

*The Big Blue: Snapshots of the 1951 Waterfront Lockout*. Edited by David Grant. Canterbury University Press in association with the Trade Union History Project, Christchurch, 2004. 216 pp. NZ price: \$29.99. ISBN 1-87725-728-1.

FIFTY YEARS ON, the 1951 waterfront lockout still manages to conjure up a few demons. The trouble begins with the very terminology employed to describe the event. Those historians whose interest in the event is tangential skirt the issue of responsibility by employing such neutral sounding labels as 'dispute' or 'confrontation' and quickly pass on. There remain a few who determinedly employ the word 'strike' and stake out their position on a battle that took place half a century ago. *The Big Blue* is unequivocal in its stance; it offers, as its sub-title proclaims, *Snapshots of the 1951 Waterfront Lockout*.

The great majority of the chapters produced here (18 of 21) were first presented to a seminar held in 2001 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of an event that, as one contributor puts it, can now be seen as the watersiders' 'last hurrah'. It is a measure of the lockout's significance in the history of the New Zealand labour movement and in the lives of those caught up in it (as well as their longevity) that so many participants brought first-hand experience of the dispute to the speaker's platform. Their reflections anchor the collection and, reproduced in *The Big Blue* from transcripts of conference speeches, bring a vitality and authenticity to the publication. Nowhere is this more strongly evident than in Bill 'Pincher' Martin's 'Seamen and Scabs', which ends with Jack London's celebrated condemnation of the strikebreaker. The accounts by Rhona Bailey and Dick Scott of how the propaganda war was fought capture the energy, excitement and anxiety of trying to keep one step ahead of policemen bent upon choking off the production of leaflets, illegal under the Emergency Regulations. Veteran Australian unionists Harry Black, Alwyn Allport and Alastair Couper explore the Australasian dimensions of the lockout, describe how funds were smuggled across the Tasman to help sustain the struggle and offer insights into the experience of British seamen who sailed into the dispute.

In addition to the testimony of people directly involved, *The Big Blue* also includes comment from people who saw the lockout from privileged vantage points. The now deceased Noel Woods was chief research officer for the Labour Department in 1951 and his thoughtful opening chapter concludes that the actions of the government, and not those of the watersiders, precipitated the stoppage. Bruce Brown, who joined the staff of Labour Party leader Walter Nash shortly after the lockout, provides insights into the strained relationship between Nash and Federation of Labour boss Fintan Patrick Walsh. He dismisses suggestions that the visit of the prominent American politician John Foster Dulles to New Zealand in February 1951 had anything to do with the lockout of the watersiders. He concludes that Nash, pilloried at the time and subsequently largely on the basis of his 'neither for nor against' declaration, deserves better from historians and describes the Labour leader's efforts to secure a settlement as 'persistent, consistent and principled'.

The longer-term impact of the lockout on the wharves industrially and politically is confronted by a number of contributors with personal experience of the waterfront. Ted Thompson, seaman, watersider, veteran of the lockout and later general secretary of the reconstructed National Watersiders' Union, speaks authoritatively of the process of union regeneration on the wharves after the rout that was 1951. Like Noel Woods, Ted did not live to see the publication of *The Big Blue*, but his contribution and those of Chris Kenny and John Whiting highlight the realities of rebuilding a union against a background of recrimination and bitterness, changing technologies and casualization. Ken Douglas, a veteran of the lockout whose subsequent trade union career took place away from the waterfront and saw him become the inaugural president of the New Zealand Council of Trade Unions, talks of the impact of defeat upon the political left. Bill Anderson judges the Auckland branch of the Watersiders' Union, of which he was a member in 1951,

‘the most democratic, militant and politically advanced’ he has known and pondered the lessons militant minorities in the union movement might take from the lockout.

The perspectives of historians and commentators are present in shorter conference pieces and longer essays. Pat Walsh demonstrates that as profound as the impact of the waterfront dispute has been, its historical legacy and the history of New Zealand trade unionism since 1951 are not one and the same. Redmer Yska reveals little-known features of the propaganda war fought against the militant unions in the lead up to the lockout. Anna Green argues persuasively that the lockout needs to be set in the context of a wider struggle for control of the work place in which the shipping companies played the most aggressive hand. In the first of the longer historical essays Melanie Nolan provides a framework for the contributions by Renee, Judith Fyfe and Kathryn Parsons that focus directly or indirectly upon the role and activities of women involved in the lockout. She cautions against generalizing from the activities of the few. Most married women immersed in the day-to-day reality of the lockout were simply too preoccupied with the survival of their families to step outside the domestic roles assigned them by prevailing community assumptions. One of the ironies of this struggle to put food on the table, Nolan argues, is that it helped ‘normalise married women’s paid employment’ within the watersiders’ community.

In the final chapter Jock Phillips suggests that the propaganda war that accompanied the lockout was founded upon ‘extraordinarily similar’ core values. Each side claimed to be acting in the national interest, professed loyalty to Britain and claimed to have democracy on their side. Each presented a cast of demons. To Holland the watersiders and their supporters were the dupes of a nest of traitors and little more than the puppets of the communist World Federation of Trade Unions. Conversely, to the locked-out unionists, Holland was acting as a puppet of Wall Street and, in their interests, subverting traditional British democracy in a welter of repressive and fascist legislation. Phillips accepts that the unionists’ rhetoric was founded upon the need to win over public opinion but argues that unlike the 1890 or 1913 waterfront disputes, ‘the lockout of 1951 did not leave behind the vision of a socialist dawn’. Its legacy was rather the ‘dawning of a 1950s consensus’ based around the building of a ‘sober and respectable family utopia’. In some respects this is not very far removed from the conclusion reached by Bill Pearson in his celebrated ‘Fretful Sleepers’ written in London during the heat of the battle.

The snapshots of the 1951 lockout that make up the collection thus provide close-ups of the battle, longer views of the political and industrial history of the New Zealand waterfront and reflections upon the social setting against which the action occurred. They are enhanced by the reproduction of Max Bollinger and Len Gale cartoons and illustrations, by a useful chronology of the lockout and a history of the Trade Union History Project. *The Big Blue* is an important, well-produced book and one that stands as an exemplar of that fusion of working-class experience and reflection that the Trade Union History Project supports and espouses.

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*Black Prince: The Biography of Fintan Patrick Walsh.* By Graeme Hunt. Penguin Books, Auckland, 2004. 288 pp. NZ price: \$45.00. ISBN 0-14301-935-X.

THIS IS A VALUABLE BIOGRAPHY of a man who dominated the Seamen’s Union from 1927 until 1963, the wider union movement from the late 1930s until 1963 and helped manage Labour’s wartime stabilization programme during the 1940s. As President of the Federation of Labour from 1952 until 1963, the year of his death, Walsh was also one of the most significant figures within New Zealand.