, interviewed by Ross Webb, 2 September, 2013.  
\textsuperscript{118} Maurice Davis, interviewed by Ross Webb, 8 May, 2014.  
\textsuperscript{119} Bill Hillman, interviewed by Ross Webb, 20 June, 2014.  
\textsuperscript{120} Kevin Amanaki, interviewed by Ross Webb, 14 September, 2013.  
\textsuperscript{121} John Leckie interviewed by Ross Webb, 1 November, 2013.  
\textsuperscript{122} Henare O’Keefe, interviewed by Ross Webb, 1 September, 2013.  
\textsuperscript{123} Peter Gosche, interviewed by Ross Webb, 24 January, 2014.
emphasises the importance of the various culture, and, in particular, the significant contribution of Māori and Māori culture to the works. But this idea rested alongside a sense that workers ‘were all the same’, ‘all mates’, united by a common work process, occupational solidarity and workplace culture. In short, the common identity of freezing workers based on class and occupation ‘drew on, co-existed with and at time subsumed differences’ of ethnicity and, to a lesser extent, gender.¹²⁴

Indeed, a difference which was not entirely subsumed by occupational solidarity in these descriptions was the gendered identity of workers. The freezing works was conceptualised as a ‘man’s world’, which applies to age as much as gender; hence why Henare O’Keefe ‘went in there a boy and came out a man’.¹²⁵ For women, such as Helen Mulrennan and Jean Te Huia, who entered the works in the 1970s and 1980s in greater numbers than before, the freezing industry workplace was a largely male space. For Mulrennan, the workplace was ‘a very male environment, of course… The whole chain was male until you got to the end [where the tagging was done] and there’d be some women’.¹²⁶ Where women did work on the chain, they were usually concentrated into jobs like ‘tagging’ because, according to Mulrennan, ‘they weren’t knife jobs. They were seen as jobs women could do’ (Workers, as well as management, made decisions about who worked where).¹²⁷ Similarly, Jean Te Huia remembered that at first being taken seriously by her male co-workers was an issue. ‘As a woman, it was difficult at the beginning… because there were guys in there that didn’t want to hear from you; they didn’t want you to say nothing’.¹²⁸ Workers had quite variable memories of how welcoming the workplace could be for women in this period. While the gendered hierarchy in the labour process remained intact by the 1970s, James Robb claimed that the workplace at Tōmoana was not ‘one of those oppressively male-only workplaces’ despite the large proportion of men. “There

¹²⁷ The next chapter will discuss Helen Mulrennan’s fight to train as a butcher at both Tōmoana and Westfield.
¹²⁸ Jean Te Huia, interviewed by Ross Webb, 3 September, 2013.
weren’t pornographic pin-ups on the walls and whistles at the one or two women who ventured into the place'. While Robb suggests that places like that did exist in the 1970s, ‘I don’t think the freezing works were ever like that; at least it wasn’t at Tōmoana’. 129

However, Tracey McIntosh (the child of a freezing worker) clearly remembered the issue of the banning of sexist calendars at Westfield. The display of these calendars was challenged by women in the union, ‘who were few in number’. ‘It was largely the men’, McIntosh claimed, ‘who didn’t support it [and] they didn’t think women should be telling them what to do and felt they [could] put up any bloody calendar they wanted’. McIntosh’s father remained ambivalent on the issue, and refused to say which way he would vote on the issue. He ‘didn’t think it was a major union issue; he maybe thought it was trivialising the main union issues’. Helen Mulrennan claimed that there was sexism in the works, ‘but not sexual harassment’, while Te Huia recalled ‘whistles and cheers’ from male workers when she walked down the chain. But as Mulrennan explained, there ‘were some pretty stroppy women. You weren’t going to mess with some of them’. Whether or not these ‘stroppy women’ maintained separate workplace cultures within the particular departments they worked in is unclear in these oral histories, though likely. Tracey McIntosh remembers visiting Westfield with her father and getting to know the women in the rag room and the canteen. ‘All of those women were really good to me’, McIntosh claimed.

The degree to which women were included in freezing works culture is complex. Women in the 1970s began to challenge their relegation to the less skilled—and therefore lower paying—jobs in the freezing industry, which will be discussed in Chapter Three. This agitation could put them at odds with the prejudices or territorialism of male co-workers. Yet this push towards equity of employment was not a result of women being excluded from workplace culture altogether. Indeed, women’s presence and contributions were implied in the way freezing workers conceived of their workplaces as ‘one big family’. The push towards greater employment equity did not necessarily make workplace culture less masculine, either. Like Hauta’s claim that workplace culture led to Pākehā ‘becoming’ Māori, women may have become ‘one of the boys’, rather than ‘feminising’ workplace culture.

133 Thanks to Cybèle Locke for this suggestion. The workplace culture of female dominated departments in the works is a potential area of further study.
culture. As one woman from the Whakatu freezing works recalled, ‘I was one of the boys, we all were’.135

‘We gravitated to each other’: Community and Social Life

The workplace culture did not begin and end at the shed gates. It extended beyond the freezing works itself, spilling over into the community and social life of workers, while community and social life were, in turn, reflected and reinforced within the workplace. ‘There is tremendous comradeship within the plant’, remembered Hape Huata. ‘But it doesn’t stop there. It goes into the community as well. That’s part of the freezing industry’.136 The first edition of the Meat Workers Journal in 1966 picked up the centrality of work to a workers’ home, community and social life in its defence of the seniority system:

The longer a worker works for an employer, the more closely his life becomes invested in that employment. Where he lives, his friends, his habits, his sleeping and eating times, his entire physical and emotional well-being and other aspects of his family’s life are each greatly influenced by his job.137

As a child of a freezing worker, Tracey McIntosh claimed that the freezing works had a ‘strong culture’ that ‘flowed from the industry into the home and back again, just constantly’.138 McIntosh wrote:

I grew up in a street nearly cut in half by the main trunk railway line, in which nearly all the Maori men (like my Pakeha father) worked at one of the three freezing works in the Otahuhu-Penrose area. Some were seasonal workers rather than ‘permos’, but still whole families had allegiances to particular works... At school many of us exhibited the perks of our fathers jobs. On swimming days I took along my towel with the red and white Westfield insignia, and looked scornfully at those who carried Hellaby or Southdown towels. The works were all dense communities made up of chain workers, tradesmen (such as my father, a mechanic), women in the office and the laundry, bosses in the office and many other people that made up this complex organisation. This community extended far beyond the abattoir walls, reaching out to many parts of South Auckland.139

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136 Quoted in Tainui Stephens (Director), (1991), Black Singlet Legacy, [Documentary]
The freezing works in Auckland and Hawke’s Bay provided a hub for workers, not only as a place of work, but a site of social, community and family life. The communities surrounding ‘the works’ were distinctly working-class; workers shared not only a place of employment and occupation, but also the same social life centred around the pub and sports as well as ties of ethnicity and kinship, home and neighbourhood.

But the freezing worker communities at Westfield and Tōmoana were different: Westfield was an urban works, on Great South Road in the Penrose/Ōtāhuhu industrial area of Auckland while Tōmoana was a semi-rural works with its workforce residing in Hastings, Flaxmere and the surrounding suburbs. Hastings ‘really was a freezing works town’, claimed Mulrennan, who worked at both Tōmoana and Westfield. ‘It’s a smallish town, Hastings, so you had a lot of contact outside of work. And it was the same at Westfield. You’d live in the same community and drink at the same pub’.140 George Rarere remembered that outside the workplace, ‘you’d see people, at the pictures or the supermarket, at the pub. We gravitated to each other’.141 Mulrennan recalled that ‘Flaxmere was the working class suburb of Hastings and it must have been made up of almost entirely of freezing workers’.142 While Westfield workers came from a wider geographical reach in Auckland, Tracey McIntosh remembers that a freezing worker community still existed. ‘It was an all-encompassing thing’, McIntosh remembered. ‘If you grew up in South Auckland... in a working class neighbourhood, there would be few kids at my school that didn’t have some connection, direct or indirect, with the works’.143 McIntosh also claimed that nearly all the men on her street, especially all the Māori men, worked at Westfield and even those who were seasonal workers still lived in the surrounding communities. John Leckie, too, recalled that ‘the workers were generally local, though there were quite a few workers who would commute from faraway places... so we’d have fellas driving thirty, forty minutes into Westfield’.144 A union delegate list from 1987 reveals that delegates resided in the surrounding areas of Glen Innes, Papakura, Otara, Mangere, Ōtāhuhu, and Mt Wellington, with some

140 Helen Mulrennan, interviewed by Ross Webb, 5 August, 2013.
141 George Rarere, interviewed by Ross Webb, 2 September, 2013.
142 Helen Mulrennan, interviewed by Ross Webb, 5 August, 2013.
commuting from Beachlands and Waiuku. For Peter Gosche, the freezing workers ‘kept Ōtāhuhu going. It was the hub of South Auckland when I was a kid’.

For Māori in particular, ‘the works’, as an intergenerational employer, remained central to their conceptions of community and home life. Some of those interviewed expressed an almost tribal affiliation with ‘the works’. For Jean Te Huia, the freezing works was ‘woven into the heart of Māori families’, while Tracey McIntosh has said that the Westfield freezing works ‘is part of my whakapapa’. McIntosh claimed that ‘in the same way I was snobbish about being Tūhoe through my mother, I was also snobbish about being Westfield through my father’. Henare O’Keefe reflected on the importance of the freezing works to the largely Māori and working-class suburb of Flaxmere in Hastings.

It employed most of the people here. It clothed our family, it housed us, it fed us. It furnished us, it educated us. It gave us a sense of value and affirmation and importance. It provided a social life for us here in Flaxmere, and others.

It was ‘vital, absolutely vital’, O’Keefe claimed, ‘as vital as the air that we breathe’. During difficult financial and emotional times, such as when a worker had suffered a death in the family, freezing workers often helped each other, setting up koha funds. Syd Taukamo claimed that ‘if anything happened to a workmate they felt for that person as if it were his brother or sister… if one of your numbers went down, you felt it right where it hurts. And you felt the same way that person felt for his family. George Rarere claims that ‘you looked after each other there… that’s the closeness of the workplace… if you got sick or your family got sick, they’d rally around to support you’. In 1986, for example, Eval Harris, daughter of freezing worker Hemi Harris, needed money for a heart transplant operation in England. Tomoana took up a collection, as George Rarere recalled that ‘she was terminally ill and there was no chance that she could be saved [unless she went to England]. The parents worked at

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148 McIntosh, ‘Living Southside’, p. 91.
149 Dane Giraud, (Director/Writer), (2011) ‘Henare O’Keefe: Te Tuatangata’ [Documentary]
150 ibid.
151 Tainui Stephens (Director), (1991), Black Singlet Legacy, [Documentary]
152 George Rarere, interviewed by Ross Webb, 2 September, 2013.
Tōmoana.... [So] Tōmoana gave her the money’. When Eval Harris eventually passed away, ‘Tōmoana workers contributed to her funeral’.154 Similarly, when Henare O’Keefe’s father passed away in 1976, he remembers that ‘they shut the whole place down and took up a collection’.155

The connections between workplace, home and community were reinforced in a number of ways. Events organised by workers, union, as well as management, drew in families. McIntosh recalled that the Christmas parties for the families were ‘quite major milestones in my growing up’ and ‘highlights of my growing up’ as were the picnics at Point Chevalier or Motuihe Island. ‘There were lot of family activities’, McIntosh recalled, ‘there were races, eggs in spoons; sack races... all that sort of thing. So there were quite a lot of activities that drew family into the works... Huge amounts of people with lots of kids. And everything was free on the day’. Such events were worker led and organised and paid for on a contribution basis—‘which was part of the ethos’.156 George Rarere remembered that during the winter, workers in the freezers ‘managed their proceeds to make sure that every weekend every family in the works had the opportunity to get together as a community and celebrate’.157 The ‘perk culture’ also connected the workplace and home life. ‘The job had its perks’, McIntosh claimed, ‘and that was an expected part of the job... that perk culture even came into the home’. The McIntosh family had a regular ‘perk night’ on Friday nights. ‘Friday was perk night... perk night was our night—family night’, while ‘Thursday was pub night’.158

Indeed, drinking and rugby culture was a central element of the masculine social life of the freezing worker. After working hard all day, freezing workers ‘drank hard’ at night. Maurice Davis claimed that after union meetings, ‘everyone would unfortunately lose their way on their path home’ and end up at the pub.159 In Hastings, the social life ‘centred around the pubs and parties after the pub’, explained James Robb. ‘You could go into any pub in Hastings and there would be

154 George Rarere, interviewed by Ross Webb, 2 September, 2013.
157 George Rarere, interviewed by Ross Webb, 2 September, 2013
159 Maurice Davis, interviewed by Ross Webb, 8 May, 2014.
people you knew there. It was good’.\textsuperscript{160} Tracey McIntosh recalled that ‘there was a big drinking culture within the works... the Criterion pub and other places were important players within the Westfield community. [They] were real Westfield meeting places’.\textsuperscript{161} Similarly, sports played a major part in the social life of the freezing worker. Freezing workers organised departmental rugby league games, while an inter-freezing works tournament brought freezing workers together from across the country. Henare O’Keefe recalled what he called ‘the Olympics for freezing workers’:

\begin{quote}
We’d all go away to the inter-freezing works sports which was a big thing... Freezing workers would all come together once a year for a week: fishing competition, bowling, darts, [rugby] league, tennis, golf—the lot. Each region would have a turn... They would disperse in the morning, then everyone would come together for the rugby... So you’d play your rugby during the day, hit the booze that night, and play again the following day... Those were fantastic days. Some of the best rugby, and most physical rugby I’ve ever seen and played.\textsuperscript{162}
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{160} James Robb, interviewed by Ross Webb, 22 June, 2013.
\textsuperscript{161} Tracey McIntosh, interviewed by Ross Webb, 16 January, 2014.
\textsuperscript{162} Henare O’Keefe, interviewed by Ross Webb, 1 September, 2013.
\end{footnotes}
At Westfield, Peter Gosche and Maurice Davis remember League as an important aspect of freezing worker culture and working class culture in general.163 ‘There was a culture of rugby league’, Davis claimed. ‘Wharfies and freezing workers were League players... League was our game’.164 Indeed, whether or not a union official running for election was a rugby league player was important to many freezing workers, who considered golf the sport of management.165 Thus, between work, home, and the community, freezing workers maintained a strong social life. It was a ‘really good social network’, Rarere explained, ‘everybody knew everybody’.166

This social network, which overlapped with many facets of a workers life, reinforced the sense among many interviewees that the workplace was a ‘second home’ with a ‘family atmosphere’. Henare O’Keefe explained that Tōmoana was ‘a real family’. An absolute total family’; Kevin Amanaki echoed this sentiment: Westfield ‘was like a big family’ and George Rarere explained that Tōmoana ‘became part of my family’.167 For Amanaki, the fact that real families worked alongside one another made for a better workplace culture. ‘Most of the jobs were obtained through family members’, He claimed. ‘The family atmosphere was good; a place where fathers, sons, sisters made up the ranks of the work force’.168 For Te Huia, the workplace culture was an all-encompassing aspect of the job. ‘[T]here was a sense of being a part of that culture’, she claimed. ‘Because it was a culture. You couldn’t go there and be an individual. You had to be part of the culture of it’.169 Tracey McIntosh perhaps summed it up best, suggesting that there was an ‘incredible community, with its own conflicts, its own functions and dysfunction’, while Te Huia explained that the comradeship among the ‘guys and girls’ was ‘something quite special. It kind of held it all together’ and made the workplace a ‘living environment’.170

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164 Maurice Davis, interviewed by Ross Webb, 8 May, 2014.
166 George Rarere, interviewed by Ross Webb, 2 September, 2013
169 Jean Te Huia, interviewed by Ross Webb, 14 September, 2013.
The popular perception of freezing workers as an over-paid and overly-militant workforce ignores or overshadows the close-knit communities and culture that freezing workers sustained in their workplaces and communities. This culture included workers’ pride in their own hard work, loyalty to one another, a sense that the workforce was a family, and a sense of pride in being a freezing worker. In their oral history testimonies, freezing workers were well aware of the negative portrayal of freezing workers as lazy, dissociated from their place of employment, militant and rough. In this sense, the oral histories provide a counter narrative or what Anna Green calls a ‘confrontations with discourses of power’.171

It would perhaps be easy to dismiss such sentiments as merely nostalgic. Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott warn against what they call ‘smokestack nostalgia’. ‘We have to strip industrial work of its broad-shouldered, social-realist patina’, they write, ‘and see it for what it was: tough work that people did because it paid well and it was located in their communities’.172 While the work did indeed pay well, freezing workers expressed no nostalgia about the work. It was ‘filthy, soul-destroying, boring and dangerous’. However, freezing workers spoke about their workplaces as something unique; other jobs did not come close to the freezing works, according to many accounts, and despite the fact that many did not enjoy the work, they kept coming back each season. For Peter Gosche, ‘going back to the freezing works became a bit of a bad habit. I knew the job and I knew the people, so I gravitated back, because of the people’.173 Dismissing such sentiments as nostalgia undermines the agency of workers in shaping and negotiating their own work experiences.174

At its root, workplace culture functioned to make the work enjoyable; it formed community and a sense of identity and camaraderie with fellow workers as well as a sense of pride in the work and control over the job and the workplace. Tracey McIntosh explained that freezing workers ‘had a real autonomy in their

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171 Green, ‘Individual Remembering and „Collective Memory”, p.143.
174 Robertson, ““It was Just a Real Camaraderie Thing””, p.117.
workplace because they had jobs to do and they did them’.\textsuperscript{175} Outside of the work process, workers shaped their workplace to their own needs; this workplace culture operated ‘according to a set of collectively defined norms, values, benefits and obligations’.\textsuperscript{176} For many interviewed, this represented the real ownership or control by workers over their day-to-day working lives.\textsuperscript{177} However, workplace culture was not enough to assert control in the workplace and industry. Workplace culture provided what labour historian Paul Taillon calls the ‘raw material’ for underpinning a strong formal organisation.\textsuperscript{178} Moreover, the social, community and family life that accompanied employment at the freezing works—what Lucy Taksa calls ‘sources of integration’—underpinned struggles in the industrial arenas and the ability of freezing workers to hold out during long strikes and support workers and their families and communities.\textsuperscript{179} The militancy of freezing workers was underpinned and sustained by a strong workplace culture and the sense of control that freezing workers wielded over the workplace was defended fiercely, especially when it came under attack, as we will see in later chapters.

\begin{itemize}
  \item Tracey McIntosh, interviewed by Ross Webb, 16 January, 2014.
  \item Williams, ‘Back-home’ and Home in the City’, p.181.
  \item Taksa, ‘Pumping the Life-Blood’, pp.18, 27.
\end{itemize}
Figure 18, Tomoana Times, March, 1985.

Christmas... The Tomoana Way

Doreen Tipoki and Patricia Hapi (calibrating) enjoy the festive season.

Love and kisses from Benny Keil and Cody Greening.

Senta visits the boys in the Feil-mongery.

Old hands Barney Smiler and Toni Reid say “Mere Christmas”.

Rena Smith (Slaughterfloor) wishes everyone a Merry Xmas.

“Yum yum” says Phillip Heremia in the new Beefside dining room.

Robin Cames (Office) gets a kiss from Santa.

John (Bleep) Smith leads the Boning Room in “Silent Night”.

Niki (Mlpq) Ta Aho and Winnie Henderson — all smiles!

Monica Henderson and Agnes Irwin say it with balloons.

Barry Kelly and Henry Keefe get the carols going.
Chapter 3

Figure 19. Freezing workers at Westfield, early 1970s. Exact Date Unknown. John Leckie Personal Collection. Frank Young, front-left.
Working together side-by-side for the common purpose brings out the innate humanity in people. A family atmosphere develops in some departments. And odd though it may seem this humanity is expressed in the union. Unions also embody such values as loyalty, comradeship, pride and independence from the employer. If unions were simply bargaining agents they would be coldly rational in their affairs. Often they are not, because of the human, emotional element.1

- Bruce Jesson, 1986

In the 1970s, freezing workers emerged as the most militant blue-collar workforce in the country, accounting for around half of working days lost to strikes and stoppages.2 For freezing workers, union militancy and control over the workplace was central to their identity and featured prominently in the oral history narratives. Freezing workers frequently challenged employer’s prerogatives and asserted their own control and autonomy on the job. Issues of heat, speed, unfair dismissals, and safety inspired stop-work meetings and wildcat strikes, while the negotiations around the Award regularly led to protracted strike action. The ‘sources of integration’ between the workplace, union, community and family were key to the ability of freezing workers to hold out for long strikes and ‘take the big hits’.3 As a result, freezing workers won and maintained decent working conditions, pay and a voice within the industry. At the same time, however, the 1970s and 1980s were difficult decades for freezing workers and their unions, operating against the backdrop of high inflation, economic stagnation, and recession caused by the combined impacts of the collapse in export prices, the oil shocks, and Britain’s entry into the E.E.C.4

Union culture, industrial action, and politics in the 1970s and 1980s are the focus of this chapter. Freezing worker militancy and union culture did not emerge simply from an intellectual or ideological perspective. Rather, it made sense to workers in the context of their day-to-day working lives and gave institutional power to their strong workplace culture, a sense of pride in their identity as freezing workers, loyalty to one another, and ownership over the job. Moreover, union culture appealed to and reinforced the adversarial ‘us’ and ‘them’ attitude held by workers towards management. ‘Union culture’ is defined here as the presence of the union in the day-to-day affairs of the workplace; the cultures of solidarity between workers, the assertion of control over the work, and an insistence of their rights in the workplace. Union culture was a culture of resistance and autonomy. But while freezing workers were militant, they were not radical; their union culture reflected a desire for control over the job, fair pay, and reflected comradeship among the mostly male workforce. Union culture found expression in stop-work meetings, wildcat strikes, picket lines and in ‘nerve’ centres or strike committees organised during strikes that aimed to alleviate the impacts of the strike on families and build solidarity within the community. Indeed, like workplace culture, union culture extended beyond the workplace, into the community and family lives of workers. Thus, unions in the freezing industry were not ‘simply bargaining agents’, but rather reflected the ‘human, emotional element’ of unionism. To be sure, the institutional role of the union was central, and is discussed in this chapter, but a focus here on ‘union culture’ gives us a sense of what shaped and sustained unionism at a local level in the workplace, in the pub, on the picket line, in the resource centres and strike committees, in the community and the home, and even on the sports field.

This chapter also traces broader industrial and political developments as they impacted the freezing industry workforce and its unions. In the 1970s and 1980s, the workforce, like much of the country, changed dramatically. Alongside a sustained strike wave on the part of workers, the period witnessed the entry of women into the workplace in unprecedented numbers; the emergence of movements against racial

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6 Len Richardson makes a similar case in relation to mine workers’ unions: Richardson, Coal, Class and Community, p.vii.
and gender discrimination, as well as the modern Māori protest movements. Some issues divided freezing workers, challenging long established workplace cultures and the attitudes of workers. The 1981 Springbok Tour unsettled a strong rugby culture, while workplace feminism and the training of female butchers was viewed by some as a threat to the ‘man’s world’ of both the workplace and the union. The militancy of freezing workers in the 1970s also attracted the attention of left wing organisations such as the Socialist Action League (SAL), who placed its members in the freezing works in a program it called the ‘turn to industry’. Finally, this chapter concludes with a brief account of the 1986 national award dispute which came at the end of a two decade period of change in the freezing industry and signalled at once an expression of freezing worker militancy as well as the beginning of the period that saw the erosion of that militancy in the wake of the deregulation of the industry and the removal of subsidies for farmers.

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The 1970s and 1980s were the most turbulent decades for the union movement in New Zealand. The Arbitration Court, which dominated New Zealand’s industrial relations landscape for much of the twentieth century, faced a major challenge in the late 1960s as economic growth faltered, inflation rose and unemployment grew. The ‘nil’ wage order of 1968, undermined union faith in the Court and led to a considerable increase in ‘second-tier’ or ‘above Award’ bargaining and a dramatic spike in industrial disputes over the next decade. By 1976, strike numbers reached their highest since 1951, only to be exceeded massively in 1986 with ‘the greatest number of working days lost ever’. The strike wave of the 1970s coincided with, and was spurred on by, the end of the post-war boom in the 1970s and the globalisation of the economy in the 1980s, which placed significant pressures on working people

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and trade unions. Indeed, the upturn in militancy among workers, to protect themselves against the erosion of their wages, was an international phenomenon during this period. But despite what Raymond Markey calls ‘substantial continuity’ in the most dispute-prone industries like meat freezing, strikes and stoppages did in fact increase significantly for freezing workers. While meat-freezing accounted for 25 per cent of strikes and stoppages in the 1960s, throughout the 1970s and 1980s it accounted for between 40 and 60 per cent. A 1974 Commission of Inquiry into the industry showed that between 1968 and 1972, freezing workers at the peak of the season represented 2.6 per cent of the workforce, but accounted for almost 50 per cent of all ‘man days’ lost in the country.

The increase in industrial disputes in the meat-freezing industry had less to do with the breakdown in centralised wage-fixing after 1968, and more to do with changes within the industry itself after 1973. Much of the day-to-day conflict in the freezing industry that pervaded union-management relations—such as pay, manning levels, speed of work, health and safety, authority and discipline—occurred against the backdrop of an industry undergoing change. Declining profits as a result of the oil shocks, Britain’s entry in the EEC, collapsing export prices, put pressure of the profitability of the industry. In turn, employers were less likely to provide wage increases, while unions were less likely to accept wage restraint. A 1973 report by the Department of Labour into work stoppages concluded that ‘in meat freezing the pay packet is the subject of much volatile discussion between the parties, and apparently a subject on which neither of the parties is prepared to easily give way to the other’. The introductions of new hygiene regulations led to further conflict as the increasing pressure by freezing workers to improve or maintain conditions and pay conflicted with the meat company’s drive for workplace discipline and restructuring. The delicensing or deregulation of the industry in 1981, discussed in the following chapter, exacerbated and accelerated these tensions.

14 Commission of Inquiry, 1974, p.103.
15 McAloon, Judgements of all Kinds, p.27.
By the late 1970s, disputes in the industry were a prominent feature of the nation’s news. In early 1978, freezing workers and companies were in the midst of a long-standing national award dispute. The *Hawke’s Bay Herald-Tribune* included an editorial entitled: ‘Desperate measures for a desperate situation’. The dispute was evidence to the author that ‘the meat industry is undergoing a period of far-reaching change’. Tim Plummer, the chairman of the Hawke’s Bay Federated Farmers, called for a ‘complete shutdown of the New Zealand freezing works industry while employers, unions, the farmers and the Government have a showdown’. In March, Prime Minister Robert Muldoon entered the negotiations and responded by subsidising the wage settlement, a move that caused outrage among employers, farmers and the press. In June of the same year, one highly publicised protest saw Southland sheep farmers slaughter their stock on the streets of a small town to express their anger at the industry’s tumultuous industrial record. June Slee, sister of the organiser of the protest, claimed that the protest occurred in response to ‘what was likely the most disruptive killing season in the history of the New Zealand freezing industry’. In 1981, West Coast Branch secretary of the MWU, Ken Findley, wrote that ‘the freezing industry is facing radical changes... Hardly a day passes without some aspect of the industry receiving media attention [about] its financial management, mergers of companies, new and costly hygiene requirements, [and] marketing problems’. Indeed, for all interested parties—from the state, employers, and farmers, to unions and freezing workers—a sense of crisis pervaded discussions about the fate of the industry.

‘Absolutely Staunch’: Union Culture
A number of key factors underpinned freezing worker militancy in the 1970s: their strategic position within the country’s largest export sector, the nature of the work itself, the long history of union activism alongside a strong workplace culture and an impressive structure of shed union leadership and department delegates. Under the Arbitration system, unions often had little incentive to develop activism within a

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18 Ibid.
workplace. However, even during the ‘classic period’ of the centralised arbitration system between the late 1930s to the late 1960s, freezing workers remained militant and bargained aggressively on the job. In this way, freezing workers present an example of what Pat Walsh calls the ‘alternative model’ to arbitration unions. The ‘alternative model’ or ‘anti-arbitration’ union ‘modified their posture towards arbitration in line with their ability to extract gains through direct bargaining outside the formal system’. This model relied on both the strategic location of workers in the economy as well as membership solidarity and loyalty. In their organisation, such unions maintained well-developed structures of regional officials and site delegates which ensured ‘the effective expression of workplace views and offered opportunities for membership participation in the union’. Freezing workers union organisation provides an illustration of this kind of model. The entire union hierarchy, from the FWU president to delegates, were subject to election by the rank-and-file. At the top of the union hierarchy were the President, Secretary and Assistant Secretary of the Auckland and Tōmoana Freezing Workers Union (FWU). For much of the period under study, Frank Barnard remained President of FWU, with Trevor Kelly as Secretary and Ross Evans serving as Assistant Secretary. At the shed level, the shed president and shed secretary, both of whom were elected from and by the rank-and-file, formed the next layer of the union hierarchy. As John Leckie explained, ‘the two union officials were unionists and freezing workers just like the rest of them’. Bill Hillman remained Westfield’s shed president throughout the 1970s and 1980s, while John Leckie served as secretary from 1983 to 1988. Meanwhile, at Tōmoana, Pat Weir served as President and Bruce Stobie as Secretary.

Departmental delegates formed the bottom tier of the union structure. In the workplace, delegates served as the ‘first port of call’ for the rank-and-file. The NZ Meat Worker magazine claimed that the delegate ‘belongs to a class that is dedicated

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25 ibid., p.60
28 ibid.
to improving the standard of living of his fellow man. He is the UNION ON THE JOB.29 ‘The general instruction to the rank-and-file’, Leckie explained, ‘was don’t go anywhere on your own if there is an issue, make sure you’ve got your delegate’. Over half of those interviewed worked as delegates in their department at one stage or another in their career as freezing workers. Bill Hillman became a delegate for the mutton butchers in the late 1960s; his decision to stand arose because of his frustrations with the seniority system and, in particular, the issue of departmental seniority.30 Peter Gosche’s decision to work as a delegate arose because of what he saw as racism in the organisation of work in the ‘yard gang’. Gosche explained: ‘There was this white guy, guess he was the boss. He had a hierarchical structure of Europeans, Maori at the next level, and Islanders were at the bottom’. Gosche ran for, and won, the position of delegate for the yard gang in order to ‘fix that up’. ‘I’m part Samoan so I used to stick up for the Tongans and Samoans and all that. We were down at the bottom and I didn’t like that’.31 While the union officialdom (the president, secretary and sub-secretary) were largely Pākehā, a large proportion of delegates were Māori and Pacific Islander. For James Robb, what made the union unique was the presence of Māori, ‘not at the very top, but more the rank-and-file leadership, and the delegates especially’.32 A ‘Board of Control’, made up of delegates and chaired by the shed President, met regularly to discuss local matters relevant to the shed and to the departments.

Outside of the union officialdom, freezing workers built strong union cultures that reinforced union pride and camaraderie on the job. As discussed in the previous chapter, the nature of the work significantly shaped this culture. ‘You learnt very early’ Bill Hillman claimed, ‘that if you stuck together, you’d do better’—both on the job as a work team as well as in the union.33 For Helen Mulrennan, the freezing works was unique in this way camaraderie and pride underpinned a sense of autonomy. ‘You felt in the freezing works, more than anywhere else, that you owned the job and it was the workers’ jobs and that was part of the pride as well’.34 O’Keefe

34 Helen Mulrennan, interviewed by Ross Webb, 5 August, 2013.
recalled his pride in being a ‘staunch’ union member and the hostility towards management that came with this pride:

I was a staunch union person. Absolutely staunch. Totally for the people. Nothing else mattered as far as I was concerned. If it meant striking, then so be it..... We were very sceptical and suspicious of management. I really was. I was more like “one out, all out”, you know, stuff them, don’t take any crap. You wouldn’t let them get away with anything.35

When freezing workers themselves were promoted to management positions, there was a sense that they had ‘swapped sides’, a process Joseph A. McCartin calls ‘social distancing’ between workers, that sometimes entailed a loss of camaraderie.36 ‘They were still your mate, but not your mate, you know what I mean?’ claimed O’Keefe. Indeed, union officials or delegates thought to be siding with management or compromising were ‘like the meat in the sandwich. Sometimes you thought, “bloody traitors, siding with management!”’.37

Indeed, there was, according to Tracey McIntosh, a determination to ‘stay a worker’ and with that a whole language around management as the ‘white coats’, ‘the bosses’ ‘the lackeys’ as well as ‘not so flattering’ discussions about the Vestey family.38 Jean Te Huia, a meat grader and therefore a ‘company person’, recalled that workers were ‘very secretive’ when it came to union affairs. ‘Even my friends, who I worked alongside on the chain, wouldn’t talk about their meetings. As company, we were not told anything’.39 For example, workers walked off the job without explanation. ‘You would be standing there one minute with the chain working away, and next minute, chain would stop and everyone would walk off. And you would say “what’s going on?” and you would be the last to know. They’d say “we had a meeting and we’re putting down our knives and walking off”’. For Te Huia, this demonstrated that ‘everyone was very loyal to the union, all the labourers and the women beside me’.40 Similarly, freezing workers refused to work alongside ‘scab’ labour. In a 1977

39 Jean Te Huia, interviewed by Ross Webb, 3 September, 2013.
40 ibid.
stop-work meeting, Westfield beef workers passed a resolution in which they called themselves ‘loyal trade unionists’ who would not ‘work behind non-union labour’.41

The control that workers held over the workplace, including the intergenerational employment, informal upskilling and the workplace culture (discussed in the previous chapter), was reinforced by union control on the job. James Robb remembered that ‘there was an extraordinary degree of union control and pride in that control’.42 ‘The unions, I believe, ran the freezing works’, claimed Jean Te Huia.43 For Mulrennan, while all unions were active in the 1970s, ‘it was sort of different’ at the freezing works. ‘You really did feel like you had some power as a union... The union was there. It was present’, she explained.44 Leckie, too, recalled that the union ‘was not something that was remote’. Rather, the relevance of the union was ‘on a daily basis’.

It wasn’t just a matter of ‘here’s the new Award, here’s the new conditions, this has been organised for us’... The role of the union was much more hands on in terms of responding, and being expected to respond, to the membership and their issues as they arose.45

The union structure described above meant that the union was able to maintain that presence. Indeed, for the rank-and-file workers, the role of the delegate, in particular, was crucial; delegates ‘policed’ control over the job.46 The work day would start with the foreman walking down the chain, ‘[b]ut the union delegate would be walking with them all the way’, claimed Mulrennan, suggesting something of the union-management workplace power dynamic.47 Peter Gosche claimed that if ‘things weren’t right, you’d grab your delegate, [and] stop the job’.48 For example, workers often counted the speed of the chain and ‘if it was too fast, they’d notify the union and they could stop the chain’.49 Similarly, one of the key responsibilities of the delegate within the departments was to police seniority at the beginning and end of each season. As a seasonal stockyard worker in the late 1970s, Leckie found that his

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41 Auckland and Tōmoana Freezing Workers’ Union, Work Meeting Minutes, p.40. Exact date not provided.
43 Jean Te Huia, interviewed by Ross Webb, 3 September, 2013.
44 Helen Mulrennan, interviewed by Ross Webb, 5 August, 2013.
49 Jean Te Huia, interviewed by Ross Webb, 3 September, 2013.
name was not on the list at the beginning of the new season: ‘so that was straight on to the union, of course, and that oversight was rectified’. But like workplace culture, union culture also required initiation and new workers often needed a ‘tune up’ on union rules within the workplace. For example, as Leckie explained, new workers in the stockyards needed reminding that if ‘something breaks, you don’t pick up a hammer and fix it. That’s the carpenters’ job’.

‘Works meetings’ or stop-work meetings brought all levels of the union hierarchy together. Union meetings were a space for union officials to inform the rank-and-file about the progress or lack of progress on Award negotiations, for the workforce to discuss workplace issues and initiate ‘homers’ (discussed below). Meetings were also largely democratic and provided room for debates on issues. At Westfield, ‘they’d go for hours and hours’, Helen Mulrennan explained, ‘and [were] quite democratic. I’d never experienced that before – people talking at union meetings’. Kevin Amanaki, who worked alongside his father at the works, recalled his father speaking up at meetings: ‘I had much respect for my Dad and his seniority in the works. He would stand up at the meetings and share his thoughts about the disputes’. A worker at the Whakatu plant remembered the inclusion that the meetings fostered:

What I liked about working at the Works was that it gave you the chance to be part of the whole scene, in the union, in the meetings. No matter who you were you were allowed to get up and voice your opinion – silly or whatever, but you still had the chance to do it aye and that’s what I liked doing.

Meetings were also educational and, as some recalled, entertaining. ‘They were always sort of fun’, claimed Robb, ‘even when they were discussing serious issues. People were kind of witty when they spoke’. Similarly, Maurice Davis claimed that the meetings were ‘amazing in terms of personalities’. O’Keefe claimed that ‘you’ve never been in a meeting until you’ve been in a meeting with two-thousand people and unionists. By golly, as a 17 or 18 year old, it was quite an education. I learnt a hell

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51 ibid.
52 Helen Mulrennan, interviewed by Ross Webb, 5 August, 2013.
55 James Robb, interviewed by Ross Webb, 22 June, 2013
56 Maurice Davis, interviewed by Ross Webb, 8 May, 2014.
of a lot’. While in other industries, such as the waterfront, stop-work meetings were permitted under the terms of the Award, in the freezing works no such provision existed. Thus, the stop-work meeting was one of a number of examples, where freezing workers exercised informal control and relied on the membership solidarity to maintain and enforce that control.

Flexing union muscle took many forms: over-time bans, load-out bans, go-slowos, stop-work meetings, and strikes. In late 1976, freezing workers across the country initiated a ‘load-out ban’ in support of their claim for a travelling allowance for all members of the industry. However, these kinds of actions occurred largely on a shed level. When Peter Gosche worked in the freezers, he and other workers adopted a go-slow to ‘get results’. ‘Second-tier’ bargaining also played a role in industrial action at a local, shed level and was far more relevant to the rank-and-file than national Award negotiations. In 1979, industrial relations scholar Don J. Turkington wrote that he was ‘amazed at just how peripheral the Award is in the day-to-day industrial relations of the industry’; it simply provided the ‘foundation’. Similarly, Peter Gosche recalled that ‘the union rank-and-file was pretty divorced from the Award talks’. Indeed, the Award was the ‘minimum document’, according to Leckie, ‘and then if you could negotiate on your shed, you were free to negotiate anything below or above’ the award rates and conditions. For example, workers in the stockyards negotiated for ‘rain money rates’ because their work was open to the weather. In the summer, too, stockyards workers negotiated shorts as part of the uniform, because the regular uniform was heavy denim. Workers negotiated walking time for some areas of the works that were far away from the smoko rooms which

57 Henare O’Keefe, interviewed by Ross Webb, 1 September, 2013.
meant less time for smoko. ‘It sounds trivial’, Leckie explained, ‘but it’s not when you’re working in those conditions day in and day out’.  

But the most common form of strike action at a shed level was the ‘homer’, a one-day wildcat strike or protest stoppage, and a prominent feature of the oral history narratives. Mulrennan remembered the ‘homers’ clearly. ‘That was unique to the freezing works’, she claimed. ‘It was sort of more wildcat. It was an excuse to say “fuck you” and walk out’.  

Some workers remember the ‘homers’ starting over seemingly trivial issues. Henare O’Keefe recalled that ‘homers’ were ‘over stupid things... we’d get to work and you get issued with your gear and there was no towel... [We would ask:] “Where’s our towel?” So we’d go home’. Indeed, the 1974 Commission of Inquiry into the Meat Industry claimed that these stoppages were initiated over ‘incredibly frivolous, trivial and apparently insignificant’ causes.  

In some cases, the ‘homer’ functioned as a release from the monotony of the work. Bill Hillman claimed that ‘in the height of the season you had four chains going, you had fifty-eight mutton butchers on it and about forty labourers. And the noise. And the heat. And the boys would get frustrated with it and at 2 o’clock, bang, that’s it for the day. They wanted a release’.  

Peter Gosche remembered that ‘the best thing you could hear was “homer!”’. Moreover, many workers used the ‘homer’ to extend their leisure time. Gosche and others would go to Mt Richmond Park and play a game of League before going to the pub, while O’Keefe recalled that ‘we didn’t really go home’.

But workers also walked off the job for political and sentimental reasons or expressions of trade union solidarity (Figure 19). When Bob Marley died in 1981, Hawke’s Bay freezing works ‘came to a virtual standstill’ as hundreds of Māori workers ‘stayed home to mourn their hero’, while in 1984, Westfield workers stopped work at midday ‘as a mark of respect to the memory of Ernie Abbott’, killed in the

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65 ibid.  
71 ibid; Henare O’Keefe, interviewed by Ross Webb, 1 September, 2013.
Wellington Trades Hall bombing. Helen Mulrennan remembered that at the neighbouring plant Whakatu, workers walked off the job in a wildcat strike after a foreman called a Māori worker a ‘black bastard’. Similarly, workers at Westfield walked off the job after rat-chewed meat was sent to the Pacific Islands from the freezers. ‘That was a show of solidarity’, claimed Mulrennan, ‘[because] there were a lot of Pacific Islanders working at Westfield’. ‘Homers’ were also used to reinforce union rules within the workplace as well as enforce safety. In March 1979, Tōmoana workers walked off the job after the company used a foreman to do a freezing workers’ job in the stockyards; something the union considered as ‘non-union labour’. In November of the same year, Tōmoana workers walked off the job after it

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74 Helen Mulrennan, interviewed by Ross Webb, 5 August, 2013.
75 Stockyard workers had also recently had their over-time cut back. *Socialist Action*, March 23, 1979.
was revealed that company had used mutton slaughterboard labourers to do a job normally done by the freezing hands.\footnote[76]{Socialist Action, November 16, 1979.}

The ‘homer’ was usually preceded by a ‘stop work’ meeting, called by a particular department, where the works as a whole decided whether or not to go home for the day and support the protesting department or to return to work.\footnote[77]{Don James Turkington, ‘The Significant Factors in Industrial Conflict, with Special Reference to Three New Zealand Industries’, PhD Dissertation, Victoria University Wellington, 1975, p.295.} Despite this, ‘homers’ were not always unanimously endorsed. A 1974 Commission on Inquiry into the Industry suggested that ‘homers’ occurred ‘without any consideration of the effects on “follow on” departments and other workers’.\footnote[78]{Commission of Inquiry into the Meat Industry, Wellington, 1974, p.103.} Indeed, the nature of the work process meant that if one section of the works walked off, and the ‘homer’ was endorsed by the rest of the workforce, the follow on departments would have to leave the job too, a fact that caused resentment between some departments. As Bruce Stobie recalled, ‘there were guys who were my mates who I worked on the chain with [who] didn’t want to go out’. But despite reluctance of some workers, the principle of ‘one out, all out’ was important, as Stobie explained. ‘Some of those [wildcats] were reckless... but I couldn’t let a group get singled out. It had to be all or nothing’.\footnote[79]{Bruce Stobie, interviewed by Ross Webb, 18 July, 2014.}

Indeed, ‘homers’ also caused conflict between rank-and-file and the union officialdom. The 1974 Commission claimed that many of these types of stoppages occurred ‘without reference to the union officials’, while in 1978, the Minister of Labour, J.B Gordon, claimed it was a ‘matter of concern that a union official who has cautioned his men on an issue of strike action, can be and has been overruled’.\footnote[80]{Commission of Inquiry into the Meat Industry, Wellington, 1974, p.103; ‘Industrial Relations in the Freezing Industry — Panel Discussion’, 30\textsuperscript{th} Ruakura Farmers Conference, 1978.} Bill Hillman claimed that Westfield was lucky that the ‘Union had a hold. Otherwise I think the boys would have liked to go every day’.\footnote[81]{Bill Hillman, interviewed by Ross Webb, 20 June, 2014.} According to Mulrennan, ‘disciplined unionists’ like the butcher delegate at Tōmoana, Major Pineaha, ‘was very clear that you go out over something worthwhile. You did it properly’.\footnote[82]{Helen Mulrennan, interviewed by Ross Webb, 5 August, 2013.} Hillman and Stobie, both union officials, expressed similar attitudes. Westfield Shed
Secretary John Leckie, on the other hand, saw the homer as ‘assertion by workers of their autonomy and independence from the will of the company’ and saw it as a pragmatic alternative to long strike action.83 While management resented the ‘homer’, Leckie explained, ‘the alternative was going out and not coming back until the issue was resolved’.84 The attitude of management was ‘oh well, we’ve lost production for the rest of the day, but least they’ll all be back at work tomorrow’. For the Union, on the other hand, ‘it was better than having a full blown dispute... a full on confrontation’. Instead, it was a way of letting management know that ‘if you don’t address this issue—and on the face of it you might think it minor—it’s the cost of fixing the problem to the loss of production for the day’.85 But while ‘homers’ served as a sort of ‘safety valve’ for both the union and management, wildcat stoppages in the freezing industry still garnered the attention of the Government and the fury of farmers and the press. The employer’s tolerance for the ‘homer’ also had its limits.

In 1970, for example, Department of Labour proposed a meeting of representatives from unions, the freezing industry and Federated Farmers. As a result, the executive of the Auckland Union agreed to give both farmers and the company two-days’ notice in the case of a strike. In the event of a ‘protest stoppage’, Frank Barnard claimed that ‘the stock already killed would be taken through the complete process and be left ready for shipment’ with the exception applied to cases of safety concerns or unjust dismissals.86 In 1976, the Government introduced the Industrial Relations Amendment (No. 3) Bill, which declared the freezing industry an ‘essential industry’ and required fourteen day’s notice in the case of strikes and lock-outs as well as fines for not killing stock before going out.87 In 1977, Southdown workers walked off the job ‘unsupported’ by the Union officialdom, in protest at the refusal of the company to pay the legal fees and costs for a worker found not-guilty of stealing meat.88 In 1978, Frank Barnard signed a similar agreement, promising 3 days’ notice of strike action.89 Three months later, workers at Westfield ignored such legislation after a police search of a worker’s car outside the works for stolen meat. At

85 ibid.
87 Calder and Tyson, Meat Acts, p.75.
88 New Zealand Herald, August 30, 1977.
89 Socialist Action, December 1978.
a stop-work meeting called immediately after the unsuccessful search, workers shouted ‘homer!’ and workers ‘walked off the job to loud applause’.  

Rank-and-file militancy was central, then, to union culture. But while freezing workers never fought to oust union officials, rank-and-file freezing workers very occasionally called stop-work meetings and initiated homers to keep the union officialdom in line. In 1983, for example, mutton butchers at Westfield called a meeting with concerns about the lack of consultation by the FWU officials about a new technology agreement; the butchers called for an ‘injunction to forestall the registration of the New Technology Agreement, ok’d by the Executive, until it was fully explained to the rank and file’. Despite a few examples like this, the stereotype of a union officialdom out of step with the rank-and-file did not generally apply to the freezing works, where many of those interviewed expressed a sense of respect for officials, especially shed presidents and secretaries, who were elected from the workforce. Indeed, when rank-and-file freezing workers encountered union officialdom less responsive to the needs of its members in off season jobs, they took with them a model from the freezing works. As Ryan Bodman demonstrates, a small group of freezing workers came to work at Tip-Top during the 1974 meat industry off-season and began bypassing union officials, taking workplace grievances directly to management and calling stop-work meetings without input from the union secretary. Yet, this protest culture remained largely confined to industrial and workplace issues. External political currents that swept through the industry brought with it a more complex and varied response from workers.

Politics
Industrial volatility in the freezing industry occurred within the context of a rapidly changing social and political landscape. In 1978, when the Ngāti Whātau o Ōrākei protestors were evicted from Bastion Point/Takaparawhau in Auckland,

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93 Ryan Bodman, ‘“The Public Have Had a Gutsful and So Have We”: The Alienation of Organised Labour in New Zealand, 1968–1984’, MA, University of Auckland, 2013, pp.44.
Wellington freezing workers led by Ben Mathews walked off the job in protest. In the same year, two women at the Fielding freezing works took on both the company and the union in the fight to be trained as butchers, a job previously reserved for men. Māori protest, the anti-apartheid movement and feminism swept through workplaces and unions alike. According to Raymond Markey, social change ‘created new political issues and movements which intersected with trade union concerns’. Evan S. Te Ahu Poata-Smith points out that the increase in strike activity in the decades after the late 1960s ‘had a profound influence in terms of the political education of many Maori workers involved in the struggle for better wages and conditions. Prominent Māori activist Syd Jackson, for example, had his union politics ‘forged in the Tōmoana and Whakatu freezing works where he worked alongside his family during the school holidays’, writes Cybèle Locke. Historians have analysed the involvement of trade unions in the broader political movements and issues of the period. However, these studies have neglected how these issues played out in local union affairs or in the workplace itself. The Māori protest movement, the 1981 anti-Apartheid movement, and the movement for gender equality in the workplace are cases in point.

At the same time, the rise of workplace militancy in the 1970s attracted the attention of left wing organisations and political parties, such as the Socialist Action League (SAL), who placed its members—among them, James Robb and Helen Mulrennan—in major industries as part of a conscious and organised effort to build working-class support for the party. It was part of what the SAL called the ‘turn to industry’: a shift in organising from university campuses to industrial workplaces. SAL member, James Robb explained that the organisation ‘recognised that there was a real ferment amongst industrial workers, and we needed to be part of it’. In 1976, the SAL National Convention decided that: ‘We must make the industrial workers

94 Locke, Workers in the Margins, p.48.
95 ibid, p.66.
98 Locke, Workers in the Margins, p.129.
100 James Robb, interviewed by Ross Webb, 22 June, 2013.
our milieu... We must make their factories, their unions and their communities our base of operations’.\(^{101}\) Tōmoana and Westfield remained a key ‘base of operations’ in the 1970s and 1980s and both Robb and Mulrennan worked at both sheds. Throughout this period, SAL’s paper, *Socialist Action*, began extensive coverage of industrial relations in the freezing works. Regular columns entitled ‘Meat Worker Notes’ or subsequently ‘From the Shed’ written by Robb, Mulrennan and others appeared regularly, recounting events at a local workplace level.

Once established in the works, SAL members began distributing papers at the gates, at lunch breaks and in the pubs in the evening in an effort to form a collaborative relationship with the workforce and the union around political campaigns. Mulrennan claimed that the SAL ‘thought we’d get a good response; we’d be workers alongside workers and we’d be active unionists’.\(^{102}\) But in bringing political campaigns into the workplace, SAL did not always find a receptive audience, as SAL member James Robb recalled. ‘We sold our paper around the canteen and at the gate, and so everyone knew where we stood on things. Some workers agreed with us, a small number joined our organisation... There were some who disagreed with us, some who hated us passionately, and they let us know too’.\(^{103}\) Henare O’Keefe claimed that himself and others ‘used to give them hell. They would say “power to the people” and all that. We used to give them a hard time. They were different, that’s for sure.... But they were good people, great people’.\(^{104}\) Interaction with the union officialdom garnered a divided response. While some had a ‘good, collaborative’ relationship with members of the SAL, others were ‘guarded’ or even ‘openly hostile’ to the movement, while SAL often disregarded union officials as a hindrance to rank-and-file militancy.\(^{105}\)

When it came to political issues, rank-and-file responses were often more complex and varied than the official Union position as well as the expectations of the SAL. At Westfield, workers were ‘all solid on Bastion Point’, according to Bill Hillman. ‘There was no action, but individual support... We used to have members


\(^{102}\) Helen Mulrennan, interviewed by Ross Webb, 5 August, 2013.

\(^{103}\) James Robb, interviewed by Ross Webb, 22 June, 2013.

\(^{104}\) Henare O’Keefe, interviewed by Ross Webb, 1 September, 2013.

from the offal floor, the chambers, boning’ going up to the site. Helen Mulrennan claimed that while there was no strike action in Auckland, there were support committees, and ‘workers would go up there on weekends’. For example, John Leckie, a stockyard worker at the time, was involved in the final days of the Bastion Point/Takaparawhau occupation and called in sick to work on 25 May 1978, the day of the eviction. Following his release from the Auckland Central prison the following day, Leckie returned to work in the stockyards, gashed his leg while working on the ramps and had a couple of days off work. When he returned, Leckie asked the foreman to sign his Accident Compensation Corporation (ACC) form. “The foreman said to me: “you were up at Bastion Point the other day weren’t you?” and I said “yeah”. And he said, “Well, I’m not gonna fucking sign your form””. Eventually, however, Leckie ‘brought other council to bare and the form was signed’. At Tōmoana, on the other hand, protest and involvement was less pronounced. As James Robb recalled, ‘there wasn’t an awful lot of direct participation in these protest actions; it was more just kind of people expressing sympathies for struggles that were going on’. But while Hawke’s Bay was not a centre of the land occupations and protests, workers at Tōmoana ‘still took a close interest’. Furthermore, Robb recalled that some on the chain ‘were just ordinary workers’ at work, but after they had changed out of their freezing works whites they were ‘people of quite high mana in Māori communities and they would be leading delegations to Government’.

But even if freezing workers and their unions did not actively take part in political movements, political debate made its way into the workplaces, union meetings, pubs and homes of workers. The 1981 Springbok Tour marked the high point of tension over sporting contacts with apartheid South Africa; the protests ‘evoked bitter battle lines not just between protestors and police’ but also within families and workplaces, where ‘intense arguments flared and tensions strained within workplaces and between friends and among families’. When the 1981 Springbok tour came to Hastings, the freezing works were as divided as the rest of the country, according to Mulrennan. ‘Quite a few workers went on the protest, and

quite a few went to the game. ... [but] a lot of people got won over as the discussions went on, because [apartheid] was a real discussion point'.\footnote{Helen Mulrennan, interviewed by Ross Webb, 5 August, 2013.} SAL organised talks in various work sites about the tour. In 1980, Sam Ramsamay, anti-apartheid activist spoke at Westfield, while in 1981, exiled Black South African trade unionist, Andrew Molotsane, gave a talk at Tōmoana to an audience of freezing workers during their lunch break.\footnote{Socialist Action, June 12, 1981, p.4.} According to Socialist Action, the crowd of freezing workers at Westfield was made up of both ‘keen rugby fans’ and others wearing “Stop the Tour, ‘81” badges.\footnote{ibid.} Indeed, O’Keefe remembered that the springbok tour ‘was a talking point’.\footnote{ibid.} O’Keefe went to the game, ‘when the Maori All Blacks played the Springboks’ and saw the protestors with ‘their helmets on and the barbed wire and all that carry on. And I was thinking... bloody hell, it’s just a game’.\footnote{Henare O’Keefe, interviewed by Ross Webb, 1 September, 2013.} For O’Keefe and others, the protest against the tour went against some of the freezing workers’ ‘stoic beliefs’ as well as the tradition of rugby culture in the works. ‘We had our stoic beliefs, you know. But we were all anti-racism, that’s for sure... So we didn’t agree with [apartheid] at all. But we also agreed that rugby’s rugby, you know... our views, if I recall, were simple’.\footnote{ibid.}

These tensions spilled over into the workplace. O’Keefe recalled that ‘there were some on the chain that said ‘bugger them. [The Springboks] shouldn’t be here’.\footnote{ibid.} Similarly, Jean Te Huia remembered that the division caused by the Springbok Tour ‘was quite nasty’ and on the chain ‘fights broke out because people were for or against’.\footnote{Jean Te Huia, interviewed by Ross Webb, 3 September, 2013.} Following the announcement of the cancellation of the Hamilton game after protestors blockaded the field, James Robb stopped the chain, put his fist in the air and ‘the place went beserk’.\footnote{Helen Mulrennan, interviewed by Ross Webb, 5 August, 2013.} While O’Keefe, Te Huia and Mulrennan remembered the divisions the tour caused at Tōmoana, George Rarere recalled a general unanimity on the issue. ‘Tōmoana freezing works was pro-rugby’, he claimed. ‘The Springboks didn’t affect the works at all. There were no one day
wildcat strikes. [It was] because we had a lot of Hawke’s Bay players at Tōmoana’. 120

At Westfield, Leckie recalls that ‘there was a really strong rugby culture in the freezing works and a really strong League culture, in particular’. Moreover, Leckie and Bill Hillman, president of the Westfield Union shed and Māori, ‘agreed to disagree’ on the matter of the tour. 121 ‘My view was that rugby and politics were separate’, Hillman explained. ‘John’s views were: “oppose it at all costs”. And a few of the delegates were the same... there was no action around the tour, but there was debate’. 122 Thus, while the official position of the union movement was anti-tour, much of the rank-and-file were, in fact, pro-tour. 123

If the Springbok Tour unsettled the rugby culture, some workers viewed the training of women as butchers as a threat to the ‘man’s world’ in the works and the union. Despite the fact that women always made up a small minority in the workplace, the unions were progressive in its attitudes towards equal pay. 124 By 1973, equal pay rates for most departments were introduced into the Award. 125 But as women entered the freezing works in greater numbers in the 1970s, the fight for equal access to jobs became central. 126 Before working at Tōmoana, Helen Mulrennan was among the first female bus drivers in Wellington, her first base of operation in the SAL’s ‘turn to industry’, where women placed stickers on their lockers that read ‘I’M MAN ENOUGH’, after being told that it was a ‘man’s job’. 127 Similar attitudes were dominant in the freezing works, by the company, workforce and even the union. Frank Barnard, president of the FWU said, ‘We feel strongly that there is a definite place in the industry for women... we don’t think that handling sheep guts is a job for women’. 128 Indeed, this skill differentiation based on gender—defining ‘men’s jobs’ and ‘women’s jobs’—has traditionally been used on the part of both employers and union to justify gender segregation and different wage levels,

120 George Rarere, interviewed by Ross Webb, 2 September, 2013.
123 For further discussion on the Springbok Tour in the context of the broader trade union movement, see Bodman, “The Public Have Had a Gutsful”, pp.63-65.
125 ibid.
126 ibid.
especially in the freezing industry, known as a noisy, dirty, dangerous and brutal job—a ‘man’s job’.\textsuperscript{129}

Indeed, for some rank-and-file workers, women entering the works posed a threat to the workplace and union culture as a masculine space. Union ‘voices’ were ‘by no means unanimous’ on the issue, explained Leckie.\textsuperscript{130} Similarly, Bill Hillman recalled that there were ‘a lot of the rank-and-file who couldn’t handle it and we [the union officials] would say “no, they’re entitled to their say and to their views. You can either accept them or reject them, but you can’t stop them”’.\textsuperscript{131} For example, Frank Young, freezing worker for 25 years and long-time union delegate, claimed that women gaining jobs in the freezing works undermined his vision of the works as ‘man’s world’ as well as the union itself. ‘I never believed women could be good unionists’, Young claimed. ‘We were worried that if the boss told the women to do something they would just do what he said without recognising the union’.\textsuperscript{132} Young changed his mind, however. ‘I’ve seen women speak out at our union meetings, supporting the union… In fact a lot of the women can educate the men on union issues now [and] after all’, Young claimed ‘we ask women to support us when we go on strike’.\textsuperscript{133}

Following demands by the women at the works, and some coaxing from a sympathetic union delegate, Major Pineaha, the Tōmoana butchers eventually voted in 1980 in favour of women being trained. Mulrennan, along with Nani Ngaronoa, Raewyn Hapi and Hetty Davies (Figure 20), all trained butchers for the following season.\textsuperscript{134} Mulrennan believed that they voted ‘because they thought we’d never be able to do it. [The attitude was] they’ll never be able to hack it, so there’s no problem anyway. And once women were able to do and get up to speed… there was quite a lot of pride about it’.\textsuperscript{135} Henare O’Keefe recalled that when women began training as butchers, the attitude of the men was ‘if they struggle we’re not going to help them…

\textsuperscript{130} John Leckie interviewed by Ross Webb, 1 November, 2013.
\textsuperscript{131} Bill Hillman, interviewed by Ross Webb, 20 June, 2014.
\textsuperscript{132} Frank Young quoted in Rotherham, ed., \textit{Meat Workers Struggles}, p.27.
\textsuperscript{133} ibid.
\textsuperscript{134} \textit{Socialist Action}, January, 1981.
\textsuperscript{135} Helen Mulrennan, interviewed by Ross Webb, 5 August, 2013.
if they’re going to earn the same pay as us, they’re going to do the same work’.\textsuperscript{136} After a while, however, the men ‘embraced’ it, according to O’Keefe, and a common argument in favour of women being trained was that many of the women were married to male freezing workers: ‘at the time you had most husbands and wives that were both on slaughterman pay checks. So why resist that?’\textsuperscript{137} When Mulrennan moved to Westfield in 1983, she again faced opposition—this time from management. Mulrennan applied as a butcher, but management offered her other positions where other women worked, such as the casings or small goods.\textsuperscript{138} The management’s complaints were ‘familiar’, Leckie explained: ‘oh the men won’t like it much and there’s no access to toilets and all that kind of stuff’.\textsuperscript{139} Mulrennan kept in contact with the Westfield shed union and secretary Leckie made demands to management that ‘if there is a vacancy, she needs to be offered it’.\textsuperscript{140} The union and Mulrennan brought the issue to the Human Rights Commission, which accepted the

\textsuperscript{136} Henare O’Keefe, interviewed by Ross Webb, 1 September, 2013. \\
\textsuperscript{137} ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{138} John Leckie interviewed by Ross Webb, 1 November, 2013. \\
\textsuperscript{139} ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{140} ibid.
management’s reason for not hiring Mulrennan, but stated that ‘it hoped she would be hired for the 1984-85 season’. Mulrennan began work in the following season. Kevin Amanaki recalled that Mulrennan ‘proved she could match the blokes; it took a strong person take a stand like she did, in a male dominated work environment’.

Following the successful campaign to train women as butchers at both Westfield and Tōmoana, Mulrennan and other SAL members organised talks in Hasting and Auckland about the fight for equality in the workplace. A pamphlet, *Meat works are for women too*, (Figure 21) outlined the position of women in the workplace.

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142 Kevin Amanaki, interviewed by Ross Webb, 14 September, 2013.
industry and the challenges they still faced, called for affirmative action and the importance of such measures in times of economic recession. These women also challenged men on the view that equal opportunity for women was a trivial issue, beyond the scope of the union; they challenged men on the meanings of union solidarity. ‘As many workers recognise’, Eileen Morgan wrote in 1984, ‘strengthening the bonds of solidarity among workers is key to building a union movement capable of defeating government-employer attacks... But solidarity does not only mean respecting the picket lines of other unions or taking up financial collections to support workers... It also means that the labour movement fights for a fair and equal treatment of every worker.’

For Mulrennan, the campaign broke down the idea of ‘men’s jobs’ and ‘women’s jobs’ and the dominance of men in the workplace, but only in a very limited way. ‘The chain used to be a completely male place’, Mulrennan said at the time. ‘If women went anywhere near it there was a lot of yahooing and carrying on. That still goes on a bit, but women are far more accepted. It is like you are one of the boys’. Similarly, as Cybèle Locke points out, ‘while men may have gained respect for women, it was for women doing men’s jobs’; gendered expectations did not change. The idea of the freezing works as a ‘man’s world’ persisted, and women’s involvement in its workplace culture and unions was as ‘one of the boys’.

In line with their efforts of ‘breaking the power of the bosses and mobilising the majority of New Zealanders to build socialism’, the Socialist Action League viewed unions as organizations that could and should fight political battles. In a 1984 pamphlet, for example, James Robb wrote that ‘it is not enough for trade unions to concern themselves solely with the narrow questions of their wages and conditions’. Historian Toby Boraman argues that these organising efforts ‘met with little success’ and reflected a ‘vanguardist elitism’ among its organisers; a belief that ‘workers were “others” that needed to be organised from above by an enlightened

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143 Eileen Morgan, “Meat works are for women too”, Auckland, 1984, p.15.
minority’. Indeed, SAL rhetoric did sometimes reflect this elitism, and their presence, impact, support and success should not be overstated. However, despite their failure to achieve their most ambitious goal of creating a broad based workers’ socialist party, oral histories indicate that SAL activists did enjoy some limited success in bringing important political campaigns into the workplace. Moreover, SAL members worked actively in the union, moved into neighborhoods surrounding the freezing works, immersed themselves into the community and social life and built close personal relationships in what was a strong workplace and union culture. As Leckie explained, their ‘visibility was way out of proportion to their numbers, because they were articulate.... They were members of the union and workers’. However, SAL’s efforts to bring political struggles onto the job were often superseded by the more immediate and pragmatic efforts to maintain pay and conditions, and control over the workplace, especially in later years as such issues came under attack by employers in the context of industry deregulation and the removal of subsidies for farmers (see Chapter Four).

‘The Big Hits’: Organising Around the Strike

The organisation around strikes provides further insights into union culture outside the workplace as well the impact of strike action on the home and community of freezing workers. In contrast to the stop-work meetings and ‘homers’, long strikes hit the pockets of the freezing workers hard, significantly impacted the home, and required the commitment of workers to hold out for long periods of time. George Rarere remembered vividly the organisation that occurred around long disputes: ‘Some of those strikes went for eight weeks. And what we did learn was to survive’. Rarere explained that workers ‘had learnt how to survive over little issues’ and were prepared for the longer strikes. ‘So we’d take the big hits, but we were always prepared for the big hits’. Similarly, Bill Hillman, recalled that ‘If you went out, unless you were prepared, you were caught. Money wise, I mean. So you learnt that lesson early so that you don’t get caught again’. In order to avoid getting ‘caught’, the union established support centres for workers and families and organised

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150 George Rarere, interviewed by Ross Webb, 2 September, 2013.
committees to run the organisation around strike. At Westfield, the union established ‘strike committees’ or ‘action committees’, and called for volunteers from union shed meetings, while at Tōmoana, organising revolved around what workers called a ‘nerve centre’. The work process, and the strong workplace and union culture of the workplace described above, fed into the organising around the strike. As Leckie explained, ‘there were many hands to the pump with a large workforce like that. I mean, they were all used to working together’.

The collection of money and food for workers and families was central to organising around the strike. The food banks were important, according to Bill Hillman, because despite making relatively good money, ‘the average freezing worker lived week to week’. ‘Down at the Mad Butcher’s in Manurewa’, Hillman recalled, ‘we had meat and cabbages, cauliflowers, potatoes. We had it all there’. Similarly, at Tōmoana, George Rarere claimed that ‘we’d go and buy meat, buy vegetables, because we had the money to go and do it. If you bought in bulk it was cheaper’. Informally, workers arranged work during the strike. ‘We’d all meet up somewhere and we’d go looking for work together’, O’Keefe explained.

Alongside the strike committees and food banks, the picket line was part and parcel of the strike. But because there was largely no question of workers breaking the strike, in most cases, picket lines were usually introduced as a public demonstration rather than an attempt to block entrance to the workplace. That no-one would ‘conceive of breaking the strike’, reflected the ‘strength of the union movement’, explained James Robb. During a 1977 strike at Westfield, Frank Young claimed: ‘It’s important to let people know the facts of what is going on. Go out and talk to people about the strike, give out pamphlets, and do paste ups. I also want to see pickets outside the works’. Interviewed during the 1986 dispute, Leckie claimed that ‘the purpose of the picket was to bring to public attention the fact that we are on strike’. The picket line at Westfield in particular was used to signal public support for workers against

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154 George Rarere, interviewed by Ross Webb, 2 September, 2013.
156 ibid.
157 ibid.
management, whose offices sat within earshot of the picket line. ‘Westfield was on the Great South Road with very heavy traffic, so the horns would be going all day long’, Leckie explained. The picket line also provided a boost to the morale of striking workers and provided a space for workers to socialise during a strike, and even bring their families.161

But these strikes were not only fought in public spaces by workers. As John Leckie writes, workers’ partners and families were ‘bound up inevitably in the process of “being on strike”’.162 Long strikes ‘really hurt’, recalled Henare O’Keefe, while Jean Te Huia explained that ‘it was really hard on families when those strikes went for more than two weeks at a time’.163 Indeed, as the previous chapter demonstrated, the connectivity between the workplace, home life and community was a crucial element of freezing worker culture. It is no surprise, then, that unionism and industrial action had a huge impact on, and presence within, the home lives and communities of freezing workers and their families. Debates about strike action and union politics were not restricted to union meetings, picket lines and the workplace. From her childhood until her teenage years, Tracey McIntosh recalled that ‘the union was a huge part of our family’s life’ as was ‘union talk’ around the dinner table, especially during strike action.164 Moreover, McIntosh remembers the organising during strikes entering the home and the involvement of the family.

The food during strikes I remember well... We had a car pit in our garage. We had a big basement, so it was a good place to set up [food parcels for families]; we had lots of people coming over... And I remember dad talking about what we needed to put in the food packs... Lots of food was donated... I can remember my mum and other being involved. I don’t know how helpful I was, I was young. But I guess dad thought it was important that we all help out.165

Indeed, the union understood the impact on the home and attempted to both alleviate the impact of the strike, and to encourage the family involvement. McIntosh recalled her father explaining that ‘what weakens resolve during a strike is family dynamics’—by which, McIntosh assumed, he meant the support of women.166

165 ibid.
166 ibid.
Indeed, the idea that domestic impact was a potential weak point for workers was part of both union and management strategy (see Chapter Four). Frank Barnard claimed that ‘the wives would eventually hound the guys back to work’.167 But as John Leckie recalled, strikes did hit the home hard and union needed to take account of this. ‘It has an effect on the whole family’, Leckie explained. ‘There could be solidarity within the family, but still when you’re facing eviction or having your power cut off, there was another priority there. So the Union felt it had a responsibility to deal with issues like that if it could’.168 Similarly, Grahame Cooke explained that he encouraged our people to bring their wives to meetings ‘because if you had the wife on side, you’ve got a winning recipe’.169

The local press often focused on the domestic impact of disputes, presenting letters from wives both for and against an industrial dispute, though mostly against. These letters were used as evidence of the lack of democracy in the unions—a familiar motif in media coverage of industrial relations at the time170—and to reveal the hardship caused by the strike. ‘I wonder what would happen if we, the housewives, came out on strike when we get “fed up” or things don’t go our way?’ read one letter in the Hawke’s Bay Herald-Tribune during the 1978 Award dispute. ‘Many, many times our grievances are much greater than a lot of those aired at stop work meetings. Perhaps if we did go on strike our menfolk would realise the upheaval caused by such action’.171 Similarly, during the 1986 Award dispute, the Hawke’s Bay Herald-Tribune published countless letters by spouses of freezing workers. A letter by ‘Another Freezing Workers’ Wife’ in March claimed that ‘[m]ost workers want to go back to work, so come on all the wives, don’t groan... get the pens out. Tell everybody... while you still have enough money to pay for a stamp’.172 Another letter, in the seventh week of the strike, read: ‘I am married to one of those Tōmoana strikers and I stand by him as he stands by his union and their principles’.173 ‘I am the proud wife of a freezing worker...’ read another letter from ‘Supportive Wife’. ‘We are struggling financially but are prepared to hold out as long

167 Listener Magazine, November 27, 1989, p.16.
170 Bodman, “The Public Have Had a Gutsful and So Have We”, p.28.
172 HBHT, March 10, 1986.
173 HBHT, April 17, 1986.
as it takes. The 4 per cent offered is an insult to every freezing worker and their families who are trying to survive in these inflationary times. Support your union and support yourself.  

‘The paroxysm of an industry in crisis”: The 1986 Award Dispute

National Award disputes made up a large proportion of these longer strikes. As George Rarere explained, ‘[w]hen there was negotiations around the Award you had to stand firm; you had to try and claw back all the conditions management was trying to take off you [and] some of those strikes went for eight weeks’. The 1986 Award dispute was one such case of an eight week strike. The dispute began in early February when shift engineers in half the freezing works across the country walked off the job after being offered only one-third of the 15.5 per cent wage increase demanded. With shift engineers either suspended or on strike, half the country’s works remained idle for nine days. Not long after shift engineers agreed to go back to work, freezing workers across the country walked off the job with the same 15.5 per cent wage demands and the same 5 per cent counteroffer by employers, which, Cybèle Locke points out, was ‘a wage cut in real terms’. In July of the previous year, the Westfield branch of the Auckland and Tōmoana Freezing Workers Union agreed on a series of remits for the upcoming Award negotiations. The first on their list was the following: ‘That we accept no less than a 15% wage increase’. The firm position held by the unions was a response to the relatively low wage settlements in previous wage rounds. As Locke points out, ‘freezing workers’ unions had been ‘losing ground’ for several years; wage had risen only 7.7 per cent since Robert Muldoon’s wage freeze—‘well below inflation and the increased cost of living’.  

In late February, the New Zealand Herald predicted a long, drawn out dispute. ‘So far in this wage round, all the signs are that both sides are gearing up for a confrontation rather than a compromise’, it reported, calling it potentially ‘the

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175 George Rarere, interviewed by Ross Webb, 2 September, 2013.
longest and most bitter strike New Zealand has experienced since the 1951 waterfront dispute’.\textsuperscript{182} Indeed, the dispute dragged on with employers, backed by farmers and the government, determined not to cave. Unions, too, would not compromise. Into its third and fourth week, the strike took a toll on freezing workers, their communities and their families. By late March, FWU President, Frank Barnard claimed that ‘it is getting to the stage now where people are starting to suffer hardships. We are getting ready to set up food depots and distribution centres…. Nobody ever wins from a strike—least of all the workers. But we have right on our side... that is why we have got [freezing workers] out’.\textsuperscript{183} Around the same time, the Auckland Trades Council agreed on a ‘Week of Action’ in support of the 30,000 freezing workers on strike. Waterside workers, for example, were told not to handle meat on the waterfront, and in Auckland and Hamilton, the Trades Council raised $10,000 in support of freezing workers and their families. At the same time, workers and their families established food distribution centres in Ōtāhuhu, Moerewa and other freezing worker communities (Figure 22). ‘We are in for a big fight’, Frank Barnard claimed at the time.\textsuperscript{184}

In early April, however, members of the Meat Workers’ Union (MWU), representing workers in the bottom half of the North Island and the South Island, went back to work after agreeing to a compromise with employers. This ended the national dispute and isolated the Auckland and Tōmoana Freezing Workers’ Union. It was in this context that the FWU met to discuss their next course of action (see Introduction). Westfield workers showed ‘overwhelming’ support for the motion that ‘we stick to our original claim of %15.5 on all earnings’, while Tōmoana voted 1000 to 4 to stay out.\textsuperscript{185} ‘In the end, the rank-and-file decided to stay out’, Leckie explained.\textsuperscript{186} But it was a last ditch effort. The FWU held out for two more weeks before negotiating and voting to go back to work. The FWU accepted the terms

\textsuperscript{182} \textit{Herald}, February 26, 1986, p.20.
\textsuperscript{183} \textit{NZH}, March 29, p.1.
\textsuperscript{184} \textit{New Zealand Herald}, February 26, 1986.
\textsuperscript{185} ‘overwhelming support’ from: \textit{Herald}, April 8, 1986; ‘we stick to our original claim’ from: Auckland and Tōmoana Freezing Workers’ Union, Work Meeting Minutes, 07/04/1986, p.138.
\textsuperscript{186} John Leckie interviewed by Ross Webb, 1 November, 2013.
Figure 23. Auckland freezing workers collecting food during the 1986 National Award Dispute. Manukau Courier, 8 April 1986. Photographer Unknown /Fairfax Media/Manukau Research Library, Courier collection, box 27/5. Footprints 00583
negotiated by the MWU two weeks earlier—a $35 flat rate increase rather than the 15.5 per cent increase. Ultimately, according to Cybele Locke, the strike ended as ‘a compromise for both employers and workers’.187

The media covered the dispute as yet another example of freezing worker greed, while farmers urged employers to hold out ‘at all costs’ against the demands of workers.188 But as some astute commentators at the time observed, the strike represented a culmination of issues in an industry undergoing massive change. In a Metro article, left-wing journalist Bruce Jesson wrote that the meat industry ‘has disintegrated into a state of utter chaos... What was occurring was the paroxysm of an industry in crisis’.189 Jesson understood the strike as a ‘power struggle’ between strong and militant unions and increasingly offensive employers. The freezing industry was a ‘declining industry’, Jesson claimed, with a strong union structure and a turbulent history. ‘Employers would like to reduce their wage bill as a proportion of costs’, he wrote. ‘And they would like to reorganise the worked arrangement so as to better utilise their plant. To achieve this they have to take on the unions head on’.190 The dispute occurred within the context of farmer dissatisfaction and anger at the Fourth Labour Government’s economic policies, economic downturn, employer attacks on workers’ wages and conditions and a massive increase in industrial strikes, stoppages and lock-outs.191 In late February, freezing workers in Canterbury picketed the Timaru wharves in protest at live sheep exports and ‘appeared to be on the verge of confrontation with police and farmers’.192 At the same time, farmers expressed their anger and frustration, by responding with what they called ‘industrial action in reverse’, withholding lambs from freezing works throughout the country ‘in protest at the disruption caused by disputes and at the economic difficulties facing farmers’.193

In his final analysis of the significance of the 1986 dispute, Bruce Jesson ended on an optimistic note. He suggested that the dispute was a ‘power struggle’

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188 New Zealand Herald, April 5, 1986.
193 Herald, February 17, 1986, p.3.
that could have been ‘a total disaster, the humbling of a once powerful union, a New Zealand equivalent of the British miners’ strike’. But instead,

a new generation of freezing workers had their attitudes hardened by the experience, and the union appears invigorated, consolidated... the strike tested the strength of the union movement, and it survived. With employers and politicians agitating for the deregulation of the labour market, 30,000 freezing workers have displayed an unexpected spirit of defiance. They have shown that a core of militant unionism exists that the free market has yet to subdue.

Jesson, however, was wrong on two accounts. First, as this chapter has demonstrated, the spirit of freezing worker defiance to employer attacks was anything but ‘unexpected’; freezing worker militancy was a constant in the history of the union. Second, the strike was no victory; it was a compromise. As John Leckie recalled: ‘The 1986 dispute wasn’t any kind of victory or advance. It was a defence more than it was an advance. And it ended in a compromise’. The 1986 Award dispute came at a time of both renewed militancy by workers, as well as an employer offensive, before unions were forced ‘onto the defensive’ in the context of economic deregulation and rising unemployment.194 The stalemate of industrial activity in 1986 reflected an equilibrium of the power held by the employers and the union. However, as the political and economic context continued to change, so too did the balance of power in the industry. Indeed, as the following chapter reveals, industrial action by freezing workers became more defensive in nature as workers faced their greatest challenges yet: the downsizing of the industry and, with that, redundancy and closure.

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Chapter 4:
‘The Bloody Gates have Closed and it Seems Your Era is Over’
Closures, 1981-1994

Figure 24. Working Press and the Auckland and Tomoana Freezing Workers Union, Your Livelihood is on the Line: The Future of the Meat Industry: a document for freezing workers and working farmers, Auckland, 1981.
John Leckie Personal Collection.
The crunch comes when the bosses shut the works gates and you know you are just powerless. Then it doesn’t matter that you can be proud of being a battler all your life — the bloody gates have closed and it seems your era is over.¹

Frank Barnard, FWU President

When times are tough and jobs are hard to get, strangely enough, that’s when the union becomes more militant. It always has been.²

Syd McCowan, Westfield Industrial Manager

In 1981, the Auckland and Tōmoana Freezing Workers Union published a paper entitled ‘Your Livelihood is on the Line: The Future of the Meat Industry’.³ The paper outlined the threats freezing workers faced in the wake of the closure of AFFCO’s Southdown freezing works in Auckland and the deregulation of the industry. According to the paper, these threats included 10,000 or more job cuts, mechanisation, attacks on wages and conditions of employment, a ‘new, tougher employer’s line-up, backed by the bosses’ National Government’, and more company ‘takeovers, mergers, closures and lay-offs’.⁴ Redundancy, factory closure and hard times for working-class communities swept New Zealand and, indeed, most industrial societies in the final quarter of the twentieth century.⁵ Stevan Eldred-Grigg writes that ‘the collapse of big old factories meant the end of workplaces where workers were so numerous that they formed a social world of their own’.⁶ David Grant writes that during the 1980s and 1990s, manual workers, ‘for decades the life-blood of the country’s economy... were disappearing in the wake of new, more sophisticated machines, more open international competition, retreating overseas markets, depressed prices and the government’s deregulatory obsessions’.⁷ Indeed,

¹ Listener Magazine, November 27, 1989, p.16.
⁴ ibid.
⁸ David Grant, Man for All Seasons, p.268.
between 1984 and 1993 a neoliberal policy revolution, pursued by both the Labour and National Government, transformed New Zealand’s political economy.8

In the meat-freezing industry, closures, redundancies and restructuring predated this revolution, but structural changes after 1984 in the economy accelerated and exacerbated the ‘crisis’ in the industry and spurred on mass closures and redundancies. Thus, the ‘last bastion’ of militant blue collar unions, were devastated by the combined impacts of deregulation, mechanisation, the export of live sheep, a deliberate strategy by the major companies to move away from large works in the cities to smaller satellite works in small town and country areas, and the decline in stock numbers following the removal of Supplementary Minimum Prices (SMPs) in 1986.9 Between 1986 and 1990, the meat freezing industry workforce of 31,000 halved.10 For those who retained their jobs, companies attacked working conditions, pay and jobs, and asserted greater control and discipline over the workplace, while government legislation severely curtailed the ability of freezing worker’s unions to maintain a position of strength within the industry. The Labour Relations Act of 1987 undermined second-tier bargaining, while the Employment Contracts Acts of 1991 removed the Award all together as well as key protections for trade unions. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, real wages for freezing workers continued to decline, while defensive strike action for redundancy became more common.11 Freezing workers, their unions, and communities had experience in sustaining and supporting workers and their families during drawn-out industrial disputes. This experience proved central when it came to industrial action for fair redundancy pay and the establishment of resource centres following closure. In these struggles, freezing workers once again drew on a strong tradition of workplace and union culture.

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8 Belich, Paradise Reforged, p.405; Brooking, p.150.
The economic and political changes of the 1970s—1990s are well documented, scrutinised, and critiqued elsewhere, and do not need to be repeated in this chapter. However, a brief overview is necessary. Put simply, the economic crisis after 1974 came to define the 1970s and 1980s, separating an era of growth and prosperity from a period of stagnation, rising unemployment and declining real incomes. As Barry Gustafson writes, ‘the collapse in economic growth around the world coupled with escalating prices for imported oil and declining prices for agricultural exports shattered New Zealand’s economy’. New Zealand dependence on pastoral exports ‘no longer guaranteed prosperity’. As discussed in the previous chapter, hygiene regulations and the costs of upgrading old plants after Britain’s Entry into the EEC added pressure to the meat-processing industry and its workers. But such changes would appear modest in comparison to those of the 1980s.

For the most part, the National Party’s economic policy under Robert Muldoon (1975-1984) aimed at maintaining high employment and high standards of living, using tariffs and subsidies. Muldoon sought to maintain the post-war status quo and appealed to the ‘ordinary bloke’. But, as Jim McAloon points out, Muldoon’s ‘ordinary bloke’ was never an active trade unionist and Muldoon’s relationship with trade unions was inconsistent and counterproductive. Similarly, Barry Gustafson writes that Muldoon’s approach to unions was ‘erratic, veering from confrontation to compromise... from wage freeze to wage bargaining, from telling employers to be


15 McAloon, Judgements of All Kinds, p.172-3.

16 McRobie, The History of New Zealand, p.150.

17 McAloon, Judgements of All Kinds, p.195.
firm in resisting wage demands to subsidising them in paying wages which they claimed were untenable’.  

In 1978, for example, Muldoon subsidised a wage settlement for freezing workers after a protracted dispute, causing outrage among farmers and employers. However, this was not so much a reflection of Muldoon’s sympathy with organised labour, but rather his desire for industrial peace in a key export sector. Muldoon’s focus remained on propping up agriculture, and, like previous governments, supporting an export-led recovery. Indeed, while Muldoon’s policies were often tough on unions, his agricultural policies did have a flow-on effect for freezing workers, whose livelihood in many ways relied on the prosperity of the farming sector. Muldoon attempted to maintain production in agriculture by providing farmers with subsidies, including tax and production incentives, loan schemes, reduction in estate duties, and additional finance through the Rural Bank. In the 1978 budget, Muldoon established the Supplementary Minimum Prices (SMP) scheme for meat, wool and dairy products, which provided incentives to manufacturers and maintained key import controls with the objective of giving farmers ‘greater certainty as to a minimum income’.  

In many ways, such schemes, and SMPs in particular, helped lessen the impact of the EEC and the associated costs. But despite his reputation as a stringent protector of ‘Fortress New Zealand’, Muldoon took steps in what McAloon calls ‘managed liberalisation’. Muldoon’s concerns that significant works would close did not stop the Government from deregulating the industry in April 1981. For Graham Cooke, the delicensing of the meat industry signalled one of the most important changes in the industry as ‘pressure came on to reduce wages and get rid of surplus plants… Technology also became an issue during this period [and] a lot of big plants shut, and smaller plants opened up. Under the Meat Acts of 1964, it was difficult for companies to open new plants. To receive a licence, companies had to show that it

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18 Gustafson, *His Way*, p.254; McAloon, pp.163-166.
21 Easton, *In Stormy Seas*, p.213.
23 McAloon, p.170.
24 McAloon, pp.171, 180.
would not put existing plants out of business. Under the new legislation, new works could be built without having to first justify that they were needed. Moreover, companies could now introduce new technology ‘leaving older larger plants struggling to compete and on the brink of closure’.

The 1980 closure of the Southdown works in Auckland—the largest single industrial closure in New Zealand history until that date—sent shockwaves throughout the country and, according to Cybèle Locke, signalled the beginning of this new era of deregulation in the meat industry. The FWU organised a successful campaign to reopen the Southdown works and their strike reopened the plant for three months before its final closure in 1981. After its final closure, leader of the opposition Labour Party, Bill Rowling wrote that ‘the fight for Southdown has been lost. The price is being paid by the Southdown workers, their families and the community of South Auckland’. He added that freezing workers ‘should never again be treated in the same way they were treated at Southdown’. The Gear Plant in Petone, Wellington was the next to go, a massive blow to the largely Māori and working-class suburb. The closure of Patea in 1982 had a devastating impact on the local community—again, largely Māori. The closure of Gear came after the union rejected a pay cut. Roger Middlemass of the MWU recalled the decision to reject the pay cut. ‘I said [to the workers]… the company wants 20% wage cuts or they will close the plants. You will lose your jobs forever. But if you take 20% wage cuts you are setting a precedent for other freezing workers right down the industry’. Middlemass claimed that he later spoke to the General Manager Barney Sundstrum. ‘[I] said “you were going to close it anyway, weren’t you?” He said, “yeah”’. Indeed, the cutting of wages ahead of closure became a common occurrence in the industry.

In the context of closures, many of those interviewed remembered a declining morale among freezing workers. ‘Workers didn’t have the same pride’, Helen

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29 Locke, *Workers in the Margins*, pp.82-83.
32 Locke, *Workers in the Margins*, pp.82-83.
33 Locke, *Workers in the Margins*, pp.82-83.
Mulrennan claimed. ‘People would talk about it being a shit job’. For both Mulrennan and James Robb, this contrasted fundamentally with the pride workers felt.

Helen Mulrennan: That was something that struck me at first, that there was a real sort of pride in what they were doing, which you often don’t get in factory jobs where people see themselves at the bottom of the heap. You never found that in the freezing works. It was neat. When you went in there, you had a sense of dignity. But that did start to fade. Before, people would get their kids up there and want their kids to work at the freezing works. But that changed.35

James Robb: There was a great spirit of solidarity in the workforce and then it all came to a sharp halt and the self-confidence and humour of the workers vanished overnight when plants started closing.36

Indeed, closure brought an end to intergenerational employment as the hiring of new people ‘fell away’.37 The atmosphere of the workplace changed, too, with stricter rules and tightening of informal workplace practises. Bill Bennett, a long time unionist in Hastings, claimed that ‘it became more rigid. It became less human to the individual that worked there’.38 Tracey McIntosh explained that the autonomy workers held saw the end of its ‘heyday’ in the 1970s. ‘Before it was a perk and then it became theft... they start bringing in police, charging people. They started to check cars’.39 The changes also had a chilling effect on freezing workers when it came to job security. ‘I think when it was not just Southdown, but then Patea and then Gear and then a whole lot of others, then people started to really fear for their job’, recalled James Robb.40 Companies took advantage of this fear, using the threat of closure to force cuts in wages and mannings. Following the Southdown closure, Westfield management approached the union with a demand that two-hundred or more jobs be cut or else the works would close. In negotiations, the union set a policy of maintaining conditions and maximum number of jobs, while ‘sacrificing some overtime and so called “restrictive” practises’.41

In the context of closures and growing unemployment that Muldoon, in his third term, ‘conducted an active anti-union campaign’. Historian Peter Franks points out that there were two distinct periods under Muldoon’s years in power in relation to trade unions. Muldoon’s early years (1975-1980) were marked by union militancy and government defeat in several confrontations, while in later years (1980-1984) unions were increasingly put on the defensive. Indeed, as Bruce Jesson noted, while Muldoon had compromised with freezing workers in the late 1970s to gain industrial peace, in the early 1980s he seems to have decided that the unions were ‘dispensable’. Tensions between Muldoon and trade unions heightened in the early 1980s, with a two year wage and price freeze implemented in 1982 and the introduction of voluntary unionism in 1983. At the same time, those in the meat industry noticed a change in attitudes among employers. In 1981, District Secretary of the FWU, Trevor Kelly, claimed that there was a ‘new mood of belligerence and arrogance among meat industry employers’. Indeed, employers support for the centralised wage fixing shifted in the 1980s to a push for voluntary unionism and a de-regulated labour market.

For many interviewed, the election of the Fourth Labour Government in 1984 was initially welcomed with relief. ‘The mood of the country, or the mood of South Auckland, at that stage was that Rob Muldoon had to go’, explained Maurice Davis, ‘and the union movement, including the freezing workers’ union, were part of getting people out to vote and helping those who struggled to get out to vote’. Similarly, John Leckie recalled the election of Fourth Labour in 1984: ‘The assumption was “that’s far better. It’s not Muldoon”. In his recent history of post-war economic policy, Jim McAloon writes that ‘the regime that emerged after 1984 contrasted fundamentally with the post war regime’. The Fourth Labour Government pursued a policy of deregulation and privatisation and shifted the emphasis of policy ‘from actively developing exports and encouraging internal diversification to a belief that

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45 McAloon, *Judgements of All Kinds*, p.175.
46 ‘Your Livelihood is on the Lime: The Future of the Meat Industry’, p.3.
47 Roper, *Prosperity for All?*, p.106.
48 Maurice Davis, interviewed by Ross Webb, 8 May, 2014.
50 McAloon, *Judgements of All Kinds*, p.199.
all that was required was getting the macroeconomic fundamentals rights'. 51 As a result, income inequality increased considerably while a new international political economy ‘subordinated significant dimensions of national policy to international markets’. 52 For Davis and Leckie, the reality of the new government’s deregulation and privatisation agenda slowly became clear. Leckie recalled that ‘the complexion of the Government gradually began to dawn on people as things progressed... the penny dropped too late and we were none the wiser to what was coming’. 53

In its market and trade liberalisation agenda, the Labour Government’s first target was agriculture. 54 Between 1984 and 1987, input subsidies, such as cheap finance and farm development incentives, as well as SMPs for output, were withdrawn. 55 As a result, many farmers, left over-exposed, reduced expenditures and cut stock numbers to service debt. 56 The removal of SMPs in 1985 had the most direct impact on the meat-processing industry, resulting in a dramatic decline in farmers’ returns, livestock production and, as a result, processing industry returns. 57 If the deregulation of the industry made closures easier, the removal of SMPs made it almost inevitable. ‘Rogernomics hit freezing workers hard’, explained Leckie, particularly after the SMP removal. ‘Automatically, lamb numbers dropped and suddenly there were fewer lambs being sent to kill’. Even those freezing works that were ‘running full steam for months, suddenly stopped’, Leckie claimed. 58 Hellaby’s freezing works in Auckland, the Whakatu works in Hastings and Longburn in Palmerston North all closed in 1986. 59 Significant redundancies followed at Moerewa in Northland and Horotiu in Hamilton. 60 Now, more than ever before, the freezing workers’ livelihood was on the line.

Labour’s economic policy led to the straining of the traditional ties between blue-collar trade unionists and the Party. While formal ties largely remained intact,

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51 ibid.
52 ibid.
55 Kelsey, p.95.
56 ibid.
59 Locke, *Workers in the Margins*, p.159.
‘the psychological ties between the two became increasingly frayed as the Government’s *laissez-faire* economic policies took hold’.\(^{61}\) Bill Hillman and Frank Barnard, both life-long ‘Labour men’, found it difficult to grapple with the changes. ‘I’ve been a Labour man all my life,’ Bill Hillman said. ‘I wasn’t too happy with Roger [Douglas]... but the damage was done’. ‘I worked my insides out for Labour’, Frank Barnard claimed. ‘I don’t know anything else but Labour. But now I’m no longer a member. Didn’t even bother to renew my subscription’.\(^{62}\) As Jane Kelsey points out, while labour market de-regulation and de-unionisation of the workforce remained impossible for a Labour government, its policies ‘significantly weakened the union base’.\(^{63}\) Before 1987, Maurice Davis claimed that despite the reforms, ‘we still had a strong union and a strong Award and we still did a lot of second tier bargaining’.\(^{64}\) However, in 1987, the Government introduced the Labour Relations Act (1987), outlawing the long standing practise of second-tier bargaining, outlined in clause 13 of the Award.\(^{65}\) The Act also tightened the legal rights to strike, as David Grant points out, and the traditional issues of demarcation, second-tier bargaining, dismissals, and conflict over interpretations of Award provisions declined ‘because these were all now illegal and unions faced massive fines if they transgressed’.\(^{66}\)

On 22 June, 1988, Graham Cooke, the recently elected secretary of the FWU, wrote a letter to Labour Party Finance Minister Roger Douglas expressing anger at the government’s economic policy and highlighted rank-and-file opposition to affiliation with the Labour Party. ‘The membership of the Union has been levelling considerable flack at this Union’s continued financial affiliation of the Labour Party’, Cooke wrote, quoting two resolutions carried at various union branch meetings:

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\(^{61}\) Oxford History, p.405; McAloon, *Judgements of All Kinds*, p.199.


\(^{64}\) Maurice Davis, interviewed by Ross Webb, 8 May, 2014.

\(^{65}\) Clause 13 States: ‘Wage rates and special conditions of work for piecework and other types of “payment by results” system not provided for in this Award may be arranged by mutual consultation and agreement between authorised representatives of the employer and the union’. *New Zealand (Except Westland) Meat Processors, Packers and Preservers, Freezing Works*, Award, 1985.

\(^{66}\) David Grant, *Man for All Seasons: The Life and Times of Ken Douglas*, Auckland, 2010, p.274; But while freezing workers were now limited by the law, workers strived to retain their traditional culture of autonomy. Workers found ‘tricks’ to work around the new laws. Peter Gosche recalled that because ‘homers’ over safety issues were still permitted, workers in the freezers would set off the fire alarm and go out into the rain ‘and get their gear wet’, which was a safety issue. Peter Gosche, interviewed by Ross Webb, 24 January, 2014.
As the Labour Party, as Government, has failed to support the Unions, this Union forthwith shall continue to withhold financial support for the Labour Party.

Senior executives of the Union express to the Government discontent at the way they are treating our members and unless there is an improvement we may have to consider our association with the party.67

Cooke pointed out that the Labour Party had accrued ‘considerable political mileage’ with its reactions to the closure of Southdown in 1981, yet it had overseen the closure of Hellaby’s, Whakatu, and Advanced Meat Limited in Gisbourne. Further, Cooke pointed out that the 1987 Labour Relations Act was ‘having a detrimental effect on this union and its members’ and he highlighted the increase in injunctions, plant lock-outs to further reduce wages, mannings and increase chain speeds with ‘little regard for safety’. Employers were ‘more militant (arrogant) now than ever before’, Cooke claimed, and continued to use the threat of closure to push freezing workers to accept changes in the workplace. ‘Every year since 1981’, Cooke wrote, ‘Lord Vestey has told the Westfield workers: “WE WILL SHUT THIS PLANT, IF YOU DON’T WORK FASTER AND WITH LESS MONEY AND PEOPLE”’.68

‘Shut Vestey’s down!’ The Westfield Redundancy Strike

Only eight days after Cooke addressed his letter to Roger Douglas, all Westfield freezing workers attended a stop-work union meeting to discuss a safety issue raised by the chamberhands.69 Following the adjournment of the meeting, management suddenly called Bill Hillman, John Leckie and delegates into the canteen to meet with head office management from Wellington. According to Leckie, the union officials and delegates expected either a discussion about the current industrial action or an announcement about the delayed $65 million redevelopment of

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68 In response to the letter, Stan Rodger, Minister of Labour, wrote that ‘the Labour Government is pursuing policies which will encourage a healthy economy and benefit all New Zealanders including your members’. He acknowledged, however, that the workers in the meat industry were facing very difficult times. ‘The job losses involved are in many cases affecting communities who have already experienced closures and lay-offs’, Rodger wrote. ‘I can however see no alternative to restructuring the meat industry, with its associated pain for the families involved, except one of continuing decline and eventual collapse’.
Westfield, announced in 1986.\(^{70}\) Instead, Weddel-Crown Managing Director, John Prendergast, simply read a written statement: ‘We have to announce that the Company has made a reluctant decision to close all operations connected with the mutton chains at Westfield’. He added that two beef chains would be reduced to one single chain. As managing director Michael Sanders recalled, ‘we had thought we could rebuild Westfield’. But with the removal of SMPs ‘and the likelihood that the herd and the flock would suddenly drop, a re-build investment was no longer practical’.\(^{71}\) While a redundancy payment was implied by Prendergast, exactly how such a payment would be calculated was unclear. Westfield Union Branch President Bill Hillman raised the question to Syd McCowan, Group Industrial Manager: “What’ll it be Syd, six and three?” What Hillman was referring to was the number of week’s pay for the first and subsequent years of service.\(^{72}\) McCowan replied: “No, four and two”. For Leckie, present at the meeting, the exchange between Hillman and McCowan was a ‘rather light-hearted skirmish’, but pointed to ‘what was to become a serious disagreement between the parties’ and a long strike.\(^{73}\)

The Westfield stop-work meeting reconvened at 11am after delegates urged McCowan, Prendergast and Sanders to address workers together, ‘face to face’, about the partial-closure of the plant. Prendergast reread his written statement to a meeting of one thousand workers and union members. After questions about redundancy, and McCowan’s response that this would be subject to negotiations, workers marked the end of the meeting with a ‘homer’.\(^{74}\) In short, Westfield workers walked out of the gates of the plant with three months’ notice of the loss of almost 900 jobs, about two-thirds of the men and women who worked at the plant. For some the announcement came as a complete shock; for others, the writing was on the wall. ‘It was expected’, Helen Mulrennan claimed, ‘[you] could see it coming. They’d closed down Southdown and Hellaby’s… It’s always a horrible feeling, but it was expected’.\(^{75}\) For John Leckie, the emotional impact of the notice of closure was ‘profound and not fully appreciated by the company at the time’. This profound

\(^{71}\) Michael Sanders, interviewed by Ross Webb, 10 July, 2014.
\(^{72}\) ibid., p.14; Leckie explained the formula: ‘So for the first year of service, the company will pay X numbers of weeks’, Leckie explained, ‘and for every subsequent year, they will pay Y. That was the common formula for redundancy agreements relating to individuals time serving’.
\(^{75}\) Helen Mulrennan, interviewed by Ross Webb, Mt Wellington, Auckland, 5 August, 2013.
shock, ‘coupled with a long militant tradition at Westfield’, Leckie wrote, ‘was to fortify the workers with formidable resolution’ when it came to the dispute over redundancy.\footnote{Leckie, ‘The Weddel Crown Redundancy Strike, 1988’, p.24.}

The strike for redundancy pay began on August 5 following the breakdown of initial negotiations. Workers temporarily returned to work on August 16, a precondition made by the company for the resumption of negotiations, which again broke down on August 29. The 900 workers being made redundant at Westfield would not return to work at all. After the August 16 return to work, workers asked Ken Douglas, President of the recently formed Council of Trade Unions (CTU), to act as advocate.\footnote{For a discussing of the creation of the Council of Trade Unions (CTU), see ‘Trade unionists recall the Transition from the Federation of Labour to the Council of Trade Unions, 1987’, in Franks and Nolan, \textit{Unions in Common Cause}, pp.183-204.} The redundancy dispute posed challenges to the union’s usual strategy of withdrawing labour as long as possible. Reflecting on the clear ineffectiveness of the initial strike, the union sought support from workers at other Weddel Crown/Vestey freezing works, including Tōmoana.\footnote{Leckie, ‘Women in Industrial Action’, p.89.}

Tōmoana Branch Secretary Bruce Stobie recalled a meeting between the branches of FWU and the discussion about bringing other Weddel Crown/Vestey plants into the strike. ‘Westfield were fighting it on their own’, he claimed, and he told the other officials that Tōmoana was beginning to receive Westfield’s stock, to which Trevor Kelly asked, ‘well how the hell are we going to do this?’ Stobie replied, ‘the only way we’re going to beat them is to shut the whole thing down; shut Vestey’s down!’\footnote{Bruce Stobie, Interview \textit{HBHT}, September 27, 1988.} In meetings held throughout the first half of September, Tōmoana and three other Vestey plants voted to join the strike, along with other Weddel Crown/Vestey plants. By the end of the month about 2,700 freezing workers were on strike in Auckland, Hastings, Whangarei and Cambridge.\footnote{HBHT, September 27, 1988.}

For workers at the other Weddel/Vestey plants, support for the strike demonstrated an act of solidarity. At the same time, however, in the context of growing job insecurity in the industry as a result of closures and restructuring, the local branch unions understood that a single company-wide redundancy agreement with Weddel-Crown Corporation would be beneficial in future. ‘We could now be
next on the chopping block’, claimed Pat Weir, ‘particularly if live sheep shipment limits are removed as is now being rumoured’.\textsuperscript{81} The FWU claim for a combined redundancy agreement across all company sheds also legalised the strikes, as the Labour Relations Act of 1987 made ‘sympathy’ strikes illegal, but allowed strike action in pursuit of redundancy.\textsuperscript{82}

Freezing workers mobilised quickly. The Westfield negotiating committee made regular trips to other Weddel Crown sheds to rally support and keep those workers and their families informed of the developments of the dispute. Alongside the negotiating committee, Westfield workers established a strike committee, made up of about twelve rank-and-file volunteers, including members of Socialist Action League. Preparing for what was going to be a prolonged strike, the committee organised speakers to address job sites throughout Auckland, raised funds for food and oversaw the organisation of a picket line between 6am and 6pm Monday to Friday. It also agreed that regular picket duty be a condition of receiving food from

\footnotesize{81} \textit{HBHT}, September 30, 1988.

\footnotesize{82} Leckie, ‘Women in Industrial Action’, p.89. see footnote 6.

\hspace{1cm}\textbf{Figure 25.} John Leckie (Branch Secretary of Westfield), Pat Weir (Branch President of Tomoana), and Ken Douglas (Council of Trade Unions President) in Hastings during the October 31 Secret ballot votes. \textit{Hawke’s Bay Herald Tribune}, November 1, 1988.
Figure 26. (Above) Tōmoana relief committee volunteers at their 'nerve centre', _Hawke’s Bay Herald Tribune_, 30 September, 1988. John Leckie Personal Collection Figure 27 (Below) Picket outside Tōmoana freezing works. Workers stop a truck from entering the gates. Photo by Bill Craig, _Hawke’s Bay Herald Tribune_, September 16, 1988.
The strike committee made a weekly visit to the city vegetable auction markets to buy food, which was later distributed from the Ōtāhuhu Branch of the Labour Party (as it had done during the 1980s Southdown reopening strike and the 1986 award dispute). Peter Gosche recalled,

I was a delegate in the yard gang... and I was involved in the strike committee. We had an outlet in Ōtāhuhu where we dished out groceries and vegetables and meat in a little hall out there and we had a big picket on there with caravans and daily rosters. That was a well organised strike.

Maurice Davis said that there was a sense of camaraderie ‘when we used to go to Ōtāhuhu and get our meat packs and vegetables and all of that’. As he had done during the 1986 award dispute, Mangere meat retailer Peter Leitch, the ‘Mad Butcher’, sold vouchers to the committee for distribution to workers; a ‘great act of solidarity’ and ‘unsung’, according to Leckie. Meanwhile, Graham Cooke, well aware of the media hostility to striking workers, made the decision to keep the media fully informed of the union’s position, programming the fax machine to simultaneously transmit union press releases to all newspapers covering the strike.

Similarly, workers at Tōmoana mobilised after beginning their strike on September 15. The union established a 24-hour picket line around the plant, allowing only those workers with dispensation to enter the plant, as well as a ‘nerve centre’ to handle food and funds, and give financial advice. Branch President Pat Weir said that ‘we don’t want families to starve’. Frank Barnard was ‘amazed’ at the organisation of the Tōmoana ‘nerve centre’. The strikes centres or committees, organised by workers at both at Westfield and Tōmoana provided ‘a social focus’, according to Leckie, ‘for striking men and women and their families’. They provided financial advice and even phoned companies on behalf of workers whose hire purchase, rent or power bills were overdue; some wives called on behalf of a husband too shy to ask

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86 Maurice Davis, interviewed by Ross Webb, 8 May, 2014.
89 HBHT, September 14, 1988.
90 HBHT, September 26, 1988.
for assistance. However, not everyone took part in the ‘nerve centres’, particularly those who opposed the strike and preferred instead to ‘try and cope with the deprivation caused by the strike on their own’. In late September, Westfield workers organised a protest march through Otahuhu. The aim of the march was to bring the issue to the public, as well as demonstrate, to both the company and other shed workers, the commitment of the workers to winning a fair redundancy agreement. Workers in the march held signs that read: ‘Vestey Must Pay’ and ‘Give Some Back Vestey’. Meanwhile in Hastings, community support remained consistent; Bruce Stobie was ‘amazed at the way outsiders, who aren’t associated with the strike, have been volunteering food and helping our members’. Workers maintained the 24-hour picket established on September 15, but after the company broke the dispensation rules by letting a truck through the back entrance, workers ‘hardened’ their picket and blocked the entire plant.

The solidarity of other Weddel Crown/Vestey sheds remained central to the resolution of the strike, particularly after Westfield workers were finally made redundant on 30 September, with a redundancy settlement still to be negotiated. On October 28, the company finally agreed to a single redundancy agreement for all plants, and raised its offer and three days later, workers across all sheds held secret ballots on whether or not to accept the proposal and return to work. John Leckie reflected on both the fact that the rank-and-file shaped the course and resolution of the strike as well as the importance of the solidarity of other sheds:

The rank and file decided how the strike started, how it expanded, and whether or not it would continue... a lot of workers believed that if an employer could get workers at one shed to go back to work, the strike would be broken, so there was a lot of effort put into keeping the other sheds informed and there were a couple of crucial votes which we thought we’d lose but we didn’t. And it was that maintaining the solidarity of the sheds which

eventually brought the employer—in this case Weddel Crown—back to the table and ready to accept the unions’ demands.¹⁰⁰

Westfield voted 397 to 45 in favour of continuing the strike. As Bill Hillman recalled, ‘Ken Douglas came back with the recommendation that we bite the bullet after nine weeks and we rejected’.¹⁰¹ But the result was not so clear in other sheds. Tōmoana voted 395 to 251 and Cambridge voted a narrow 90 to 89 in favour of continuing the strike—as Leckie points out, the vote at Cambridge was influenced by the speeches made by two workers’ wives who were able to speak at the meeting, but not vote.¹⁰² Whangarei, on the other hand, voted 26 to 16 to return to work.¹⁰³ On November 5, two letters appeared in the *Hawke’s Bay Herald Tribune*: one by a worker who voted against the continuation of the strike, but nevertheless respected the vote and claimed that ‘all points of view were considered and a fair secret ballot held’, while another suggested that the vote was ‘rigged’.¹⁰⁴

Indeed, entering its seventh week at Tōmoana and its ninth at Westfield, the strike did not come without its tensions and conflict. As with most protracted disputes, industrial action also had a significant impact on the home. Both the union and company shared the perception that domestic pressure would be a vulnerable point for some workers.¹⁰⁵ Leckie recalled that the union was quite aware and worked to minimise the stresses on the household.

And you’ve got to contend with the eventual questions that come up: How long is this thing going to go on? What is the outcome? Are we going to achieve anything? Or are we up against it? When those sort of doubts—which everyone had—found expression, you had to be realistic and demonstrate the possible outcomes.

The company sent out messages to workers and their families, suggesting that their strike was a threat to the viability of the plants. ‘Tomoana is your place of work’, read one notice, ‘Your job provides for you and your family. Working plants provide jobs.'

Idle plants put jobs at risk'. Nor were wives natural allies of the union. Loraine Story, the wife of striking Tōmoana worker, organised a meeting and a secret ballot for the wives of workers. While the partners of workers were encouraged to attend meetings, Raewyne Pooley, wife of a Cambridge worker, recalled that involvement of wives at the meeting was ‘very difficult because sometimes they are not welcome at the meeting by their own husbands... we found that we had to be very careful approaching women because it could cause marital strife at home’.

The results of the October 31st vote convinced both the company and negotiation committee that an agreement needed to be reached soon. From the employers’ point of view, the combined strike might continue, while for the union, the next vote could go either way and there was fear of the strike being isolated to the Westfield shed. In the following week, the parties finally reached an agreement. A union committee made up of representatives from all sheds met Michael Sanders and Syd McCowan on November 6, to work out the details of the final agreement, which was unanimously endorsed at shed meetings the following day, and extended to other Weddel Crown plants. Those interviewed hold different attitudes about the resolution of the strike, however. Peter Gosche felt that the ‘national officials’ and Ken Douglas ‘let us down there... I thought [Ken Douglas] was a sell-out, quite frankly... Everyone felt that he had sold us out’. Bill Hillman, Branch President of Westfield, claimed that the resolution ‘rankled’ him. After Westfield workers stayed out for nine weeks and rejected Douglas’s recommendation that they go back to work, Hillman claims that the ‘meetings were getting smaller’ and on the eleventh week, Westfield again ‘had speakers for and against.. Douglas got up and let loose. He said “you’ve gone as far as you can go. That’s it”. Head between the tails, we slunk back to work’. But, Hillman explained, ‘at least we got the redundancy’. Graham Cooke and Leckie recalled a more positive outcome. ‘We ended up with a reasonable redundancy deal’, Cooke claimed. For Leckie, ‘the announcement of the new agreement was greeted with applause. The strike had been worth it and we’d made

106 But as John Leckie points out, the company’s ‘complacent assumption’ that freezing workers wives were natural allies of the company ‘proved to be seriously misplaced’. Notice from October 14, cited in Leckie, ‘The Weddel Crown Redundancy Strike, 1988’, pp.79, 80.
109 ibid.
an advance’. But the ‘advance’ was tempered by the fact that most workers were made redundant and would not return to work.

Those who retained their work at Westfield continued after the settlement. Leckie, for example, continued as Secretary for the Union. However, the employer approached Leckie and told him his pay would be cut. It was ‘a substantial loss and I felt that it was a very pointed statement’, Leckie explained, who decided to take redundancy. The remaining workers at the plant called for action, as Leckie recalled:

The shed called a meeting and asked me why I was leaving and I said ‘well the buggers have cut my pay’ and the cry went up from the shed that we’ll do something about it; we’ll take them on. And I didn’t feel like that was a good basis for taking industrial action. I appreciated the solidarity, but I said no.\textsuperscript{111}

In October, 1989, despite assurances that Westfield’s future was secure, the plant closed completely and the remaining 500 workers lost their jobs.\textsuperscript{112} In 1990, New Zealand slid into yet another recession, with unemployment at 11 per cent—a post-Depression record.\textsuperscript{113} For those made redundant the previous year, the prospects were not looking good. Maurice Davis ‘struggled to get a job’.\textsuperscript{114} Indeed, as John Leckie explained, ‘unemployment in general was increasing in the country at that time so the prospect of losing a job wasn’t the only problem. It was the prospect of finding another job’.\textsuperscript{115} The \textit{Auckland Star} reported in October 1989 that many of the workers made redundant from Westfield in 1988 had not yet found jobs and ‘some were badly affected psychologically’.\textsuperscript{116}

After two terms of radical restructuring, and the disintegration of the Labour Party, the Fourth National Government won a landslide victory in 1990.\textsuperscript{117} Despite promises by the National Party that reform would ‘slow and become consensual’, the election instead inaugurated a ‘second wave’ of reform, entering its most controversial phase: industrial relations and the welfare state.\textsuperscript{118} The Employment Contracts Act of 1991 oversaw the transformation of labour relations in New Zealand

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item John Leckie interviewed by Ross Webb, 1 November, 2013.
\item \textit{Auckland Star}, October 5, 1989; Leckie, ‘Women and Industrial Action’, p.100.
\item Maurice Davis, interviewed by Ross Webb, 8 May, 2014.
\item John Leckie interviewed by Ross Webb, 1 November, 2013.
\item \textit{Auckland Star}, October 6, 1989.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
from a protective industrial relations system to one founded on freedom of contract and ‘unrestrained market forces’. With the intention of driving down wages, the act removed the legal status of unions and decentralised the bargaining process. It dismantled the national award system of multi-employer bargaining, withdrew all exclusive rights of unions, and reduced the role of unions in employment relations. To survive, smaller unions were forced to amalgamate. The Auckland and Tōmoana Freezing Workers Union, devastated by the closures of Southdown, Hellaby’s and Westfield, amalgamated with the West and East Coast Branches of the New Zealand Meat Workers and Related Trades Workers Union to form ‘Meat Union Aotearoa’. By 1994, union density in New Zealand stood at 23%, a drop of 38-47% in three and a half years. The enactment of the ECA attracted international attention. In 1994, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) found that the ECA violated important labour conventions, while in 1996, United States House Majority Leader Newt Gingrich sent a congressional delegation to study New Zealand as a model.

For unionists in the freezing industry, the ECA signalled a dramatic shift. For Graham Cooke, the ECA was ‘a monumental change’. Similarly, for Bruce Stobie, the ECA signalled a blow to the working class. ‘The real thing that crippled the working-class in my opinion was the Employment Contracts Act of ’91. It just gutted it!’, Stobie explained. The day that the ECA became law on 15 May coincided with the expiration of the freezing workers National Award. Employers used the opportunity to reorganise the way in which bargaining worked at a shed level; they saw it as a ‘grand opportunity to sort the unions out.’ As Cooke recalls:

The Meat Industry Association had an industrial committee and they decided they would go to departmental negotiations. In other words, there would be no collective negotiation; rather they would go plant by plant, and even lower and go department by department and member by member. So they resolved to get rid of the union that way and to get rid of the National Award.

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121 ibid.
125 Calder and Tyson, pp.288-289.
In many of the new, smaller, and more mechanised sheds, employers hired workers with no ‘industry experience or union history, and attempted to ‘train them to the company culture’. But as Michael Barry and Pat Walsh point out, for strategically placed workers like freezing workers, who could rely on member solidarity, the ECA was not the greatest challenge. Rather, industry restructuring and job losses sapped the strength of these unions. For some, working in the industry was no longer the same. ‘Working in the meat works in the 1990s was hell in every way’, explained James Robb. ‘In fact I couldn’t go on doing it. I thought “my body is not going to be able to take this anymore”’. Concurrently, the National Party oversaw a dramatic scaling down of the welfare state, compounding the problems faced by communities hit by factory closure and thecorporatisation of state assets.

‘Just like that, overnight’: The Closure of Tōmoana, 1994

It was in this context of high unemployment, cuts to welfare and hard times for towns like Hastings that Tōmoana workers were laid off without redundancy. On Friday evening, August 19, 1994, Tōmoana, along with five other plants around the country, closed its gates following the receivership of Weddel New Zealand (a subsidiary of the British Vestey Corporation). At the time of its closure, 1,214 workers were employed at Tōmoana and a further 690 were expected to begin work in November of that year. As one study notes, Weddel New Zealand ‘was Hawke’s Bay’s largest single employer with some whānau having contributed workers for up to five generations’. The closure sent shockwaves throughout the community. ‘My heart went into palpitations’, Henare O’Keefe recalled, ‘starting beating 100 miles an hour because that’s all I knew...didn’t know anything else. Worked there for 23 years and didn’t know what to do outside of that’. To make matters worse, many workers found out about the closure from the news. ‘I get a phone call and it’s my daughter’, explained union official Bruce Stobie. ‘She said “Dad, I’m just watching the news; what’s this about Tōmoana closing down?” I said, “I don’t know what you’re talking

127 Calder and Tyson, p.289.
128 Barry and Walsh, ‘State Intervention and Trade Unions in New Zealand’, p.66.
131 Dane Giraud, (Director/Writer), (2011) ‘Henare O’Keefe: Te Tuatangata’ [Documentary]
about?”. She said “it’s on the news”. One group of workers found out at rugby practise that night. ‘Some of the guys suddenly found themselves without a job’, Jean Te Huia recalled, ‘without any money, without an income - just like that, overnight’. Te Huia went to work the following day for her Saturday shift. ‘We got to work the next day, and we were locked out... we had stuff in our locker that we weren’t allowed to get. Nobody knew what was happening. No one said to us, “Tōmoana is closed, you're not going to get back in there”’. When workers were finally allowed to retrieve their belongings from their lockers early the next month, they were ‘treated like prisoners’ and escorted six at a time on to the site by a security guard in a van.

For those who had experienced redundancy after Whakatu, the news was particularly devastating. ‘Think about it—’, said Brian Walker, ‘you get whacked twice ... and stop coming up for breath’. The closure hit hardest for those with multiple family members working at the same shed. ‘I worked the works for 23 years’, Ina Forsythe said at the time of the closure, ‘between me and my husband we’ve worked for 53 years... I’m not sure about what we’re going to do now’. Interviewed at the time, Rarere claimed that ‘over 500 were employed for the last 20 years and now that the umbrella has been taken away from them, they are standing in the rain’. As with the threats at the Gear and Westfield sheds before closures, management gave Tōmoana workers the ultimatum of jobs versus a pay cut a year before the closure. Workers ‘reluctantly’ took a pay-cut to ‘secure their jobs’ as well as sweeping workplace reforms. ‘The word was if you don’t take a pay cut we’re going to shut down’, Henare O’Keefe recalled. ‘And so we said, “okay we will”. And then they shut down anyway’. According to Labour MP Rick Barker, some of them took cuts of up to $130 a week; many took a $100-a-week pay cut. Despite the pain they still believed they were better off because they had a

133 ibid.
135 Jean Te Huia, interviewed by Ross Webb, 3 September, 2013.
136 ibid.
139 Kahungunu Iwi Newspaper, Issue 6, 1994, pp.4-5.
job. The company continued to reassure them that all was well. They were meeting their targets, and their efficiency gains were meaning that their jobs were secure. 143

Brian Walker said that he was ‘peeved’ because workers at Tōmoana worked ‘bloody hard’. ‘They met their targets, they met the production levels. They flogged their guts out. They don’t know who to blame’, Walker explained. 144

On the following Tuesday, the New Zealand Parliament in Wellington debated the receivership of Weddel New Zealand. Much of the debate revolved around the appropriate relationship between state, society and the economy, and what Helen Clark called the ‘saga of disaster in the meat industry’. Clark opened the debate

I have never seen a closure more appallingly handled. That company did not have the guts to look its workers in the eye before they went home. ...I know from my colleague the member for Hastings that the first workers there knew of it was when they saw it on television at home or in the pub... Where do they go now? The human impact is dreadful, as will be the economic impact on those towns... There is little relief in sight. These workers will be lucky to get even a sniff of a redundancy payment, because the law treats a redundancy payment as it would treat an unsecured creditor. 145

Indeed, under the Companies Act of 1993, workers’ held the status of creditors, making them vulnerable in regards to unpaid wages and redundancy payments. 146 National’s Minister of Agriculture, John Faloon, rejected Helen Clark’s calls for Government intervention into the industry and redundancy payments as doing ‘more harm than good to people who need help from their managers and leaders, not from the Government’. 147 Faloon urged that state intervention would ‘destroy the opportunity for the proper processes of the market to work’. Labour MP Jim Sutton claimed that the way the closures and redundancy were handled reflected the ‘sort of corrupt approach that has invaded our commercial life in this country, and this Government is sitting idly on its butt, doing nothing about it’. 148 Tini Tirikatene-Sullivan, representing Southern Māori for the Labour Party addressed the human impact of the closures and, in particular, the impact on Māori:

144 HBHT, April 20, 1994.
Māoridom has manned the frozen-meat industry for over a century. Māori-intensive labour forces have characterised the industry. Trained, skilled, superbly organised tangata whenua labour has provided the industry with stakeholders unmentioned so far in this debate... Tōmoana has been the largest, and the collapse there is having ramifications in large groups of whanau throughout Hawke’s Bay... I personally know of several dozen cases in which several members in the same family have worked at Tōmoana. The father, the mother, the sons, the sons-in-law—every one of them in large extended whanau groups—have lost their jobs in this closure and are so traumatised by this collapse that they do not know what to do.149

But such speeches made little impact on the Government’s response to the closure. The National Government’s ‘stand-down’ period law meant that freezing workers would have to wait at least ten weeks before receiving the unemployment benefit. At the end of August, the Government again ruled out any reduction to the stand-down period for the unemployment benefit. ‘The Government wouldn’t waive it’, claimed one worker, ‘even though they had heaps of delegations going down to Wellington, letters written, MPs come visited and that was one thing that Government would not do’.150 For those involved in the fight for a combined redundancy deal in 1988, the news that redundancy payment would not be made after the collapse of Weddel/Vestey caused considerable resentment. As Bruce Stobie explained,

We fought like hell and worked hard to get that redundancy deal. We looked after our own people through organisation of our centres where we would feed our own and raise money, and we contributed to their centres up in Westfield too. We fought like hell, got Westfield a redundancy, and when it came to our turn, we went out with nothing.

With no redundancy, and a long stand-down before redundant workers could collect the unemployment benefit, freezing workers mobilised on their own.

‘Spiritually and materially’: The Tōmoana Resource Centre (TRC)
George Rarere planned to go on a fishing trip on the Monday following the announcement of the closure. He had spent the weekend organising the trip. But on the morning of the August 22, he received a call from Tom Morrison, a freezing

worker and union delegate. Morrison told Rarere: ‘you need to come down to this meeting. Why aren’t you down at this meeting? You need to come down’. Rarere replied: ‘Oh no, I’m going fishing, bro. Good luck to everyone else’,\textsuperscript{151} As Morrison and Rarere spoke, freezing workers were gathering in the car park of the Tōmoana works, confused and angry after the sudden announcement of the closure the previous Friday. At the car park meeting various community leaders spoke, including local Labour MP Rick Barker and the company managing directors. In an expression of frustration at the discussion that focused solely on the reasons for the closure, Henare O’Keefe shouted from the crowd. ‘I was so overcome with frustration’, O’Keefe explained, ‘and I screamed out at the top of my voice from the middle of this two-thousand or so people: “what are you going to do about the wives? What are you going to do about the children? I haven’t heard anyone talk about the family. What are you going to do about the families?’\textsuperscript{152} Rarere eventually turned up at the meeting, but ‘still with the thought of going fishing in my mind’, as he explained.

And just before I was about to leave the car park, someone got on the mic and said “George Rarere is here and we hope he'll be here [to help us]... to help our people”. And I thought “shit, should have seen it that way”. That got my emotional side.

Rarere and O’Keefe emerged as community leaders in the wake of the closure and would go on to play a central role in the support networks established in the following weeks.

The day after the car park meeting, union delegates met at a ‘crisis meeting’ in Hastings to plan how to go about helping workers following their sudden and unexpected redundancy.\textsuperscript{153} There, leaders agreed on the establishment of a Tōmoana Resource Centre (TRC). At this stage, it remained unclear whether or not the plant would reopen. Bruce Stobie ‘had hope’. ‘I can’t be over-optimistic’, he explained in an interview at the time, ‘but it would be tragic for Hastings’.\textsuperscript{154} Mike Nahu, president of the newly formed Meat Union of Aotearoa, claimed that the mood was not ‘overly optimistic’ about the prospects of a reopening.\textsuperscript{155} On the August 25, around 500

\textsuperscript{151} George Rarere, interviewed by Ross Webb, 2 September, 2013.
\textsuperscript{152} Dane Giraud, (Director/Writer), (2011) ‘Henare O’Keefe: Te Tuatangata’ [Documentary].
\textsuperscript{154} HBHT, April 20, 1994.
Figure 29. Meeting in the Tōmoana freezing works car park after the announcement of its closure four days earlier on Friday, August 19. *Hawke's Bay Herald-Tribune*, August 22, 1994.

Figure 30. Henare O'Keefe (left) and George Rarere (right) were central to the Tōmoana Resource Centre's Efforts. Photos from: *Hawke’s Bay Herald Tribune*, September 8, 1994, pp.1, 3.
workers packed the Municipal Theatre in Hastings at 3pm to receive the final decision on the plant. ‘It could be good news; it could be bad’, claimed one worker. Weddel Tōmoana General Manager David Gusscott spoke first, expressing anger at the way in which receivers dealt with the closure and thanked the workers, calling them the ‘family of Tōmoana’. ‘We gave it our best shot. God bless you all’, he said. Finally, Rod de Terte, who oversaw the receivership, gave the final verdict that no plants would reopen. After the announcement, media were asked to leave while the union informed workers on the support networks in place. In spite of the announcement, the work on the Tōmoana Resource Centre continued, opening on the same day.

On its opening day, a ‘continuous flow’ of workers visited the centre. George Rarere, TRC co-ordinator, explained that ‘it was a big community response. People were coming down to the resource centre wanting to sign on, just to help, just to do something’. At its first meeting, Rarere recalled,

There was everything from the banks, Housing New Zealand, Māori Affairs, New Zealand Employment Service, Social Welfare, Hospital Board, and the Power Board... everybody that a freezing worker touched in their lives sat in the room. The first thing that I said was “well, there’s going to no money coming in for a little while”. Similarly, Bruce Stobie recalled that the community support ‘was incredible. Sanitarium gave us two pallets of Weetabix a week. Off the truck, they dropped it off and were gone. Don’t even know how they found out about us’. The TRC operated in a voluntary capacity for over six weeks. The centre provided workers to access government agencies, an onsite food bank, and a range of job training courses. ‘There has been a lot of support from people but that’s not surprising’, Ina Forsythe

159 George Rarere, interviewed by Ross Webb, 2 September, 2013.
160 ibid.
claimed. ‘People come off the streets into the centre and bring cakes, scones, money etc. for the workers and it’s really good’.\textsuperscript{163}

Not all workers visited the TRC, however, and members were sent out to check on families that had not attended. Henare O’Keefe was involved in this effort. ‘Henare was out on the road’, Rarere explained. ‘I’d be looking at the database every day and see that nobody had touched base with this family, so Henare would come back and take a parcel out’.\textsuperscript{164} As O’Keefe recalled, he would go houses and knock on the door and shout: ‘It’s Henare here. I’ve got some kai here and I want to talk to you!’; O’Keefe aimed to bring ‘hope’ and ‘reassurance’ to workers who had ‘lost all of that in one fell swoop’.\textsuperscript{165} But in visiting ‘husbands and wives’, O’Keefe claimed that the signs of stress were ‘already there’.\textsuperscript{166} Similarly, Tōmoana General Manager David Gusscott claimed that ‘there is no doubt there is trauma and in these situations people often act without seeking advice’.\textsuperscript{167} In response, the TRC also took on counselling, recognising that those not attending were perhaps the most at risk and organisers feared the impact on of the closure on family relationships.\textsuperscript{168} Indeed, organisers knew that the isolation caused by sudden unemployment would be a major issue. In 1995, the \textit{Hawke’s Bay Sun} looked back on the events of the closure and the impact it had. ‘Some husbands were drinking too much; some had no idea what to do with their time. Much of the pain was due to lack of communication’.\textsuperscript{169}

Henare O’Keefe aimed to bring the whanaungatanga and comradeship of the workplace to the efforts of the TRC. At a union meeting on September 12, O’Keefe claimed that ‘there are a lot of people we haven’t seen yet. They really concern me’ and he urged former workers to ‘get your butts down here and talk to these people’.\textsuperscript{170} The \textit{Hawke’s Bay Herald Tribune} reported that the ‘spirit and humour that once abounded’ at Tōmoana ‘was probably seen for the last time’ at the meeting, which was marked by humour, singing—‘that once resounded along six Tōmoana

\textsuperscript{163} \textit{Kahungunu Iwi Newspaper}, Issue 6, 1994, pp.4-5
\textsuperscript{164} George Rarere, interviewed by Ross Webb, 2 September, 2013.
\textsuperscript{165} Dane Giraud, (Director/Writer), (2011) ‘Henare O’Keefe: Te Tuatangata’ [Documentary]
\textsuperscript{166} \textit{HBHT}, September 8, 1994 p.1.
\textsuperscript{167} \textit{HBHT}, September 8, 1994 p.1.
\textsuperscript{168} \textit{HBHT}, September 8, 1994 p.1.
\textsuperscript{170} \textit{HBHT}, September 13, 1994 p.1.
chains at Christmas’—and a karakia (prayers).\textsuperscript{171} Indeed, the resource centre recognised the Tōmoana workforce ‘as a whānau, and the fellowship and comradeship that accompanied their employment’\textsuperscript{172} In organising the Resource Centre, freezing workers and their unions were drawing on their experience of both seasonal work and the annual lay-offs as well as experience in sustaining workers through strike action. Rarere explained that he had helped organise a similar resource centre for workers during the 1986 National Award strike.\textsuperscript{173} But unlike the ‘nerve’ centres created during strikes, the resource centre had multiple purposes, providing support, advice, assistance, guidance, training, and re-employment.\textsuperscript{174} Indeed, the TRC had to contend not only with the loss of an income, but also the loss of the workplace and a community. For these reasons, it provided not only financial support, but also supported workers through the stress and anxiety of losing what

\textsuperscript{171} HBHT, September 13, 1994 p.1.
\textsuperscript{173} HBHT, April 26, 1994.
many considered ‘a second home’ and a ‘whānau atmosphere’. Peter Robin claimed that apart from the income, he would miss above all the social side of the freezing works. ‘[Y]ou got to meet heaps of people’, he said, ‘and some became your closest friends’.175 ‘I think the centre is achieving a lot more than it’s supposed to’, said Willy McDonald, another freezing worker made redundant following the closure. ‘Spiritually and materially. You have to think positively not negatively about the future’.176

Henare O’Keefe and George Rarere both played a central role in the TRC. Both understood the importance of the works to the community and understood the substantial loss that the closure wrought. But O’Keefe and Rarere were, in the end, in the same boat as other workers and the closure had a devastating impact on both men. After working for the Tōmoana Resource Centre for six months, Rarere finally got to go on his fishing trip.

I put my career on hold to make sure that everyone around me in my community, in the works, was safe. But I left the resource centre after six months. I left because I wanted a break. I was worn out. The day I left, I got all my holiday gear, fishing gear put the boat on the back of the car. I said to my wife and my two boys, 'I'll see you guys when I feel a little better'. I went to have a holiday at our camp. And I was there for about eight days. My wife called me one day and asked me if I was ready to come home and I said 'yup', packed up my stuff and went home.177

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The closure of freezing works across New Zealand had a devastating impact on communities reliant on the local ‘works’. It brought an end to guaranteed work and intergenerational employment, as well as a strong workplace and union culture. Māori, in particular, were hit hard by the closures where, in many cases, whole whānau lost their incomes. The Māori unemployment rate in 1986 reached 24.2 per

175 Kahungunu Iwi Newspaper, Issue 6, 1994, pp.4-5.
176 ibid.
177 George Rarere, interviewed by Ross Webb, 2 September, 2013.
cent, compared with 9 percent for non-Māori.\textsuperscript{178} At the same time, benefit cuts and higher rents for state housing had significant impacts on areas like South Auckland and Hastings.\textsuperscript{179} Both international developments and domestic policy choices shaped the course of the economic changes in the 1980s and 1990s. Under the influence of neoliberal theory, ‘the social and moral economy shifted from a post-war commitment to maintaining full employment to one in which fighting inflation and supporting growth took precedence’.\textsuperscript{180} Free markets and deregulation promised ‘wealth creation’ and ‘individual freedom’, but resulted in an uneven distribution of wealth, as well as stagnating wages and declining standards of living for many.\textsuperscript{181} As many scholars note, inequality increased everywhere where neoliberal policies were introduced in the 1980s, but it rose fastest in New Zealand.\textsuperscript{182}

These statistics are well rehearsed in the political and economic history of the period, but little attention is given to how people coped and responded. As Aroha Harris and Melissa Matutina Williams write, ‘Māori battled, coped and survived, doing what they could to keep their families, whānau and communities afloat’.\textsuperscript{183} While the position of the freezing workers’ union was significantly eroded by the combined impacts of legislative changes and broader international developments, workplace and union culture remained alive and well in the efforts of workers to fight for redundancy pay and in setting up resource centres. Freezing workers’ brought their experiences of long strikes and community mobilisation to these efforts. But workplace and union culture relied significantly on the workplace as its nexus. Its loss meant not only a loss of income, but a loss of a central site of camaraderie and whanaungatanga.

For many, closure signalled the end of a ‘way of life’.\textsuperscript{184} As Steven Eldred-Grigg writes, the ‘closure or destruction of many big factories in the late twentieth

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{179} ibid.
\textsuperscript{181} ibid.
\textsuperscript{182} ibid.
\textsuperscript{184} Bill Hillman, interviewed by Ross Webb, 20 June, 2014.
\end{flushleft}
century broke up the collective life which had once linked working people together
and encouraged them to see themselves as people with common needs’.185 Indeed,
many of those interviewed explained that it took years to get over the closures. ‘For
about ten years after I missed it’, Rarere explained, ‘I missed the comradeship... It
took a long, long time to get over 20 years of a close-knit family life’.186 Similarly,
Maurice Davis found that he was ‘absolutely devastated’ for years after Westfield
closed.187 McIntosh said that her father ‘loved the freezing works. He always said “I'd
still be there now if it hadn't closed”’.188 Workplace reunions continued in the years
and decades after closure (Figure 32). Maurice Davis explained that he stopped
going, ‘because you were reliving a past that you couldn’t get back’.189 Closure did not
only mean a loss of a workplace community, but also a reshaping in the social
geography and fabric of the local areas. ‘I can remember, just in that part of Great
South Road’, Mulrennan recalled, ‘there was Westfield, Southdown, Hellaby’s, and at
four o’clock or so, hundreds of workers would come out of those freezing works... and
then hundreds and hundreds of workers [lost their jobs]’.190 For Gosche, the closure
changed ‘the whole culture of South Auckland. The freezing works kept Ōtāhuhu
going’,191 On the day I interviewed Gosche, he drove past the Westfield works. ‘I
drove past this morning and it’s just so sad that you don’t even know it was there: the
gates, the Westfield gates, the watch house, things like that’.192 On Great South Road,
where the Westfield freezing works once stood, is Vestey road, but ‘There’s no Bill
Hillman Street’, said John Leckie. But while the workplaces are no longer there, the
memories remain, as George Rarere reflected: ‘While others would have moved onto
other jobs, the memories will still be there. Like it is for me’.193

185 Eldred-Grigg, New Zealand Working People, p.228.
186 George Rarere, interviewed by Ross Webb, 2 September, 2013.
187 Maurice Davis, interviewed by Ross Webb, 8 May, 2014.
189 Maurice Davis, interviewed by Ross Webb, 8 May, 2014.
190 Helen Mulrennan, interviewed by Ross Webb, 5 August, 2013.
192 ibid.
For all ex-staff, freezing workers, meat inspectors, maintenance, contractors and partners
to be held at
Otahuhu Working Men’s
Cosmopolitan Club

On Sunday
26th September, 1999
12.30-5.00pm

Contact
Bill Mudford Ph 278 6725
Ron Graves Ph 534 2670
Eric McIntosh Ph 379 2728
Stan Scott OWMC Club Reception Mon-Fri 4.30 onwards
Bill Hillman

Figure 32. Poster for a reunion at the Westfield freezing works, 1999. John Leckie Personal Collection
Conclusion:
“It’s Worth Remembering that Stuff”
Memories and Legacies

We know that memory reconstitutes the past; it does not hold the details of human experience intact. Rather, individuals translate their experiences into stories, and some of the stories enter into communal consciousness. Further, narratives born of social and political crises are preserved in memory not so much as records of those times but as tools by which to act in the present... History is better informed when we remember the past, not merely reconstruct it. The stories that we remember are our markers, guides, comfort—and warning.1

- Judith Binney

Jack Wilson was one among thousands of freezing workers who lost their jobs on August 19, 1994, following the receivership of Weddel New Zealand/Vestey’s. For Wilson and many others, the Tōmoana freezing works was his ‘second home, not just a workplace’, with its own social networks, family connections, ‘camaraderie’ and a strong union culture. At the time of the closure, Wilson was No.2 on the mutton chain seniority list. Among Wilson’s memories were the ‘big strike’ of 1986 when he picked apples with his wife to make ends meet. Wilson remembered the social side of the works, in particular, the interwork sports tournament. And he remembered the ‘family spirit’ of the workplace. When Wilson’s house burned down in 1989, a union delegate arrived with $500 collected from the workers that afternoon. Sixty years old at the time of the closure of the Tōmoana freezing works, Wilson hoped to write his memoirs about his time on the job. ‘I’ll do a bit of taping from now on’, he said, ‘while a man’s memory is still fresh. You’ve got to let it out; talk about it. It’s happened, it’s history and it will never repeat itself’.2

Like Wilson, many of those interviewed looked back on their years in the freezing works as a unique period in their lives. ‘What a fantastic movie that would make’, said Henare O’Keefe.3 For James Robb, the ability to take part in ‘the more or less continuous ferment’ that was going on in the labour movement’ and a ‘period of rank-and-file militancy’ was a ‘limited period in history’ and ‘hard to see at the time’.4 Robb recently published a novel entitled The Chain about working in the Hastings freezing works. ‘It was an important era and it’s kind of getting lost which is

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3 Henare O’Keefe, interviewed by Ross Webb, 1 September, 2013.
partly why I wrote the book’, Robb said. ‘It’s worth remembering that stuff’.5 The book focuses on the characters and personalities at the freezing works. Indeed, for most, the central aspect of work in the freezing industry was the people. At the end of each interview, I asked ex-freezing workers what their most vivid memories were of the works and I asked them what they learnt. Again and again, the responses returned to the people in the works. Jean Te Huia said that there was an ‘honesty’ and ‘respectability’ about the labourers and the butchers at Tōmoana, a quality she has yet to encounter again.

Since [Tōmoana], I’ve worked with upper middle-class people, whose attitudes wouldn’t even match some of the butchers that I worked with and some of the labourers that I worked with. Some of the attitudes of the upper middle class people that I’ve worked with, they wouldn’t even come half way to the same respectability of those labourers and butchers at Tōmoana... I can never talk ill of anyone that I worked with at the freezing works; just a good, hardworking, fun-loving, whanau-oriented lot of people.6

Similarly, George Rarere explained that ‘something I’ll never forget is the relationship between people’.7 For Henare O’Keefe, the ‘beginning’ and the ‘end’ are the memories that ‘stuck’. The ‘in-between’ was ‘a mixture of a whole host of things; a whole host of teachings, learning, humility—you know?’ 8 The freezing works left a legacy, then, not only of social dislocation and rupture in communities reliant on ‘the works’, but also of strong personal relationships, a sense of the importance of that time and place, and fond memories.

The introduction of this thesis argued for the importance of the use of oral histories in exploring what Anna Green calls ‘finely grained and nuanced understanding of the texture of everyday life in the past’, the ways in which freezing workers made sense of their working lives, and the value of involving historical actors in the writing of their own history.9 But another benefit of the oral histories is the lessons we learn from participants. Many of those interviewed shared not only their experiences of working in the freezing works, but also reflected philosophically

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5 Robb interviewed in Manakau Courier, December 18, 2012, p.4.
6 Jean Te Huia, interviewed by Ross Webb, 3 September, 2013.
7 George Rarere, interviewed by Ross Webb, 2 September, 2013.
8 Henare O’Keefe, interviewed by Ross Webb, 1 September, 2013.
about their time. They shared their most vivid memories, humorous stories, their regrets, and their struggles. Some of those interviewed continued work inspired by their involvement in the freezing works and its union, as well as the community responses to closure. Peter Gosche’s experience in the freezing works inspired him to work for a union. ‘The main thing I liked about [the freezing works] was the people; the people that I worked with. I think that gravitated me towards trying to help workers and working for a union’.10 Similarly, Maurice Davis, ‘learnt about unionism’ in the freezing works. ‘I learnt about collectivism in terms of being united, together’.11 Henare O’Keefe’s current position as a social worker stems directly from involvement in the Tōmoana Resource Centre as well as the relationships he developed in the freezing works. Now a councillor and respected community leader in Hastings, O’Keefe explained that his time at Tōmoana shaped his current views and attitudes.

I learnt a hell of a lot. It was the University of Life for me. I always say, ‘if in doubt, pull Tōmoana out’. It stood me in good stead. It taught me how to manage people... And I took a real interest in [other workers] and their families...Today I believe that the currency of the future is in relationships. I totally and absolutely believe that...That came from Tōmoana, mate.

Pride in what he learnt and in the workplace culture, however, is laced with a sense of regret. ‘I only wish, when I think back, though, that we realised what we had back then’, O’Keefe explained. ‘It’s not until it’s taken away from you, when you realise what you had. We will never see that ilk again’.12 For James Robb, too, a sense of the uniqueness of the freezing works, and in particular its militant tradition, is coupled with regret at how things worked out. ‘I got a small glimpse of the courage, self-confidence, openness to serious political discussion, the unselfish generosity and of the power of the industrial workers when they act in solidarity’, Robb explained. ‘The impression all this made on me was only deepened when I saw it all reversed’.13

Indeed, for many interviewed, the 1980s signalled a period of transition in New Zealand’s history and the end of an era. When John Leckie left Westfield he continued studying at the University of Auckland History Department, where he

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11 Maurice Davis, interviewed by Ross Webb, 8 May, 2014.
wrote an MA thesis on the Westfield redundancy dispute. In the introduction, Leckie reflected back on the changes he had lived through.

This stepping back and taking stock is something I share with many, many thousands of New Zealanders whose jobs and corresponding sense of identity have fallen victim to the radical restructuring, even destructuring, of the economic base of the country during the nineteen-eighties.14

Bruce Stobie explained that the changes in the 1980s ‘wounded’ him. ‘I’m wounded by the change because there is a lot of unfairness now’, he said.15 For Jean Te Huia, subsequent governments have ‘not totally considered the impact that closing the freezing works had’, because ‘it wasn’t just about going to work and getting money, it was about that comradeship’.16 For many interviewed, the existence of freezing works—and with it, guaranteed employment, good pay, and a strong workplace and union culture—was a symbol of a different time in New Zealand history. The closure of freezing works across the country signaled the end of that era.

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How do we interpret and make sense of the fundamental changes that swept the economy, working-class communities and the union movement over the late twentieth century? A vast literature explores the changes in the direction of economic policy in New Zealand in those decades.17 On the one hand, business people, economists, and social commentators ‘applaud the reforms, believing they markedly improved New Zealand’s economic prospects and international competitiveness, made industry more efficient, and New Zealand people more accountable and self-reliant’; the changes, according to this interpretation, were ‘necessary’ and ‘inevitable’.18 The closure of the freezing works was an unfortunate, but necessary, outcome of the structural changes. Indeed, one former Labour Politician, Michael Basset, suggested that there was a ‘silver lining’ to the farming crisis of 1985 and

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16 Jean Te Huia, interviewed by Ross Webb, 3 September, 2013.
17 See footnote 12, Chapter 4.
1986; that is, that a ‘considerable amount of long-delayed rationalisation within the meat industry was taking place’. On the other hand, many scholars argue that the changes have led to declining productivity, growing income inequality and increasing poverty, as well as undermining aspects of democracy—what Jane Kelsey calls the economic, social and democratic ‘deficits’.

Similarly, scholars have analysed the changing fortunes of the union movement in this period of economic transition: the emergence of rank-and-file militancy, changes in industrial legislation and regulatory framework, public attitudes towards trade unions, the decline of traditionally militant blue collar unions, and the growing employer offensive. Some scholars emphasise trade union’s structural vulnerability and dependence on the Arbitration Court; unions were simply unprepared for the deregulatory policies of the 1980s and 1990s. Another long–standing and common historical judgement of the trade union movement in this period is that it failed to pursue alternatives and provide a radical challenge to the capitalist order. This interpretation holds that the rank-and-file are inherently revolutionary, while union officials represented a conservative layer within the trade union movement’ and failed to ‘fend off the ruling class offensive’ of the era. In this interpretation, ‘unions, for the most part, were obstacles in the paths of rank-and-file workers’. On the Right, the interpretation focuses on the powerful position of trade union as a privileged group, whose legislative support

impinged on the flexibility of the free market. The freezing worker was the prime example and archetype in this argument.

The voices of ordinary people are largely missing from these interpretations. Drawing on oral histories, this thesis has provided insights into the daily rhythms of work, culture, unionism, and community in the freezing works. It has illustrated how freezing workers understood and made sense of their working lives, their union involvement, and responses to economic change and hard times. Alongside the grand narrative of worker militancy, dire economic challenges, and hard times for working-class communities, it has provided an analysis of various aspects of the lives of freezing workers: the workplace culture; the links between work and community; the conceptualisations of ethnicity, gender and class, how political issues played out in the workplace; the insistence on autonomy on the job and the collective identity of freezing workers. These are stories missing from the interpretations described above. The praise of neoliberal policies by the Right overlooks the human tragedy of those decades, while the case study of freezing workers challenges the theory of a radical rank-and-file kept in check by a conservative union officialdom. At times, rank-and-file freezing workers certainly acted beyond the officialdom’s requests, but never in a radical manner. It is also perhaps true that the union movement did not pursue alternatives to the post-war status quo, but this interpretation largely fails to acknowledge the beliefs and aspirations of workers, as well as developments and structures well beyond the control of trade unions and working people.

Only by exploring workers in the context of their workplaces and communities, and exploring unionism at a local workplace level, can we understand how and why workers responded the way they did during this turbulent period in New Zealand’s recent past. Melanie Nolan argues that by putting workers at the centre of our stories, labour historians can challenge ‘the business– and policy–elite narrative of seemingly inexorable economic and political developments’. This thesis aimed to achieve this, while acknowledging the limits of workers’ agency, especially in a time of economic crisis and transformation. As labour historian Paul Taillon

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26 Carlyon and Morrow, Changing Times, p.323.
27 Nolan, ‘Neoliberalism at Work in the Antipodean Welfare State’, p.163
writes, ‘the fate of workers’ movements was often beyond their control’; workers ‘constructed their collective identities and institutional ideologies and strategies under conditions not of their own choosing’.29 This study has emphasised the agency of workers in their workplaces, unions and communities; but this agency was always limited and tested by broader economic, legislative, and political trends. Further research is required to fully develop these questions and explore other aspects of the freezing industry, its workforce and its unions. Analyses of employer strategy in the most dispute-prone industry in the country during the 1970s and 1980s is a subject worthy of investigation. As Michael Barry has recognised, ‘the employer’s role in creating or remedying industrial disputation remains poorly examined’.30 Moreover, explorations of workplace cultures and communities of South Island sheds, as well as more specific analysis of Māori and Pacific Island workers in the industry, would broaden our understanding of those who worked in the freezing industry and add to our understanding of the labour movement and working people during a period of fundamental change.

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Those who began work in the freezing industry in the 1970s were the heirs of a century of change and expansion in the meat industry, a well as a long and militant history on the part of its unions. Chapter One of this thesis laid the foundations for the subsequent chapters, providing a brief national history of the rise of freezing workers as powerful and industrially militant sector of the blue collar workforce. Between the 1880s and 1970s, freezing workers built strong craft and then industrial unions and favoured a strategy of bargaining both within and outside the limits imposed by the Arbitration Court. During and directly following the Second World War, the demography of the workforce shifted significantly, so that by the 1960s and 1970s, Māori and Pacific Island workers made up a large proportion of the workforce. While the dominance of men remained consistent, the post-war period also witnessed the increased presence of women in the industry. Chapter One ended with a discussion of the centrality of the freezing works for towns and communities.

around the country, as well as the economic context of the 1970s, as the growth and prosperity that characterised the 1950s and 1960s gave way to economic instability, high inflation, declining terms of trade, and growing unemployment. By the 1970s, both the meat industry and the strength of freezing workers’ unions reached their pinnacle, before entering a period of instability and economic downturn.

While Chapter One provided a national overview, the focus of subsequent chapters narrowed in on Tōmoana and Westfield. Chapter Two explored workplace culture and community. For those interviewed, the workplace culture was central to their experiences of working in the industry. In a workplace dominated by speed, regimentation, and monotony, as well as ‘blood and guts’, workers sustained a strong workplace culture that emphasised values of camaraderie and whanaungatanga, and reinforced wider community connections. Workers sustained this workplace culture through a series of rituals and practices and it functioned as a means of alleviating the monotony of the work at the same time that it transformed the workplace into a site of humour, community and fun, reinforcing the strong bonds between workers. While ethnicity and gender played a central role in how working people understood and conceptualised this workplace culture, occupational or class solidarity subsumed and co-existed with such differences. Interviewees explained that while ethnic differences mattered, workers were all simultaneously ‘just mates’ and ‘all the same’. Gender differences were more rigid, however. As increasing numbers of women entered the freezing works, their acceptance into this workplace culture was limited; the masculine hegemony of the freezing works remained intact. Chapter Two ended with a discussion of the wider community connections. It argued that the freezing works in Auckland and Hawke’s Bay provided a hub for workers, not only as a place of work, but a site of social, community and family life. The communities surrounding ‘the works’ were distinctly working-class; workers shared not only a place of employment and occupation, but also the same social life centred around the pub and sports as well as ties of ethnicity and kinship, home and neighbourhood.

This workplace culture fed into and underpinned a strong workplace unionism or union culture in the freezing works. After expanding on the political economy of freezing worker militancy in the 1970s and 1980s, Chapter Three discussed union culture. It demonstrated how workers frequently challenged employer’s prerogatives
and asserted their own control and autonomy on the job. Union culture provided workers with a sense of pride in their identity as freezing workers, loyalty to one another, and ownership over the job. Freezing workers expressed a pride in being ‘staunch unionists’. Union culture found expression in stop-work meetings, wildcats strikes, picket lines and in ‘nerve’ centres or strike committees organised during strikes that aimed to alleviate the impacts of the strike on families and build solidarity within the community. Rank-and-file militancy and involvement remained central to this union culture. The Chapter also explored how political currents entered the workplace and, in some cases, divided workers, challenging long standing beliefs and workplace cultures. Such divisions dissolved, however, when it came to drawn out strike action. During long strikes, workers, unions and communities mobilised quickly, establishing strike committees and ‘nerve’ centres.

The 1986 Award, used as a case study, reflected the militant tradition of freezing workers at the same time that it revealed long standing tensions in the industry over wages and conditions following the deregulation of the industry and the removal of subsidies for farmers.

Chapter Four provided a narrative of the vast changes that hit the industry, the economy and the labour movement in the 1980s and 1990s. Between 1981 and 1991, government deregulated the meat industry, removed subsides for farmers, removed the right for workers to bargain through the ‘two-tier system’ and then removed the Award and legal protections for unions altogether. As closures swept the industry, freezing workers’ tradition of autonomy, militancy and workplace culture came under threat. In 1988 Westfield cut its mutton production and closed the following year. In 1994, Tōmoana closed without warning. In responding to closure—in the fight for redundancy pay and in the establishment of community support networks following closure—workers once again drew on their traditions of workplace and union culture. The closure of the freezing works had a devastating impact on the local areas of Hastings and South Auckland. For freezing workers, it marked the ‘end of an era’, the end of a ‘way of life’, and the end of a strong workplace and union culture. But as the opening of this conclusion has suggested, while closures ruptured communities, the workplace and union culture had longstanding and sometimes positive legacies.
Despite the closures and the economic restructuring of the 1980s and 1990s, freezing workers and their unions have adapted and survived, though have never returned to the position of strength once held in the 1970s. As Marjorie Jerrard writes, ‘after two decades of restructuring and employment relations change, unions can be seen as survivors in the industry, and the employers as the winners’. The Fifth Labour Government restored some of the protections eliminated by the Employment Contracts Act, and the return to collective bargaining under the Employment Relations Amendment Act has had positive outcomes for the union. Today, however, freezing workers again face a hostile political and economic environment. A third term National Government has passed legislation removing key protections for collective bargaining, while employers continue to push for greater ‘flexibility’ in the workplace and employment practises. In 2012, AFFCO/Talley’s locked out over 1,200 workers for twelve weeks in an effort to de-unionise the plant. The Meat Workers’ Union campaigned to end the lock out; their campaign slogan was ‘Workmates. Whānau. Community’. More recently the union has launched a campaign called ‘Jobs that Count’, a push against casualization and the erosion of seniority protections, and highlighting the greater safety risks in the industry (Figure 33). Clearly, freezing workers and their communities continue to sustain themselves during drawn out industrial action, assert their pride in their jobs, and underscore the values of camaraderie, union solidarity, and community.

32 ibid., p.37.
33 ibid., p.48.
Figure 33. 'Jobs that Count' Campaign Poster. From 'Jobs that Count' Facebook Page.
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