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THE PALMERSTON NORTH POLITICAL LABOUR MOVEMENT,

1916 - 1935.

A research exercise presented in partial  
fulfilment of the requirements for the  
degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honours  
in History at Massey University.

B.J. Webster, 1980.

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## Abbreviations

AJHR	Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives.
ASCI	Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners.
ASRS	Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants.
EFCA	Locomotive Engineers, Firemen and Cleaners Association.
FSU	Friends of the Soviet Union.
LRC	Labour Representation Committee.
MDT	Manawatu Daily Times.
MW	Maoriland Worker.
MES	Manawatu Evening Standard.
NUWM	National Unemployed Workers' Movement.
NZCP	New Zealand Communist Party.
NZJH	New Zealand Journal of History.
NZLP	New Zealand Labour Party.
NZLP:ACR	New Zealand Labour Party : Annual Conference Report.
NZRR	New Zealand Railway Review.
NZSP	New Zealand Socialist Party.
NZWEA:AR	New Zealand Workers' Educational Association : Annual Report.
PNCP	Palmerston North Communist Party.
PNLP	Palmerston North Labour Party.
PNLRC	Palmerston North Labour Representation Committee.
PNSDP	Palmerston North Social Democratic Party.
PNUWM	Palmerston North Unemployed Workers' Movement.
RW	Red Worker.
SDP	Social Democratic Party.
WCTU	Womens' Christian Temperance Union.
WEA	Workers' Educational Association.

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## INTRODUCTION

Within a year of the formation of the NZLP in July 1916 the Palmerston North political labour movement was running Labour candidates in local body elections. The struggle for political power preoccupied the efforts of both the New Zealand and Palmerston North political labour movements for the next two decades, until, in 1935, both achieved electoral success. This monograph is a narrative and analysis of the establishment, development and eventual success of the Palmerston North political labour movement. It is essentially a local history of a national political party.

The approach adopted is that of local history, in that it is a study of a national phenomenon (the NZLP) in a local setting (Palmerston North). This approach has certain potential advantages over national history, for as Finberg points out:

... all national histories are perforce written selectively. Faced with countless phenomena, the [national] historian must bring them as best he can into a manageable compass. He therefore selects those which impress him as significant, and arranges them into some sort of pattern. In doing so, he runs the risk of overlooking some local occurrences which, once perceived, necessarily upsets or alters the whole pattern.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast, the local historian:

... has a clearer and truer view, within his limited horizon, than the national historian surveying a vast field from his exalted watchtower. He may supply important information which his more exalted colleague has overlooked; at the very least he provides a useful corrective, by exhibiting in all its diversity a past too complex to be securely imprisoned in generalized statements.<sup>2</sup>

In this sense local history is a useful adjunct to national history; what Oliver calls the "hidden agenda"

of academic local history, to "illuminate" national history.<sup>3</sup> Oliver describes national history as:

... in essence a set of generalisations, a set of general statements that are held to be true of a particular country at a particular time .... In very many cases, what pass as true general statements about New Zealand as a whole ... are in fact derived from a limited, indeed an overlimited, number of specific local instances.<sup>4</sup>

The history of the early New Zealand Labour movement suffers from this weakness. Oliver finds that it is "substantially the history of labour movements in a small number of localities."<sup>5</sup> In effect it is a "synthesis" of the histories of a small number of localities (usually the four main centres and the mining townships), "masquerading as a national generalisation"<sup>6</sup> Oliver cites evidence of the lack of trade union militancy in several, smaller New Zealand centres during the early 1910s, in particular during the Great Strike of 1913, a period when the New Zealand industrial movement as a whole was allegedly militant.<sup>7</sup>

There are similar shortcomings in the history of New Zealand political labour movement. There is a sad lack of local histories, and of studies of the moderate wing of the movement.<sup>8</sup> Plumridge has recently criticized Gustafson's Labour's Path to Political Independence (1980) for being a "traditional narrative account of events at the executive level."<sup>9</sup> Brown's history of the early NZLP, though still the standard reference work on the party, does not address itself to the essential local dimension of Labour's political evolution. Plumridge in contrast, in her study of the Christchurch labour party in the period 1914 - 1919, concentrated more upon events "'on the ground' in Christchurch" than at the national level, claiming that this local dimension to the party's development was more important than the national perspective.<sup>10</sup> To convert the electorate to its cause, the Christchurch Labour Party had to create its own, locally acceptable political image, and this image:

... had as much to do with the public's perception of the party's credibility, respectability and the ethos it was thought to embody as with the concrete proposals [policies] it put forward.<sup>11</sup>

In Palmerston North the public's perception of the Labour Party was also critical, and distinctive. There were local factors that the PNL P had to take account of to achieve political success, a recipe for political victory peculiar to the Palmerston electorate.

Yet the Palmerston North political labour movement was more than just an electioneering machine. This case study also reveals the variety and importance of the movement's non-electoral activities and functions, and the richness and strength of political imagination to be found even in a secondary centre. This non-electoral aspect of the Palmerston North political labour movement gave it an existence and dynamic of its own.

The local study also provides an interesting insight into the relations between the "centre" and the "periphery" of the NZLP.<sup>12</sup> What was the relationship between the PNL P and the NZLP? and how did the PNL P react to developments at the national level? And here Oliver asks an interesting question:

... to what extent ... is the retreat of industrial and political labour from extremism in the 1920s due to the building up of a nationwide party [the NZLP] which enabled the moderation of the smaller centres to bury the extremism of the main centres?<sup>13</sup>

A history of the Palmerston North political labour movement presents an opportunity for studying some of the "neglected moderates", of providing a "useful corrective" to the national history of the political labour movement, and of investigating the local dimension of the movement's development.