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THE MANAWATU FLAXMILLS EMPLOYEES' INDUSTRIAL UNION OF WORKERS,

1906 - 1921.

A Research Exercise presented in partial  
fulfilment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Arts in History at  
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Michael Kevin Fitzgerald

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ABBREVIATIONS.

The following abbreviations have been used in references to newspapers, periodicals and official papers:

<u>AS.</u>	<u>Auckland Star.</u>
<u>MES.</u>	<u>Manawatu Evening Standard.</u>
<u>MDT.</u>	<u>Manawatu Daily Times.</u>
<u>MH.</u>	<u>Manawatu Herald.</u>
<u>PH.</u>	<u>Press Hank.</u>
<u>RT.</u>	<u>Round Table.</u>
<u>WN</u>	<u>Weekly News.</u>
<u>AJHR.</u>	<u>Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives.</u>
<u>PD.</u>	<u>New Zealand Parliamentary Debates.</u>

### BACKGROUND TO MILITANCY.

In most industrialised nations, the years immediately preceding the outbreak of the First World War were marked by an intensification of radical agitation against the existing social order. This outburst of dissent found expression in France, Germany and Great Britain in the various Socialist political parties, and in the rhetoric, and occasionally in the violence, of Syndicalism. In the United States the foremost vehicle of dissent was the Industrial Workers of the World, formed in 1905 to promote the organisation of all workers in a particular industry into a single fighting union, each of these 'Industrial' unions in turn being linked with others so as to form a homogeneous and militant working-class organisation. The I.W.W. scorned 'Craft' unionism; unions which restricted their membership to men who had served time in a particular trade, the I.W.W. alleged, were divisive of working-class solidarity, and were concerned primarily not with the abolition of the capitalist system but with gaining piecemeal improvements within the system.<sup>1</sup> In New Zealand, as in Australia and South Africa, it was among miners that the ideas of overseas radicals found their greatest response.<sup>2</sup>

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1. See Appendix I for a sketch of the messianic aims and appeal of syndicalism and 'I.W.W.-ism' in France and the U.S.A.

2. RT, March 1914. p. 366



These countries were not industrialised on the scale that Germany or the United States were, but in each there were certain industries which brought comparatively large numbers of men together under relatively harsh conditions; it was these men who were to provide the basis for movements of radical dissent.

This was the heyday of the radical agitator in New Zealand, when colourful and long-winded personalities stumped the country preaching the doctrine of the mission of the working class to overthrow capitalist society. Although a near-contemporary writer observed that in New Zealand there were few large bodies of workers concentrated into large masses, and that consequently most New Zealand workers were not particularly militant,<sup>3</sup> men in those industries that did require a large and concentrated work force provided a sympathetic audience for the agitators. It was watersiders, seamen, the miners of Westland, Waihi and Huntly, some large unions of unskilled urban labourers, and the men employed in the flax industry of the Manawatu who could be expected to provide the basis for the type of militant unionism that was creating such a stir abroad.<sup>4</sup>

Such men lived to large extent in isolation from men employed in other occupations or ways of life. The miners of Westland or seamen are obvious examples of men in situations of geographical isolation, the isolation of remote mining communities or of a coastal vessel which would encourage the development of a strong sense of comradeship and solidarity.

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3. E.J.B. Allen, *Labour and Politics*, (Wellington, n.d.) [1920], p. 4

4. See Appendix II.

Labourers and watersiders in the larger cities, one would suggest, were 'socially' isolated; that is, they tended to live, and in the case of the watersiders, to work in more or less clearly defined areas, and to possess a sense of group solidarity. A connection between isolation and political radicalism has been noted by S.M. Lipset:

Wherever the social structure operates so as to isolate naturally individuals or groups with the same political outlook from contact with those who hold different views, the isolated individuals or groups tend to back political extremists. It has been repeatedly noted, for example, that workers in so-called 'isolated' industries - miners, fishermen, lumbermen, sheepshearers and longshoremen - who live in communities predominantly inhabited by those in the same occupation,<sup>5</sup> usually give overwhelming support to the more left-wing platforms.

In other words, life in an isolated community may lead men to develop a strong sense of solidarity; when this solidarity is combined with a sense of relative deprivation arising out of unpleasant working conditions, men may be expected to lend their support (or at least their ears), to a radical political programme with messianic overtones.

Among the New Zealand proletariat of miners, seamen and watersiders from about 1906 on, the major sense of grievance that arose was resentment of the reluctance of the Arbitration Court to revise awards to meet the rising cost of living;<sup>6</sup> more specific local grievances arose from time to time over working or living conditions. Given the existence of these preconditions for corporate militancy, immigrant agitators such as Robert Semple and Pat Hickey found that their rhetoric stimulated a surge of militancy among the New Zealand proletariat.<sup>7</sup>

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5. S.M. Lipset, Political Man, (London, 1960) p. 87

6. R.C.J. Stone, "The Unions and the Arbitration System, 1900 - 1937," in R. Chapman and K. Sinclair, (eds.), Studies of a Small Democracy, (Auckland 1963), p. 206.

7. Pat Hickey was a New Zealander who had been converted to the doctrines of the I.W.W. while working as a miner in Colorado; Robert Semple had been active in the Victorian Miners' Union. Both men arrived on the West Coast in 1908.  
- B. Brown, The Rise of New Zealand Labour, (Wellington, 1962), p. 7.

The formation of the Federation of Miners at Greymouth in 1908 marked the appearance of 'Industrial' unionism in New Zealand, the initiation of a radical surge that reached a peak at the time of the Waihi strike of 1912 and the 'Great Strike' of 1913, when many feared, and some hoped, that class war had come to the country which had not long before been known as 'The Land Without Strikes'.<sup>8</sup>

These two episodes created great excitement at the time, but they did not hasten the coming of Revolution. The collapse of the strikes, the less than enthusiastic support which many unions had given them, and the introduction of restrictive legislation by the Massey Administration spurred radical labour leaders to revise drastically their views as to the means of establishing socialism in New Zealand. The leaders of the Federation of Labour were forced to take into account the strong attachment to moderation and constitutionalism among New Zealanders.<sup>9</sup> It seemed evident that to disregard the existing means of political action in favour of 'direct action' would bring the cause of labour to a dead end, whereas recourse to political action would eventually enable labour to, as Hickey put it in a Maoriland Worker editorial in 1912, control 'the police club and the conscript's bayonet'.

In jailing Parry, McLennan, Melrose and others, / the leaders of the Waihi strike, the government has rendered an object lesson.... We must invade Parliament; we must wrest the sceptre of power from the hands of capitalism; we must openly declare the battle politically as well as industrially; we must attack at all vulnerable points. We have sat on the fence politically, I am beginning to think. Let us get in and control the police club and the conscript's bayonet. It's got to be done, so let us commence right away to prepare for the day of action.<sup>10</sup>

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8. H.D. Lloyd, A Land Without Strikes, (New York, 1900).

9. Allen, p. 10.

10. MW, 8 October, 1912

Although the 'Red Fed' lapsed into impotence during 1914<sup>11</sup> and its leaders were forced to reassess their attitude to political action, an undercurrent of militancy survived during the war years, fed on resentment of the high and increasing cost of living, and, from early 1916, on opposition to compulsory military service. Towards the end of the war, there was a revival of the militant attitudes of the old 'Red Fed' in two radical and Syndicalist organisations, the Alliance of Labour and the N.Z. Workers' Union. Once more there was talk of the violent overthrow of the 'Class State', but the advocates of Revolution now had to compete with the parliamentary Labour Party for the allegiance of the workers who had formerly supported the Federation of Labour. The contest was an unequal one, since the economic depression of 1921-22 led workers to regard talk of direct action with scepticism. Men knew that if they went on strike, their places would be taken by the unemployed; on the other hand, exponents of parliamentary action to redress workers' grievances could claim the support of workers on the ground that constitutional action was the New Zealand way of doing things.<sup>12</sup>

The experience of the Manawatu Flaxmills Employees' Industrial Union of Workers throughout the period is of some significance as an illustration of the effect of these events and movements on a single body of workers.

The preparation of the fibre of 'New Zealand Hemp' (the indigenous flax *Phormium Tenax*) for export to Europe, where it was used in the manufacture of rope, was during this period the most important industry of the Manawatu region. The industry required a numerous and physically tough labour force - during the years 1908 - 1918, the number employed varied from 800 to 1,000 - and the area accounted for up to 85% of New Zealand's annual output of the fibre.<sup>13</sup>

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11. Brown, p. 19

12. Allen, p. 7

13. WN, 6 July, 1913



A group of flaxcutters, 1912.



A group of 'trammers' in the  
Makerua swamp, circa 1912.

For most of the men employed in the industry, the work was arduous and accompanied by the hazards of knife wounds or of being caught in machinery.

The initial stage in the preparation of fibre was the cutting of the flax in the swamps, which were either owned by the mill-owners or leased from Farmers. The swamps were divided into blocks, which were "cut over" at intervals of four years. Flaxcutters were necessarily tough men; they were paid by the tonnage they cut, and skilled men could earn good money. The cut leaves were tied into bundles, and carried to a 'fly line' (a temporary branch line from a permanent tramway laid through the swamp). The bundles were then loaded by 'trammers' on to horse-drawn waggon and taken to the mill. Flaxmills in the Manawatu at this time varied in size, some employing only 25 - 30 men, while a few more recent and more highly capitalised concerns employed to to 200 men. The mills were located alongside a stream or river, since a continuous supply of water was needed for cleaning the fibre. At the mill, the leaves were weighed (to determine the flaxcutters' earnings), then 'stripped' by placing them in a machine which removed the green outer layer to reveal the fibre. These machines were operated by two or three 'benchloaders' who brought the leaves to the machine, and by a 'stripper feeder' who fed the leaves into the machine. The stripped fibre was then washed to remove its green stain, tied into bundles, and taken out to the bleaching paddock, where 'paddockers' spread out the fibre on the ground. The fibre was left to bleach in the sun for a few days, then taken to a 'scutching shed', where it was placed in a machine which used rapidly rotating beaters to remove bits of vegetation and broken fibre. The cleaned fibre was then baled and taken to either Wellington or Foxton, where it was graded by Government inspectors, and passed or rejected for export.<sup>14</sup>

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14. Based on information supplied by Mr I. Matheson, City Archivist, Palmerston North. Mr Matheson is preparing a history of the flax industry in the Manawatu.





Fibre being 'scutched' at one of the larger mills, 1912.



Paddockers' laying fibre out to bleach.

Men employed in the flax industry could have been expected to have developed a militant unionism during the period when the 'Red Fed' agitators were active; the 'preconditions' for militancy were much in evidence in the area. Although the flax area itself was not physically isolated from the rest of New Zealand as Westland mining communities were, (the Main Trunk line passed through the area), most of the flaxworkers seem to have been isolated 'socially'. Life in the small towns of the area was dominated by the fluctuations of the London hemp market - 'Foxton people', it was observed in 1913, 'live and work and have their being absolutely in the hemp industry; if flax is up, they are up, if flax is down, their spirits and turnover diminish'.<sup>15</sup> Many of the flaxworkers lived in makeshift and insanitary accommodation near the mills, which could be up to ten miles from the nearest township. Access to these camps was difficult, so much so that in some cases the men could not leave them on their days off.<sup>16</sup> One effect of this enforced comradeship was that flaxworkers were noted as having a strong sense of group solidarity when it came to pressing for redress of their material grievances; it was this comradeship, combined with resentment over living and working conditions, that was to provide the basis for the largest and most militant union in the Manawatu.

The other trade unions in the Manawatu were essentially 'craft' unions; they were extremely weak during the period and the militancy of the flaxworkers was distinctive and rather notorious, yet the overall impression of the experience of the flaxworkers' union is that it confirms the generalisation that 'though union leaders [of the period] often preached revolution, they usually practised reform'.<sup>17</sup>

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15. WN, 6 July, 1913

16. AJHR, 1907, 1-9, p. 2a

17. Stone, in Chapman & Sinclair, (eds.), p. 207



TABLE I.

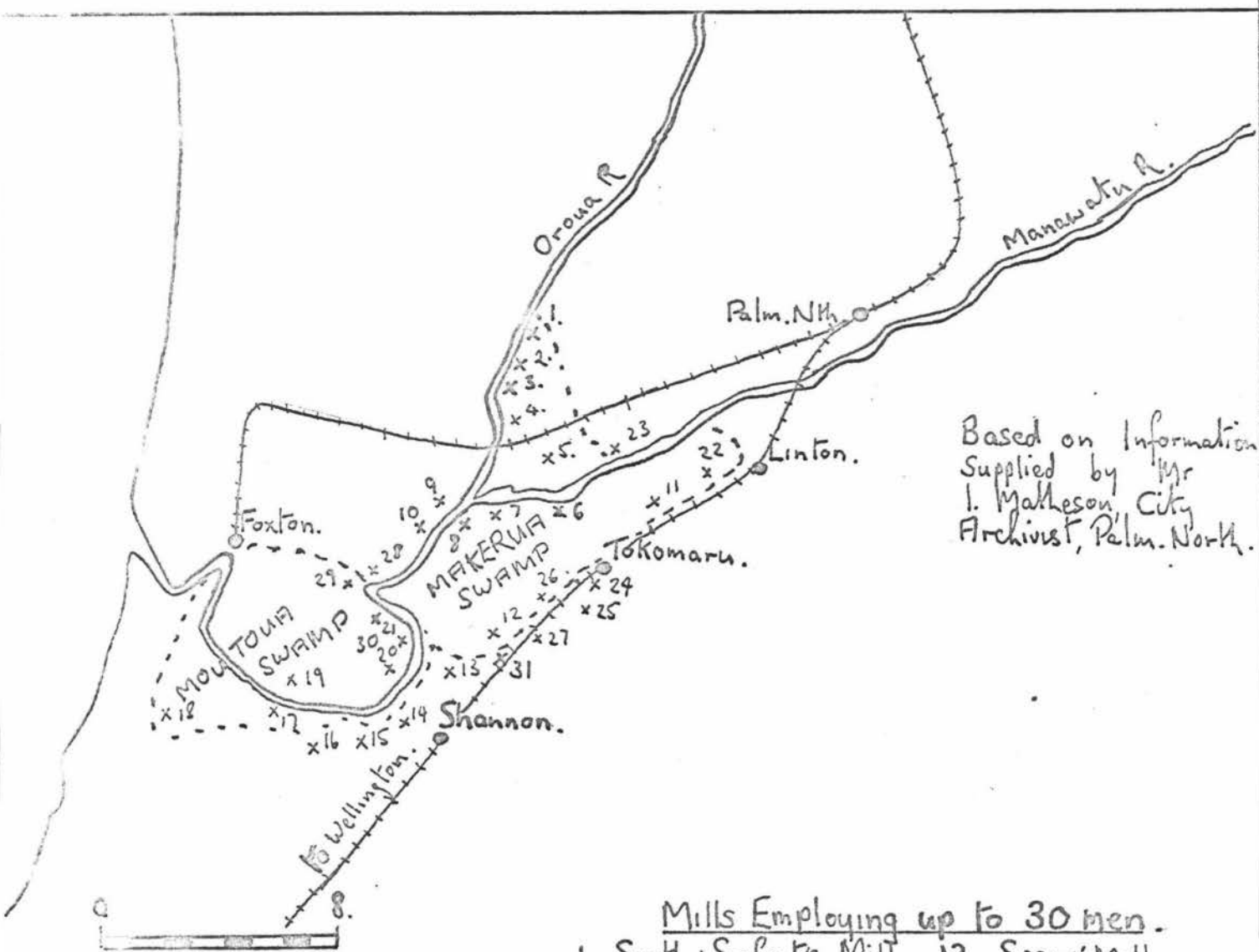
UNIONS REGISTERED IN THE MANAWATU, 1912 - 1921.

source : AJHR, 1913 - 1922, H-IIa.

<u>Year.</u>	<u>Unions Registered Under I.C. &amp; A. Act.</u>	<u>Membership.</u>
1912	Manawatu Freezing Works Employees.	46.
	Palmerston North Carpenters and Joiners.	43.
	Palmerston North Painters and Decorators.	28.
	Manawatu Flaxmills Employees.	523.
1913.	Manawatu Freezing Works Employees.	44.
	P.N. Carpenters and Joiners.	74.
	P.N. Painters and Decorators.	27.
	Manawatu Flaxmills Employees.	666.
1914.	Manawatu Cycle and Motor Mechanics.	26.
	Longburn Slaughtermen.	17.
	Manawatu Freezing Works Employees.	48.
	P.N. Carpenters and Joiners.	91.
	P.N. Painters and Decorators.	27.
	Manawatu Flaxmills Employees.	1053.
1915.	Longburn Slaughtermen.	29.
	Manawatu Cycle and Motor Mechanics.	24.
	Manawatu Freezing Works Employees.	67.
	P.N. Carpenters and Joiners.	118.
	P.N. Builders' and General Labourers.	21.
	Manawatu Flaxmills Employees.	557.
1916.	Manawatu Freezing Works Employees.	66.
	P.N. Carpenters and Joiners.	142.
	P.N. Branch Amalg. Society of Engineers.	27.
	P.N. Builders' and General Labourers.	25.
	P.N. Painters and Decorators.	38.
	Manawatu Flaxmills Employees.	661.
1917.	P.N. Carpenters and Joiners.	120.
	P.N. Painters and Decorators.	39.
	Manawatu Flaxmills Employees.	931.
1918.	P.N. Carpenters and Joiners.	101.
	P.N. Branch Amalg. Society of Engineers.	36.
	P.N. Painters and Decorators.	29.
	Manawatu Flaxmills Employees.	851.
1919.	P.N. Carpenters and Joiners.	110.
	P.N. Branch Amalg. Society of Engineers.	30.
	P.N. Painters and Decorators.	23.
	Manawatu Flaxmills Employees.	824.
1920.	P.N. Carpenters and Joiners.	94.
	P.N. Branch Amalg. Society of Engineers.	30.
	P.N. Painters and Decorators.	25.
	Manawatu Flaxmills Employees.	616.
1921.	P.N. Carpenters and Joiners.	80.
	P.N. Branch Amalg. Society of Engineers.	43.
	P.N. Painters and Decorators.	23.
	Manawatu Flaxmills Employees.	569.

# THE FLAX INDUSTRY of the MANAWATU, circa 1912..

## Location of Mills and Approximate Numbers Employed.



Based on Information  
Supplied by Mr  
I. Matheson, City  
Archivist, Palm. North.

### Mills Employing up to 100 men.

- |                       |                      |
|-----------------------|----------------------|
| 22 Crows' Mill.       | 29 'Poplar' Mill.    |
| 23 'River' Mill.      | 30 'Whitaniui' Mill. |
| 24 Seifert's Mill.    |                      |
| 25 'Te Hukanui' Mill. |                      |
| 26 'Leggins' Mill.    | 31 'Miranui'         |
| 27 'Whakapai' Mill.   | - 250 Employees.     |
| 28 'Gibbs' Mill.      |                      |

### Mills Employing up to 30 men.

- |                           |                     |
|---------------------------|---------------------|
| 1 Smith & Seifert's Mill. | 13 Speirs' Mill.    |
| 2 Jarvis' Mill.           | 14 Speirs' Mill.    |
| 3 Bell & Tennant's Mill.  | 15 Dalziel's Mill.  |
| 4 'Karere' Mill.          | 16 Jupp's Mill.     |
| 5 Broad & Ingram's Mill.  | 17 Porter's Mill.   |
| 6 'Puke' Mill.            | 18 Porutawhao Mill. |
| 7 'Rangitane' Mill.       | 19 'Piaka' Mill.    |
| 8 'Kea' Mill.             | 20 Potu Mill.       |
| 9 Gibbs & Nimmos' Mill.   | 21 'Titoki' Mill.   |
| 10 'Ariki' Mill.          |                     |
| 11 Seifert's Mill.        |                     |
| 12 'Weka' Mill.           |                     |

Agitators such as Semple, Holland and Parry addressed meetings of the union and spoke in lurid terms of the sufferings of the workers under the domination of 'Mr Fat',<sup>18</sup> of the Promised Land of a socialist New Zealand, and of the benefits that workers would obtain if they were to foster and preserve a sense of 'militant solidarity'. Yet for the majority of members of the union, this rhetoric was little more than a veneer on the basic and foremost objectives of the union, the improvement of wages and conditions for its members, objectives which the union had no intention of achieving by revolutionary means.

There was, as will be seen, a group of about 200 left-wing extremists who lived at Tokomaru and the nearby mills, but the union as a body was concerned with neither revolutionary action nor doctrine, but took an essentially pragmatic approach to the redress of its grievances. Ideology seems to have played little part in the affairs of the union, as was indicated by the fate of a motion of no confidence that was moved by an extremist member against the President shortly after the Waihi strike. The mover of the motion, Mark Briggs, claimed that the President was guilty of inconsistency, since he was at the same time the President of a union affiliated to the radical Federation of Labour and a member of the 'moderate' United Labour Party. But the motion was lost after the President had denied any inconsistency, claiming that he did not see where his connection with the party interfered with his administration of the union.<sup>19</sup> A later indication that even extremists in the N.Z. labour movement preferred pragmatism to rigid adherence to radical doctrine emerges in a Maoriland Worker editorial of May, 1920.

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18. 'Mr Fat' was the character used by the Maoriland Worker as a personification of the capitalist system. He appeared in cartoons as a top-hatted and obese figure, contrasted with his underfed and bedraggled 'wage-slaves'.

19. Manawatu Flaxmills Employees' Industrial Union of Workers, Minute Book, May 1912 to February 1913, entry of 2 November, 1912.

Referring to the N.Z. Workers' Union's campaign to build 'One Big Union', the writer noted approvingly that the campaign 'was not hampered by fine-spun theories made in Germany or America', but was rather 'guided by that common sense and spirit of active method which has made the union a power in the land',<sup>20</sup>

Although the flaxworkers' union made free use of the rhetoric of extremism at its meetings, it showed a marked and consistent unwillingness to resort to extremist actions, an unwillingness which seems to have been due in part to the lack of bitterness in employer-employee relations in the industry. While there were certainly many among the flaxworkers to whom capitalism was anathema, the way in which the industry was organised made for a very close association between employer and employee. As Lipset points out, a social structure unfavourable to cross-class communication serves to foster intransigence among an 'isolated' group of workers,<sup>21</sup> but in the flax area, 'class' distinctions between workers and employers were not much in evidence. Some employers were themselves former flaxworkers who had, as in the case of the Seifert family, built up considerable holdings from small beginnings. Such employers had mastered every aspect of the industry and were constantly around their mills, in some cases operating one of the machines, and on occasion repairing or tinkering with machinery; they were competent men, capable of earning the respect of their employees.<sup>22</sup> The mill-owners had formed their own association, the N.Z. Flaxmillers' Association, which, although it was not registered as an Industrial Union of Employers, was authorised by its members to act as their agent in negotiations with the flaxworkers' union.<sup>23</sup>

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20. MW, 26 May 1920.

21. Lipset, p. 249.

22. Interview with Mr I. Matheson, City Archivist, Palmerston North, 16 February 1970.

23. New Zealand Department of Labour, Book of Awards, vol. XIII, (1913), p. 42.

TABLE II

MEMBERSHIP of the FLAXWORKERS' UNION AS PERCENTAGE of TOTAL  
NUMBER EMPLOYED in the INDUSTRY, WELLINGTON INDUSTRIAL DISTRICT.

YEAR.	MEMBERSHIP of UNION.	TOTAL PERSONS EMPLOYED in FLAXMILLING, WELLINGTON INDUSTRIAL DISTRICT.	MEMBERSHIP of UNION as % TOTAL PERSONS EMPLOYED.
1907.	607.	745.	81%
1908.	509.	1,029.	50%
1909.	483.	683.	75%
1910.	351.	780.	45%
1911.	365.	889.	41%
1912.	523.	650.	84%
1913.	666.	924.	72%
1914.	1,053.	1,017	99.9%
1915.	557.	788.	77%
1916.	661.	Not Published.	
1917.	931.	" "	NOTE : Membership figures are as of 31 Dec. preceding year. Thus, the figure for 1914 applies to 31 Dec. 1913.
1918.	851.	" "	
1919.	824.	" "	
1920.	616.	" "	
1921.	569.	" "	
1922.	336.	" "	SOURCE: AJHR, 1908 - 22, H-11a.

Agitators who visited the flax area denounced capitalism and the profits of 'The Bosses', but unlike I.W.W. agitators in the United States, who could point to the vast and shady 'trusts' as evidence of the inherently corrupt nature of capitalism, they could find no such incentive to militancy in the Manawatu. All of the mills were owned by local men, financed in some cases by capital made available by local merchants such as Levin & Co. As far as is known, there were no overseas interests involved in the mills at all.<sup>24</sup> However, though there were no 'robber barons' in the Manawatu, there were other incentives to militancy on the part of the flaxworkers. The Manawatu Flaxmills Employees' Industrial Union of Workers had been founded in 1906;<sup>25</sup> its first President was R.H. Dalhousie and the Secretary, who retained his position until the 1920's, was P.T. Robinson.<sup>26</sup> There was, of course, no compulsory unionism, and during its first few years, many men declined to join, though it is probable that many of those who did not were itinerant workers, who did not stay long in the area. However, as will be seen later, the appointment of an effective organiser during 1913 had a rapid and spectacular effect on the membership of the union.

From 1909 to 1911, the union was concerned with attempts to redress two major grievances, the 'contract system' and living conditions for the men at the smaller and more remote mills. These grievances were articulated during 1909 and 1910 in a newspaper, the Press Hank, published by the union.

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24. Interview with Mr I. Matheson, 16 February 1970.

25. AJHR, 1907, H-11a. This is the first appearance of the union in the list of unions registered under the I.C. & A. Act. Interview with Mr R. Downs, a former member of the union, Shannon, 26 November 1969. The full title of the union as it appears in its Minute Book for May 1912 to February 1913.

26. Dalhousie had been born in India, and had worked in many parts of the world before settling in the Manawatu in the late 1890s.  
- PH, 14 May 1910.  
No information on Robinson's background could be found.

Mr Robertson would frankly admit the truth of the accusation that he was a Socialist and would then go on to expound his platform, carefully pointing out that it was not Socialism that he was advocating, simply necessary reforms which the electors could not get from either of the other parties. From being a diffident and rather poor speaker he developed during the campaign into about the most coldly logical and convincing speaker that I have ever heard. His statistics were always right and his deductions therefrom showed sound reasoning and clear thinking. For three months or more prior to the election, Robertson and his mother-bike were known on every road and track in the electorate; he must have personally interviewed fully 75% of his constituents. He made a special point of interviewing electors opposed to him, and though it cannot be claimed that he converted any great proportion by this means, he certainly converted some and took most of the sting out of the opposition of others.

The strain of the campaign must have been terrific, and it was an utterly exhausted John Robertson who was duly elected Member for Otaki ...<sup>45</sup>

As no candidate in the first ballot had received an absolute majority of the votes cast, a second ballot had to be held, with the result that Robertson won the seat with a majority of 21.

TABLE III.

OTAKI ELECTORATE, 1911. RESULT OF FIRST BALLOT.

Field.	(Liberal).	1,743.
Robertson.	(Independent Socialist').	1,280.
Monckton.	(Official 'Opposition' candidate).	1,155.
Brown.	(Unofficial 'Opposition' candidate).	1,028.

45. AS, 26 December 1935. The quotation is from an article signed 'T.A.H.', congratulating Robertson on his victory in Masterton. The author of the article may be identified with the late Sir Thomas Alexander Hunter, who in 1911 was Professor of Philosophy at Victoria College, and was involved in the Workers' Educational Association and associated with many prominent members of the labour movement. I must acknowledge the courtesy of Mr H. Roth in drawing my attention to this reference.

Robertson's campaign platform was published in MH, 4 November 1911.



The Press Hank was short-lived, only twelve issues being produced;<sup>27</sup> it seems to have been intended as an experiment in producing a newspaper for the rural workers of the Wellington province, since its masthead claimed that 'this paper goes into every flaxmill, creamery, butter and cheese factory in Wellington Province'.<sup>28</sup>

The 'contract system' had been introduced by some of the mill-owners in April, 1909; under this system, one man could, as the case may be, make a contract with a mill-owner to cut, 'scutch' or to 'paddock' a quantity of flax at an agreed rate per ton. In August, 1909, the Labour Department took an employer to Court for paying less than award rates to four men who had signed a contract to 'strip' a quantity of flax. The employer showed the Court the contract the men had signed, and the Judge, (Mr Sim), ruled that the Arbitration Court had no competence in the matter, since the act of signing the contract had established between the two parties the relationship of employer and contractor, rather than that of master and servant:

If a flax-mill owner entered into a bona fide contract with a contractor by which the latter agreed to do all the work of 'scutching' at a mill, during a definite period, at a fixed price per ton, on explicit terms, such an agreement would not create the relation of master and servant between the parties, and would not amount to a breach of award, although the rate to be paid per ton was less than that fixed by the award....an employer would not be entitled to insist on<sup>29</sup> any workers working under the award signing such an agreement.

This ruling was clearly subversive of the entire system of industrial awards; in any industry which involved piecework, employers were now free to make contracts (provided employees were willing), which would not be bound by the provisions of any existing award.

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27. Mr H. Roth, Deputy Librarian, Auckland University, has six copies of the Press Hank in his possession, and I much appreciated his courtesy in giving me access to them.

28. PH, 8 January 1910.

29. PD, vol. 160, p. 314, Mr Robertson.  
PH, 11 September 1909.



The flaxworkers' award of March, 1910 recognised the situation when it left the rate for flaxcutters to be agreed between employers and workers, although a minimum rate for 'paddockers' was set at 20s. per ton in summer and 23s. 6d. in winter, the increase in winter being designed to compensate for the greater number of days lost, since the bleaching process required fine weather.<sup>30</sup>

From the employers' point of view, the contract system for 'paddockers' saved them the wages they would have had to pay on the days when it was impossible to lay out fibre for bleaching, but the union's view was that this was unfair to the 'paddockers', whose earnings were made as unpredictable as the weather. The 'contract system' could also be applied to mill-hands who 'scutched' washed fibre; rouseabouts and drivers were the only classes of flaxworkers whose work did not involve piecework.

During 1909-1910, the union attempted to induce the Ward Administration to amend the I.C. & A. Act so as to abolish the contract system. In April, 1909, immediately after the introduction of the system, a deputation was sent to the Minister of Labour, who after hearing the union's case, promised to introduce legislation against the system.<sup>31</sup> But nothing was done; the President and the Secretary of the union had a further interview with the Minister on 25 October, when Mr Millar said that 'something would have to be done'. By this time, the union was losing patience with Millar ('the Minister who is alleged to look after the interests of labour'), and on 22 November, Dalhousie and Robinson, supported by two labour M.P.'s, (McLaren and Laurenson), buttonholed Millar at supper. Millar 'definitely promised' to introduce a Bill against the contract system, but the 1909 Session was nearing its end, and the proposed Bill was held over.<sup>32</sup>

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30. New Zealand Department of Labour, Book of Awards, vol. X (1910), p. 26.

31. MW, 20 February 1911.

32. PH, 8 January 1910.

But by July, 1910, the government, true to Ward's policy of 'a rest in legislation',<sup>33</sup> still had done nothing, and the union took the step of laying before each member of the House a circular stating its case on the issue. This action prodded both Ward and Millar into an admission (in correspondence with the union), that the system was an 'award-beater', and a further promise to introduce appropriate legislation.<sup>34</sup> However, in February, 1911, it was announced that the Bill had been set aside 'till next Session'.<sup>35</sup> This was the last straw for the union; deciding that stronger measures were necessary, it proceeded in August, 1911, to nominate its own candidate for the Otaki seat in the forthcoming election.<sup>36</sup>

A further source of anti-Government feeling among flaxworkers was the accommodation issue. Although those employees of the larger and more financially solvent mills who did not live in their own homes in the townships were in most cases provided with satisfactory accommodation,<sup>37</sup> the Shearers' and Agricultural Labourers' Accommodation Act of 1908 made no specific provision for adequate water supplies or sanitary arrangements for flaxworkers.<sup>38</sup> Conditions at the smaller and more isolated mills, where the men lived in makeshift camps because the employers often could not afford to construct adequate buildings, were often very unpleasant. Several cases of typhoid occurred each year, sometimes with fatal results.<sup>39</sup>

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33. In 1908, Ward had announced a policy of a 'rest in legislation' in an attempt to retain the allegiance of the 'Right' by eschewing further radical labour legislation.  
cf. R. Shannon, The Decline and Fall of the Liberals, (unpublished thesis, Auckland University, 1954), p. 10.

34. MW, 20 February 1911

35. Ibid.

36. MW, 11 August 1911.

37. PD, vol. 160, p. 880, Mr Robertson

38. PH, 12 February 1910.

39. NZPD, vol. 160, p.880 (8 October, 1912), Mr Robertson.

The union's nominee for the Otaki seat, John Robertson, had been active in the Independent Labour Party in Scotland, being appointed Secretary in 1895. He arrived in New Zealand in 1902 (on the same ship as did Tom Mann), and settled in Palmerston North in 1910. At the time of his nomination, he was a member of the Socialist Party and the Secretary of the Wellington Dairy Workers' Union.<sup>40</sup> The decision of the flaxworkers' union to enter politics seems to have aroused some opposition among prominent members of both the radical and moderate wings of the labour movement. The Federation of Labour held that the best way to redress workers' grievances was through 'direct action', while some among the leadership of the Trades and Labour Council seem to have regarded the Arbitration Court as the proper forum for the airing of labour's problems. There was, apparently, a heated controversy among labour leaders over the nomination of Robertson, but the public heard very little of it, and the controversy had no effect on the union's decision.<sup>41</sup>

In nominating Robertson, the union hoped that the Liberals would be prodded into action on both its grievances; as a last resort, the union claimed with some bitterness, 'it would be better to have straight-out Toryism than a Liberalism which eventually turns out to be a mere mush of useless enactments like the Shearers' and Agricultural Labourers' Accommodation Act'.<sup>42</sup>

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40. G. Scholefield, (ed.), Who's Who in New Zealand, (Wellington, 1951), p. 201. In 1935, Robertson was elected MP for Masterton, and in 1946 he was appointed to the Legislative Council. He died in 1952.

41. AS, 26 December 1935.

42. MW, 16 June 1911.

16.

As there were about 650 men employed in the flax industry at the time of the election, as against a total of 6,485 enrolled voters in the electorate,<sup>43</sup> Robertson obviously could not expect the flaxworkers' vote alone to put him into Parliament. His good performance in the first ballot, when he trailed the sitting Liberal member, W.H. Field, by 463 votes, may be attributed to the 'Opposition' vote being split between an official and an unofficial candidate, the support of a large majority of the flaxworkers, (from a total of 26 polling places, 69% of his votes came from the 7 polling places located within the flax area), and of a number of small-town workers - as he was the Secretary of the Wellington Dairy Workers' Union, he could presumably count on the support of most of his members in these centres. Other factors contributing to his good showing in the first ballot were the 'dry' vote - Robertson held that a bare majority in a referendum on National Prohibition should be sufficient to decide the issue, whereas Field's position was that a 60% majority would be needed to carry Prohibition<sup>44</sup> - and the considerable effort which Robertson devoted to his campaign:

His campaign was an epic. It was a rural constituency with a predominant farmers' vote, about as unpromising from a Labour point of view as it would be possible to get. The candidate was unknown, and funds were meagre. Mr Robertson was a Socialist, and of this fact his opponents made good electioneering ammunition, but Robertson produced a complete platform covering all the important issues then before the electors, land tenure, finance, education, etc.

Robertson's platform favoured easy access to the land for aspiring farmers, the establishment of a State Bank, the extension of free education to university level, the holding of referenda on all important public questions, and opposed Compulsory Military Training/. This platform formed the basis of the programme put forward by the official Labour party at the / 1914 / election.

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43. AJHR, 1912, H-12, p. 3.

44. MH, 4 November 1911.

TABLE IV

Robertson's Support in the First Ballot, 1911

Returns from each Polling Place

1. POLLING PLACES WITHIN THE FLAX AREA:		<u>Votes cast for Robertson:</u>	<u>Total Vote:</u>	<u>Votes for Robertson as % of Total:</u>
Shannon	Township	186	450	41%
Miranui	Mill	79	112	75%
Tokomaru	Township	104	233	44%
Ingram's	Mill	16	35	45%
Moutoua	Mill	81	138	58%
Foxton	Township	237	820	28%
Gibb's	Mill	51	77	66%
		<u>754</u>	<u>4865</u>	<u>44%</u>
2. POLLING PLACES ON THE FRINGE OF THE FLAX AREA:				
Koputaroa	Rural	37	149	24%
Rangiotu	Rural	34	133	26%
		<u>71</u>	<u>282</u>	<u>25%</u>
3. POLLING PLACES OUTSIDE THE FLAX AREA:				
Otaki	Township	74	605	12%
Levin	Township	164	1120	14%
Taikorea	Rural	4	107	4%
Himitangi	Rural	3	88	3%
Akatarawa	Rural	1	28	3%
Akatarawa Road	Rural	3	31	10%
Paekakariki	Township	59	142	41%
Paraparaumu	Township	59	150	39%
Maunganui	Rural	2	14	14%
Muhunoa East	Rural	2	32	6%
Reikorangi	Rural	4	70	5%
Waiohanga	Rural	4	32	12.5%
Waikanae	Township	23	153	15%
Te Horo	Rural	12	112	10%
Manukau	Township	24	215	12%
Chau	Rural	6	101	6%
Absent Voters		<u>11</u>	<u>59</u>	<u>17%</u>
		<u>455</u>	<u>3059</u>	<u>14%</u>

Source: AJHR, 1912, H-12a

TABLE V

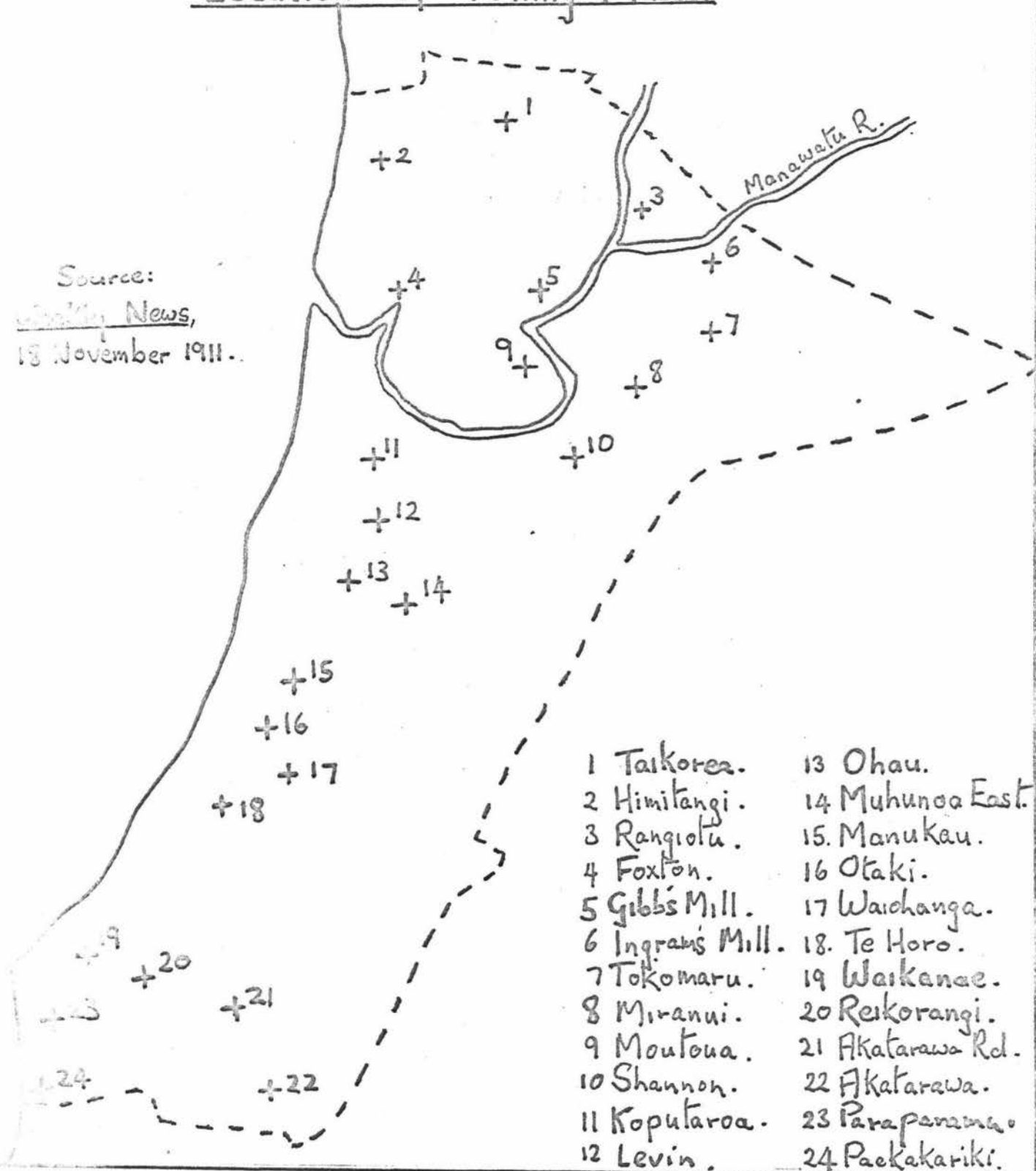
Robertson's Support in the Second Ballot, 1911Returns from each Polling Place

1. POLLING PLACES WITHIN THE FLAX AREA:		<u>Votes cast for Robertson:</u>	<u>Total Vote:</u>	<u>Votes for Robertson as % of Total:</u>
Shannon	Township	209	418	50%
Miranui	Mill	94	121	72%
Tokomaru	Township	141	240	59%
Ingram's Mill		16	35	45%
Moutoua	Mill	109	148	74%
Foxton	Township	454	814	55%
Gibb's Mill		56	85	66%
		<u>1079</u>	<u>1861</u>	<u>56</u>
2. POLLING PLACES ON THE FRINGE OF THE FLAX AREA:				
Koputaroa	Rural	79	144	59%
Rangiotu	Rural	46	119	38%
		<u>125</u>	<u>263</u>	<u>48</u>
3. POLLING PLACES OUTSIDE THE FLAX AREA:				
Otaki	Township	253	595	42%
Levin	Township	486	1069	45%
Taikorea	Rural	37	89	41%
Himitangi	Rural	24	79	32%
Akatarawa	Rural	3	28	10%
Akatarawa Road	Rural	14	23	68%
Paekakariki	Township	64	128	50%
Paraparaumu	Township	96	140	68%
Maunganui	Rural	7	16	49%
Muhunoa East	Rural	18	23	78%
Reikorangi	Rural	21	66	33%
Waiohanga	Rural	3	30	10%
Waikanae	Township	45	143	31%
Te Horo	Township	58	112	51%
Manukau	Township	95	206	46%
Absent Voters		23	43	53%
Chau	Rural	66	99	66%
		<u>1313</u>	<u>2889</u>	<u>45%</u>

# OTAKI ELECTORATE, 1911.

## Location of Polling Places.

Source:  
Starling News,  
18 November 1911..



Although the figures from the polling places in the flax area indicate that the union made an effort to increase the turnout of voters, the major factor in Robertson's success was Mr Massey's decision to oust the Liberal member by instructing 'Opposition' supporters to vote for Robertson. He sent a telegram to his supporters:

I trust that in the interests of Dominion, Opposition will join with Labour in ousting Ministry, whose first thought is for themselves, and not for the country. Therefore, vote Robertson.<sup>46</sup>

The figures in Table III indicate that if a single 'Opposition' candidate had stood, he would have come close to achieving an absolute majority (the figure needed was 2,600). In the second ballot, if most of the 'Opposition' supporters had followed Massey's instructions, Robertson could have expected to receive up to 2,000 additional votes. As it happened, he received 1,237 additional votes, an indication that many of Massey's supporters could not bring themselves to vote for a Socialist. Field, in fact, received 753 additional votes. Robertson's razor-thin majority was a fluke - a Socialist sent to Parliament by the grace of Mr Massey. The greatest absolute gains in Robertson's support came from the polling places in the townships (Foxton, Otaki, Levin, Manukau); nevertheless, these gains in themselves would not have been sufficient to cancel out Field's lead had it not been for the union's evident efforts to get as many of the flaxworkers as possible out to vote. Polling places in the flax area were the only ones to show an increased total vote in the second ballot - it was this increase (of 34 votes), which gave Robertson the seat.

It was ironical that Mr Massey should be, to a large extent, responsible for Robertson's success, but the flaxworkers were elated at the success of their venture into politics; Robertson, after all, was New Zealand's first Socialist M.P. to be returned from a predominantly rural electorate.<sup>47</sup>

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46. Shannon, p. 137.

47. MW, 8 April 1914.



Although he was a member of the Socialist Party, he described himself during the campaign as a 'Socialist Independent', since he was run solely by the flaxworkers' union, to whom he had given a pledge to oppose, if he were elected, both the Liberals and the Massey Party.<sup>48</sup> But he was indebted to Mr Massey, who was highly unpopular among the flaxworkers, for his election, and he would have been in an embarrassing position in the no-confidence division on February 28 had it not been for Sir Joseph Ward's announcement of his 'February Programme' of radical legislative proposals. Ward's programme was a desperate attempt to stave off the defeat of his Ministry by wooing the support of the labour candidates who had been elected in 1911;<sup>49</sup> in the case of the flaxworkers, the attempt was successful. At a mass meeting of the union, Robertson was released from his pledges to oppose the Ward Administration, and shortly afterwards voted with the Liberals in the first of the no-confidence divisions.<sup>50</sup>

Robertson's election encouraged the union to take action to redress its grievances over the contract system. The union first held a meeting at Shannon to discuss the issues, but the employers did not reply to the union's demands.<sup>51</sup> At the mass meeting held at Palmerston North on 22 February, at which Robertson was released from his pledges, the union restated its grievances. The meeting protested at the lack of a fixed minimum rate of payment for flaxcutters, the lack of a standardised system for weighing cut flax, and at the excessive distances over which some flaxcutters had to carry their bundles to the tramlines.

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48. MW, 8 January 1912.

49. Shannon, pp. 142, 152-3.

50. MW, 1 March 1912; 7 March 1912.

51. MW, 8 April 1914.

There was some talk of strike action, but the meeting decided to refer its grievances to a Conciliation Commissioner, who would arrange a meeting between representatives of the employers and of the Union. Negotiations took place, and a supplementary agreement to the award was signed between the union and the Flaxmillers' Association on 28 February.<sup>52</sup> The agreement provided for the weighing of cut flax on arrival at the mill, the establishment of a minimum payment of 4s. 9d. per ton to flaxcutters, and the demarcation of labour between flaxcutters and 'trammers'; flaxcutters were not to carry flax more than 1½ chains to the tramway, nor were they to load flax onto trucks.<sup>53</sup> The agreement did not end the contract system, but it did go some way towards making it more acceptable to the union. The last that is heard of the union's grievances over the system is a report of a meeting between the union and the Flaxmillers' Association in June, 1912; the President of the Millers' Association commented on the 'very friendly' relations which existed between the union and the association,<sup>54</sup> a comment which may be construed as an indication that instances of employees being paid below award rates were rare, and that the union's objection was based on principle rather than on any great hardship suffered by its members.

The union was more successful in its efforts to redress its other grievance, over accommodation. Although the McKenzie Ministry had begun to investigate conditions at the mills during May,<sup>55</sup> it was not until October, under the Massey Ministry, that Robertson was able to introduce his Pure Water Supply to Flaxmills Bill to the House.<sup>56</sup>

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52. WN, 29 February 1912; 7 March 1912.

MW, 1 March 1912; 8 March 1912.

53.

53. N.Z. Department of Labour, Book of Awards, vol. XIII, (1913), p. 42.

54. MES, 21 June 1912.

55. PD, vol. 160, p. 868, Mr Laurensen.

56. PD, vol. 160, p. 866, Mr Robertson.

Typhoid and other intestinal diseases were an ever-present hazard at the campsites in the swamps, a consequence both of the practice of drawing water for drinking from the Manawatu and Oroua Rivers, which were polluted with sewage from Palmerston North and Feilding, and of the careless habits of some of the men themselves.<sup>57</sup> At the time when Robertson was introducing his Bill, there were four cases of typhoid, all from the same mill, in the Palmerston North hospital.<sup>58</sup> During the debate on the Bill, Robertson illustrated conditions at a similar mill where typhoid had broken out by quoting from a report which the district sanitary inspector had made at the request of the union in May, 1912:

There are two camps, the main one upstream from the mill, consisting of cookhouse, three corrugated-iron whares, manager's office, and several tents. The sanitary conditions are very unsatisfactory. Cookhouse and dining-room should be lined; this applies also to the whares. The tents are unfit to live in during the winter... there is no doubt in my mind that the four cases of typhoid reported to date have been caused by sewage from the camp percolating from the river-bank in the vicinity of the tented area... The present system of water supply is bad in the extreme, / and all drinking water should be boiled for at least ten minutes /... the present camp arrangements are unfit for habitation, and are a standing menace to the health of the inhabitants.<sup>59</sup>

At about the same time, a flaxworker wrote a letter to the Manawatu Herald relating his experiences in one of the camps:

... the food was wholesome enough, and plenty of it, but there was something that seemed to take one's appetite away, and that was the surroundings in which we had to live. You are eating your porridge, perhaps, and there are a dozen cockroaches waiting around the edge of your plate for you to finish, but that's not all; they will help themselves if you do not hurry. The sleeping accommodation was not in the least healthy, the apartment being just a shed provided with bunks.

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57. Ibid;  
AJHR, 1913, H-31, p. 47. Report of the Wellington District Health Officer.
58. PD, vol. 160, p. 868, Mr Robertson.
59. Ibid.



FLAXWORKERS CAMPS AT TOKOMARU, N.S. G. ANDERSON. PHOTO

Flaxworkers 'accommodation' at Tokomaru, circa 1912.



The larger concerns could afford to house their employees adequately. These quarters were built by the Whitanui Flax-milling Company.

It's true there was a wooden floor, where in some cases there was nothing but the soil, but no beds were provided other than those which the millhands devised... The only illumination at night was perhaps a candle - also provided by mill-hands. There was no wash-basin provided, so as the river was near, the men had to wash in it. There was no lavatory supplied for the men. The water required for cooking, drinking and washing was taken from the river, where often both human and animal bodies have lain for weeks. Therefore, we cannot wonder at contagion raging at some of the mills.<sup>60</sup>

The debate on the Bill soon degenerated into mutual recriminations as to which Administration had or had not done its best to improve living conditions for flaxworkers; in any case, Mr Massey, acting on the report of the Secretary of the Labour Department, who had toured the flaxmills during May, had drawn up an amendment to the Shearers' and Agricultural Labourers' Accommodation Act of 1908. The Secretary's report had noted that there was a need not only to improve the water supply, but also to improve the condition of the buildings in which the men lived. It was recommended that flaxworkers' accommodation be brought under the supervision of the Labour Department, and that compulsion be applied to both mill-owners and workers, the mill-owners to provide adequate accommodation, and the workers to be required to keep it clean.<sup>61</sup>

The Shearers' and Agricultural Labourers' Accommodation Amendment Act was passed on 7 November,<sup>62</sup> but it was not until detailed regulations were gazetted on 12 June, 1913, that the flaxworkers were brought under its effective protection.

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60. MH, 19 October 1912. The reference to "human bodies" lying in the river may seem a little melodramatic, but drownings were quite frequent at that time.

61. MH, 9 November 1912.

62. Statutes of New Zealand, 1912, (Wellington, 1912), p. 178.

Considerable discontent arose among the flaxworkers over the delay, and although the regulations, when gazetted, promised a great improvement in living conditions - solidly constructed and properly ventilated sleeping and dining accommodation, adequate sanitary arrangements, first-aid facilities, and facilities, and a supply of artesian water -<sup>63</sup> they were found to have their loopholes. A deputation from the union told Mr Massey (who was also the Minister of Labour), in August, 1913, that some of the Regulations were too vague. The example was quoted of the provision that the men were to be provided with wire mattresses; one mill-owner nailed pieces of wire-netting to two pieces of timber, and considered that he had complied with the Act. 'Only for the men falling through these makeshifts when getting into bed', the deputation told Mr Massey, 'they would still be in use'. Mr Massey told the deputation that he felt that the trouble arose not from any deficiency in the regulations but from the fact that the Labour Department did not have enough staff in the area; however, he promised that in future the mills would be regularly inspected, and the regulations enforced.<sup>64</sup> Living conditions continued to cause discontent among flaxworkers until the end of 1913; in October, the Maoriland Worker's correspondent wrote of the frustration that some of the flaxworkers felt over the non-enforcement of the regulations:

Can you tell me, Mr Editor, when Square Deal Bill is going to deal out a bit of genuine stuff to the poor toilers? The flaxies are asking themselves this question, and if he doesn't come to light shortly, and very shortly too, there is going to be serious trouble in the Manawatu. It's up to the flaxy to wake up, for Square Deal Bill is with the bosses and can't be budged, and very soon a fight must take place if things aren't altered - it will have to be a solid fight too.

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63. New Zealand Gazette, 1913, vol. 1, p. 1882.

64. MW, 4 July 1913.

The regulations are just passable, and if 'Bosker Bill' won't enforce them, then we'll have to'.<sup>65</sup>

What is remarkable about this piece is not its subject - the accommodation grievance was an old one - but the strident manner of its expression. To discover why threats of violence should be heard among the flaxworkers, we must investigate the impact of outside events on the flax area.

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65. MW, 15 October 1913. The 'Square Deal Bill' and 'Bosker Bill' referred to was Mr Massey, who was also the Minister of Labour. cf. PD, vol. 160, p. 867, Mr Robertson :  
'The Minister of Labour has promised us a Square Deal'.



THE MILITANT UNION, 1913 - 1918.

Prior to the strike at the Waihi gold mine, the flaxworkers' union had shown that it was capable of taking initiatives to improve the living and working conditions of its members. But although the union had affiliated to the Federation of Labour in 1911,<sup>1</sup> militants among the flaxworkers felt that most of the flaxworkers showed little enthusiasm for the policies of the Federation. During mid-1912 there were some among the flaxworkers who doubted the wisdom of affiliation with the Federation, and there was talk of a ballot to decide whether the union should secede.<sup>2</sup> But reports of the violence at Waihi and the imprisonment of some of the strikers seems to have acted as a catalyst in the radicalisation of many among the flaxworkers.

The Waihi strike had broken out in May; the Miners' Union, affiliated to the Federation, had gained a wage increase for its members. The mine-owners retaliated by persuading some engine-drivers to form a union registered under the I.C. & A. Act; the owners could now negotiate with this minority union for Award rates which would apply to all employees. The Federationists struck in protest at the formation of this 'company union', and stayed out for six months. Violence, resulting in the death of a striker and the shooting of a policeman, and the imprisonment of some strikers for refusing to enter into sureties to keep the peace, resulted from the employers' use of strike-breakers.

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1. MW, 7 July 1911.

2. MH, 27 July 1912;  
WN, 20 June 1912.



The strikers eventually gave in, but many left Waihi during November because of intimidation by employers and police.<sup>3</sup>

The flaxworkers were not at first very enthusiastic in support of the Waihi strikers; they did, however, give financial support to the striking gold-miners at Reefton.<sup>4</sup> (The issue at Reefton was the number of men required to work a new type of drilling machine. The employers said one man was enough, the union said two men were needed. In November, after the men had been out for six months, the employers agreed that two men should work the machine).<sup>5</sup> But the violence at Waihi during September and October led to a change of attitude among the flaxworkers. Shortly after the strike, a militant who had formerly belonged to the union wrote an open letter to the flaxworkers expressing his pleasure at the way the events at Waihi had affected the union:

In the few months I worked at Tokomaru, I couldn't help but be impressed with the lack of enthusiasm shown by the majority of members of your union. I believe now that the ending of the Waihi trouble has done more to bring the workers together than years of oral propagandising.<sup>6</sup>

On 21 September, the Executive of the union carried a resolution supporting the Waihi strikers,<sup>7</sup> and on 10 October, 240 men held a meeting at Tokomaru at which all present except two donated a day's pay to the Waihi strike fund (the two who declined to contribute were 'sent to Coventry').<sup>8</sup>

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3. AJHR, 1913, H-11, p. ix;  
H. Holland, et. al., The Tragic Story of the Waihi Strike, (Wellington, 1913), passim.
  4. WN, 25 July 1912.
  5. AJHR, 1913, H-11, p. ix.
  6. MW, 10 January 1913.
  7. MH, 24 September 1912;  
Manawatu Flaxmills Employees' Union, Minute Book, entry of 21 September 1912.
  8. MW, 18 October 1912;  
WN, 26 October 1912.



The meeting in the square at  
Palmerston North, 22 October  
1912.

The flaxworkers' union was one of the few unions to support the Federation's call for a one-day sympathy strike;<sup>9</sup> on 22 October, a stop-work meeting was held at Palmerston North, attended by about 500 men, virtually the entire membership of the union. The meeting was addressed by Semple and Webb, and about half those attending were reported as wearing the badge of the Federation, a red ribbon in their lapels.<sup>10</sup> During November, Federationist 'refugees' who had fled Waihi after the strike arrived in the area. The number of Waihi men and their families who arrived is unknown, but their militancy and their tales of the violence at Waihi aroused the sympathy of many.<sup>11</sup> Early in 1913, The Tragic Story of the Waihi Strike was published by the Federation; it was widely read among the flaxworkers, and sold especially well at meetings addressed by Harry Holland, one of its co-authors, when he made a tour of the area in March.<sup>12</sup>

However, not all of the flaxworkers had become advocates of militancy. There were still about 100 men who had not joined the union, and among these men there was a good deal of hostility towards the Federationists. This hostility is illustrated by the experience of two militants from the 'Red-ribbon infested district of Tokomaru' who went to Foxton to persuade the men there to support the demonstration at Palmerston North. The pair met with a cool reception, especially at one mill, where the men gave them the choice of getting out within two minutes, or being thrown in the river. They left.<sup>13</sup>

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9. F. Milburne, The Revolt of the Militant Unions, (unpublished thesis, Auckland University, 1937), p. 131.

10. MES, 23 October 1912.

11. MW, 4 March 1914.

12. MW, 28 March 1913.

13. WN, 7 November 1912.

During 1913, the leaders of the union set about channelling the newly aroused radicalism among some of the flaxworkers into a sense of 'militant solidarity' (this was the slogan of the Federation), and increasing the membership of the union. So much importance was attached to these tasks that the Federation's vice-president, W.E. Parry, the President of the Waihi Miners' Union at the time of the strike, was appointed by the union as its first full-time organiser.<sup>14</sup> Parry, who began his work in March, 1913, stated at his first meeting that his task was to 'awaken men to a sense of duty to their class';<sup>15</sup> in subsequent addresses to the flaxworkers, his basic theme was the ease with which a strong and militant union could act to redress their grievances. Parry's task was no sinecure, his main difficulties being the large area over which the mills were scattered, and the high rate of turnover in the work force - many men 'went walkabout' when most of the mills closed down in winter, and did not return, and during the summer and autumn, men were constantly wandering from mill to mill in search of work. However, Parry soon became popular among the men, and it was not long before his work was showing results. '... New members are being secured, unfinancial members are making themselves good and the keenest interest is being awakened industrially'.<sup>16</sup> The effectiveness of Parry's work is clearly seen in Table I; to have 99.9% of a large, scattered and rather unstable work force enrolled in the union was no mean feat.

Parry also set about reorganising the union on the syndicalist pattern of representation from each 'Industrial Department', forming local committees at each mill on which each 'Department' (e.g. flaxcutters, millhands, paddockers, engineers), had a representative;

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14. MW, 7 March 1913. Parry was to become Minister of Internal Affairs in the first Labour Government.

15. MW, 14 March 1913.

16. MW, 28 March 1913.

each committee was to send one delegate to the meetings of the union.<sup>17</sup>

Parry had attended the 'Unity Conference' of July, 1913, and on his return to the area, he began organising meetings in support of the Social Democrat Party, which had been established as the militant labour movement's vehicle for political action.<sup>18</sup> Parry used every opportunity to foster a sense of solidarity among the flaxworkers. He organised a picnic, at which addresses were given by Semple, Webb and Hickey, and social evenings for the men and their wives. The object was 'to bring the workers together, to get them to understand why they should stick together in all things affecting their welfare'.<sup>19</sup> An incident which occurred on one of his tours of the mills was used by Parry to show that the use of 'direct action' could improve the flaxworkers' living conditions far more swiftly than could the union's previous policy of trying to obtain improvements through legislation. He visited a small and remote mill that had been closed down, but recently reopened following a rise in hemp prices on the London market. The accommodation provided for the men at this mill was 'almost beyond description'. Only one of these men was a union member, but after Parry had addressed them on the benefits of union membership, they all joined up; they then passed a resolution demanding that the mill-owner improve their accommodation. The manager arrived, and asked who was the individual dissatisfied; greeted with the reply 'We all are!', he had little choice but to satisfy their demands. When Parry returned to the mill two weeks later, he found some carpenters 'busy with the erection of buildings that have every appearance of being fit for human habitation'.<sup>20</sup>

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17. Ibid.

18. MW, 15 August 1913.

19. MW, 16 May 1913.

20. MW, 4 July 1913.

Towards the end of the year, the outbreak of the waterfront strike at Wellington provided a test of the extent to which Parry had succeeded in creating a sense of 'militant solidarity' among the flaxworkers. The strike originated in a dispute between the Wellington Shipwrights' Union and the Union Steamship Company over the Company's refusal to allow travelling time to a new repair yard three miles from the city. Negotiations broke down, and in June, the shipwrights cancelled their registration under the Act and joined the Wellington Watersiders' Union, which was affiliated with the Federation. The Company refused to negotiate with the Watersiders' Union so the shipwrights ceased work. Shortly afterwards, the watersiders held a stop-work meeting, but when they returned to work, they found that other men had been given their places. The watersiders then decided to go on strike until the men who had lost their places were reinstated, and control of the strike was handed over to the Federation. Attempts at strike-breaking were forcibly prevented by watersiders; on 6 November, an 'arbitrationist' union of watersiders was formed, and the members began work under police protection. Watersiders at the other large ports went out in sympathy, as did seamen and coal-miners. There was much disorder during the strikes, especially at Wellington, where clashes took place between strikers and 'special constables' recruited from rural districts, but the strikers' determination wavered during December, as men started to drift back to their jobs, and the Federation called the strike off on 20 December.<sup>21</sup>

There had for some time been rumours of a general upheaval being planned by the Federation - in September, 1912, the Manawatu Evening Standard had printed an article claiming that a 'stupendous struggle' was to take place at Christmas<sup>22</sup> - but it is generally believed to day that the Federation was not prepared for the strikes of 1913, and that its leaders were embarrassed by the eruption of violence.<sup>23</sup>

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21. AJHR, 1914, H-11, p. 11.

22. MES, 14 September 1912.

This would explain the instructions which one of the extremists from Tokomaru received when he went to Wellington to ask the Federation's Executive for authorisation for the flaxworkers to go out in sympathy; he was sent back with the warning not to go on strike, as it would give the employers a chance to form an 'arbitrationist' union, as had happened at Waihi.<sup>24</sup> In any case, a sympathy strike by the flaxworkers would have been in danger of failure, as many among what the Weekly News called the 'saner' members of the union were unsympathetic towards the Federationists, and were unwilling to be dragged by them into the waterfront dispute.<sup>25</sup> As the Manawatu Daily Times reported:

On the whole, these men are loyal unionists, but they object to being used as tools in order to magnify the powers of the 'Red Fed'. The utterances of some of the strike leaders are read with mingled feelings of annoyance and amusement by sober-minded flaxmill employees. It is admitted that there is an extreme section of unionists in the Tokomaru district, but their fanaticism is not shared by the men in the Foxton district.<sup>26</sup>

The question of why some among the flaxworkers became enthusiastic 'Red Feds' while others did not do so seems to have some connection with Lipset's views on the relationship between isolation and radical political behaviour, since the radical group at Tokomaru was composed mainly of single men who lived together at campsites near the mills or in boarding-houses in the town. The men at Foxton on the other hand, were mostly married men living in their own homes in the town.<sup>27</sup> There was 'widespread unemployment' among the flaxworkers at the time of the waterfront strike;<sup>28</sup> no doubt the Foxton men felt they had more to lose through precipitate strike action than did the hotheads at Tokomaru, a town which the Weekly News termed 'the 'Red Runanga' of the West Coast of the North Island'.<sup>29</sup>

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24. WN, 20 November 1913;  
MW, 8 April 1914.

25. WN, 20 November 1913.

26. MDT, 27 November 1913.

27. Interview with Mr R. Downs, Shannon, 25 November 1969.

28. MW, 12 September 1913.

29. WN, 5 February 1914.



Although the union did not call a sympathy strike, its members aided the strikers with donations (by March, 1914, it had contributed more than any other union to the Strikers' Aid Fund), with an offer of horses as an answer to 'Massey's Cossacks', and near Tokomaru, an attempt was made to obstruct a train carrying special constables to Wellington. (Fence posts and cart 'liberated' from the railway station were placed across the line; the train was undamaged by the obstacle, although stones were thrown at the carriage windows. No arrests were made; The Weekly News attributed the incident to 'a combination of I.W.W. talk and Dutch courage'). At about the same time, a flaxmill near Tokomaru caught fire; the Weekly News smelt a rat, but nothing could be proved. There was a strike, though, at one mill; the men stopped work for a morning in protest when they heard that one of their workmates had volunteered as a 'special'.<sup>30</sup>

The union's aid to the strikers may have proved more useful to them than a sympathy strike would have, but the divisions revealed among the flax-workers showed that its organiser's ideal of 'militant solidarity' was far from being realised. That many of its members did not feel closely involved in the affairs of the union was shown by the voting figures in a ballot held to elect a new President in January, 1914, when from a total of 1,053 members, only 553 votes were cast.<sup>31</sup> This ballot, which led to the election of J.R. Brown, one of the Tokomaru Federationists, gave rise to some ill-feeling between moderates and militants in the union with moderates alleging that the result had been announced before all the votes had been counted.<sup>32</sup>

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30. MW, 4 March 1914; 13 May 1914;  
MH, 4 November 1913;  
MDT, 5 November 1913;  
WN, 13 November 1913.

31. MW, 7 January 1914.

32. WN, 8 January 1914.



A few weeks later, the union had to contend with a 'secession crisis', brought about by disaffection among the militant Federationists at Tokomaru. The crisis arose when 41 members, most of them from Tokomaru, signed a requisition to call a special meeting of the union 'to consider the advisability of severing all connection with the United Federation of Labour and the Social Democrat Party'.<sup>33</sup> It was a very curious situation that had arisen, as it was the members who had previously been the most ardent supporters of the Federation who were now advocating that the union secede from it. The motives and aims of those who signed the requisition are obscure; according to the requisition itself, they were 'dissatisfied and disgusted' with the leaders of the Federation, who, they claimed, now thought more of their 'fat salaries' than of their socialist ideals. The secessionists claimed that the union's precarious financial position was due to its having to pay £200 a year to the Federation, and to support the union's organiser at a salary of £6 per week.<sup>34</sup> However, it seems that a major reason for their disaffection with the Federation was that they resented the way the Federation showed itself to be cderced following the defeat of the 1913 strikes, and by the passage of legislation aimed at preventing recurrences of such strikes.<sup>35</sup> As a Maoriland Worker editorial complained in March, 1914:

Owing to the collapse of the late strike and the amendments of the I.C. & A. Act that the Massey Government has passed, and is to pass, many of the supporters of Unionism have begun to despair, and to practically turn the whole of their energy to Parliament and to neglect industrial action'.<sup>36</sup>

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33. MW, 1 April 1914;  
WN, 2 April 1914; 16 April 1914.

34. MW, 1 April 1914.

35. Brown, p. 16;  
Stone, in Chapman and Sinclair, (eds.), p. 206.

36. MW, 18 March 1914.

The Union held a special meeting to consider the requisition, which was rejected overwhelmingly.<sup>37</sup> Following the defeat of the requisition, the President and his Executive resigned, and were replaced by a more moderate group, led by A. Hillier, of Shannon, loyal to the Federation.<sup>38</sup> During the crisis, the Federation had spared no effort to defeat the requisition, sending Robert Semple around the mills addressing the men on the benefits of continued affiliation,<sup>39</sup> and by printing an emotional article in the Maoriland Worker, in which 'the comrades' in the flaxmills were asked if they remembered the time when:

We were compelled to carry the flax any old distance the boss liked to make us, when we were compelled to load it ourselves. Do you remember how the Arbitration Court turned a deaf ear to your appeals for flaxcutting conditions? Do you remember the meeting we had in Shannon, and when the bosses refused to negotiate with your representatives, how we organised that monster meeting in Palmerston North which resulted in loosening the bosses' tongues and the granting of a minimum wage, weigh-bridges and a set of conditions? Do you remember the election, the fight we had, the way we voted together, returning for the first time in New Zealand a workingclass member for a country constituency? And surely you don't forget the hovels we used to live in, and the way the bosses had of telling us that if we succeeded in forcing them to provide us with decent and sanitary accommodation, the number of mills that would be forced to cease operation as a result? Surely you don't forget the water we used to drink, the fever we used to contract, the comrades we have seen buried as a result of these conditions? These things have been overcome, and how, comrades? Our conditions have been bettered by militancy, sheer militancy, real militancy, harmonious organisation among ourselves, and marching in the right direction, fighting shoulder to shoulder, our energy directed against our only enemy, the exploiter. The conditions on the mines, on the waterfront, on the construction works, have been similarly brought about....<sup>40</sup>

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37. WN, 16 April 1914;  
MW, 8 April 1914.

38. WN, 9 April 1914.

39. WN, 2 April 1914.

40. MW, 8 April 1914.

By early 1914, then, both the Federation and the flaxworkers' union were basing their appeals for support not so much on doctrines of class conflict but on their demonstrated effectiveness in securing redress of material grievances. The union's emphasis was on the 'here and now' questions of wages and condition; the Federationist rhetoric of 'militant solidarity' was scarcely meant as a call to Revolution (although the hot-heads at Tokomaru seem to have taken it at face value), but as a means of coalescing a sense of grievance into attempts to reform existing conditions by securing the passage of legislation and the enforcement of regulations;

The flaxworkers have experienced in labour Parliamentary representation, a valuable means of improving the conditions of their work. Housing legislation has been secured, which partly bettered the appliances and the accommodation at the mills, and this alone has saved many lives. Bad water used to cause epidemics of typhoid (only last week typhoid was reported at one mill), but generally conditions on this score are not to be compared with those before labour in the House forced long-over-due legislation from tardy politicians.... The fact that /Mr Robertson's / presence in the House forced concessions to the flaxworkers has given them an object-lesson in the value of working-class representation which most of them have learned for good....<sup>41</sup>

The outbreak of war led to a rapid and drastic decline in the membership of the union, from 1,053 in December 1913 to 557 a year later; men left the area when many of the mills closed down owing to a shortage of shipping space.<sup>43</sup> Many years later, Robertson claimed that the closing of the mills on the outbreak of war was the main reason for his defeat in the 1914 election,<sup>44</sup> but the total vote from polling places in the flax area reveals an increase over the vote in these places in the 1911 second ballot.

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41. MW, 27 October 1915.

43. MW, 27 October 1915.

44. G. Scholefield, (ed.) Who's Who in New Zealand, (Wellington 1951), p. 201.

TABLE VI

Robertson's Support in 1914

Returns from each Polling Place

1.	POOLING PLACES WITHIN THE FLAX AREA:	<u>Votes cast for Robertson:</u>	<u>Total Vote:</u>	<u>Votes for Robertson as % of Total:</u>
	Shannon Township	314	552	56%
	Makerua (Ingram's Mill)	16	35	45%
	Tokomaru Township	119	230	50%
Foxton	Foxton Township	514	882	58%
	Rangiotu Flaxmill	25	30	83%
	Moutoua Mill	60	107	56%
	Gibb's Mill	46	62	74%
		<u>1094</u>	<u>1898</u>	
2.	POLLING PLACES ON THE FRINGE OF THE FLAX AREA:			
	Rangiotu School Rural	47	121	38%
	Koputaroa Rural	28	108	24%
		<u>75</u>	<u>229</u>	
3.	POLLING PLACES OUTSIDE THE FLAX AREA:			
	Otaki Township	209	589	35%
	Levin Township	463	1178	39%
	Taikorea Rural	37	130	28%
	Akatarawa Rural	13	33	29%
	Akatarawa Rd Rural	5	17	29%
	Paekakariki Township	83	161	49%
	Paraparaumu Township	77	175	44%
	Reikorangi Rural	23	59	39%
	Waiohanga Rural	10	32	34%
	Te Horo Township	63	178	31%
	Manukau Township	48	198	24%
	Ohau Rural	37	135	27%
	Absent Voters	69	126	57%
		<u>1215</u>	<u>3281</u>	

Robertson was defeated in 1914 not by the absence of many flaxworkers but by a swing of 528 votes (10% of the 1914 total) towards Field, who had recently switched to the Reform party. In 1914, there was an understanding between the Liberals and labour groups to avoid splitting the 'progressive' vote; consequently, no Liberal candidate stood in Otaki in 1914, and Robertson had the benefit of erstwhile Liberal votes. In 1914, Robertson gained 2,384 votes, 1,100 more than in the second ballot. No doubt wartime suspicion of 'Socialist Internationalism' contributed towards the swing to Field, but Robertson's personal standing in the electorate seems to have been such that he could earn the support of many Liberal supporters.<sup>45</sup>

During the first two years of the war, there was not, apparently, a very high rate of enlistment among the flaxworkers - by November, 1915, only 20 union members had joined the Expeditionary Force.<sup>46</sup> Most of the mills were closed until the beginning of 1915, when wartime demands began to raise the price of fibre on the London market; by late 1915, prices were higher than ever.<sup>47</sup>

By this time also, the union, as was the labour movement in general, was becoming concerned at the failure of the Arbitration Court to issue new awards to compensate for the sharp increases that the war had caused in the costs of basic commodities.<sup>48</sup>

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45. Shannon, p. 229;  
AJHR, 1915, H-24a, p. 15.

46. MW, 17 November 1915.

47. MW, 27 October 1915.

48. R.C.J. Stone, A History of New Zealand and Trades Unionism, 1900 - 1937, (unpublished thesis, Auckland University, 1949), p. 23.  
By 1915, the price of bread had increased by one-third over pre-war levels, and the costs of other basic commodities (footwear, sugar, meat) were also going up.

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In August, 1915, the union had applied to the Arbitration Court for a new award, but the Court agreed only to raise the hourly rate for unskilled workers to 1s. 1d., leaving the rate for all other men unchanged. The result was that considerable resentment built up among the flaxworkers.<sup>49</sup>

But wartime conditions in the flax industry were not conducive to militancy on the part of the union. During the summer of 1915-16, there had been an influx of men of military age who had been sacked from other jobs for failing to volunteer for military service, with the result that there was a surplus of labour in the area. There were rumours that the mills would be forced to close down at any time owing to a shortage of shipping space, and there was an outbreak of grub infestation which damaged many plants and reduced the output of the flaxcutters, with a consequent decline in their earnings. The rumours that the mills would soon close, and in addition, perhaps, the knowledge that conscription would soon come into force, led many flaxworkers to enlist during April and May, 1916; enlistments took place at such a rate that by June it was thought that there would be a scarcity of skilled workers for the coming season. The labour situation had changed so drastically that one miller ensured that he would have an adequate supply of labour by increasing wages for flaxcutters from 7s. to 10s. per ton. However, the general belief that the mills could be forced at any time to close down continued throughout the war period.<sup>50</sup>

Although by September, 1915, several members of the union, said to be 'mostly Red Feds' had been killed at Gallipoli,<sup>51</sup> the union itself gained some local notoriety during 1916 for its campaign of opposition to the introduction of compulsory military service.

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49. MW, 1 September 1915; 27 October 1915.

50. MW, 19 April 1916.

51. MW, 29 September 1915.

Militant labour had long been hostile to compulsory military training (which had been introduced in 1909), and had supported the concept of a voluntary citizen army, with its soldiers paid standard wages.<sup>52</sup> In January, 1916, the Federation had called a conference to discuss the labour movement's attitude to conscription, which it was generally believed would soon be introduced. At the end of the conference, a manifesto was issued demanding the conscription of wealth before conscription of life, and that it be fully tried before manpower conscription be considered.<sup>53</sup> Two delegates from the flaxworkers' union had attended the conference; on their return they addressed a meeting of the union which endorsed and pledged loyalty to the manifesto, and arranged for the distribution of 5,000 copies of it around the Manawatu.<sup>54</sup> The Military Service Bill was introduced to the House during May, and the labour movement reacted by bringing its campaign against conscription to a peak.<sup>55</sup> On June 10, after a series of fourteen preparatory meetings at various mills, the flaxworkers' union held a large meeting at Palmerston North, at which resolutions condemning compulsory service were passed.<sup>56</sup> These resolutions echoed those of the January Conference in calling for the conscription of wealth as well as of life. Fears were expressed that the introduction of conscription was part of a government plot to bring the workers permanently under martial law, and that the secret proceedings of the 'Exemption Tribunals' (to whom men could appeal for exemption from service on the grounds of essential work or undue hardship to dependents), were intended to protect wealthy 'shirkers'.

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52. Brown, p. 21.

53. Brown, p. 22.

54. MW, 9 February 1916.

55. Brown, p. 23.

56. MES, 4 July 1916.



The union resolved

That this meeting of flaxworkers, after having fully considered the Conscription Bill, now before the legislators, in detail, is of the unanimous opinion that it is not a military necessity, nor does it aim at equality of sacrifice, but it is a measure designed for the purpose of raising a cheap army and protecting the enormous war profits of the wealthy shirker from just taxation. Further, that it is an after-war measure, with the intent of shackling the wage-workers, abolishing Trade Union protection and restrictions, and making workers subservient to the commands of the military authorities.

This union draws the attention of its members and of the public to the fact that the Government insists on the 'Exemption Tribunals' doing their work in secrecy, and to the fact that no reasons are to be given for the refusal or granting of exemptions.

This union protests against the Star Chamber methods as calculated to result in favouritism to the rich and discrimination against the workers. It demands a public hearing for every application, and publication in the New Zealand Gazette of the reasons explaining the decisions of the Tribunals.

That this meeting pledges itself by signature attached to the form provided that it will immediately go on strike the moment the Conscription Bill is put into operation to enforce any man against his will or conscience to join the forces, and that all flaxmills<sup>57</sup> be circularised calling on members to give a similar undertaking.

The issue of opposition to the Military Service Bill had brought together both moderate and militant elements in the labour movement in a common endeavour;<sup>58</sup> the resolutions passed by the flaxworkers' union echoed those of the January Conference. But the thread of strike action attracted the attention of the Government, and the Prime Minister referred the union's resolutions to the Crown Law Office.<sup>59</sup> Another aspect of the union's **campaign against conscription** was its sponsorship of lectures by Adela Pankhurst; during July, the former Suffragette spoke at Foxton, Tokomaru and Shannon against 'War-mongers and Conscription', apparently to some effect in creating sympathy for her views.<sup>60</sup>

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57. MW, 14 June 1916.

58. Brown, p. 23.

59. MW, 28 June 1916.

60. MW, 19 July 1916;  
D.J. Mitchell, The Fighting Pankhursts, (London, 1967), p. 58.



After the Manawatu Herald had denounced the 'Rua-like fanatic' (i.e. James Thorn), who had been addressing flaxworkers on the issue, the Foxton members of the union met and passed a resolution condemning the Herald's attitude and declaring support for the union Executive. The government evidently felt that things were getting out of hand; a detective was sent to tour the mills and interrogate members about the union's policies. The outcome was that the Secretary of the union, P.T. Robinson, was arrested for 'writing with seditious intention', a breach of the War Regulations.<sup>61</sup> At Robinson's trial at Palmerston North in July, the Crown claimed that a circular bearing his signature contained the union's resolution to go on strike if any man were forced to serve against his will. Robinson's defence was that the union's protest was directed at the Bill's failure to recognise the rights of conscientious objectors; that to put one's signature to the resolution was not seditious, and that the strike was envisaged by the union as only a token of objection to compulsion. The result of the trial was that Robinson was fined £25;<sup>62</sup> the fine was sufficient warning to the union, since no more is recorded of any opposition to conscription, not even over the case of Mark Briggs.

Briggs was a Yorkshireman, one of the few ideologues in the union (it will be recalled that he had moved the motion of no confidence against the President at the time of the Waihi strike).

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61. MW, 12 July 1916; 26 July 1916. James Thorn was to become the President of the Labour Party in 1929; during the war, he was living in Palmerston North. His position as editor of the 'Country Workers' Page' of the Maoriland Worker brought him into close contact with the flaxworkers' union. His opposition to the Military Service Bill led to his being imprisoned under the War Regulations in December, 1916.

Brown, p. 26; Scholefield (ed.), p. 232.

62. MW, 9 August 1916.

In 1917, he was conscripted, his appeal was rejected, and he was forced into the army and taken to France, where as a secular pacifist, his consistent refusal to perform military service resulted in his being given 'Field Punishment No. 1' (in which the victim was tied to a stake with his arms outstretched and left in the open for several hours), and being literally dragged into the front line. There is no record of the union protesting at the treatment of Briggs; an indication of the effectiveness of the War Regulation in inhibiting any 'seditious strike or lockout' that would hinder the war effort. Briggs managed to survive his ordeal; he became active in the Palmerston North branch of the Labour Party, and was appointed to the Legislative Council in 1938.<sup>63</sup>

With the trial of Robinson, the union ended its agitation against conscription and turned its concern once more to the cost-of-living problem, endeavouring to arouse indignation at war profiteering by encouraging the sale of the Maoriland Worker throughout the area, and by having Peter Fraser tour the mills and address the men on 'the necessity for vigorous action on the part of workers' organisations'.<sup>64</sup> Over the next two years, the union showed that it was prepared to bypass the Arbitration Court in order to gain wage increases, as the Court had shown itself unwilling to raise wages at a time when the millers were receiving extremely high prices for their product. The first instance of successful direct bargaining with the employers occurred in October, 1916, when flaxcutters at the 'Rangitane' mill claimed that the award rate of 7s. 9d. per ton was inadequate.

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63. Scholefield (ed.), p. 31;  
A. Baxter, We Shall Not Cease, (London, 1939), p. 188;  
New Zealand Gazette Extraordinary, Volume 1 (1917), p. 699.

64. MW, 25 October 1916.

They asked for 8s. 9d. per ton, were refused, and struck. The employer soon compromised, and work was resumed at 8s. 6d. per ton.<sup>65</sup> A more significant dispute occurred at the largest mill ('Miranui'), employing 170 men, when the millhands struck over a claim for a rise of 1s. a day. At a mass meeting of the union on September 13, 1917, a motion that a general strike be called on the issue was defeated (by 209 votes to 208), but an amendment that the strikers be supported by a levy on all other union members was passed, as was a motion that the union set up a committee to negotiate wage claims directly with the Millers' Association.<sup>66</sup> The outcome of this dispute was that an agreement was signed on 20 November between the union and the Millers' Association which raised the minimum wage rate to 14s. per day. The agreement was to be valid for three months, and each side was to give a week's notice of its desire to alter the rate.<sup>67</sup>

This agreement remained in force until shortly after the Armistice, when a slump in fibre prices forced the mills to close down.<sup>68</sup> By April, 1919, the mills had reopened, but the imposition of a cut in wages by the millers led to considerable discontent among the flaxworkers. In May, a meeting of the union had resolved that no man should accept work at less than 14s. per day, and after asking for a conference with the employers, called a strike. The employers agreed to take part in the proposed conference, but when the union named as one of its delegates a man who had been blacklisted as a military defaulter, said they would only take part if this man was replaced.<sup>69</sup>

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65. Ibid.

66. MW, 19 September 1917.

67. MW, 28 November 1917.

68. MW, 3 September 1919.

69. MW, 18 June 1919.

The resulting deadlock lasted until July, when the newly nominated Labour Party candidate for Palmerston North, the Rev. Moses Ayrton, mediated in the dispute with the result that 'substantial concessions' were extracted from the millers.<sup>70</sup> Although Ayrton had led a socialist study group in 'Red Runanga', he was himself only mildly radical, seeing socialism essentially as an expression of Christian ideals of social justice;<sup>71</sup> it seems that the millers were more prepared to listen to him than to the leaders of the union, while Ayrton in turn could count on the goodwill of the union, since it had a close association with the local branches of the Labour Party.

A branch of the party had been formed at Shannon in November, 1917; the organisers were confident that the flaxworkers would ensure that it would be a militant branch.<sup>72</sup> In the Palmerston North by-election of November, 1918, one of the union's Executive members (A. Galbraith) had stood, and had come a close second,<sup>73</sup> and in 1919, a former President of the union, A. Hillier, had stood as Labour candidate for Manawatu. (Boundaries had been changed since 1914, and the new electorate included the northern section of the old Otaki electorate).<sup>74</sup> The support which the union was giving to the political programme of the Labour Party seems to have been a major reason why it showed such reluctance to affiliate with the radical and syndicalist N.Z. Workers' Union during the late war and early post-war years.

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70. MW, 16 July 1919.

71. L.W. Richardson, The Workers and Grey District Politics During Wartime, 1914 - 1918, (unpublished thesis, University of Canterbury, 1969), p. 54.

72. MW, 21 November 1917.

73. MW, 11 December 1918. The result of the by-election was:

Nash	(Government)	2229.
Galbraith	(Labour)	1914.
Crabb	(Independent)	1119.

74. MW, 16 July 1919.

In the last two years of the war, there had been a revival of militant unionism; the flaxworkers were one of several classes of workers who found that the wartime labour shortage had placed them in a strong position to bargain for wage increases. Two new militant organisations made their appearance; the Alliance of Labour, formed in 1919 and consisting of water-siders', drivers' and other transport unions, and the N.Z. Agricultural and Pastoral Workers' Union, formed in September, 1915, to bring all rural workers into a single organisation.<sup>75</sup> The leaders of the old Federation had by this time turned their attention to the Parliamentary Labour Party, and the new organisations were led by men who, influenced by a variety of syndicalism of English origin,<sup>76</sup> were to attempt to build a new type of militant unionism in New Zealand.

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75. Stone, p. 163;  
Brown, p. 44 - 45;  
Stone, in Chapman & Sinclair, (eds.), pp. 207-211.

76. Stone, p. 163.

### MILITANCY REJECTED

The N.Z. Agricultural and Pastoral Workers' Union (the name was changed in 1919 to 'The N.Z. Workers' Union'), had been formed in September, 1915, to bring all rural workers (shearers, farmhands, millhands, shepherds, flaxworkers) into a single organisation; the ultimate aim was to build 'One Big Union'.<sup>1</sup> This was a fighting union, distrustful, even contemptuous of political action, determined to organise for the transformation of society. Or so its leaders claimed. The protracted course of negotiations between the Workers' Union and the flaxworkers' union over the amalgamation of the two bodies were to show that even a reputedly radical union was unwilling to lose its identity in the 'One Big Union' and surrender control of its affairs to distant hotheads in Wellington.

In June, 1917, the flaxworkers' union had held a ballot to decide whether or not to amalgamate with the A. & P. Workers' Union; the result was 328 votes to 14 in favour of amalgamation,<sup>2</sup> yet this was only accomplished in 1920, after a long controversy published in the Maoriland Worker. At the centre of the dispute was the flaxworkers' union's desire for a guarantee of representation on the A. & P. Union's Executive.

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1. Stone, p. 163.

2. MW, 13 June 1917.

In view of the flaxworkers' union, the constitution of the Workers' Union gave no guarantee of such representation, since it provided that the Executive were to be elected from the delegates to each annual conference; there was no provision for Executive members to be elected from specific member unions. The position that the flaxworkers' union took was that although it was anxious to amalgamate with the larger body, it was not prepared to 'bury itself in it' without a guarantee of representation on the Executive. Consequently, it proposed during 1917 that the name of the A. & P. Workers' Union be changed to 'The N.Z. Workers' Union'; that local branches be assured of continued autonomy; that member unions be assured of proportional representation on the National Executive, and that members of the Executive be elected by the local branches.<sup>3</sup>

The second of these proposals contradicted the 'first objective' of the Workers' Union - 'to organise all wage-workers into one organisation,'<sup>4</sup> but opposition to complete control by a national office, as well as mistrust of the extremism of the Workers' Union, seems to have been widespread among the rank and file of the flaxworkers' union. One enthusiast for amalgamation wrote in the Maoriland Worker of the apathy he had encountered among the flaxworkers - 'One member told me the Workers' Union did not live up to its promises, another said it was no good being governed by Wellington'.<sup>5</sup> It was not until September, 1919, that progress began to be made towards amalgamation, when the Workers' Union gave an assurance that the flaxworkers need have no fear of being 'buried' in the larger union, and gave a guarantee that the interests of all member unions would be safeguarded.<sup>6</sup>

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3. MW, 7 August 1918; 6 August 1919.

4. MW, 30 June 1920.

5. MW, 18 June 1919.

6. MW, 17 September 1919.

In February, 1920, the Secretary of the Workers' Union addressed meetings of flaxworkers, at which resolutions in favour of amalgamation were passed;<sup>7</sup> on 19 May, the union held a ballot. Amalgamation was approved, on condition that the flaxworkers' union retain its autonomy, with its own office, that its funds be pooled with those of the Workers' Union, and that it be guaranteed representation on the Executive of the Workers' Union.<sup>8</sup>

It is clear that all the ardour was on one side in this particular courtship. The Workers' Union was enthusiastic over the amalgamation, claiming that with the pooled funds, each member union would be better able to 'fight arbitration', and that the flaxworkers' union in particular would be able to employ an organising staff adequate to cover the large area over which the mills were scattered.<sup>9</sup> But the flaxworkers' union was wary of being seduced by the rhetoric of the militants.

Despite the stated objective of the Workers' Union, 'to bring all workers into one organisation', the flaxworkers had insisted that they retain their identity as a union registered under the I. C. & A. Act;<sup>10</sup> they were clearly reluctant to place themselves under the control of the militants in Wellington who could have called them out on an issue which did not directly affect them. 'Doctrines of direct action were eyed askance by workers whose hold on jobs was precarious'.<sup>11</sup> The economic climate of the early 1920's was not conducive to militancy among New Zealand unionists.

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7. MW, 11 February 1920.

8. Ibid

9. MW, 17 March 1920.

10. Ibid

11. Stone, p. 57.



The post-war slump was at its height in 1921-22,<sup>12</sup> but those workers who had kept their jobs were not in a position to combat the resulting wage cuts. This was also the time when 'Yellow Leaf Disease' was beginning to destroy large areas of flax in the Manawatu, with disastrous effects on the industry.<sup>13</sup> The address of the president of the Workers' Union, Arthur Cook, to the union's conference in 1920, was quite out of touch with reality. After some remarks on the amalgamation with the flaxworkers' union ('well known throughout N.Z. as a fighting union'), he made his profession of faith;

I stand before you today as an Industrial unionist. I am at last convinced that Industrial unionism is the only unionism worth fighting for. Political action in the labour movement, I consider, has become too damn respectable for me to be any longer associated with it. Build up one industrial union in this country and you will gain more in one day by job action than can be gained in 100 years by political action, and I want the thousands of men that I represent here today to know that in future I am purely an Industrial fighter.<sup>14</sup>

Brave words. But as far as the flaxworkers were concerned, so much hot air. During 1921, the depressed state of the flax industry forced the flaxworkers' union to the tacit admission that a policy of active opposition to wage cuts would succeed only in killing the industry. The union had no choice but to acquiesce in wage reductions of 1s. per day for millhands and 1s. per ton for men on piecework.<sup>15</sup>

At about the same time as the flaxworkers acquiesced to the wage reductions, the Maoriland Worker had published an editorial which may be construed as the epitaph of the 'Red Fed' era. It seems ironical that the paper which had been founded ten years before to spread the gospel of militant socialism should now dismiss as irrelevant the extremism of those who disregarded the basic moderation and constitutionalism among New Zealanders.

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12. Brown, p. 50.

13. A.M. McLintock, (ed.), Encyclopedia of New Zealand, Volume 1, (Wellington, 1966), p. 705.

14. MW, 26 May 1920.

15. MW, 23 March 1921.

The belief that militancy such as was preached by the Workers' Union would lead the labour movement into a dead end was summed up in the title of the editorial, 'What's Wrong With Our Movement?'

For New Zealand workers to depend entirely upon their economic organisations and refuse to recognise the advantages of the ballot box to assist in bringing about the desired social change, is to adopt a policy in which a small minority - the organised industrial section - propose to force their will upon the majority regardless of that majority's own desires. Such a policy, spectacular though it may be, is stupid and can only lead to failure. New Zealand is wedded to the constitutional method for political change.... for any labour organisation in this country professing to stand for working-class emancipation to teach that that goal can be reached by insurrectionary methods (for that is what the ignoring of constitutional procedure means), is to be guilty of a serious crime against the working class... Thus, labour is at the crossroads. Many organisations, seeing the signs aright, have turned resolutely towards the goal. Others, with uncertain footsteps, are stumbling onwards to chaos, whilst others are still hesitating which road to take.<sup>16</sup>

No more explicit admission could be made that extremist labour movements could not find an adequate foothold in New Zealand. The experience of the Manawatu flaxworkers over the preceding ten years may give some insight into why this was so.

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16. MW, 25 May 1921.

IV

CONCLUSION

Early in this essay, attention was drawn to Lipset's comments on the relationship between 'isolation' and political radicalism. However, it seems that it is only up to a certain point that the flaxworkers may be taken as an example of Lipset's observations.

The evidence certainly points to the flax area as being quite distinct, with most aspects of the lives of its inhabitants dominated by the fortunes of the flax industry; like other areas where a single industry was dominant, the Manawatu flax area had a unique 'atmosphere' or ethos. But whether the general 'isolation' or distinctiveness of the area led necessarily to political radicalism on the part of its inhabitants may be doubted.

Grievances over accommodation and working conditions were strong incentives to militancy, but it must be recalled that conditions at the larger mills, even before the enactment of legislation, were notably better than those at the smaller and more remote mills, and that in any case, a large number of the flaxworkers lived in their own homes in the towns. The men who lived at Foxton proved particularly resistant to Federationist propaganda during 1912 - 1913; this, it seems, may be ascribed to nothing else than the fact that the majority of them were married men. Men with families to support may be expected to have a built-in suspicion of militant rhetoric, especially when, as at the time of the 1913 strike, there was considerable unemployment among flaxworkers. An additional disincentive to militancy was the generally close association of employers with their men; overseas, for example in the Victorian coal mines where Robert Semple spent his formative years, the large and impersonal nature of the concerns and the comparative rigidity of the 'Us - Them' mentality bred intransigence on both sides, but this was not so in the

Manawatu flax area. Many of the conditions and attitudes which bred militancy overseas were not to be found in the area, yet those material grievances that were felt were a major ingredient in the radicalism of the union - a major element in Parry's success as organiser was the fact that he could show that talk of direct action could be used to bring about swift improvements in living conditions.

For the men living around Tokomaru and at the mills in the swamps, a sense of comradeship and solidarity arising from shared grievances and deprivations was indeed a potent influence towards radicalism, but in assessing the nature of this radicalism, we must consider the types of men involved in these situations. The flaxworkers were in general not particularly concerned with ideological abstractions, but with the ways in which radical attitudes could be used to bring about material improvements; the rhetoric was a convenient means to material ends. The group at Tokomaru may appear to have taken a more doctrinaire view of things - the attempt to derail the trainload of 'specials' was the nearest that flaxworkers came to politically motivated violence. But the episode does bear the stamp of a more or less drunken escapade (it did, after all, take place on a Saturday night), rather than a serious attempt at sabotage. The fact that several of the Tokomaru group were killed early in the Gallipoli campaign seems to indicate that it was something of the same search for excitement that led them to volunteer that made them keen supporters of notions of class violence. In other words, the young and single men at Tokomaru were, like many other young and single men, inclined to be hotheaded.

Wartime grievances over the rising cost of living gave a new lease of life to the flaxworkers' 'bread and butter' militancy, and the anti-conscription agitation of 1916 brought some additional notoriety to the union. However, the union's agitation was not against the war itself, nor was it against even the principle of conscription; it was rather in support of the principle of equality of sacrifice - if the lives of workers were to be sacrificed for the common good, why not the wealth of employers as well?

The final point, and one that was fully realised by the Foxton men in 1913 and by the union as a whole in 1921, was that militancy of the type preached by the President of the Workers' Union was a luxury for workers. In good times, such as the flax industry enjoyed during the war, workers could bargain effectively with employers. In times of depression, the places of strikers would be taken by the unemployed; the way out of the dilemma was for workers to organise for eventual political victory. Flaxworkers, bearing in mind their success with Robertson, had begun to do this during 1917 - 1918; it was the hard times of 1920 - 1921 that, as the flaxworkers were concerned, finally stilled the revolutionary rhetoric of the 'Red Fed' era.

## APPENDIX 1

### SYNDICALISM AND THE I.W.W.

It was in France that 'anarcho-syndicalism' made its greatest headway. In general, it represented an amalgam of trade unionism, Marxism and anarchism which began early in the 1890s when many anarchist workers entered the French trade union movement, and once there, combined their ideas with the 'pure and simple' trade unionists. The anarcho-syndicalist concept of abolishing the state immediately after the revolution and basing the new society upon decentralised economic structures led to the economic organisation replacing the political party as the agent for making the revolution. This it wanted to do through the tactics of the general strike which by bringing all production to a halt would break the power of the capitalist class and enable the working class to take over industry. With immediate abolition of the state, the trade unions would then conduct production and form the centre of economic administration in the new social order. In short, the syndicat, or trade union, was to be a tool in the education of the working class, and a weapon in the continued war on the capitalist state.

Although the influence of French syndicalism in the formative period of the I.W.W. was strong, it is also true that the forces that brought the I.W.W. into being were the product of U.S. economic and political developments. Among the factors influencing the formation of the I.W.W. at Chicago in 1905 were the existence of great masses of disfranchised migrants and floating workers, the widespread corruption of American politics, and the growing conviction among left-wing socialists that neither reform legislation nor votes for socialism seemed to make much headway in gaining immediate benefits for the workers. These factors led to the erroneous conclusion that politics should be abandoned and all energy directed towards building the revolutionary labour union. The adherents of this view naively supposed that the workers organised in 'One Big Union' could in the near future call a general strike which would cause the end of capitalism. All this, the history of the I.W.W. was to prove, was not as easy to achieve in real life as it was to put down in lengthy and stirring articles in journals and pamphlets.

P. Foner

A History of the Labour  
Movement in the United  
States (New York 1965)

pp.20-23

APPENDIX 11

UNIONS AFFILIATED TO THE FEDERATION OF LABOUR

September, 1912

<u>Union:</u>	<u>Membership:</u>
Waikato Miners	475
Denniston Miners	400
Granity Miners	390
State Miners (Dunollie)	400
Otago and Green Island Miners	300
Puponga Miners	54
Taitapu Miners	20
Waihi Miners (before strike)	900
Inangahua Miners	700
Denniston Engine Drivers	210
Seddonville Miners	20
Kiripaka Miners	35
West Coast Workers	300
Canterbury Labourers	954
Auckland General Labourers	800
Westport Labour Union	190
Wellington Watersiders	1000
Nelson Watersiders	50
Dunedin Watersiders	278
Foxton Watersiders	25
Picton and Patea Watersiders	63
Shearers' Association	3589
Auckland Brewery Workers	141
Wellington Gas Stokers	35
Manawatu Flaxmillers	620
	<u>14,077</u>

Source: Manawatu Evening Standard

14 September, 1912

## LIST OF SOURCES

### INTERVIEWS

1. The reminiscences of Mr R. Downs, a well-known resident of Shannon who had joined the union in 1913, were a valuable source of information. Mr Downs' reminiscences were the only first-hand material I managed to obtain, but in interviews with Mr I. Matheson, City Archivist, Palmerston North, and Mr H. Roth, Deputy Librarian, Auckland University, several aspects of the topic were elucidated. I very much appreciate the courtesy of these three gentlemen.

### MANUSCRIPT MATERIAL

2. Manawatu Flaxmills Employees' Industrial Union of Workers Minute Book, May 1912 to February 1913. This book is in the possession of Mr A. Millar, Public Service Association Organiser, Palmerston North: it seems that no other of the union's documents of the pre-war period survive. The union, which is still in existence, has some material from the 1920s, but I was unable to obtain access to this.

### PARLIAMENTARY AND OTHER OFFICIAL PAPERS

3. Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives, 1906 - 1922, H-11, (Annual Report of the Department of Labour): 1912 H-12 and H-12a, (Returns for the 1911 General Election): 1913 H-31, (Annual Report of the Department of Health): 1915 H-24, (Returns for the 1914 General Election).

New Zealand Gazette, 1913, Volume 1.

New Zealand Gazette Extraordinary, 1917, Volume 1.

New Zealand Parliamentary Debates, Volume 160.

Statutes of New Zealand, 1912.

### NEWSPAPERS AND PERIODICALS

4.	<u>Title and Place of Publication:</u>	<u>Period Consulted:</u>	<u>Location:</u>
	<u>Auckland Star</u> , (Auckland)	26 December, 1935	Auckland Public Library
	<u>Manawatu Evening Standard</u>	Jan., 1911 - Dec., 1921	Public Library Palmerston North
	<u>Manawatu Daily Times</u> (Palmerston Nth)	Jan., 1912 - Dec., 1913 Jan., 1918 - Dec., 1920	Public Library, Palmerston North



<u>Maoriland Worker</u> (Wellington)	Jan., 1911 - March, 1918	Turnbull Library Wellington
	March, 1918 - Dec., 1921	General Assembly Library, Wellington
<u>Manawatu Herald</u> (Foxton)	Sept., 1911 - Feb., 1914	Foxton Borough Council Chambers
<u>Press Hank</u> (Foxton)	Aug., 1909 - Feb., 1910	In the possession of Mr H. Roth, Deputy Librarian, Auckland University
<u>Round Table</u> (London)	March, 1914	Library, Massey University
<u>Weekly News</u> (Auckland)	Jan., 1911 - Oct., 1916	Library, Auckland Institute and Museum

#### CONTEMPORARY WORKS

5. E.J.B. Allen, Labour and Politics, Wellington, n.d. Written in 1920 or 1921, this pamphlet claims the support of workers for the Parliamentary aspirations of the Labour Party on the grounds that the violent fantasies of the leaders of the Workers' Union and of the Alliance of Labour are not acceptable to the majority of New Zealanders. The vast majority of New Zealand workers, Allen claims, are not interested in revolutionary action to improve their lot; they would rather save to acquire the capital necessary to set themselves up as shopkeepers or 'cow-cookies'. The essence of Allen's argument is that the constant aspirations of many members of the New Zealand 'working class' towards social osmosis means that any attempts at political violence based on notions of rigid and antipathetic class structures are bound to be rejected by the vast majority of workers.

H. Holland, The Tragic Story of the Waihi Strike, Wellington, 1913.

#### UNPUBLISHED THESES

6. F. Milburne, The Revolt of the Militant Unions, University of Auckland, 1937.

L.E. Richardson, The Workers and Grey District Politics During Wartime, 1914 - 1918, University of Canterbury, 1969.

R. Shannon, The Decline and Fall of the Liberals, University of Auckland, 1954.

R.C.J. Stone, A History of New Zealand and Trades Unionism, 1900 - 1937, University of Auckland, 1949.

LATER PUBLISHED WORKS

A. Baxter, We Shall Not Cease, London, 1939. Baxter was one of the conscientious objectors shipped to England in 1917; he knew Mark Briggs and was subjected to similar punishments.

B. Brown, The Rise of New Zealand Labour, Wellington, 1962

R. Chapman and K. Sinclair, (eds.), Studies of a Small Democracy, Auckland, 1963.

S.M. Lipset, Political Man, London, 1960

D.J. Mitchell, The Fighting Pankhursts, London, 1967. Contains a brief mention of Adela Pankhurst's three-week tour of New Zealand in 1916.

A. McIntock, (ed.), Encyclopedia of New Zealand, Volume 1, Wellington 1966.

G. Scholefield, (ed.), Who's Who in New Zealand, Wellington, 1951.