Michael Dineen O’Keeffe: Union Leader – a ‘colourful personality’

By PHILIP HART

Michael William Dineen O’Keeffe [1852-1931] was a lively character who stood out from the usual bland, staid and respectable presidents of the Thames Miners’ Union in the late 19th century. O’Keeffe was first mentioned in the press in December 1880, when fined ten shillings for damaging a table on a boat travelling between Auckland and Thames. The fact that he was dancing on it at the time was viewed with amusement, the prosecutor commenting that ‘he was a splendid dancer, and suggested that he should give the Court a specimen of his performance in the Terpsichorean Art’. O’Keeffe, who ‘had been performing for the benefit of passengers’, claimed he could ‘dance forty variations to one tune’.

After settling at Te Aroha in 1881, his flirtation with his future wife, Margaret O’Leary, was noted several times, as was a brief mention of him ‘taking the girls by storm’. At a dance three weeks later, his ‘unmentionables’ split when he bowed too low, requiring a temporary repair.

But in picking up a handkerchief the darned stitches bursted,
And when the missing link appeared, great Caesar!
how he cursed it,
And left the Hall and Margaret, disheartened and disgusted.

Despite this embarrassment, he was back a month later when he enjoyed ‘a good waltz, and spooned all the time with Margaret’. They soon ‘got the tables and chairs for the little house’ and were ‘about to go into partnership’. A month later, ‘Alphabet O’K’, a reference to his many initials, was reportedly to marry soon. He grumbled about his wedding plans being publicised: ‘Mick, you softy, you might have known that a woman cannot keep a secret. That is how it leaked out about your building the dove-cot’. He later removed this small house to Waiorongomai without his landlord’s permission. When sued for damages, he stated that, after the landlord and the mining inspector had told him not to remove it,

I consulted Mr Miller (solicitor) on the matter; he advised me not to remove it. I did not take his advice. (Laughter.)
In reply to Mr Miller, defendant stated it was quite true he told the Mining Inspector, “If he could not remove it he would make it so small that he (Mining Inspector) could smoke it in his pipe.” (Great laughter.)

One night, his contribution to ‘a little vocalisation’ was described as being ‘yelled by a voice as melodeous as the sound made by sharpening a saw, the vibration, created by it, smashed two cups and put a split in the bottom of the old fryingpan’. O’Keefe was obviously an extrovert with ‘character’.

**Mining at Waiorongomai**

Born to a farmer in Ireland in 1852, he was ‘brought up to foundry work’, but may have been a coal and gold miner before arriving in New Zealand in early 1880. The following year, he acquired two small interests in worthless Te Aroha mines, and had shares in several equally unsuccessful Waiorongomai claims and companies, sometimes quickly profiting through a quick sale. As an example of his speedily assessing the value of his claims, he abandoned one after only 15 days. He also worked for wages. In mid-1883, when he took up two claims with a fellow Irishman, John O’Shea, a witness at his marriage, the local newspaper described them as prospecting ‘energetically. The known reputation of the owners as miners is sufficient guarantee that the ground will be well prospected’. Shortly afterwards, he was referred to as ‘the well known prospector’. Rarely did he find payable ore, and once he cut his leg badly when ‘cutting a route in a very awkward place’ three hours’ walk from his home. He studied how to find silver ore, but made no discoveries. With O’Shea, he tributed in a claim during 1885 that, for a while, produced good ore. O’Keeffe was shift boss of this party for three years. He was also underground boss in another mine. In 1888, he won contracts to drive tunnels, but other tenders were declined.

From 1883 onwards, O’Keeffe was prominent in moves to protect the interests of mining. In 1889, he assisted to revive an accident relief fund.

**Financial struggles**

Early in 1886, with another Irish miner he attempted to become a contractor, but all their tenders to make tracks, roads, and bridges were declined. Despite his appalling spelling, for a time he was a travelling correspondent for the local newspaper.
When mining faded in 1885, he helped establish the Gordon Special Settlement to farm nearby swamp. Receiving 150 acres, he was described as ‘the pioneer of the settlement’. Struggling to meet the cost of fencing, draining, and purchasing animals and equipment, in March 1889 his land was liable for forfeiture because he was not ‘continuously in residential occupation’. His defence was - hard times, low wages, scarcity of work and no market for produce - and that he had complied with the regulations requiring improvements, and hoped to settle there ‘before the end of this year’. Should his section be forfeited, he asked for a refund of the cost of his improvements, rent, and survey, being ‘a poorer man than I had been before I got such land’. Because development had been minimal he had ceased working it and had paid only the first installment of rent, it was forfeited in 1890.

In December 1889, two shopkeepers sued for small debts, one of £4.2s.5d and the other of £6.11s. He explained that he had not worked for wages since the beginning of September, and since then had been tributing for a return of ‘about £13’. His land had been ‘more a source of loss than profit’. After failing to pay £1 a month as ordered, he was again sued; the bailiff sold two of his dairy cows but found no other possessions of value to seize. Having sold his cattle to meet several debts of between £1 and £6, he could not meet these shopkeepers’ debts, and filed as bankrupt. Owing £57.18s, he had no asset apart from his Gordon land, on which he owed £8.11s in rent. After the magistrate criticised him for exaggerating his financial status when offering to be a surety for another debtor, O’Keeffe stated that the magistrate ‘made as false and deliberate a statement in Court as ever a man made, or else he made a great mistake’, although creditors thought otherwise and accused him of selling cattle ‘to his own mate’ just before filing. They received only 1s.3d in the pound.

Unlike most bankruptcies, this was not the end of the story. According to his own account, after being ‘unfortunate’ and becoming bankrupt, he ‘carried his swag to the Thames, and some time afterwards, having been successful in mining, called a meeting of his creditors and paid everyone twenty shillings in the pound’. This unusual act was widely and favourably commented on. Although the Official Assignee had tried to talk him out of it, he wanted to ‘look any man in the country in the face’, and was later praised for providing ‘a high lesson in honour and morality’.

There was also another side to O’Keeffe, as he occasionally participated in races and rugby. He liked making speeches, and was a member of a short-lived debating
society. To help defend local interests, he was elected to several committees and a deputation to a visiting Minister. He attended entertainments arranged to assist charities and his Catholic Church, and helped to organize a ball and to collect subscriptions for a destitute widow. A supporter of Home Rule for Ireland, he collected money to relieve evicted Irish tenants.

Mining at Thames and the Thames Miners’ Union

Within three years of moving to Thames in 1890, a lucky find earned the £1,300 that enabled him to pay his creditors. He was promoted to shift boss. For part of 1894, he was on the committee of the Thames Prospecting Association. Four years later he was granted permission to dredge and sluice a creek for tailings, but eight months later abandoned this work to tribute in a leading mine. In 1894, he obtained a Second Class Service Certificate, and two years later attended the Thames School of Mines. At a meeting of ‘experienced miners’ discussing government proposals to require managers to hold certificates of competency, he defended men trained in the School of Mines because they possessed practical as well as theoretical skills. Results in his courses varied greatly, partly because he attended only about half the classes, but he qualified as a first-class mine manager.

In 1894, O’Keeffe won election to the union’s committee with the sixth highest vote. As its records have not survived, his influence in its discussions is unknown but he proved prominent at meetings. When unsuccessful in forcing a Waihi company to compensate the widow of a miner killed in its mine, he urged that compensation be made an issue in the parliamentary elections, to the disapproval of the president, William Henry Potts, who opposed involvement in politics. In 1898, O’Keeffe defeated Potts in a three-way race. He was welcomed by the local newspapers as a creditable choice, because of his integrity, experience as a working miner and ‘learned’ qualifications, though there were doubts about his having ‘the polish that some exacting critics would demand’. O’Keeffe emphasized the union’s opinion that more good was to be effected by quiet and reasonable diplomacy in case of friction than by a policy of aggressiveness, which invariably led to ill feeling, believing that conflicts should be resolved by diplomatic or amicable arguments. A strike was ‘like a fire – when once started there is no knowing where it ends’. He was a firm supporter of the Conciliation Act and the
arbitration court, which he saw as ‘a grand thing for the working man’. However, if his members were ‘forced into a fight’ he ‘should feel very much insulted’ if ‘not permitted to be the first into that fight’.

O’Keeffe always spoke plainly and called a spade a spade. He attacked the local members of the Liberal government, which was generally supported by miners, for doing insufficient for his members. He urged it to construct a railway to the Waihi mines, threatening that delay could mean defeat for local parliamentarians, one of whom was Minister of Mines. He also promoted erection of a public crushing battery at Thames. Critical of the local Member of Parliament (James McGowan, a future Minister of Mines), he supported the concept of a Labour Party, citing the British Labour Party as an example of the ‘intelligence and open-mindedness which the workers impart into politics’.

Of particular concern to O’Keeffe was that companies held excessively large areas that were often unworked and under-manned, thus creating ‘a system of landlordism’ as bad as in Ireland. Such protection of large areas also reduced employment opportunities and he advocated that unworked ground be let on tribute. His criticism of the rates offered to tributers ‘hit the right nail on the head’, according to the press. Not until mid-1900 was he able to convince the warden’s court to adopt the union’s conditions for tributing. He also opposed the working of overtime, as ‘men working overtime only take the bread away from those who most require it’.

He argued that the contracting system enforced in Karangahake and Waihi would soon turn these districts ‘into a poorhouse of labour’. ‘Contract work caused rush and hurry, and therein lay the great secret of most accidents. It opened the door to incompetent labour, killed unionism, and was undoubtedly the greatest evil which tradespeople had to contend against’, because contracts produced too little return to pay the miners’ debts. Claiming not to oppose contracts as such, he objected to abuses, and wanted an agreed minimum rate. Contractors should not be paid less, for otherwise managers would make the minimum wage ‘abortive by letting all the mines on contract in order to evade the award of the Court’. He found the conditions attached to Waihi contracts obnoxious, and saw as a form of tyranny the ability of a manager to sack a man because he was dissatisfied with the contract. He was also very much opposed to Sunday work in mines. Disapproved very highly of it. It was a bad moral principle to lay down in a colony like this. Efforts
were being made to prevent our posterity from becoming slaves. Sunday work is against the law of God, and the law of man, and to break both is as bad as to bag gold, or steal specimens.\textsuperscript{81}

To end Sunday work, he advocated payment at double time.\textsuperscript{82} His perseverance on this issue convinced one Coromandel mine manager to cease work on Saturday night even though it took a year of persuasion to do so.\textsuperscript{83} He also sought shorter hours in wet ground, and wanted more land opened up to settlement.\textsuperscript{84}

Soon after becoming President of the union, O’Keeffe visited outlying districts to strengthen their branches.\textsuperscript{85} After a year, he could report very satisfactory progress, as membership in outlying districts had increased from 432 to about 940.\textsuperscript{86}

**Before the Conciliation Board**

In mid-1899, an attempt by one Waihi company to introduce a sliding scale of wages for shift bosses based on the average monthly yield produced widespread opposition, and the union referred the issue to the conciliation board.\textsuperscript{87} O’Keeffe told an enthusiastic meeting of members that the company’s move could be ‘the thin end of the wedge for eventually introducing the same system to the working miners’ and that the union would protest against any increase in the hours of labour, as had occurred in some Coromandel mines. The meeting unanimously supported taking the case to the board where O’Keeffe, assisted by two others, would represent the union.\textsuperscript{88} A Waihi newspaper applauded these representatives as ‘made of the right stuff’, with ‘true grit’.\textsuperscript{89}

Subsequently, O’Keeffe negotiated with the board on the scale of payments, to the ‘great satisfaction’ of the miners.\textsuperscript{90} A Waihi newspaper praised the ‘genial’ O’Keeffe for conducting the case ‘in an honourable and worthy manner’, and had ‘no hesitation in saying that an abler man would have been hard to find’.\textsuperscript{91} A Thames correspondent wondered if ‘a better man’ had ever been president of the union.\textsuperscript{92}

O’Keeffe was re-elected in August 1899 with 702 votes to his challenger’s 227.\textsuperscript{93} One member said that ‘we never had a live president’ previously.\textsuperscript{94} A cartoon of ‘“Micky”, the Thames Miners’ Union’s Own’ (Figure 1), showed him with intense, staring eyes; these are confirmed by a photograph of him slouching in the midst of his more formal colleagues.\textsuperscript{95} His Irish brogue and wit were commented on, favourably.\textsuperscript{96}

Despite all his work, in 1900 his predecessor defeated him by 68 votes,\textsuperscript{97} a result that reflected dissatisfaction with union policy. One miner claimed that the union did
not inquire into deaths in ‘up-country districts’, and that the rate of wages agreed to at Waihi had lowered the amount received by mullockers, who had left the union. There was a call for greater militancy.\textsuperscript{98}

\textbf{Figure 1: Michael Dineen O’Keefe}

Source: Observer, 26 August 1899, p. 7.

Although no longer president, O’Keeffe continued to defend miners’ interests.\textsuperscript{99} In early 1901, after Waihi unionists sought increased wages and voted to take the Waihi Gold Mining Company to the conciliation board, 12 union officials and activists were dismissed.\textsuperscript{100} More men were dismissed as the manager obeyed his English directors’ instructions to cut costs.\textsuperscript{101} After considerable controversy, the manager offered to reinstate the dismissed men on condition that the union withdrew its wage demands.\textsuperscript{102} An ‘immense meeting’ unanimously rejected this and went on to demand all Waihi companies be cited before the board in order to obtain a new wage scale.\textsuperscript{103}

When the board first met, the companies asked that every company in the Hauraki district be required to appear and be bound by the new award. As conditions varied, Union leaders argued for hearings in each locality and for different awards in different
places. The companies responded by raising the spectre of foreign capital being scared away if all mines had to pay the rates that the more profitable Waihi mines could afford. This might not have concerned O’Keeffe, who called foreign capitalists ‘Christ-killers’ solely interested in extracting ‘boodle’.

When the board first met, at Waihi, Potts presented the union case. O’Keeffe, who sought to prove that Thames mining was dangerous and unhealthy because of gas and the use of compressed air, joined him. One question provided unintended amusement:

“Well to avoid any misunderstanding … will you state whether it was half-past eleven in the morning or half-past eleven in the afternoon?” A smile passed over the faces of those present, but Mr O’Keeffe was too much in earnest to notice the slip, and resumed the examination.

Describing how gas drove air from the lower workings, he said that ‘if a workman should happen to be caught in the gas he would lie down (laughter) and sleep the sleep of death’. He insisted that compressed air was ‘injurious to health’. The Thames miners, ‘in order to keep the peace’, had ‘refrained from causing trouble by asking for a higher rate. The present trouble had been forced upon the miners’. Opposing classifying men into such categories as ‘inexperienced’ and ‘aged’, he claimed that an old miner ‘does not hardly exist. He is dead before he gets old’. A miner was old at 50. Increasing wages would not ‘be to the detriment of the small struggling companies’, whose conditions would be improved because, ‘when the present dispute was settled, and the award made, matters would quieten down’.

Under cross-examination by Frederick Daw, manager of the Crown mine at Karangahake, O’Keeffe had to admit to limited geological knowledge, despite having cited geology as a cause of danger to Thames miners. He ‘declined to go into the question of geology … for if he did he would keep them there until Christmas’, and ‘declined to go into the question of the formation of peculiarities of gases in mines’. Compressed air, he claimed, had the moisture taken out of it and ‘was polluted, and therefore rendered dangerous’. When questioned about ‘the constitution and peculiarities of certain gases’, he sidled his lack of scientific knowledge through wit:

You cannot answer the question? - No I am no chemist. If I were I should not be in the witness box, but would be drawing £1500 a year, the same as you are. (Laughter.)
How about ventilation in the Crown mine? – Oh it is good.
Plenty of ventilation? – Plenty of ventilation! Why there is so much ventilation that it blows the hair off, and every man in the Crown mine is bald-headed (Loud laughter).\textsuperscript{113}

His ‘prompt and peculiar answers’ to Daw ‘simply convulsed those present’ and his last sally about every man being bald ‘simply “broke up” Court, mining and Press representatives, and audience, and for a minute nothing but shouts of laughter could be heard’.\textsuperscript{114} Even Daw ‘chuckled’, for he had ‘but a slight ring of hair left on his cranium’, to which O’Keeffe had pointed.\textsuperscript{115}

In reply to an attorney for the English-owned mining companies, he claimed that it was

an opportune time – it was a beautiful time – to ask for an increase because it could not affect the companies. He thought a time of depression a good time to ask for an increase … He thought an increase of 20 per cent. on all wages would give a great impetus to the mining industry. He would not include mine managers and superintendents in the increase – he would take it off their salaries. (Laughter.) He thought it would be a great advertisement for the colony. The Stock Exchange jews and others would be attracted to New Zealand and its splendid gold mines. The Union only wanted a fair day’s work – but it appeared to him the higher the increase of pay the better it would eventually be for the goldmining industry.

He went on to say that boys’ wages should be increased because ‘this was God’s country’ and ‘not old Ireland’. If increasing their wages caused the closure of some tailings plants ‘he would still be in favour of the increase, as the effect would be to abolish slavery’.\textsuperscript{116}

His performance brought him to the attention of the wider public, the Auckland Observer devoting four of its seven cartoons on the hearing to him.\textsuperscript{117} A Thames newspaper noted his dramatic posturing and intense, staring eyes.\textsuperscript{118} The Observer wrote that now ‘the whole province’ knew the ‘comic questioner’.\textsuperscript{119} It published a poem praising ‘the marvellous O’Keeffe’, whose wit made the poet ‘laugh the livelong day, and very far into the night’ because of his ‘sublime’ and ‘very lively’ remarks.\textsuperscript{120} To the Observer, he was more than just a comic Irishman; it cited his paying his creditors as showing a ‘sense of honesty’ that put to shame some leaders of Auckland society.\textsuperscript{121} He was high in the miners’ estimation because of being ‘a sterling and able man, and as full of dry humour as they make them’.\textsuperscript{122}

O’Keeffe assisted the union case at Coromandel also.\textsuperscript{123} During the hearings, the companies had offered to raise the wages at Thames by sixpence a day and in the ‘up-
country’ by fourpence, but the union’s leaders now wanted a general scale for the Hauraki district.\textsuperscript{124} The board’s decision increased the pay of some men, to their ‘great satisfaction’, and but reduced others’, who were ‘not so pleased’.\textsuperscript{125} The Waihi Company increased discontent by replacing wages men with contractors.\textsuperscript{126} In other districts also, the workforce was reduced for a variety of cost-cutting reasons.\textsuperscript{127} The Waihi branch determined to resist the contract system, and like other branches rejected the award because they received little benefit.\textsuperscript{128} As the executive was divided, it resolved to ballot the members. Rejection would mean that the award would be referred to the court for a binding decision.\textsuperscript{129} O’Keeffe argued that this ‘unfair and unsatisfactory’ award should not be accepted, even if Thames miners would benefit, for ‘it would be ill-becoming for the parent branch of the union to accept an award which outside branches thought was unsatisfactory’.\textsuperscript{130} Only Thames miners accepted it, narrowly; everywhere else it was overwhelmingly rejected.\textsuperscript{131} The \textit{Thames Star} warned that the court ‘very seldom made any very great alterations in the awards’, but the union was determined.\textsuperscript{132} The companies also rejected the award, unanimously, and the Waihi Company heightened tensions by dismissing more men.\textsuperscript{133}

\textbf{Before the Arbitration Court}

In August 1901, O’Keeffe was re-elected president with a majority of 43 votes over Potts, receiving especially good tallies in outlying districts.\textsuperscript{134} He was returned to office when mining at Thames was ‘about as dull as it could be’ and the mining depression was intensifying.\textsuperscript{135} An \textit{Observer} cartoon showed Potts placing on O’Keeffe’s back a heavy swag labelled ‘Miners’ Dispute’ and wishing him ‘luck of it’.\textsuperscript{136}

When O’Keeffe, who led the union case, complained that a solicitor was assisting the employers, whereas the union had no solicitor ‘and no talented men’, the judge, Theophilus Cooper,\textsuperscript{137} raised a laugh by responding ‘I’m not so sure of that’.\textsuperscript{138} In his opening address, O’Keeffe made what a newspaper headlined as ‘Some Startling Assertions’. He claimed the Waihi Company’s manager was trying ‘to strike terror into the miners’ by dismissing 150 union members after the board hearing at which some had given evidence.\textsuperscript{139} Increased wages he suggested would not frighten away foreign capital or be an excessive burden. As for ‘the struggling companies’, he pointed to the excessive salaries of their supervisors, some of whom ‘were not worth twopence, and could not tell the difference between a gad and a crosscut saw. They were no good except to breed mischief’.\textsuperscript{140} Denying that miners could live on less money, he stated
that many families lacked ‘sufficient house room to observe the dictates of common
decency; their children have not sufficient food to eat, not sufficient warm clothing to
cover them day or night’. All men dismissed should be given ‘a valid reason’, and
unless preference was given to unionists the union would be destroyed and forced off
the goldfield and prominent members of the union would be ‘stigmatised’ as ‘agitators
– everything short of anarchists’. 141 All those discharged by the Waihi Company for
asking to be paid the union rate should, he believed, be reinstated, and, as the union had
paid their wages ‘from the time they were locked out’, its expenses should be
recouped. 142

When witnesses at Karangahake were questioned on hazardous and unhealthy
conditions there, he gave evidence about his experiences ‘in nearly all the mining
camps on the Peninsula’. He repeated that compressed air was ‘injurious to health’. At
Thames he had experienced gas and temperatures so hot that he ‘wore no clothing
except trousers and boots without any socks. The mineral water affected the boots, and
he had seen the sole and upper parted in less than a fortnight’. 143 ‘Thames was the worst
hole he ever put his foot in to earn a day’s pay’. 144 He had been preaching ‘peace’ to the
militants of Waihi, not because he was ‘afraid of the superintendents, but he wanted to
protect the wives and children who might have suffered’ in a large strike. An extra
shilling a day ‘was a fair wage’, but the managers ‘had combined’ to force the men to
compete for contracts. 145 Ignoring reality, he continued to argue that mining was at its
most flourishing. 146 Despite continually being over-ruled, he asked about managers’
salaries. 147

In his closing address, O’Keeffe argued that the owners’ representatives had
‘failed to show why the miners should not receive their just demands’ and cited
examples of their witnesses agreeing that the union demands were ‘reasonable’. The
Waihi contract system was ‘a most one-sided and pernicious system, favouring only the
companies and doing incalculable harm’ to the miners, while directors and managers
’swallowed up the cream of the returns, while the balance was spread over an army of
toilers who won the gold’. 148 He called for

a healthy readjustment whereby the workers may obtain their proper share
of the results of their toil in conjunction with the protection of the law
against tyranny, injustice, and coercion. If any mine is worth working then
the labourer is worthy of his hire, but if it is not then let it be shut down
before any man is compelled by circumstances to forfeit his independence,
his right to live, and his right to fair treatment.
He concluded by thanking his opponents for ‘the gentlemanly manner in which they have treated us’, and thanked Judge Cooper for his ‘kindly and courteous manner’ and ‘fair play’.149

**Responding to the award**

Despite O’Keeffe’s strong advocacy, the award fixed wages at levels below those set by the board, and legitimised the policies of the Waihi Company.150 As the *Observer* commented, if the union had been content with the board’s award, ‘they would at least have had a moderate increase all round. But, in grasping at the shadow, they have lost the substance’. The hearing had produced ‘overwhelming’ evidence that British capital would no longer be provided and mines would close if the increases had been granted.151 Employers and newspapers moralised about ‘the folly of going to extremes’ and argued that the award would save the industry.152 Most miners expressed ‘general disapproval’ of the outcome,153 while O’Keeffe, was ‘characteristically candid:

“What do I think of the award,” he queried, in answer to our representative’s question. “Well I can hardly say, I don’t know whether I am awake or dreaming. It is an award that I think the Arbitration Court will be sorry they gave, for it is unfair to the miners. In Coromandel it has reduced the pay of the men, and it is anomalous, and I think altogether that it is award that those responsible should be ashamed of. My the divil fly away wid the mimbers av the Board for putting their fists to such a statement.”

“What do I think of the award? Haven’t I said what I think of it,” he continued in answer to another query. “What can I say except that I think it a most disgraceful one, and one that never should have been. D---n the award say I, and there you have my opinion!”154

This final comment caused much hilarity in the press.155 O’Keeffe told a union meeting that the award was ‘unjust and unfair’, and indeed ‘a pre-arranged affair’ with the judge legitimising the actions of the Waihi Company. He concluded by urging members ‘that this defeat, great as it is, should not dishearten us …and be again ready for battle when this two years penal servitude has expired’.156 Privately he was so disheartened that earlier the same day he had applied to be a mining inspector.157 His members passed a ‘hearty vote of thanks’ to him and the others who had fought the case.158

O’Keeffe’s attacks on the judge amused some and horrified others.159 At an interview with the Minister of Mines, James McGowan, O’Keeffe called for Cooper’s
removal as chairman of the court. ‘The miners had no confidence in him, and they thought’, as he did, ‘that influence of the Auckland companies had something to do’ with his decision. Cooper, formerly ‘solicitor for the companies cited’, had been ‘hand in glove’ with the companies’ solicitor and ‘had not been an impartial judge’ and as such should be removed. McGowan was ‘sorry to hear’ this ‘very serious charge’, for Cooper had been ‘actuated by the highest motives’ and had done his best to decide on the basis of the evidence presented. After praising Cooper’s ‘ability and legal acumen’, he insisted that the courts should be free ‘from anything approaching political influence or interference’. Newspapers also deplored the demand, one condemning O’Keeffe’s ‘cool impertinence, bad taste, and reckless assertion’, plus ‘want of respect for a Minister of the Crown, and utter disregard for the institutions of the country’. This newspaper commented that whilst O’Keeffe’s ‘utterances are usually not taken seriously’, in this case he deserved ‘a stiff lecture’ from McGowan.

Although some unionists deplored his remarks, others praised their ‘manly and outspoken President’. The Observer commented that O’Keeffe was ‘such a droll and inveterate joker’ that it was ‘scarcely safe to take seriously his demand’. As he had previously praised Cooper’s ‘strict impartiality’, it was ‘difficult’ to regard the demand that he be removed ‘as anything else but one of those dry and caustic jokes for which he is famous the goldfields over’. It warned against political control over the court, and considered his demand ‘an utterly preposterous and unworthy one – that is, if it is not an audacious joke’. Citing this interpretation, the Thames Star considered it ‘not a bad joke in itself’ to accuse O’Keeffe of making a joke, for ‘all who have the honour of Mr O’Keeffe’s acquaintance know that unnatural seriousness characterises all his official utterances’. While a Waihi delegation told McGowan that they repudiated O’Keeffe’s attack, Karangahake miners asked that Cooper be removed. While some of the Union executive believed the statements had been ‘made without due consideration’, O’Keeffe insisted that he had made the statement deliberately after giving the matter serious consideration. By eight votes to six, his attack was censored, but with the rider that he had ‘voiced the views and sentiments of a majority of the members’. O’Keeffe accepted the verdict was against him and resigned.

Standing for re-election, he defeated Potts in every district. As the Waihi branch had nominated Potts, O’Keeffe was ‘especially gratified at obtaining a majority’ in an area, ‘where he least expected it’. ‘Well pleased’ with the result, he considered it showed that most miners ‘fully endorsed his sentiments’.

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**Conflict and disillusionment**

Increasing conflict with an increasingly independent Waihi branch marked his last term as president.\textsuperscript{171} When, at a meeting there, O’Keeffe defended his attack on Cooper, the chairman called him to order, as this was not the subject of the meeting. ‘Upon which Mr O’Keeffe said the Chairman wanted to shut his mouth, this he declined to do, and said he would shut his mouth for no man. (Applause.)’ He repeated that Cooper ‘was not an impartial judge’ but ‘hand in glove with the mining companies’, on whose behalf he had acted for 20 years.\textsuperscript{172} His attempts to heal the rift with Waihi, the largest branch, failed, and it formed its own union in 1902.\textsuperscript{173}

After moving to Coromandel, he did not stand for president, but was elected to the executive, again receiving more votes than Potts.\textsuperscript{174} At the last annual meeting he chaired, he said he had ‘discharged his duties to the union honestly and faithfully, and to the best of his ability’, before again attacking the Cooper award. He spoke in strong terms against the Court’s decision. His advice to the members was to buckle themselves together, canvass for all they were worth for new members, and prepare for another squabble. He also strongly advised the union to become a political body, for until it did so it would never, in his opinion, have any influence.\textsuperscript{175}

At a well-attended farewell social, speeches were made about his ‘splendid work’. O’Keeffe thanked them ‘in a temperate, well-chosen speech’, wishing ‘every prosperity to the Union’.\textsuperscript{176} Thereafter he had little involvement in union affairs and did not again seek election.\textsuperscript{177} While he did consider contesting the 1902 general election,\textsuperscript{178} eventually he actively supported another union leader who stood against McGowan, but the candidate was unsuccessful.\textsuperscript{179}

**Life after the union**

From mid-1902 until April 1907, O’Keeffe worked with a small number of mates on some Coromandel fields.\textsuperscript{180} After managing two Ohinemuri mines, he managed one at Wakamarina in Marlborough before once more returning to Ohinemuri.\textsuperscript{181} From 1915 until 1921, he managed mines and prospected at Wakamarina.\textsuperscript{182} After prospecting for a time near Karangahake, which he found too physically exhausting, he returned to Wakamarina, where he worked for the remainder of his life.\textsuperscript{183} His services were ‘dispensed with’ two years before his death at the age of 79.\textsuperscript{184}

As with many other once-famous miners and prospectors, no obituary was published, for his prominence had ended 30 years before his death. But at the height of
his union involvement, he had expressed, in his own special way, the views of most of
the organised miners of the Hauraki district. A genuinely popular leader, his efforts,
though largely unsuccessful, were greatly appreciated by the rank and file.

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