

# ‘The View from Over the Hill’: Developing a Balanced View of Blackball ’08 from a Wider Range of Perspectives<sup>1</sup>

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On 26 February 1908 Walter Leitch, the mine manager of a small private West Coast mine employing about 160 workers, dismissed seven miners, all members of the recently formed Blackball branch of the Socialist Party. The miners had been agitating for some time for an eight hour ‘bank to bank’ day, that is for overtime to be paid if a miner worked longer than eight hours from the time he entered a mine to the time he left the mine.<sup>2</sup> Tensions had been inflamed by a second local union demand for half an hour rather than fifteen minutes for lunch or crib. The Blackball Miners’ Industrial Union of Workers struck the next day when management refused to reinstate and compensate the sacked workers. The Blackball strike, famously known as the ‘crib’ or ‘tucker time’ strike, lasted 11 weeks, ending on 13 May 1908 when the Blackball Coal Mining Company (Limited) reinstated the men and the mealtime was increased to thirty minutes.<sup>3</sup>

The Blackball strike in 1908 focused national attention on the arbitration system. Conservatives were enraged by the apparent victory of the miners in the ‘Blackball affair’.<sup>4</sup> The Arbitration Court of New Zealand fined the miners’ union £75 for striking in defiance of the Arbitration Act. The union had no assets and so each miner was liable to a fine up to £10. The miners refused to pay any such fines, and an auction of confiscated miners’ goods was an embarrassing failure. Radicals were encouraged by the strike’s achievements and went on to form the New Zealand Federation of Miners in Greymouth in August 1908 and to hold their first national conference in Wellington two months later.<sup>5</sup> The Miners’ Federation changed its name in 1909 to the New Zealand Federation of Labour or, as it was more commonly known, the ‘Red Feds’. Watersiders’, general labourers’, shearers’, and other, mainly unskilled, unions, representing a quarter of organised workers, affiliated to the federation over four years. The federation was successful in convincing a number of these unions to cancel their registration under the Arbitration Act. Militant industrial union policies begun in 1908 culminated in the 1913 Great Strike.<sup>6</sup> The 1908 strike is widely held to signal the start

of the rise of industrial unionism in New Zealand; some relate the strike in 1908 to the formation of the New Zealand Labour Party in 1916 and the Labour electoral victory in 1935.<sup>7</sup>

Historians have not neglected the 1908 Blackball Strike: the shifting current of historical discourse has drawn with it this relatively small strike. New Zealand historians once analyzed 1908, as they did most strikes, in terms of a division of the labour movement into moderates and militants.<sup>8</sup> Writing on the strike in the past century first concentrated on the militants or 'Red Feds' in the making. Undermining the moderate/militant dichotomy, historians then began to examine moderate labour, Independent Labour and Liberal-Labour factions.<sup>9</sup> Most recently, the perspective of urban radicals has been considered, especially that offered by J.A. (Jack) McCullough, Workers' Representative on the Arbitration Court, a socialist but not a Red Fed, who also attempted to mediate in the Blackball dispute outside his court role.<sup>10</sup>

The historiography on the Blackball strike, as it reproduces the broader pattern of labour history, similarly reveals shared weaknesses in its fabric. Examining the 1908 Blackball Strike from McCullough's perspective draws our attention to three aspects that still need more work. We need to pay more attention to the range of radical voices. Terms such as 'socialist' need to be unpacked and analyzed to explore the diversity of perspectives within the labour movement before the first World War.<sup>11</sup> We need to better understand the employer dynamics, or the history of the 'right', in New Zealand labour history.<sup>12</sup> The wider social and cultural issues behind the success of the Red Feds at Blackball – and the limits of their appeal – have been neglected. Finally, women's experience needs to be considered.<sup>13</sup> Few would disagree with these points. While calls for work in these areas of labour history have been made elsewhere, they are well worth reiterating, specifically in regard to the Blackball Strike. One might think that the Blackball strike has been thoroughly considered, but the inclusion of McCullough's perspective draws our attention to aspects still neglected.

The Blackball Strike is a useful case study for considering the socialists who did not support strike action, the history of the 'right' and the role of working-class women in New Zealand in the first decade of the twentieth century. The 'representation' approach to social history is popular. It is based on the view that the best explanations are ones that consider all actors' perspectives whether based on class, race, gender or ethnicity. The theory appeals, but the evidence eludes. Despite new work on Blackball, the lack of evidence limits what we can discover, especially regarding women's experience. Revisiting Blackball and its historiography on its centenary encourages theoretical reflection and exploring points of view neglected in the history. In this paper, I plumb the prospects provided by considering Blackball from the perspective of socialist urban labour. I also consider the

limits of this approach. Revisiting Blackball thus encourages us to think about future research strategies.

### The existing historiography

The first accounts interpreting the 1908 strike were published in newspapers from April 1908.<sup>14</sup> Some memoirs were written in the interwar period.<sup>15</sup> For their part, historians have shown a continuing interest in the Blackball strike from the second World War, first concentrating on the miners, politics and ideology. Taken as a whole, there is a big divide, thereafter, in the historiography between work, on the one hand, by W.B. (Bill) Sutch, P.J. (Pat) O'Farrell and Erik Olssen – concentrating on the Red Feds – and, on the other, by Len Richardson and, most recently, Brian Wood, who consider the broader community.<sup>16</sup> All are social labour historians, interested in 'history from below' or the political movement of the masses and, increasingly, in what hindered the movement. There is also increasing interest in all the constituent parts making up 'the masses' and the consequent social relationships.

The first sustained analysis of 1908 was Sutch's *Poverty and Progress in New Zealand*, published in 1941.<sup>17</sup> He was concerned with a national narrative and explaining how the Liberals came to lose their popularity amongst working people. He argued that the Liberals' legislation rested on a moment of prosperity in New Zealand's history 'caused by rising export prices and the change in New Zealand's economy from large-scale wool producing and manufacturing based on sweated wages to more intensive farming, producing not only wool but lamb, mutton, beef, butter and cheese for export'.<sup>18</sup> The Boer War and Australia's drought helped too. Then the prosperous moment passed, the legislation dried up and discontent mounted. So Sutch emphasises the 'comparative mild depression of 1907' which 'made for a clearer realization that the workers had nothing to gain from the Arbitration Court'.<sup>19</sup> The economic and material conditions were tinder dry, and the socialists were the spark.

The socialists were a small group of miners touched by the international industrial moment. The problem with Sutch's analysis is the classic 'moderate and militant' model.<sup>20</sup> He argues that the Independent Labour League was not socialist.<sup>21</sup> He defines socialism as those joining the Socialist Party formed in 1901. Kerry Taylor has shown, however, that even within that group there were those supporting the parliamentary strategy.<sup>22</sup> Sutch mentions that there was argument among the socialists over parliamentary action, but the emphasis in the chapter is that the rest of the labour movement was moderate.<sup>23</sup> He assumes the Independent Political Labour League contained no socialists who might be arguing over strike action. Rather, they were 'craft unionists'.

O'Farrell concentrates on the socialists, describing the miner leaders, Pat Hickey, Bob Semple and Paddy Webb, as 'consummate opportunists'.<sup>24</sup> He argued that 'the Grey coal mining district, with its potentially militant workers, was merely a first favourable base for agitators with national ambitions'.<sup>25</sup> They built the Runanga Miners' Hall and got the Westland Trades and Labour Council to appoint an organising secretary of labour for the West Coast.<sup>26</sup> The socialist leaders, a 'social vanguard' chose Blackball to plan, organise and provoke a miners' strike. Blackball was a microcosm of the 'classic Marxist technique with "the most advanced and resolute section" of the working class asserting its historical role'.<sup>27</sup> Blackball was 'an isolated and dreary township with a population of about 500', and in such a dull place 'concerted socialist descent on the normally quiet township amounted to a sensation'.<sup>28</sup> They converted 30 or 40 of the 130 Blackball miners – that is, less than a third – to socialism. 'Not many of the miners were socialists', but all were hostile to the 15-minute crib. The 'doctrinaire' socialist leaders' 'tactics were shrewd and simple – exploitation of an existing grievance to call upon the basic and traditional union precept, solidarity'.<sup>29</sup> They used Blackball and moved on to bigger soapboxes. They were successful because of a general context of 'dissatisfaction with gains made under arbitration and of an increasing local confidence engendered by rising prosperity' after 1905 on the coalfields.<sup>30</sup> O'Farrell is aware of the Red Feds' organisational and propaganda skills; he concentrates on them rather than on those who were 'taken in'.

Olssen is concerned with the national story of the rise of labour, regarding 1908 as the direct ancestor not only of the 1912 Waihi and the 1913 Great Strikes, but also of the formation of the New Zealand Labour Party in 1916 and of the election of a Labour government in 1935. He concentrates on the Red Feds, offering a cultural explanation of how they cultivated a growing community. In the beginning, the socialists 'appealed mainly to the politically minded transients, the frustrated outsiders, who had strong views but no power'.<sup>31</sup> The coal miners had become 'volatile'. Olssen emphasises the 'large number of young and single transient miners'.<sup>32</sup> They had been roused by experienced overseas agitators from Australia, by Ben Tillett from England and by H.M. Fitzgerald from Canada. Unlike Sutch and O'Farrell, however, Olssen considers the social conditions at Blackball in more detail as a backdrop to explaining the success of the industrial socialists. He emphasises three issues. First, the years between 1900 and 1906 might have been prosperous years nationally, but they had been hard for the miners, their families and the company, with irregular work and coal orders. Second, the miners had ongoing concerns. The wooden tubs used to weigh their coal at the mine mouth had lost weight owing to a dry spell, and the miners believed (correctly as it transpired) that they were being underpaid.

They also believed the mine was inadequately ventilated. The issue of a half-hour crib time was, then, just one of their concerns. Finally, there was a more general discontent among the miners: the 'bank to bank issue' or the eight-hour day. The Liberals had passed the Coal Mines Act of 1902 limiting a miner's working day to eight hours, a day that included traveling from the mine entrance to the coalface. Unfortunately, the relationship between the law and reality was not direct. The Arbitration Court provided overtime rates for traveling, but it did not automatically enshrine eight-hour working days in the legal awards negotiated and set down under its aegis. The Blackball strike was about the company's desire to operate an aerial tramway resulting in a ten-hour day, which would flout the bank-to-bank provision in the Act.

Olssen, like O'Farrell before him, takes to task the interpretations of the Blackball strike that 'imply that the miners left the arbitration system in droves'.<sup>33</sup> After all, the Blackball miners themselves did not leave the Arbitration Court until 1910. Moreover, some Red Fed leaders, like Mark Fagan and the Inangahua Miners' Union, supported arbitration without pause. Olssen also notes that there were 'conflicting claims of class and geographic community' and between 'socialism and liberalism'.<sup>34</sup> However, Olssen concentrates on 'the spokesmen for the new spirit of truculence' rather than the opponents of industrial unionism.

Richardson picks up the threads of others.<sup>35</sup> For instance, by 1975, O'Farrell had accepted that British socialism was as important as Australian and United States socialism in the Grey Valley. The 'first socialist organizations in New Zealand were strongly British in orientation', advocating a 'mild and vague co-operative socialism', like the Socialist Church and the Wellington Socialist League in 1897 and later the Clarion socialists, whose aim was a 'co-operative commonwealth'.<sup>36</sup> Richardson notes the 'English bias both in personnel and doctrine' and further explores the range of socialisms evident at Blackball, the two different streams. Sutch argues that the arbitrationists were soon defeated, but Richardson suggests it was not quite so straightforward.<sup>37</sup> Like Olssen, he notes that Semple spoke the socialist rhetoric while remaining a pragmatist.<sup>38</sup>

Richardson's main point, however, is that the strike was a cultural phenomenon rather than a matter of political ideology. He is much less concerned with the national political story than with the history of mineworkers from 1880 to 1960. Rather than highlighting new men, new politics and new ideologies, he points to the long history of radicalism and how it fared after Blackball. Consequently, he emphasises, like those before him, the demand for bank-to-bank provisions, the need for pensions, the demand for direct representation of miners on public bodies that bore directly on the operation of the coal industry and so on. In addition, he concentrates

on the housing conditions of the miners and the conditions in communities that grew too quickly as things on the coast had done since the gold rushes. He points to the expectations that a state coalmine at Runanga had fed and how both miners and government were disappointed, and the effect of the economic uncertainty on mining communities. He considers the lack of safety in the mines, the poor sanitation, the prevalence of miner's phthisis and the miners' demands to be involved in mine inspection. The Blackball miners were 'hard-nosed men' who were not seduced by 'the verbal pyrotechnics of ideologues'.<sup>39</sup> They steadfastly pursued reform in the workplace or 'pit radicalism'. Similarly, Wood considers the pit radicalism of the miners at Blackball, more specifically beginning with the formation of the Black Ball Creek Coal Company in 1885, and, in Richardson's wake, concentrating on the environment and the miners' working and social conditions.<sup>40</sup>

We can take Richardson and Wood's perspective further still. One source used extensively by both authors is the diary of Jack McCullough, Workers' Representative on the Arbitration Court, 1907–1921.<sup>41</sup> McCullough's experience raises important further issues about the divisions among socialists and the nature of New Zealand society, the role of the employers in the dispute and the issues to do with community and how we approach strikes.

### **Pro-arbitration Socialists and the Blackball Strike 1908**

J. McCullough was a socialist. He had been baptised in the font of the Sinclair Seamen's Church in Belfast and apprenticed in the craft unionism of the Liverpool smiths. In New Zealand from 1880, he made his mark as an activist in the Socialist Church speaking on a soapbox in Christchurch Cathedral Square on Sundays with Harry Atkinson. Over time he became an atheist and pacifist. The 'Irish-born railways tinsmith' McCullough 'may justly be regarded as the single most influential figure in Christchurch socialism of the period'.<sup>42</sup> He was the 'chief organizer' in Christchurch of first the Socialist Party in 1901; then the Political Labour League (PLL) 1904, which became the Independent Political Labour League (IPLL) by 1905; then the first 'moderate' Labour Party in 1910 and finally the Social Democratic Party (SDP) from 1913.<sup>43</sup> He joined the New Zealand Labour Party in 1916 and stood as a Labour Party candidate in 1922. McCullough chaired the revival meeting of the Christchurch Socialist Party in 1932, just as he had chaired its inaugural meetings in 1902.<sup>44</sup> He was loathe to leave the Socialist Party in 1904, but he decided to support the IPLL because it was 'independent', that is it was not associated with existing parties and might facilitate solidarity in a way that organisations affiliated with warring factions could not.<sup>45</sup>

McCullough's experience of the 1908 Blackball Strike shows that at the time there were a range of views of the strike and arbitration, even among socialists. McCullough's faction supported the Arbitration Court through the period 1908–1913. As O'Farrell pointed out as early as 1959, most of the miners were not militant socialists, and most workers continued to support arbitration throughout the period. Thus, a pro-arbitration socialist who was involved in the aftermath of the Blackball strike offers a different perspective on the strike.

What was McCullough's experience? McCullough was well aware of the increasing criticism of the Arbitration Court throughout the union movement at the time of his election to the position of workers' representative on the court in late 1907. For a decade, overseas visitors had publicised their opinion that compulsory arbitration had restrained the New Zealand union movement. McCullough had had a few hours' private conversation with Sydney and Beatrice Webb, for instance, who made it clear that they did not believe that the progressive legislation in New Zealand had improved the wage workers' lot. Rather, the union movement's acquiescence in compulsory arbitration was a sad reflection on the ideological and political backwardness of New Zealand workers.<sup>46</sup> British workers never relinquished their independence by submitting to compulsory unionism. McCullough noted that after 1906, New Zealand unionists started to echo criticisms by overseas visitors. Increasingly, industrial unionists were also critical of compulsory arbitration.

In 1908 a motion calling on the Westland Trades and Labour Council to proclaim it had no confidence in the Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act was narrowly defeated by a casting vote.<sup>47</sup> Unionists criticised the Arbitration Court because it gave 'unlimited power to the employers, while it limits the power of the workers'. It was noted that in the old country workers would have nothing to do with compulsory arbitration. Even the moderate Ramsay MacDonald had condemned it. Bob Semple, an Australian immigrant and rising miners' leader, forcibly argued that an arbitration court would not be needed in a just society. The arbitration court was a poor expedient that had failed in New South Wales, and it was failing in New Zealand. This verdict was substantiated by the Granity Union's award hearing in December 1907.<sup>48</sup> William A. Sim, Judge of the Arbitration Court, offered the workers 'no hope' after telling the Granity Union that he would not listen to them 'on cost of living, profits or nature of work'.

It was with a great deal of trepidation that McCullough went to Greymouth two days after the historic Westland Trades and Labour Council meeting to hear a case against the Blackball miners.<sup>49</sup> He knew the mood of the miners, who had struck over the dismissal of seven unionists who they contended were being victimised for leading the campaign to extend the crib time from fifteen to thirty minutes.<sup>50</sup> The mine manager, W. ('Boko') Leitch, maintained

that he had to reduce the underground workforce to restrict the mined coal to a volume that could be moved in only eight hours, since the union had refused to allow truckers to move coal for ten hours.<sup>51</sup> McCullough met with Hickey, Rogers, Secretary Fox, the Vice President, and others: 'They agreed with me that there had been a strike and that I could not prevent a fine being inflicted.'<sup>52</sup> He negotiated with the employers 'for a return to the 10 hour system of running the ariel tram, ½ hour crib and definite promise to reinstate all the dismissed men and not to victimise or discriminate in the future'.<sup>53</sup>

The day after hearing the case on 11 March, the court issued its decision, criticising both parties to the dispute. It was observed that mine manager Leitch, by peremptorily dismissing the seven particular unionists, could not have done more to bring about a crisis between the union and the company. The court suspected Leitch had deliberately selected the seven men for sacking because he believed they were leading the 'trouble' about both the crib time and the reduction of the truckers' hours. On the other hand, Sim maintained that the high-handed and arbitrary manner in which the union attempted to increase the crib time, with less than twenty-four hours' notice to Leitch, was inexcusable. Moreover, the union appeared to shun peacemakers who attempted to conciliate in the dispute.<sup>54</sup> The final analysis convicted the union of striking in defiance of the existing industrial law. Judge Sim's declaration that 'in view of all the circumstances we have decided to impose a fine of £75', veils the dispute that went on behind closed doors between the three members of the court in committee. Since he could not guarantee that the miners would go back to work, McCullough reluctantly agreed they had to be fined by the court for striking, but argued that £25 was sufficient. In contrast, Brown, the employers' representative, demanded the maximum of £100, and the Judge 'compromised' at £75.<sup>55</sup> McCullough declared that he could not get less than a £75 fine because 'I could not definitely assure his honour that the men would decide to return to work'.<sup>56</sup>

McCullough publicly appeared to be an ardent defender of arbitration, criticising the radical miners. This view, that McCullough was unsympathetic to the miners, has been captured in Beardsley's novel, *Blackball '08*: 'He'd always been a moderate, always would be, but he'd seen the moderate unions clobbered pretty hard recently by the court, the court that was supposed to aid and protect them. And it was this, more than anything else, that was causing militancy among the unions, especially those in essential industries, like mining. But if they were militant, they were still unions and you had to do what you could for them – within the law, anyway.'<sup>57</sup>

Privately, McCullough attempted to act as a peacemaker in the *Blackball* dispute. He drew up terms and arranged a conference between the parties.

He also met a small group of the unionists. Far from sharing a passionate solidarity, as suggested in the Arbitration Court hearing in Greymouth, the twenty-one men were almost evenly divided. 'The union' accepted McCullough's terms, but, as Hickey later told him, decided only by a narrow majority to go back to work. Paddy Webb congratulated McCullough and prominent miners for producing a settlement. The next morning, McCullough discovered that both sides had reneged on the agreement. He assumed, in the beginning, that it was a case of the militants pressuring their mates, and he bitterly deplored the 'undemocratic manipulating' of a genuine grievance by both sides. 'If it is ever my privilege to assist in similar proceedings', he vowed, 'I will not be innocent enough to trust the word of honour or the memory of either side.'<sup>58</sup> Immediately upon his return to Christchurch, the Blackball Coal Company sent a representative to wait on McCullough to try to get him to continue to act as a mediator.<sup>59</sup> A meeting was arranged for him with G.G. Stead, an Addington coal and grain merchant and a major shareholder in the Blackball Coal Company. Stead assured McCullough that he had forwarded instructions to Leitch, the mine manager, to give the men a half-hour crib, the issue over which they had ostensibly struck. He also told McCullough that the reason negotiations had ended was because Leitch would not see his way to making any compromises at the worksite for the sake of peace.<sup>60</sup> McCullough knew that James Isdell, the local Greymouth Labour Department Office official, and bigger guns, including John A. Millar and E. Tregear, had also tried unsuccessfully to negotiate a settlement.

McCullough gradually became convinced that conciliation in the coalmining industry was impossible. The main reason was the 'vindictiveness on the part of the employers of labour on the West Coast'.<sup>61</sup> For over a month McCullough was involved in negotiations between the union and the employers; a code of words was used to prevent the media publishing the details of the negotiations. McCullough acted as the go-between. He informed the union that Stead was prepared to pay half its court fine and arranged for Dave Pritchard, a union spokesman, to meet Stead after the Minister of Labour refused to talk to the unionists. He even personally travelled to Blackball to induce the men to write 'courteously' in reply to Stead's offer 'even though he was a capitalist'. Finally, he tried to persuade the miners to compromise in their demand to reduce truckers' hours.

McCullough's efforts met a brick wall in the employers. William Scott, secretary of the Otago Employers' Association (OEA), informed William Pryor, president of the New Zealand Employers' Federation, at the collapse of negotiations that confidences had been broken so often by outsiders, including the Minister of Labour and the media, that it had been decided to stop all negotiations and remain both firm and silent.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, Stead asked McCullough not to publish any correspondence between them, particularly

his offer to pay the miners' fine, for fear that it might be misconstrued.<sup>63</sup> The employers had become angry: Pryor suggested that the miners be imprisoned, and Stead suggested to Scott that they should be disenfranchised. For his part, Stead proclaimed that he would never have any confidence in future arrangements with the miners.<sup>64</sup> McCullough quietly took note of the threats the angry employers made against the West Coast miners. None of them augured well for the future of arbitration.

The Blackball affair also highlighted McCullough's dilemma on the court. How, as a supporter of the court in principle, could he appropriately protest at decisions he disagreed with? He publicly dissented in eleven cases in two years, less than 1% of all court decisions or approximately 6% of all award decisions. There were three major issues during 1908 and 1909 which sorely tested McCullough's commitment to the court: the strike clause; wages and hours; and the exemption of certain industrial sectors from the arbitration system.<sup>65</sup> In nearly every dispute the court heard, however, McCullough wrote privately to the union secretaries concerned, making it clear that he did not really agree with the decision and had fought it most strenuously in committee but that he could not publicly dissent for the sake of the continuance of the institution.<sup>66</sup> McCullough withstood a great deal of pressure from his old union mates to publicly dissent from decisions of the court he disagreed with. In his view, it was not the court's duty to introduce repressive legislation. He also argued that a number of arbitration decisions made the task of his faction in the labour movement, a faction that supported arbitration in principle, more difficult.

The officials of the Red Federation were more ambivalent towards political action than is generally assumed. Moreover, while clearly against arbitration, the militant socialists did not oppose collective agreements. The Red Feds did not generally deliver on their rhetoric of tearing up agreements with employers, a tactic McCullough described as showing the ethics of a boa constrictor.<sup>67</sup> There was considerable argument within the Red Fed ranks over tactics, particularly between officials such as Semple and Fagan. Few realised the internal divisions in the Red Fed executive. As Ted Howard explained later: 'We quarrelled; we fought for hours and hours, but when we came forth from that executive meeting we stood as one man, abiding loyally by the will of the majority. That is why the FOL did things.'<sup>68</sup> There was a discrepancy between the official propaganda of the *Maoriland Worker*, which reached its crescendo in Hickey's 'no compromise' articles, and the settlements the 'Red Feds' made with employers.<sup>69</sup> In fact, the militant miners were resorting to the fullest extent to the use of collective agreements: the so-called revolutionaries made practical demands for higher wages, shorter hours of work and improved job conditions.

McCullough was more ambivalent in his attitude toward the Red Feds than is usually assumed, too. Like many other pro-arbitration unionists, he found the propaganda of the *Maoriland Worker* repugnant. He rescinded his earlier advice to the editor of the *Weekly Herald* not to wield a poison pen.<sup>70</sup> In a counterattack, he protested that the Red Feds in New Zealand were treating Marxist theory as dogma. Industrial unionists read nothing but ‘literature of the De Leon type’, a reference to Daniel De Leon, who founded the Marxist Socialist Labor Party of America in 1890.<sup>71</sup> Hickey, of course, had sojourned in America and participated in the revolutionary Western Federation of Miners. McCullough opined that the Red Feds had ‘discovered a new and infallible method of industrial organisation that cannot fail and so enthusiastic are these persons that even failure will not convince them’.<sup>72</sup>

McCullough believed in the materialist conception of history. The materialist view was a ‘legitimate and necessary’ argument he himself used, but he protested that the the Red Fed would not win converts by attacking the ethical basis of socialism: ‘to preach exclusively the economic basis is, to put it mildly, short-sighted, and unity, the ideal of universal love and Brotherhood, will never be built upon selfishness’.<sup>73</sup> Sectional and universal strikes were, in his view, occasionally necessary, but socialists should aim to convince rather than coerce the majority of New Zealanders.<sup>74</sup>

The division between McCullough and the miners, typified by Semple, resulted as much from a personality clash and different experiences as from a theoretical rift. On the strength of a short acquaintance McCullough decided Semple’s aggressiveness was deleterious: ‘His combativeness if not its earnestness will prevent him being as useful as he should, nay it is possible it may be as bad as to make him a decided hindrance to progress in the direction of solidarity.’<sup>75</sup> By taking Jack McCullough, a man who had qualms about shooting rabbits, to a boxing match, Semple highlighted the disjunction of their temperaments. McCullough’s reaction was to see all ‘the devil there is in poor human nature’ displayed by competitors and audience alike. He viewed the miner’s pugnaciousness in a similar light.

While older Trades and Labour Council men like McCullough found the miners’ resolve and combativeness intimidating, the miners felt they were being cold-shouldered by a group of men who had no fight left in them. They had reason to feel they were outsiders, as McCullough noted: ‘My blood has boiled within me as I have listened to the wild and mad denouncing of men in the movement whose honesty and self-sacrifice I have proven again and again. This often by men scarcely in the country.’<sup>76</sup> Not surprisingly, the miners showed little sympathy for New Zealand’s industrial history. At the unity meeting McCullough chaired between the Red Federation and the Trades and Labour Council executives in August

1910, for example, Webb accused the Trades and Labour Council officials of negligence: 'We have devoted our whole time to the education of our class. If the Trades Council would arrange meetings for miles and miles out, 20 or 30 miles out of Christchurch the same way as we have been doing get on old bikes and go round spreading the truth then they would be doing a great deal towards building up an organisation.'<sup>77</sup> Ironically, in the time-consuming task known as 'plough-chasing', McCullough and his socialist friends Jimmy Thorn and Bob Whiting had been on their old bikes interviewing workers as organisers of the Farm Labourers Union before many of the miners' leaders had arrived in New Zealand.

The issue of arbitration was never settled. Other issues, such as unity, assumed a greater importance. Thus, at the July 1911 Unity Conference, the resolution to strike out the IWW (Industrial Workers of the World) preamble opened old sores. The preamble declared that trade unions assisted employers by convincing the working class that it and the employers had common interests; whereas, really the 'working class and the employing class have nothing in common'. McCullough, representing the Fabian Society, was blamed for the preamble's excision: 'Poor Bob Semple, Holland and Fraser accused me of being responsible for the defeat [of the IWW preamble] and was very wild because they declared I had introduced the question of arbitration vs. strike policy.'<sup>78</sup>

Thus, the Blackball miners were not alone in lacking unity in their attitudes and objectives. The avowed socialists themselves were far from united. The first socialist organisations were formed in New Zealand in the mid 1890s. Each of the four main centres had a different character, following disparately the ideas of Robert Owen and the Owenite co-operative movement, William Blake, William Morris and Robert Blatchford rather than those of Karl Marx.<sup>79</sup> The Socialist League of Wellington was initiated in 1897 during a visit by British socialist trade unionist Ben Tillet.<sup>80</sup> Its numbers were augmented by some 190 Clarion immigrants in 1900, galvanised by William Ranstead's glowing reports in the *Clarion* newspaper of the prospects for working people in New Zealand.<sup>81</sup> The Clarionettes were largely behind the formation of the New Zealand Socialist Party, formed in Wellington during July 1901.<sup>82</sup> Branches of the party were soon formed in Auckland, Christchurch and many smaller centres.<sup>83</sup> The first socialist newspaper, however, was founded in 1897 by Atkinson, together with his good friend, McCullough, in Christchurch.<sup>84</sup> Atkinson had been heavily involved with John Trevor and the British Labour Church; he had worked on the church's paper, the *Labour Prophet*. The New Zealand Socialist Church similarly rested on a foundation of ethical socialism.<sup>85</sup> Kerry Taylor estimates that there was a collective membership of only about 250 socialists

in 1900, later boosted by the Clarionettes.<sup>86</sup> The first national conference of the NZSP convened in 1908.

Valerie Smith, analysing the great diversity of the early socialist movement, aptly described it as a 'truly chameleon creature'.<sup>87</sup> Similarly, Kerry Taylor identifies at least three competing visions of revolution amongst socialists between 1906 and 1913.<sup>88</sup> One attached equal weight to the twin pillars of revolutionary politics and industrial unionism; another, the syndicalist strand, opposed political action; and a third emphasised a purely political orientation, with revolutionary political action leading to the return of 'class-conscious Marxian Socialists' to parliament.<sup>89</sup> This view of the diversity of socialism has yet to come through the discussions of the strike and anti-arbitration movement of New Zealand that Blackball personifies. Nor has there been much interest in the constantly shifting alliances; by 1914 Semple and McCullough were taking tea together and working in the same organisation.<sup>90</sup>

### **Employers and the Blackball Strike**

While there is writing on workers, however critical one is about it, work on the mine owners or employers has appeared only recently.<sup>91</sup> Historians are slowly beginning to consider the development of employers' organisation and strategies after 1900, a development that resulted in more effective employer advocacy within arbitration.<sup>92</sup> Wood, in particular, analyses insightfully the role of 'imperial capitalism', especially in regard to the Blackball strike as it revolved around G. G. Stead.<sup>93</sup> There was an emerging militant managerial elite among Canterbury employers and the directors of the mining companies who lived in Christchurch and beyond. For his part, Richardson points to the role of Stead's successor, Sir George Clifford, chairman of the Blackball Coal Company and a Canterbury run holder.<sup>94</sup> The Blackball strike is a good site to examine urban and rural property owners' stance on workers, especially coalminers. McCullough's experience provides a more explicit view of the employers' new doctrine of efficiency, which coincided with a more aggressively anti-union position.

Scott, a Dunedin warehouseman and the secretary of the Otago Employers' Association (OEA), spearheaded an employers' strategy that mirrored the Independent Political Labour League's strategy of putting McCullough on the arbitration bench. Scott could be described as an industrial employer rather than a 'craft employer'. In July 1904 Scott proposed the uniform conduct of cases before the Arbitration Court, and the OEA resolved not to voluntarily furnish the Labour Department with any industrial information. The OEA wanted to replace Samuel Brown, the sitting employers' representative on the Arbitration Court, with their own secretary. The association considered Brown's manner abrasive, finding that he had a 'craft employer' mentality

unsuited to the demands of new employers and a new century. The Canterbury Employers' Association (CEA) supported Brown, however, and so, in the interests of unity, Scott relinquished his campaign. From August 1904 the OEA directed its secretary to conduct all disputes where practicable, and at the end of 1905 Scott resigned his position on the Conciliation Board to concentrate on conducting cases before the Arbitration Court.<sup>95</sup> Scott's triumphs acting for the OEA led employers throughout New Zealand to seek his advocacy. Indeed, hiring out their secretary became a lucrative trade for the OEA.

By February 1908, Scott was the most experienced employers' advocate in New Zealand. He had conducted 142 disputes before the court and had presided over 187 conferences between employers and workers.<sup>96</sup> During July and August 1908, for instance, Scott followed the court through Otago and Southland, conducting ten major disputes on behalf of the employers, defending many of the cases for enforcement and presiding over most of the conferences between workers and employers.<sup>97</sup> The press sympathised with what must have been an 'arduous and trying' time for a lone advocate, and even Scott admitted in private correspondence to being consumed by his task: 'I have got coal on the brain and the poor down trodden mines disturb my dreams.'<sup>98</sup>

The employers' tactics in the Arbitration Court became a major concern for McCullough as Workers' Representative. He became as concerned with Scott's advocacy on behalf of employers as he was with internal union factionalism. McCullough noted in his diary after meeting Scott, at about the same time he met the Red Feds for the first time in February 1908:

I went around with Pryor [president of the New Zealand Employers' Federation] to Scott's office and am more than ever convinced after seeing them at work and the methodical manner in which his office is conducted that until such time as we adopt their methods, have our well paid brainy officials to conduct our cases for us, men who make the presentation of cases and the conducting of our business the work of their lives we are handicapped to such an extent that we cannot win . . . . I read a pamphlet by Scott delivered at an employers' meeting and proving him to be a man thoughtful and careful and displaying a knowledge of the court and the history of the Court's procedure and the Act itself that I have never met any worker displaying . . .<sup>99</sup>

Well might McCullough have pondered Scott's constant presence in the courtrooms of the travelling Arbitration Court. From the time Scott had been selected from fifty-one applicants for the secretarial position in 1904, he had embarked on a recruiting crusade for the OEA. He had provided the association with its office, its furniture and its typist. In just four years

he turned the Otago office into a 'verifiable bureau of information for the Dominion'.<sup>100</sup>

Most importantly, Scott provided the OEA with a successful arbitration strategy. Briefly, there were two facets to Scott's strategy: first, to organise industry-based trade associations of employers in important industries; and second, to take consistent and ably conducted cases to the Arbitration Court on a dominion principle rather than, as previously, making ad hoc agreements with individual unions.

This 'Otago strategy' was in keeping with a growing employer consensus on the need for coordinated organisation. For instance, in 1899 the CEA had reorganised to form Master Trades' Associations, a Parliamentary Bills Committee and an Industrial Disputes Committee.<sup>101</sup> It advised other associations to follow its example. Two major national employers' coalitions were created in response to general employer sentiment: the Employers' Federation in 1902; and the Parliamentary Vigilance Committee in 1903 to organise employers' submissions to the Labour Bills Committee. From 1906 these two national bodies, which had a high public profile, were led by another Otago employer and Scott's *confreere*, William Pryor. However, the less obvious but arguably more important employer offensive was that orchestrated in the Arbitration Court by Scott himself.

From his experience as an advocate in industrial disputes and as the acting employer-member of the arbitration bench when Sam Brown was unavailable, Scott found his major obstacle to be 'stupid agreements entered into by employers without a full knowledge of their effects'.<sup>102</sup> The OEA relied on the larger companies for financial support and influence. To counter worksite agreements, Scott built upon the OEA's relationship with these companies to form important trade associations. In particular, Scott organised the local Otago and Southland Associations of Woollen Manufacturers in 1906 and the Otago Coalmine Owners in 1907, both of which used him and his office for their secretariat, as had the previously established Otago Sheepowners' Union from 1904. Scott being the Otago Clothiers' and Drapers' Associations' representative helped him marshal the woollen manufacturers. Similarly, Pryor's former role representing the Coal Merchants' and Carriers' Association aided in rallying the coalmine owners. Further, the OEA had deliberately undertaken to deepen its *entente cordiale* with certain farming interests after 1904. Regular consultation resulted in regional agreement as to the rates employers would offer the unions.

McCullough joined the Arbitration Court at the turning point in Scott's campaign to coordinate employers locally and nationally. Scott realised that his strategy infuriated the unions, which now openly condemned the court's decisions. He counselled employers to be cautious so as not to jeopardise public confidence in the court in which he was planning to win and warned

them against making the 'first attack in the workplace'. The employers' new and now national offensive was being discussed freely between two of its leaders, Scott and Pryor: 'It is manifest that the Federation from this time on will require to keep a stiff back and as you say show its teeth as legislators and Judges alike seem prepared to go as far as they can or until the employers squeal. We shall have to squeal oftener.'<sup>103</sup> Consequently, the tone of the Arbitration Court hearings was changing. Employers and workers in the early years of the Arbitration Court hearings had appeared to share a consensus; certainly, the proceedings were amicable 'with parties congratulating each other at the conclusion upon the fine spirit and excellent presentation displayed by the opposition'.<sup>104</sup> Overseas visitors had been struck with the 'good temper displayed by all parties'. By contrast, in 1908, Scott found the presentation skills of union advocates feeble. He was convinced that there was no union advocate competent to win the important Otago cases and advised mine managers to put off making agreements with workers until after the Arbitration Court case had been heard. In that forum, most employers had 'everything to gain and nothing to lose'.<sup>105</sup>

McCullough was inclined to agree with Scott's assessment of union advocacy. He sharply criticised incompetent or ineffectual union advocates and especially those who addressed the court 'as if on their soapboxes'. McCullough regarded as even more perturbing the increasingly uncomplimentary comments made by his benchmates and employers' advocates about the working class. The new managerial elite and their representatives, such as Scott, had a new perception of labour based on their own criteria of efficiency and capability.

McCullough's experience taught him that union leaders were reluctant to participate in the arbitration process, and consequently, their counter-evidence in court was usually very poor. Lack of effective presentation and the consequent poor results, McCullough believed, alienated union advocates from the Arbitration Court. Certainly, there was no workers' advocate of the calibre of Scott. This inattention to presentation was unfortunate for, as Noel Woods has argued, the court's procedures were being consolidated to emphasise formal evidence.<sup>106</sup> Sim disparaged formal evidence presented by unionists, because, in general, it was not supported by either well researched documentation or by a concern for precedent. Henry Broadhead, secretary of the CEA from 1899 and a member of the Canterbury Conciliation Board, shared the judges' assessment of the factual poverty of the workers' evidence: 'It practically revolves itself into something like this: "We want higher wages because the present wages are too low, and are not so high as in other parts of the colony; we want shorter hours, because the present hours are too long." Or the union may emphasize the fact that the cost of living has increased.'<sup>107</sup> McCullough claimed that the court was biased

against workers and manipulated by experienced employer advocates. The best defence he could see for the workers was to emulate the employers' tactics and beat them at their own game.

McCullough sought to steep himself in the workplace practices of a host of different trades and occupations and to convince workers of the need to defend themselves in the Arbitration Court. He set about encouraging the more effective union secretaries, like Arthur Rosser, to act for less well-represented unions. Eventually, he organised mock Conciliation Court and Arbitration Court hearings for union advocates. He persuaded members of the Canterbury Industrial Presidents' and Secretaries' Associations, for instance, to role-play in mock disputes such as the 'Miners' versus the 'Colliery Owners' Association', with McCullough acting as judge.<sup>108</sup>

Unlike the miners, McCullough had already run up against the likes of Sir George Clifford and George T. Booth, who were in partnership with the Scotts and Pryors of the employers' federation. From 1906 the *Farmers' Advocate* carried articles denouncing the rabid teachings of the Socialist Party and prophesying the coming danger posed by the black cloud of socialism.<sup>109</sup> Such warnings were accompanied by threats that farmers would turn from labour-intensive wheat to sheep farming if urban unionists like McCullough continued their campaign to bring farmers into the arbitration system. In August 1906 the North Canterbury provincial executive of the Farmers' Union affiliated to the Canterbury Employers' Association.

McCullough's diaries and papers are full of comments on employers' activities, such as the presence of the farmers in the courtroom to attend the Christchurch General Labourers' dispute. For instance, he noted in 1908 that 'the Farmers were there in force: Jones, Evans; Acland & a number of other big guns'.<sup>110</sup> McCullough was candid about his feelings over the judge wanting to exclude the farming sector from the award. After the farm labourers' case in July 1908, Henry Acland and David Evans were toasted at the CEA annual conference. In the most extreme public statements to that date, the employers declared that there was an insidious 'civil war' being fought in New Zealand between 'right minded New Zealanders and Socialist union agitators'.<sup>111</sup> Acland and Evans told the city employers that they had fought the farm labourers and their urban leaders in the way they had because their demands were largely political. They protested vociferously at the prostitution of the Arbitration Court for political purposes and promised to do battle with these union agitators. McCullough was convinced that all employers, the farmers in particular, were conspiring against the farm labourers.

Of course, one runs the risk of overemphasising the battle. McCullough's conspiracy thesis, like the employers', had its limitations. The real strength of the employers lay in their organisation and their capable officials. In contrast

to the trade union organisations such as the Canterbury Trades and Labour Council, the employers' affiliations specialised in their roles: the employers' associations acted as the political watch-dogs; the chambers of commerce focused on trade issues; and the industrial associations concentrated on municipal philanthropy.

Yet for all their apparent unity, there were major tensions within their ranks. The tariff issue, for example, revealed the essential incompatibility of urban and rural, producer and manufacturer interests. The industrialists and manufacturers wished to build up a tariff wall, an idea the farmers did not support. This division was a major stumbling block to a proposed amalgamation of Canterbury employers in 1910. While it was difficult for the small employer groups to mount a unified front, their disagreements were less public and certainly less divisive than those within trade union ranks. What McCullough feared as he read in the CEA's annual report in 1908 was that the employers were organising a 'well-disciplined and solid phalanx', which the labour movement was ill-equipped to counter.<sup>112</sup>

McCullough's position on Blackball was based on two aspects of his experience, then. First, the miners, in common with most other trade unions, did not present well in court. They did not argue their case convincingly. McCullough did not record his view of the miners in court in March 1908. However, when the Blackball miners sought a new award in November 1908, McCullough was 'disgusted with Hickeys attempt to cross-examine W Leach Manager of the Mine': 'I pleaded with him at the luncheon adjournment to leave him alone: but he continued to examine him for another hour each question making matters worse for the Union.'<sup>113</sup>

Secondly, McCullough had dealt with Christchurch employers like G.G. Stead, and he knew the connections between them and the West Coast mines. His experience led him to be sceptical of the chances of success for the miners' militant strategies. He was concerned that they were playing into the hands of the employers. He wrote to Tom Paul in January 1908: '[The employers] have the impression that the "Miners Federation" are looking for a fight and I know many of the Bosses would like to fight them at once; while they are in their infancy and before they attain power and influence which such a large federation must exercise if wisely governed.'<sup>114</sup> A number of urban socialists like McCullough did not oppose industrial militancy in principle; they disagreed with its being squandered without profit for socialists.

### **Women's role: limits of the representation strategy**

Finally, a third characteristic of the historiography on Blackball is that little has been written on women's role.<sup>115</sup> We know a great deal of the women in the 1890 strike, the 1912 Waihi Strike, the 1913 Great Strike and the 1951

Waterfront dispute.<sup>116</sup> We know about the activism of Blackball women in the name of unionism at other times. For instance, in 1914 two married women were fined £10 and £2.10.0 respectively for ‘assault and hurling epithets at members of the new union at Blackball’.<sup>117</sup> Richardson has written of Blackball women in the interwar period, including Ida Galbraith, Sophie Doyle and especially Annie Balderstone, a leading member of the Communist Party in Blackball in the 1920s.<sup>118</sup> We have no comparable work, however, on the women at Blackball in 1908, or indeed at other West Coast mines at the same time.

Women were involved in the strike of course. Women and children lined the main Blackball street, cheered when Hickey was arrested and made a triumphal procession through the town on 28 April 1908 to jail at Ngahere.<sup>119</sup> More women and children than men were dependent on the union funds during the strike. The schedule listing the members of the union liable to pay the fine the court imposed on the Blackball Miners’ Union on 12 May 1908 lists over 160 miners’ names.<sup>120</sup> Olssen notes that 40 miners had left Blackball by the end of the April ‘but most of the married men remained’ and of course their wives.<sup>121</sup> At first the union decided to pay strikers £1 10s a week, with 10s for a wife and 5s for each child, but these rates soon strained the union’s resources and were halved. From the strike fund of £1603, the Blackball union made eleven relief payments covering seven of the eleven weeks of the strike, to 104 miners, 46 women and 111 children.<sup>122</sup> It is difficult to write about women’s role in 1908 compared to other strikes, because there was no women’s committee in 1908, the main source of women’s views during the 1912, 1913 and 1951 strikes. Part of the problem, too, is that the strike was a relatively small one.

Novelists rather than historians have pioneered in representing women’s role in the strike.<sup>123</sup> There may not be a Blackball Annie, but we have a Denniston Rose.<sup>124</sup> Walter Rogers, secretary of the Blackball Miners’ Union in Eric Beardsley’s novel, *Blackball '08*, has a wife, Elizabeth (nee Harris) Rogers, and a daughter, Rose Rogers.<sup>125</sup> The character Elizabeth was a socialist like her husband. She had met Walter at a Clarion rally, joined the Clarion Fellowship and came out with Ranstead’s 200 Clarionettes. Theirs was a partnership. She tells Paddy Webb: ‘the women, Paddy, the women. They can be as good socialists as the men – yes and probably a damned sight better.’<sup>126</sup> Beardsley modelled his fictional Elizabeth on Annie Balderstone.<sup>127</sup> Another fictional figure, Mary Scobie in Jenny Patrick’s *Denniston Rose*, converts to unionism and perhaps socialism. Mary was the daughter and granddaughter of English Midlands miners.<sup>128</sup>

Historians lack the artistic license that fiction writers exercise in inventing an Elizabeth Rodgers or a Mary Scobie. Given extant sources and the absence of any oral history, we may never know much more about

Blackball women's activism in 1908. This gap in the historical record raises an interesting problem for work based on a relational model, the approach that a more balanced view of the strike derives from having as wide a range of views as possible. What happens when we have no evidence of the women's viewpoint? Finding a more balanced view of the 1908 Blackball strike requires more than simply gathering the range of available perceptions regarding the strike.

Recording the urban socialists' view of 1908 partially redresses the lack of women's views. When McCullough first talked to the miners during the case brought against them in the Arbitration Court for illegally striking in March 1908, he 'urged upon them the necessity in the interests of the women & kids that they should patch up & get back to work'.<sup>129</sup> McCullough's view may well have been widely held. Indeed, sympathy for the miners' wives and children motivated urban radicals to support the strike fund, even when they did not support the strike itself. West Coast miners contributed half of the Blackball strike fund, with the Runanga State Miners' Union single-handedly providing 12% of the total raised. Half the contributions came from other trade union and socialist organisations.<sup>130</sup> Among the latter contributors to the strike fund, we find the Wellington Typographers, the Christchurch Tailors' and Pressers' Union and the Dunedin Political Labour League, associations that were never supporters of the Red Feds and yet did support the strike fund, 'for the sake of the women and children'. By a majority of one in a ballot, the Wellington Typographers agreed to 'vote £10 immediately, and £5 per month, to the women and children of the Blackball strikers'.<sup>131</sup> For that matter, the Denniston, Tyneside and Brunner Miners' Unions and the Westport Labourers' Union all decided that 'they had no sympathy with the Blackball strikers but, in order to prevent their wives and children suffering, it was resolved to call on a five per cent even on the men's wages'.<sup>132</sup> Similarly, when Dave Pritchard traveled around New Zealand in March, trying to raise strike funds and support funds, Kaitanaga colliers raised £2 in sympathy 'for the women and children'. In motivating contributions to the strike fund, the women were pivotal to the prosecution and the success of the strike.

## Conclusion

While we may add the urban radicals and the employers to the story of Blackball, the main obstacle to adding women is that the 'primacy of politics' still prevails in its historiography. The primacy of politics approach stresses politics over socio-economic class-based determinants and other expressions of class. As Neville Kirk suggested, this weighting of politics has led to an 'imbalance of treatment and fragmentation of subject matter'.<sup>133</sup> What happened in Blackball in 1908, as is increasingly recognised, was not just

a matter of politics. Economics, the weather and contingency all played a part. If there had been a depression, the miners might not have been able to raise the resources with which to wage a strike. If the Tyneside mine had not flooded, the employers might not have settled and thus encouraged the Miners' Federation. In the last analysis, the strike was less about any particular grievance or long-standing concern. It was altogether more ambitious: it was about the rising expectations of workers who wanted something more than the industrial relations system was delivering. It was about aspiration as much as ideology.

The cost of living contributed to the Blackball strike, but it was a necessary rather than a sufficient reason.<sup>134</sup> Lack of agreement in the movement regarding the cost of living exacerbated industrial relations after 1907. Most unions argued that the cost of living between the 1890s and the 1900s had increased by 30-40%, while wages had only been increased 10%.<sup>135</sup> McCullough was inclined to agree with these figures and used them as the basis for urging wage increases. The employers, however, rejected the figures: they summoned land agents, butchers and grocers to testify that prices had not increased.<sup>136</sup> Employers' advocates maintained that claims of an increase in the cost of living resulted from the inflated expectations of workers who wanted to live in homes with 'tubs, a copper and a bath' and to afford to go to Wonderland and to the races.<sup>137</sup> Assenting to neither view, the judge of the watersiders' case asserted that the cost of living between 1894 and 1908 had not risen by more than 20% and that wage increases had largely compensated for this increase.<sup>138</sup> How he arrived at his opinion is not elucidated. Indeed, in another case he argued that the evidence showed that the cost of living had actually dropped between 1905 and 1908.<sup>139</sup> A consideration of the cost of living and the family economy would put women into the story of Blackball '08. While wages were high at Blackball, so too were expenses, and living conditions were remote and poor.

Adding a wider range of perspectives certainly helps us understand the 1908 Blackball strike. We are alerted, for instance, to the extent to which socialist Red Fed coalminers have dominated the history of 1908. Consideration of the socialist urban position, represented by McCullough, undermines the moderate/militant dichotomy. Blackball is a case study allowing us to tease out the range of ideologies, the employers' position and the socio-cultural as well as the political and ideological aspects of the strike. In the decade before the first World War, there were a variety of discourses and discussions, not just on the left, about how New Zealand society was going to be managed. As well as adding new points of view, thickening and stirring the existing narrative, a more thorough-going revision of Blackball, comes from a systematic criticism of the 'primacy of

politics'. To write an account of Blackball 1908, concentrating on women, without the onus of politics, would be truly revolutionary social history.

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- 1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Blackball Strike '08 Centennial Symposium, Blackball, 21-23 March 2008. I am grateful to the anonymous readers' comments on that paper.
  - 2 No woman was a coalminer in New Zealand. The Regulation of Mines Act 1874 had prohibited women's and young people's employment below ground in mines; the Liberal government (1890–1912) endorsed and enhanced this prohibition with the Coal Mines Act 1886 which specified that '[n]o female of any age, and no male child under the age of twelve years, shall be employed in any capacity in or about any mine', Coal Mines Act, 1886, No.31, s20.
  - 3 Brian Wood, *The Great '08 Blackball Coal Miners' Strike 27 February–13 May 1908*, Greymouth, 2008, pp.161–205.
  - 4 For a discussion of the employer's stance in Blackball, see Melanie Nolan, 'Jack McCullough: Workers' Representative on the Arbitration Court', MA thesis, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, 1985, pp.48–54.
  - 5 *Evening Post* (EP), 20–23 October 1908.
  - 6 Melanie Nolan, ed., *Revolution: The 1913 Great Strike in New Zealand*, Christchurch, 2005; H.E. Holland, et al., *The Tragic Story of the Waihi Strike*, Wellington, 1913; P.H. Hickey, *'Red' Fed Memoirs*, Wellington, 1925.
  - 7 Erik Olssen, *The Red Feds: Revolutionary Industrial Unionism and the New Zealand Federation of Labour 1908–1913*, Auckland, 1988, p.223.
  - 8 R.T. Newman, 'Moderates and Militants in the New Zealand Labour Movement', MA thesis, University of New Zealand (Canterbury), Christchurch, 1948.
  - 9 Stephen Mills, 'The Trades and Labour Councils 1891–1911: The Myth of Moderation', BA Hons. research essay, Massey University, Palmerston North, 1977.
  - 10 Work that has used McCullough's diaries and his perspective on the strike includes James Holt, Erik Olssen, Len Richardson, but especially Wood, *Great '08*.
  - 11 Melanie Nolan, *Kin: A Collective Biography of a New Zealand Working-Class Family*, Christchurch, 2005. James Taylor is completing an MA thesis on this topic, 'Transnational Ideas and Activists: New Zealand Labour and the British Clarion Movement, 1890–c.1914', MA thesis, Victoria University of Wellington.
  - 12 Erik Olssen, 'Where to from Here? Reflections on the Twentieth-Century Historiography of Nineteenth-Century New Zealand', *New Zealand Journal of History* (NZJH), 26, 1 (1992), p.61; Jim McAloon, 'The Making of the New Zealand Ruling Class', in Nolan, *Revolution*, pp.217–36.
  - 13 Melanie Nolan, 'Do Your Share, Like a Man!: The Issue of Gender in the Strike', in Nolan, *Revolution*, pp.237–59.
  - 14 See, for example: Pat Hickey, special edition *New Zealand Worker* (NZW), 6 April 1908; 'The Blackball Strike', *Commonweal*, 2, 4 (1908), pp.4–5; 'The Miners Strike', *Commonweal*, 2, 3 (1908), p.4; and *Lyttelton Times* (LT), 13 March 1908, p.8.
  - 15 The memoirs include: *Tom Mann's Memoirs*, London, 1923; and Pat Hickey, *'Red' Fed Memoirs*, Wellington, 1925.
  - 16 W.B. Sutch, *The Quest for Security in New Zealand 1840 to 1966*, Wellington, 1966; P.J. O'Farrell, 'The 1908 Blackball Strike', *Political Science* (PS), 11, 1 (1959), pp.53–64 ; Olssen, *Red Feds*; Len Richardson, *Coal, Class and Community: The United Mineworkers of New Zealand 1880–1960*, Auckland, 1995, pp.87–125; Wood, *Great '08*.

- 17 Sutch, p.xiii. *Quest* was published in 1966, but the first eight chapters, including 'Industrial Defeat', were written 'in 1939 and early in 1940', as *Poverty and Progress in New Zealand*, Wellington, 1941.
- 18 Ibid., p.99.
- 19 Ibid., p.101.
- 20 F.M.J. Irvine, 'The Revolt of the Militant Unions: A Study of the Trade Union Revolt against the Arbitration System in New Zealand, between 1906 and 1913, with particular reference to the part played by the Federation of Labour', MA thesis, University of New Zealand (Auckland), 1937; L.D. Smith, 'Industrial Unionism in New Zealand 1908–1914', MA thesis, University of New Zealand (Auckland), 1939.
- 21 Sutch, p.102.
- 22 Kerry Allan Taylor, Chapter One, "'Our Motto No Compromise": The Ideological Origins of the Communist Party of New Zealand', in "'Worker's Vanguard or People's Voice?": The Communist Party of New Zealand from Origins to 1946', PhD thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, 1994, especially pp. 54–6.
- 23 Ibid. Compare Taylor with Sutch, ch. 6, 'Industrial Defeat', pp.97–122; the latter suggests that the main argument was over parliamentary action.
- 24 O'Farrell, '1908 Blackball Strike', p.55.
- 25 Patrick O'Farrell, 'The Blackball Strike' in *The New Zealand Heritage*, V, part 60, 1972, p.1888.
- 26 P.J. O'Farrell, 'The Workers in Grey District Politics, 1865–1913', MA thesis, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, 1955.
- 27 Patrick O'Farrell, 'Politics and Coal: The Socialist Vanguard, 1904–1908', in Philip Ross May, ed., *Miners and Militants: Politics in Westland 1865–1918*, Christchurch, 1975, p.101.
- 28 O'Farrell, 'Blackball Strike', p.1889.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 O'Farrell, 'Politics', p.121.
- 31 Olssen, *Red Feds*, p.3.
- 32 Ibid., p.6.
- 33 Ibid., p.14.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 Richardson, *Coal*, pp.87–125.
- 36 O'Farrell, 'Politics', pp.111–12.
- 37 Sutch, p.104.
- 38 Len Richardson, 'Semple, Robert', in *The Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* (DNZB), updated 22 June 2007. Accessed 5 February 2009 at: <http://www.dnzb.govt.nz/>.
- 39 Richardson, *Coal*, p.108.
- 40 Wood, *Great '08*, pp.13–118.
- 41 Richardson, *Coal*, pp.52–86; Wood, *Great '08*, pp.161–204.
- 42 Jim McAloon, 'Radical Christchurch', in John Cookson and Graeme Dunstall, eds, *Southern Capital: Christchurch, towards a City Biography 1850–2000*, Christchurch, 2000, p.175.
- 43 E.W. Plumridge, 'The Necessary but Not Sufficient Condition: Christchurch Labour and Working-Class Culture', *NZJH*, 19, 2 (1985), p.138. See also Kath Clark, 'A History of the Canterbury Trades and Labour Council, 1889–1937', MA thesis, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, 1993, p.196; and Jane Tolerton, *A Life of Ettie Rout*, Auckland, 1992, pp.53–54.

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- 44 NZW, 24 February and 22 June 1932.
- 45 McCullough to Paul, 16 January 1908, MS Papers 0982/529, Hocken Library (HL), Dunedin. I am grateful to Peter Franks for drawing my attention to this point.
- 46 McCullough's Column, *Christchurch Truth* (CT), 10 November 1906.
- 47 *Greymouth Star* (GS), 10 March 1908. The rift between the factions had been developing for some time. See O'Farrell, 'Politics', p.115.
- 48 *Book of Awards* (BOA), 1907, 8, p.1065.
- 49 McCullough Diary, I, 3 March 1908, Canterbury Museum (CM), Christchurch.
- 50 O'Farrell, 'Blackball Strike', pp.1888–94.
- 51 *Dominion*, 12 and 13 March 1908.
- 52 McCullough Diary, I, 11 March 1908, CM.
- 53 *Ibid.*, 12 March 1908.
- 54 BOA, 1908, 9, pp.55–60, Judgement on the Blackball coal-miners taking part in a strike delivered by W.A. Sim, Judge.
- 55 McCullough Diary, I, 11 March 1908, CM.
- 56 *Ibid.*
- 57 Eric Beardsley, *Blackball '08*, Auckland, 1984, p.193.
- 58 McCullough Diary, I, 14 March 1908, CM.
- 59 *Ibid.*
- 60 *Ibid.*, 18 March 1908.
- 61 *New Zealand Parliamentary Debates* (NZPD), 1936, 245, p.194.
- 62 Scott to Pryor, 30 March 1908, Outward Letter Book, Otago Employers' Association Records, MS 1041, Hocken Library (HL), Dunedin.
- 63 Stead telegram to McCullough, 23 March 1908, Roth Collection, MS Papers 0314:0004, Alexander Turnbull Library (ATL), Wellington.
- 64 *Ibid.*; Stead telegram to McCullough, 18 March 1908, Roth Collection, MS Papers 0314:0004, ATL.
- 65 There were three general reasons for McCullough's protests: first, the strike clause in the Southland Timberyard and Sawmills Award; second, the wages and hours of certain classes of workers in the Canterbury Tanners', Fellmongers' and Skinners' Award, the Wellington Drivers' Award, the Christchurch General Labourers' Award, the Canterbury Carpenters' and Joiners' Award, and in the Wellington Grocers' Award; and third, the exemption of industrial sectors in the Canterbury Agricultural and Pastoral Labourers' case, the Wellington General Labourers' (County) Award, the Inangahua Miners' Award, the Dunedin Tinsmiths and Sheetmetal Workers' Award, and in the Canterbury Hotel and Restaurant Workers' case.
- 66 McCullough to Westbrook, 22 October 1908, McCullough Outward Letter Book, McCullough Papers, folder 8; McCullough to Rosser, 9 November 1908, *ibid.*; McCullough to Kneen, 21 December 1908, *ibid.*
- 67 McCullough Diary, I, 30 September 1911, referring to H.M. Fitzgerald, CM.
- 68 *Maoriland Worker* (MW), 22 December 1915.
- 69 *Ibid.*, 5 May 1911, Hickey's classic position.
- 70 McCullough to Young, 21 November 1911, McCullough Outward Letter Book, McCullough Papers, folder 8.
- 71 McCullough Diary, II, 3 March 1909, CM.
- 72 McCullough to Dominion Executive of the NZFOL, 23 November 1911, McCullough Outward Letter Book.

- 73 Notes of speech by McCullough on 'the Moral Aspects of Socialism', McCullough Papers, folder 14.
- 74 McCullough to Hutcheson, 25 November 1911, McCullough Outward Letter Book.
- 75 McCullough Diary, II, 5 May 1910, CM.
- 76 MW, 21 March 1913.
- 77 Barry Gustafson, *Labour's Path to Political Independence*, Auckland, 1981, p.33. H. Roth, in *Trade Unions in New Zealand*, Wellington, 1973, p. 44, suggests that it was not until 1914 that the Red Fed activists began organising farm labourers as opposed to other industrial workers.
- 78 McCullough Diary, IV, 5 July 1913, CM.
- 79 The Socialist Church was founded in Christchurch in 1896; the Fabian Society in Dunedin in 1896; the Clarion Club in Wellington in 1895; and the Socialist League in Wellington in 1897. Bert Roth, 'The Labour Churches and New Zealand', *International Review of Social History*, 4 (1959), p.362; Josephine Milburn, 'Socialism and Social Reform in Nineteenth-Century New Zealand', PS, 12, 3 (1960), p.64.
- 80 EP, 23 and 25 November 1897.
- 81 Ranstead had been one of the chief financial backers of the *Clarion*.
- 82 EP, 11 March and 2 May 1901; NZT, 12 and 30 July 1901, clippings in Roth Collection, MS Papers 0314, ATL. The best accounts of the early movement, including the NZSP, are Valerie Smith, "'Gospel of Hope" or "Gospel of Plunder": Socialism from the mid 1890s up to and including the Blackball Strike of 1908', BA Hons research essay, Massey University, Palmerston North, 1976; and H.O. Roth, 'The New Zealand Socialist Party', PS, 15, 4 (1959), pp.76–83.
- 83 Denew to Atkinson, 20 October 1901, Roth Collection, MS Papers 0314, ATL; Canterbury Trades and Labour Council, Circular Letter re Socialist Party, December 1901, *ibid*. See also Bert Roth, 'The Distribution of Radicalism in New Zealand', *New Zealand Geographer*, 15, 1 (1959), pp.79–81.
- 84 Bert Roth, 'Atkinson, Harry Albert', DNZB, *Vol. Two, 1870–1900*, Wellington, 1993, p.15; Roth, 'Labour Churches', pp.361, 364; H.A. Atkinson, 'Social Reform in New Zealand', *The Labour Annual* (LA), 1899, p.48; LT, 27 November 1897, clipping in Roth Collection, MS Papers 0314, ATL; NZT, 16 December 1897, *ibid*.
- 85 Taylor, 'Transnational Ideas', is focusing on John Trevor and the Labour Church movement; the Clarion and associated clubs and organisations; and the writings of Robert Blatchford, William Morris and Edward Carpenter, which he argues have been neglected in New Zealand historiography.
- 86 Taylor, "'Worker's Vanguard"'.  
87 Smith, "'Gospel"', p.79.  
88 Taylor, "'Worker's Vanguard"'.  
89 MW, 2 June 1911.
- 90 McCullough Diary, V, 12 March 1915, CM. McCullough noted in his diary, IV, 3 February 1913: 'This morning I met Semple in the Trades Hall closeted with Whiting & Sullivan. This is an eye opener, and is a good augury to see Semple who was a bitter antagonist of the Trade Unions having discovered that there was not so much between these men as he imagined & that they are equally as honest in their effort to improve the conditions of the workers lot as he is himself'.
- 91 For instance, the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* does not include essays on George Clifford, Henry Acland, David Jones, George T. Booth, William Scott or William Pryor.

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- 92 F.S. Rudman, 'Employer Organisations: Their Development and Role in Industrial Relations', in J.M. Howells, N.S. Woods, and F.L.J. Young, eds, *Labour and Industrial Relations in New Zealand*, Melbourne, 1974, pp. 53-77. A more recent example is Jim McAloon, 'The Making of the New Zealand Ruling Class' in Nolan, ed., *Revolution*, pp.217-36. Farmers' organisation has not been neglected. See Thomas W.H. Brooking, 'Agrarian Businessmen Organise: A Comparative Study of the Origins and Early Phases of the Development of the National Farmers' Union of England and Wales and the New Zealand Farmers' Union, ca. 1880-1920', PhD thesis, University of Otago, 1977; and R.J. Duncan, 'The New Zealand Farmers' Union as a Political Pressure Group, 1900-1912', MA thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, 1965.
- 93 Wood, *Great '08*, pp.7-56.
- 94 Richardson, *Coal*, p.117.
- 95 Scott to Field, 22 October 1904, Outward Letter Book, Otago Employers' Association Records, MS 1041, HL; and Scott to Booth, 25 October 1904, *ibid*.
- 96 *Dunedin Star* (DS), 27 February 1908.
- 97 *Otago Daily Times* (OTD), 20 August 1908.
- 98 Scott to Dixon, 26 August 1908, Outward Letter Book, Otago Employers' Association Records, MS 1041, HL.
- 99 McCullough Diary, I, 11 February 1908, CM. The pamphlet referred to by William Scott was *Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act: Its Past, Present and Future*, Wellington, 1907.
- 100 OEA Annual Report, 1908, Otago Employers' Association Records, MS 1041, HL, p.2.
- 101 Canterbury Employers' Association, Annual Report, 1900, p.5.
- 102 Scott to Walpole, 24 November 1909, Outward Letter Book, Otago Employers' Association Records, MS 1041, HL.
- 103 Scott to Pryor, 26 March 1909, *ibid*.
- 104 James Holt, 'Compulsory Arbitration in New Zealand, 1894-1901: The Evolution of an Industrial Relations System', NZJH, 14, 2 (1980), p.185.
- 105 Scott to Handysides, 7 April 1908, Outward Letter Book, Otago Employers' Association Records, MS 1041, HL; and Scott to Handysides, 7 May 1908, *ibid*.
- 106 Noel S. Woods, *Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration in New Zealand*, Wellington, 1963, p.96.
- 107 Henry Broadhead, *State Regulation of Labour and Labour Disputes in New Zealand: A Description and a Criticism*, Christchurch, 1908, p.62.
- 108 *Weekly Herald* (WH), 28 August 1910.
- 109 *Farmers' Advocate* (FA), 26 May 1906.
- 110 McCullough Diary, II, 10 July 1909, CM.
- 111 Canterbury Employers' Association, Annual Report, 1908, pp.24-25.
- 112 *Ibid.*, p.20.
- 113 McCullough Diary, I, 20 November 1908, CM.
- 114 McCullough to Paul, 16 January 1908, McCullough Letterbook, CM.
- 115 Richardson, *Coal*, pp.3-5, 10, 38, 130-2, 210, 296-7 .
- 116 Nolan, "'Do Your Share'", p.237ff.
- 117 EP, 20 January 1914.
- 118 Len Richardson, 'Class, Community and Conflict: The Blackball Miners' Union 1920-31', in Len Richardson and W. David McIntyre, eds, *Provincial Perspectives: Essays in*

- Honour of W. J. Gardner*, Christchurch, 1980, pp.106–27; Len Richardson, ‘McLagan, Angus’, DNZB, updated 22 June 2007. Accessed 5 February 2009 at: <http://www.dnzb.govt.nz/>; Kerry Taylor, ‘Galbraith, Alexander’, DNZB, updated 22 June 2007. Accessed 5 February 2009 at: <http://www.dnzb.govt.nz/>.
- 119 Maryan Street, *The Scarlet Runners: Women and Industrial Action, 1889–1913*, Auckland, 1993; Melanie Nolan, ‘Shattering Dreams about Women in the 1951 Lockout’, in David Grant, ed., *The Big Blue: Snapshots of the 1951 Waterfront Lockout*, Christchurch, 2004, pp.59–81.
- 120 BOA, 1908, 9, pp.372–3.
- 121 Olssen, *Red Feds*, p.9.
- 122 Ibid., p.11.
- 123 Bill Pearson, *Coal Flat*, Auckland, 1963; and Eric Beardsley, *Blackball '08*, Auckland, 1984.
- 124 Jenny Patrick, *The Denniston Rose*, Auckland, 2003.
- 125 Beardsley, *Blackball '08*, pp.37–41.
- 126 Ibid., p.41.
- 127 Melanie Nolan, conversation with Eric Beardsley, Blackball, 23 March 2008.
- 128 Patrick, *Denniston Rose*, p.270.
- 129 McCullough Diary, I, 11 March 1908, CM.
- 130 Wood, *Great '08*, p.188.
- 131 EP, 11 March 1908.
- 132 See, for instance, *Taranaki Herald* (TH), 16 March 1908; *Wanganui Herald* (WH), 30 March and 1 April 1908; and *West Coast Times* (WCT), 6 April 1908.
- 133 Neville Kirk, ‘Decline and Fall, Resilience and Regeneration: A Review Essay on Social Class’, *International Labor and Working Class History Journal* (ILWCH), 57, 1 (2000), pp.88–102.
- 134 Neville Bennett, ‘Some Remarks on the Economic and Social Aspects of the Blackball Strike’, paper presented at the Blackball Strike '08 Centennial Symposium, Blackball, 21–23 March 2008, suggests that the willingness to take industrial action may have been encouraged by a declining standard of living at Blackball, a new town, relatively remote, in which housing and other commodities were scarce and expensive.
- 135 *Dominion*, 27 March 1908. The watersiders claimed the cost of living had risen 30–40% between 1905 and 1908. For the ‘great New Zealand debate’ on the cost of living see *Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives* (AJHR), 1912, H-11, ‘Report of Commission on the Cost of Living in New Zealand: Together with Minutes of Proceedings and Evidence’. Two hundred seventy witnesses gave evidence that was widely reported in the newspapers in June to July 1912, when the Cost of Living Commission moved around the country taking evidence. For the list of 13 questions submitted to witnesses, see EP, 1 July 1912. The list began with the general query: ‘Has the cost of living increased in New Zealand during the past twenty years?’
- 136 *Dominion*, 27 March 1908.
- 137 Ibid., 21 March 1908.
- 138 Ibid.
- 139 BOA, 1909, 10, p.191, Gisborne Painters’ and Decorators’ Award.

