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UNEMPLOYMENT IN NEW ZEALAND, 1875-1914

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ABSTRACT

Unemployment, although a common feature of economic and social life in colonial New Zealand, has received little attention from historians or economists for the period before 1920. While construction of a reliable index of unemployment is not possible from available data, an intensive analysis of published and other official sources establishes the significance of unemployment.

The decade of the 1880's, following as it did years of large scale immigration and marked as it was by little overall economic growth, drew attention to the insecurity of employment for many skilled and unskilled workmen. Agitation, though evidenced frequently enough was not sufficient in the absence of an organised labour movement, to move policy.

Nevertheless as part of an overall move towards a regulative role in many economic and social spheres, Government formalised procedures for coping with unemployment. The activities of the Labour Bureaux in assisting unemployed to find jobs became an important part of the labour market, and assisted the co-operative works scheme of completing necessary public works.

The thesis suggests that it is this regulative approach of Government which is the significant feature. Other periods and societies have had a more welfare-oriented approach to unemployment. The ideology of work in a growing colonial economy was fiercely against any form of pauperisation, or even long term support.

Unemployment, apart from apparent cyclical influences in the 1880's and less certainly 1903-1907, was largely of a seasonal or frictional variety. Availability of seasonal work in areas surrounding most towns absorbed even skilled workmen who lacked employment for summer months. However, winter and any slackening of public construction works, brought high levels of unemployment to many towns. Often, these problems were exacerbated by new immigrants entering the job market.

Because the fluctuations in employment were so localised, the efforts of the Labour Department in developing a national labour market were appropriate though not uniformly successful. These efforts were not geared to find skilled employment where this was desired in many cases, nor was female unemployment adequately catered for.

Assisting mobility and identifying employment opportunities were important contributions of the Department of Labour. Government also played a limited role as an employer of unemployment workers. No government of the period, central or local, was clearly and unambiguously in favour of providing work as a means of combatting unemployment. Although the co-operative works system had as one of its functions the provision of a "buffer" for male unemployment, the system cannot be considered purely as a relief work mechanism.

The last two decades of the period are marked by the articulation and implementation of the problems and policies identified during the 1880's.

"The curse of unemployment falls almost in equal ratio on the individual, on the city, and on the nation... To tramp one street after another and from one possible job to another, to go from one city to another, and leave one country for another, and all without success, is in a word, the reality of unemployment."

Hon. Mr Paul, New Zealand Parliamentary Debates, 1909, p. 257.

"The Pony"

"Looking for work?" he went on. We nodded and asked, "Any work where you come from?"

"Don't know. I never look for it", he replied.

J.A. Lee, Delinquent Days, pp. 72-73.

PREFACE

Unemployment. The very word remains a vote-catcher in New Zealand in 1975. In March 1976, there are 10,000 or so either unemployed or on government special work. At time of last census (1971) there were 16,168 self-declared unemployed. If ordinary people or public figures wish to raise the spectre of joblessness they hark back to the 1930's. It is salutary to reflect on the colonial economy in which unemployment was an ever-present, if fluctuating, problem.

Inevitably reflection on pre-World War I unemployment leads to reflection on employment, the structure of the labour market, the very nature and meaning of work in that context. Speculation, however, must be restrained. This thesis has a much more limited purpose. At most, it has traversed ground which will make one small aspect of future investigation unnecessary.

This thesis began as a longer project, and certainly the field has only begun to be explored. For their assistance in research I should like to thank the following: P.S. Harris, G.R. Hawke, W.H. Oliver, J.W. Rowe, and other colleagues.

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