

‘The Thames Miners’ Union: Defending Miners and the Mining Industry’

By PHILIP HART

The miners of the early Thames goldfield were recalled as being ‘sturdy, independent ... battlers¹ but their ‘traditional individualism’ appears to have faded as the industry became dominated by ever larger companies, culminating in ‘the angry anonymity of the Waihi unionist’.² This anger was a twentieth century development, and indicates that earlier unions in all trades had not been run by ‘revolutionary firebrands’ seeking to overthrow the social order.³ As illustrated by the Thames Miners’ Union, they were formed to unite miners in defence of their conditions, not to challenge the private ownership of industry. Miners in the coal mining industry, by contrast, were much more militant.⁴

The development of the union movement in New Zealand was greatly influenced by the example set by Australian unionists. One historian has noted ‘a distinct and very natural tendency towards Australasian trade union organisation’ developing in the late 1870s and early 1880s.⁵ Although the Australasian federation of unions proposed in 1885 did not eventuate, Australians and Australian money helped to form and support the first New Zealand unions. At the end of that decade, the coal miners’ and seamen’s unions were branches of Australian unions, and the relationship of the New Zealand Workers’ Union and the Australian Shearers’ Union ‘was of the closest and most sympathetic character’.⁶ The Thames Miners’ Union was another example of the application of an Australian model in New Zealand, both in structure and outlook.

The three strikes in the Te Aroha Mining District

There were only three strikes in the Te Aroha Mining District. The first, in January 1884, was provoked by the employers suddenly reducing wages from nine shillings a day to eight after returns from the initial crushing at the Waiorongomai battery were much less than anticipated.⁷ When miners met to protest, a mine manager told them the reduction was made ‘on account of most of the mines not yet being payable’.⁸ There was an ‘ugly rumour’ that the owners would stop all work for 12 months if the miners did not go back to work at the lower rate.⁹ What particularly angered the miners was that, when receiving their wages on Christmas Eve, the companies kept back one week’s pay, told them to take a fortnight’s holiday, and made no mention of the planned wage cut.¹⁰ Some had not received all their wages,¹¹ which made their financial position even more difficult when this meeting agreed, unanimously, to strike.¹²

The strikers received considerable sympathy. The warden criticised the companies for not giving advance warning; they 'had placed the men in a corner and forced them to accept or decline at once'. Nevertheless, he thought the miners should accept the new rate as both inevitable and realistic in the light of the returns.¹³ Some newspapers supported the miners, as did many in the community.¹⁴

The miner chosen to chair the meeting that resolved to strike, Hamilton Verity, had not previously been antagonistic to capitalists. When he chaired the miners' banquet celebrating the first month's crushing, he had 'impressed upon all the advantages to be derived from the union of capital [and] labour', and urged them not to envy those who 'so liberally responded to our need of capital'.¹⁵ He may have been the popular choice because of his prominence in sporting and social life.¹⁶ His role during the strike was not recorded; unlike those who left because they would not accept the new rate, he continued mining there for another year.¹⁷

Having declared a strike, the miners held no further meetings apart from one that heard the directors' response that they refused to alter their decision.¹⁸ Some miners drifted back to work, left the district (reportedly the best ones) or sought other employment.¹⁹ Although there was talk of blacklegging those who returned to work, the one attempt to do so was successfully resisted by a 'sturdy digger'.²⁰ Within less than a month, most miners had returned to work despite some 'malcontents' trying to continue the strike.²¹ Within two months, it was all over.²² As the strike faded, employers cut pay rates in the battery and on the tramway, prompting a brief, ineffectual, strike by the tramway workers.²³ Afterwards, at least one prominent striker was refused employment,²⁴ and most wages men were forced to take up contracts designed to save the mineowners money.²⁵

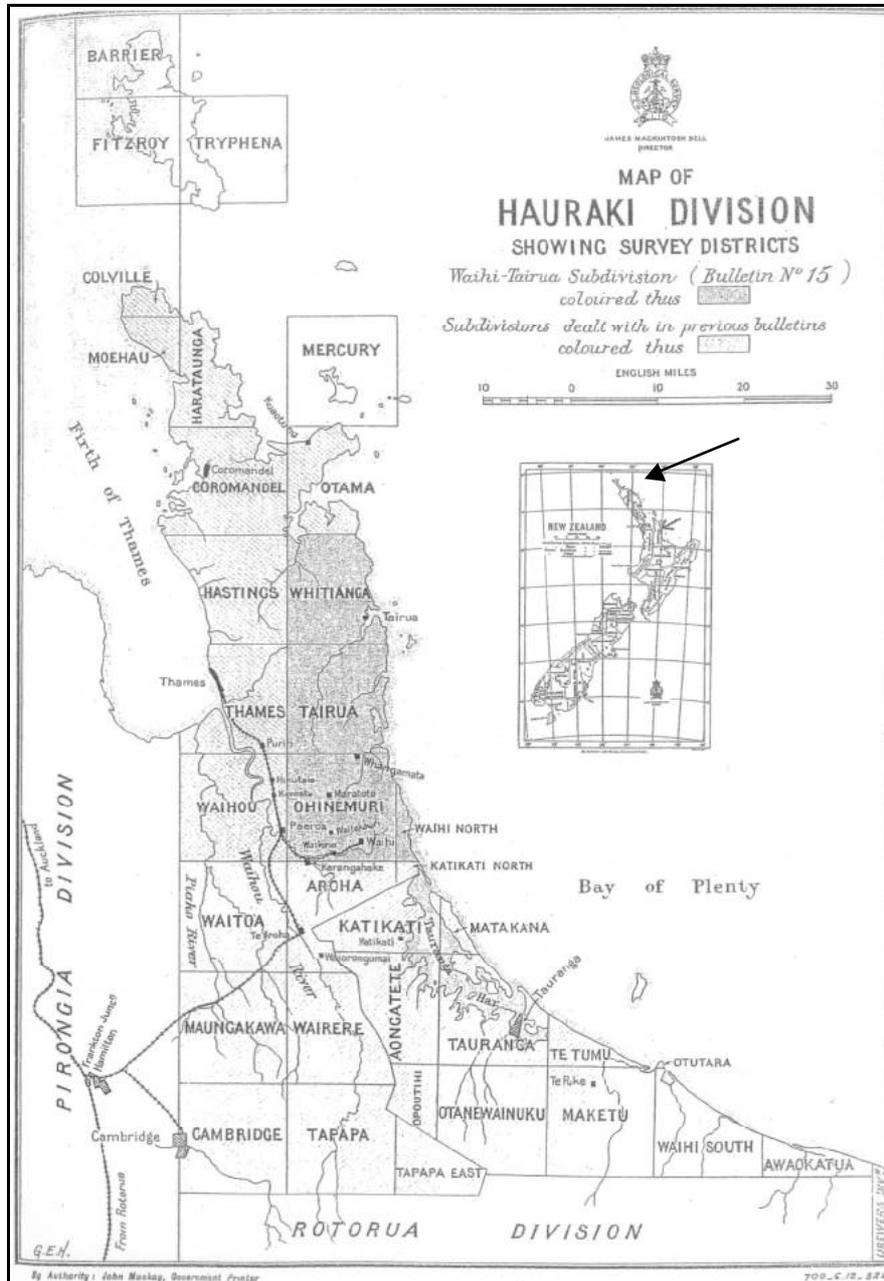
Despite this experience, no union emerged. There was an accident relief fund, established to provide friendly society benefits, formed with the involvement of mine and battery managers and with the leading battery owner as its patron.²⁶ This lasted for less than two years, collapsing when miners left the district, and being re-established three years later when mining revived.²⁷ The renewed fund was a feeble creation due to the 'apathy and inertness shown by the subscribers'.²⁸

A brief second strike in 1897 demanding higher wages from an English company, also failed. 'The greater part' of the strikers then left for another district, being replaced by miners imported from elsewhere.²⁹

Not until after a visit from the president of the Thames Miners' Union in 1896 was a union branch established.³⁰ In 1897, it was involved in the last strike, provoked by Joseph Campbell, an Australian Anglican clergyman doubling as a mine manager.³¹ He sought to impose rules that included prohibiting smoking except for five minutes in both morning and afternoon and the 'instant dismissal' of anyone 'talking, or otherwise loitering in the company's time'.³² The union's president 'went up and interviewed the

Rev. Joseph, and convinced him of the errors of his ways', and 'peace again reign[ed]'.³³ Campbell, who considered miners were overpaid, later preached a sermon on the text 'Be content with your wages'.³⁴

Figure 1: Map of Hauraki Division



Source: Government Printer, New Zealand

Formation of the Thames Miners' Union

Not only did it take a long time to form a union branch at Te Aroha, it took a long time to form a union at Thames. Apart from the stillborn Miners' Mutual Protection League of 1870 and an accident relief fund formed during that decade,³⁵ a union was not

formed until 1890, when miners resisted one company deducting sixpence per week from their wages to cover its liabilities in case of accidents.³⁶ Miners, previously ‘a long suffering people’, then formed a branch of the Amalgamated Miners’ Association of Australasia.³⁷ Described by Geoffrey Blainey as ‘watchdog rather than bulldog’, it was ‘rarely militant’, becoming Australia’s largest union because of its ‘generous accident and funeral and sickness benefits’.³⁸ It supported investors receiving high returns, did not seek ‘excessive wages’ for fear of closing mines, and reflected the interests of miners who often were shareholders themselves.

Goldminers did not use their trade union as a battering ram against company mining, because they still hoped to make a fortune. Most underground men did not think they were doomed to be wage-earners for the term of their The mildness of unionism reflected an industry where the humblest man was not yet divorced from excitement, hope, and profit.³⁹

Humphrey McQueen regretfully concurred that ‘gold contributed to the consciousness of the labouring class in a number of ways all of which served to reinforce the belief that there was something to be gained under capitalism – perhaps that most prized of all possessions, independence’.⁴⁰ However, Charles Fahey has warned that ‘it is a mistake to see goldmining as an industry free of class tensions and industrial conflict’, and has shown the existence of both in Bendigo.⁴¹ These also existed in New Zealand, although in general most members exemplified Blainey’s model; the Thames union was formed to defend the economic interests of miners rather than to challenge the capitalist system.

The promoter of the Thames union, Edwin Wass Lowe, mined for a ‘number of years’ in the 1850s on Victorian goldfields.⁴² He wrote to the Creswick branch of the union⁴³ for copies of its rules, which he recommended for adoption by the meeting called to consider forming a union.⁴⁴ ‘The object was to secure the payment of a sum of money to every member who might be injured’, and £50 in the case of a fatal accident. There would be an eight-hour day, and ‘in case of injury by neglect’ by employers ‘funds would be available to securing compensation’. Whilst miners ‘should be prepared to stand up for their rights’, he ‘sincerely hoped’ there would never be a strike.⁴⁵ The union was not ‘likely to give rise to any trouble, as unless the men had some grievance worth going into and requiring amendment, the Union would not of course do anything’. A subsequent speaker, referring to the recent strike at Broken Hill,

said it was time the miners of the Thames awoke and brought themselves into living contact with their friends across the sea. They were all Britons at heart, and should unite, not for aggression, but in order to be in a position to demand their rights, and accept no less. (Loud applause.)⁴⁶

The motion to form a branch was 'carried unanimously, amidst prolonged cheering'.⁴⁷ After the rules were refined, it was affiliated as AMA branch no. 54.⁴⁸ As the Australians provided financial assistance as well as advice, it commenced 'on a sound financial footing'.⁴⁹

Figure 2: *Edwin Wass Lowe, a founder of the Thames Union*



Source: *The Cyclopaedia of New Zealand*, vol. 2, Christchurch, 1902, p. 862

Objects and membership

With 'the utmost unanimity', a meeting attended by 'fully 500 persons' adopted the following objects:⁵⁰

To maintain the privileges and customs at present appertaining to mining in this district, and to mutually assist our brethren in carrying out the objects defined and specified in the General Rules of the A.M.A., and in rendering pecuniary and other assistance in repelling any infringement that may be attempted against rights and privileges, and also to provide pecuniary assistance to their widows and children in the case of death of a member, arising from accident while pursuing his occupation.

Members were not to 'accept less than wages under penalty', and not to work on Sundays.⁵¹ The preface to the rules proclaimed that, 'when due attention and obedience' was paid to these 'wholesome and salutary orders, peace and concord arise'. By strict adherence, 'the cultivation of brotherly affection, and mutual regard for each other's welfare, cannot fail to be the result. And every good member of society will admire and respect the noble triumph you will have obtained by your united exertions and perseverance'.⁵²

Not till 1910, when the union registered a new set of rules, were wider concerns officially adopted. When 'deemed necessary', it would 'render pecuniary and other assistance' to repel 'any infringement' upon the 'rights and privileges' of other unions. It also explicitly supported political action: 'To obtain legislative enactments for the more efficient management of mines, whereby the lives and health of miners may be preserved'.⁵³ These new rules merely codified earlier practice.

At the preliminary meeting, Lowe, asked whether miners alone could join, explained that the union 'included all branches of mining, and all trades', the rules providing that 'anyone could join and participate in the benefits'.⁵⁴ The vice-president in 1901 stated that it accepted 'all sorts of men who pay their fees, irrespective of occupation'.⁵⁵ The chairman of the initial meeting, James McGowan, a grocer who later became Minister of Mines in the Seddon Liberal Government,⁵⁶ considered that forming a union 'was necessary to avoid evils which otherwise might creep in'.⁵⁷ After urging that 'every business man on the Thames, or anyone who was living indirectly from mining, should become honorary members. (Cheers.)', he handed in his subscription, 'for which he was loudly applauded'.⁵⁸ Within a month of its formation, the union had 490 'working members' and 60 honorary ones, and by the end of its first year there were 750 of the former and 70 of the latter.⁵⁹ As there were only 701 miners at Thames at that time,⁶⁰ some from nearby districts must have joined, as some honorary members may also have resided elsewhere. The union had received 'the hearty support and co-operation of the business people', proof of the 'cordiality of the relations' between miners and businessmen being 'the large number of handsome trophies' provided by the latter for the sports competitions held on the first Miners' Union Day.⁶¹

Activities to assist members and other unionists

The first act of the 'association', which quickly became known as the Thames Miners' Union, was to end the 'iniquitous' compulsory deduction from wages of a shilling a week for accident insurance.⁶² It provided rules to guide miners obtaining tributes.⁶³ Minimum wages and slightly reduced hours of work were fixed, and only union members were to be employed, managers being threatened with strike action if non-unionists continued to work.⁶⁴ Basing its services on its Australian model, it established

reading rooms on several goldfields, and paid accident allowances and a lump sum upon accidental deaths.⁶⁵ In the first year, £157 was paid to members who suffered accidents, and 'benevolent gifts' of £10 were made.⁶⁶

During its first decade, the union 'disbursed large sums for benevolent purposes', including payments to families whose bread-winner was suffering from Miner's Complaint.⁶⁷ Several serious accidents in 1893 caused a large payout, and a doctor was employed to certify when injured members were again able to work and should no longer receive relief.⁶⁸ Concerts, socials, and dances open to the public were held 'in aid of the Benevolent Fund'.⁶⁹ All unionists were urged to attend the funerals of deceased members.⁷⁰

As an example of benevolence extending beyond its own members, the annual meeting of 1897 considered a request to assist the father of one of those killed in the Brunner disaster in the South Island, to fight a case in the Appeal Court. The unanimous support for granting the maximum permitted under the rules prompted the president to declare it 'an honor to belong to a Union carrying so noble a proposition'.⁷¹ A local newspaper commended their action 'to the community as one worthy of a class of men who have earned a reputation for warm-heartedness towards their fellows generally'. As 'few if any' knew those concerned, 'no personal feelings actuated the local miners in their noble decision'.⁷²

The union sometimes provided assistance for other unions. For example, in its first year, £150 was sent to maritime strikers in Australia and £20 to the striking Auckland Tailoresses' Union.⁷³ A special levy had been adopted to assist the Australians after listening to a delegate from the Seaman's Union; all speakers 'expressed their strong sympathy with the strikers and their desire to render them assistance'.⁷⁴ The following year, £300 was sent to the striking miners of Broken Hill.⁷⁵ In 1897, a leading unionist gave moral backing to the Federated Seamen's Union when it battled Auckland employers before the Arbitration and Conciliation Commission.⁷⁶

Members supported the interests of the industry that provided their employment, periodically urging the government to provide it with financial assistance.⁷⁷ For instance, from 1891 onwards the union supported a scheme to extend the Moanataiari tunnel to open up the lower levels of the Thames field.⁷⁸ It urged the government to purchase the freehold of the field from Ngati Maru so that miners' rights fees could be reduced by three-quarters.⁷⁹ In 1892, it formed a committee to prepare a prospecting scheme for the 'back country' behind Thames, and subsequently made small grants to prospectors.⁸⁰ It opposed the locking up of ground through protection of unworked claims and the granting of large special claims, except when it saw possible employment when mining was in decline.⁸¹ Miners saw their union as a means to 'promote the best interests of this important industry',⁸² and participated in meetings designed to find ways to revive the declining Thames field.⁸³ As an experienced mine

manager, mining reporter, and investor⁸⁴ explained to British investors, miners recognized ‘to the full that without the assistance of the capitalists it is impossible to develop quartz mining of the character of the New Zealand mines, and therefore every encouragement is given to the capitalist to induce him to invest his money’.⁸⁵

Despite the initial enthusiasm, within a few years of the union’s formation there were complaints that only a minority of miners in some districts had joined, and that because members were inactive it was becoming ineffectual.⁸⁶ With mining fading on all fields except Waihi and unemployment amongst miners rapidly increasing, it was not in a strong bargaining position.⁸⁷ It had been formed when the industry was near the end of its most profitable stage, and most of its efforts were devoted to protecting its declining membership as best it could.

Union leaders and Involvement in national politics

The chairman of the meeting called to discuss forming a union had stated that, ‘with prudent men to guide it, the Union could not fail to be productive of much benefit to the working classes’.⁸⁸ Its early leaders were respectable members of the community, not radical critics of its values, as the following examples reveal. Lowe was for 20 years a mine manager until, two years after the union was established, ill-health forced him to cease mining and become the Thames librarian.⁸⁹ A prominent Mason, he was actively involved with friendly societies.⁹⁰ The only indication of any ‘radicalism’ was his support for a ‘labour candidate’ in the 1890 election.⁹¹ On his death, the *Thames Star* referred to him as ‘our much respected librarian, who was well and favourably known to almost every resident’ and had taken ‘a prominent part in the various organizations formed’.⁹²

The president for six years during the 1890s, William Henry Potts, was a member of the borough council for the same length of time, as well as being on the harbour board and Captain of the Thames Naval Volunteers. Like Lowe, he had mined for some years in Victoria and in the South Island of New Zealand before becoming a mine manager at Thames for several years.⁹³ He was so respectable that it was rumoured in 1897 that he would be appointed to the Legislative Council.⁹⁴ The following year, he told the Auckland Chamber of Mines that his union ‘had never been an aggressive body, but had always strived ... to assist the mining industry. Not one action could be pointed out where the Union had had not acted in the best interests of the community’. Its object ‘was to get as much capital into the country as possible’ because its members recognized that it was in their ‘interests to do so’.⁹⁵ When he lost his position, he was praised as ‘a tower of strength’ whose ‘experience both as a working miner and as a public man’ had been ‘of great practical aid to his colleagues’. His ‘counsel’ had ‘always been thrown on the side of moderation and justice’.⁹⁶

William Henry Lucas was president for two years in the 1890s and secretary from 1894 onwards. A Justice of the Peace, he was a member of the borough council and an officer in two Volunteer corps.⁹⁷ When he first stood for the council 'in response to numerous requests', he was described as 'very popular amongst all classes' and 'a gentleman of ability and unimpeachable integrity'.⁹⁸ He was one of the few early leaders not to have been a mine manager.

Many other examples could be given to reinforce this almost universal stance of respectability and caution.

Moderation in industrial matters did not rule out involvement in politics at the liberal end of the spectrum; there was no socialist end when the union was formed. Before the 1890 election, a public meeting organized by the union unanimously agreed that 'the working men of the Thames take steps to elect a man from among themselves to represent them', and appointed a committee to choose a candidate.⁹⁹ One of its members was a mine manager, Edward Kersey Cooper, described as 'a generous employer of labour' and 'a friend and brother to those under him'.¹⁰⁰ It selected a local Church of Christ clergyman, Edmund Harvey Taylor, who had recently supported the maritime strike. 'Who ought to stand by the oppressed but Christian pastors? Who ought to speak words of warning to capitalists but Christian pastors?' Labour demanding its 'fair proportion of this world's wealth' was a 'righteous cause', and he argued that the rich had 'accumulated wealth at the expense and degradation of the *worker*', warning of 'the certainty of the miseries' in Hellfire awaiting those who underpaid the poor.¹⁰¹ His critics were urged to study, amongst other books, one by the founder of the Marxist-orientated Social Democratic Federation in England.¹⁰² Eight years later, he stated that 'ever since my boyhood days I have been interested in labor unions'.¹⁰³

When asked to stand as a 'labour candidate', Taylor responded that he would explain his principles at a public meeting to clarify 'if they were in sympathy with those of the Committee'.¹⁰⁴ At this meeting, chaired by McGowan, he argued that capital and labour should be equal and 'linked in the bonds of matrimony – not as a matter of convenience, but of necessity. Capital without labor must waste. Labor without capital must be a source of much energy misspent, and therefore unprofitable'. His opinions on mining issues were those of the union: new gold-saving appliances were needed; land near goldfields should be made available for settlement by older miners and those unable to work underground; ground should not be undermanned or held for speculative purposes; miners should become mine managers on the basis of experience; and 'bogus companies' should not be floated.¹⁰⁵ In his second speech, he stated that all auriferous land should be state-owned. 'Personally, he would like to see all minerals, coal, timber, and gum, all the natural products of the earth in which labor has not been necessary for its creation, worked by a system of co-operation for the general weal (Applause)'.¹⁰⁶

Some suspected that Taylor was being put up to split the workers' vote.¹⁰⁷ Taylor responded to the rumour that 'he was being "run" by English capital by declaring that 'he was being "run" by the half crowns of the honest working man (Loud applause.)'.¹⁰⁸ One Liberal supporter considered it a joke that workers, after deciding that one of their own class should represent them in parliament, had chosen a parson whose chief backer was a representative of 'English plutocrats',¹⁰⁹ a reference to Cooper, who was treasurer of Taylor's election committee.¹¹⁰ Some unionists, especially outside Thames, preferred his Liberal opponent.¹¹¹ After Taylor obtained 878 votes to the successful candidate's 982,¹¹² the *Thames Advertiser* praised the 'judgment and good sense' of the union's campaign and admired the miners for taking 'their defeat – by no means an overwhelming one – like men'.¹¹³

With a Liberal Government in power from 1891 to 1912, most unionists saw no need for union candidates and instead supported Liberals. Potts argued in 1896 against the union becoming involved in politics, for members could, as individuals, take up issues with candidates.¹¹⁴

Public support for the union

When the union was first mooted, the *Thames Advertiser* considered it a 'matter for wonder' that one had not been established earlier. It did not share the fear of some employers that miners would 'take the bit in their teeth and demand more than their fair dues', having 'sufficient confidence' that their 'intelligence and common sense' would prevent them attempting 'to kill the goose'. Companies and miners shared a common interest, and it hoped that 'cool heads and a sense of justice' would prevail.¹¹⁵ As all the speakers were 'careful to convey that if the working miners had any grievances they were of a trifling nature', clearly they did not seek 'any material alterations' in their terms of employment, but were combining 'to resist any injustice that might be attempted in the future. The benefit side of the question was given great prominence to and aside from any other advantages that may accrue this alone makes it worth while to form the Association'. It hoped that everyone 'living indirectly by mining' would join it, for having non-miners participate would mean that 'a broader view' would be taken of important issues.¹¹⁶ The *Thames Star* expressed its 'hearty sympathy and approval' of the proposal.¹¹⁷ To see so many miners, 'the very bone and sinew of the field, and on whom the future prosperity of the district so largely depends', uniting in this way was 'a happy augury'. It was pleased at the 'exceedingly moderate, calm, and dispassionate tone which characterised the proceedings', and was sure that all who took 'any real interest in the welfare' of the district would hope that the union might 'under wise and judicious management become a permanent institution'.¹¹⁸

On its first anniversary, the *Thames Advertiser* lauded the union as something for the district 'to be proud of'. Nothing could be more fitting than to celebrate its

anniversaries 'by means of pleasant outdoor sports'. Its procession through Thames was 'a most interesting sight':

A finer body of men than the processionists it would be difficult to see anywhere. Their appearance no doubt gave rise to many reflections, amongst them being, "what fine mining properties there must be at the Thames to employ so many men; how well the mine owners must be served by such fine fellows, the majority of whom are obviously the possessors of healthy bodies and wholesome minds; and what an excellent thing it is for the community to have so many men steadily employed in a profitable and progressive industry."¹¹⁹

The *Thames Star* concurred, expressing pleasure that the union's 'careful policy' had brought real benefits to its members and that its 'exceedingly moderate and cautious manner' had 'avoided many of the unfortunate errors committed in other cities and towns'. Its achievements had 'been accomplished without any friction whatever between employers and employees, and as a result of the commendable conciliatory and moderate tone adopted by the officers, the utmost good feeling' prevailed 'amongst all engaged in the mining industry'.¹²⁰ Doubts 'in the minds of many' that the leaders could achieve real improvements and that 'the bounds of prudence' would be 'overstepped' and cause 'disaster' had been 'soon dispelled'.¹²¹

The borough council agreed to make each anniversary day a public holiday when all mines and businesses closed. In 1891, after miners marched through the town to the music of the Naval Artillery's brass band to a sports ground, a variety of races were held for all ages and both sexes at the largest gathering at Thames for many years.¹²² 'Miners' Union Day' continued to be a public holiday well into the twentieth century, and these family occasions provided opportunities for miners from different fields to socialize.¹²³

Wherever branches in other Hauraki goldfields had sufficient members, the union erected halls that became these communities' social centres. By hiring them out for social occasions, their erection became a profitable investment.¹²⁴ At Thames, evening parties were held fortnightly, with entertainments arranged by a committee comprising an equal number of men and women.¹²⁵ As well, fortnightly dances were held by the 'Miners' Union Quadrille Assembly'.¹²⁶ The union was also involved in special events; for instance, it held a social and dance on race day in 1901.¹²⁷

Good relations between managers and miners

One feature of the anniversary sports was a race for mine managers.¹²⁸ Industrial harmony was increased by the many indications of good relations between miners and their managers. In small mines such as those at Te Aroha, often manned by fewer than

ten men, miners worked alongside their manager. This was typical of mining in much of the peninsula; only at Waihi was a really large overseas company formed. As managers were not normally remote figures, there was considerable social contact outside work. For instance, Charles Henry Lawn, who managed a mine in the Te Aroha district the 1890s, was described as ‘deservedly popular, not only as a zealous promoter of musical entertainments, but also as a private citizen’.¹²⁹ When he married, his miners presented him with a ‘handsome marble time piece’,¹³⁰ and some of them along with other friends greeted him at the railway station on his return from the honeymoon. The ‘happy couple ... appeared somewhat taken aback at the heartiness of the welcome accorded them’.¹³¹ Managers who left for other mines commonly received illuminated addresses and gifts. One was praised for always considering

the comfort and safety of the men under your charge. All your orders have been given with a courtesy of manner that has rendered their fulfillment as much a pleasure as a duty. You have been ready when cases of emergency or distress called for your aid, and by your liberality and example have helped to alleviate the sufferings of many on this goldfield who have been laid low by sickness and accident.¹³²

Commonly, departing managers were ‘entertained at dinner’, where speeches extolled their virtues.¹³³ One, when receiving his presents, was told that he had obtained the esteem of his workers ‘principally because he had meted out to them fair play and generous consideration’.¹³⁴ Obituaries of one leading manager agreed that he was ‘highly respected by miners’ and ‘a very popular man, and every miner’ on five goldfields ‘took a pride in working for him’.¹³⁵

Battery managers more rarely won plaudits, but one such was John Howell, who managed the Waiorongomai battery before moving to Broken Hill in 1889. A local correspondent wrote that, ‘by his keen, quiet, and affable demeanour’, he had ‘won for himself the sincerest respect of all’.¹³⁶

Despite the many examples that could be cited, managers and owners had hard-headed attitudes to their workers when their financial viability was at stake. In the case of Edward Kersey Cooper, mentioned earlier as a popular manager and a supporter of the union, miners at two mines he supervised presented him with gifts and praised his ‘humane and kindly treatment’.¹³⁷ However, after the Waiorongomai strike of 1884 he ordered the dismissal of a miner who had ‘had a great deal to say’ during this dispute.¹³⁸ Six years later, after provoking a strike in one of his mines through paying sixpence a day less than the union rate, he let all work on contract.¹³⁹ Ten years after riding on horseback in the first union parade,¹⁴⁰ he told the arbitration court that the industry could not afford the higher wages the union sought.¹⁴¹

End of the union

Some of the more radical miners at Waihi were well aware of the contradictions involved in moderate union leaders fraternizing with 'the enemy'. As the main Waihi mine was the largest and most successful in New Zealand and the company was more concerned with profit than the welfare of its miners, the latter did not have the brake on militancy of working in marginally payable mines.¹⁴² By the late 1890s, conflicts increased over Sunday work and the imposition of the contract system.¹⁴³ Because negotiations failed,¹⁴⁴ the branch increasingly demanded greater representation on the union executive and more independence on local issues.¹⁴⁵ In 1901, with the strong support of the Waihi miners, a particularly active president, Michael Dineen O'Keeffe, fought to obtain better wages and conditions from the conciliation board and the arbitration court, but without the success anticipated.¹⁴⁶ Dissatisfaction with this result and with the union in general resulted, two years later, in this branch forming the Waihi Amalgamated Miners and Workers Union.¹⁴⁷ In 1912, this more militant body took on the might of the Waihi Gold Mining Company in a big strike, and was defeated.¹⁴⁸

In 1901, there were 1,744 members throughout the Hauraki Peninsula, out of about 3,500 miners.¹⁴⁹ The decline of mining everywhere except at Waihi meant a declining membership and 'very little interest' being taken in its affairs.¹⁵⁰ When Waihi split off, membership plummeted to 575.¹⁵¹ Leaders admitted that the 'great depression' in mining meant continued loss of members and financial strength.¹⁵² Although there were 839 members in all branches in 1910, ten years later there were only 269, and membership continued to fall steadily.¹⁵³ In 1959, when an application was made to cancel its registration under the Industrial and Arbitration Act, out of its 35 members all but one member (who could not be located) voted for cancellation.¹⁵⁴

Conclusion

From its beginning, this union was 'a benefit and accident concern, rather than as a militant industrial union'.¹⁵⁵ In the procession to mark the coronation of Edward VII, the miners marched with the friendly societies.¹⁵⁶ Its cautious policies were seen as a virtue; for instance, in 1904 the retiring officials trusted 'that the incoming Officers will continue to carry on the business of the Union in a spirit of moderation'.¹⁵⁷ It never called a strike;¹⁵⁸ its desire to keep its miniscule membership employed meant that strike action during the twentieth century was not a realistic option. Apart from at Waihi, where miners' bargaining power was greater, confrontation was avoided. Only in that location were capitalists challenged; elsewhere it acted as a defensive pressure group, usually supporting harmony between miners, managers, and owners. Many miners hoped in time to become either or both of the latter, and united with their employers in defending their industry against rival interest groups and in seeking the

governmental assistance that was of mutual benefit. Despite tensions, especially when mining declined and pay or conditions were endangered, miners accepted that the interests of employees and employers were intertwined. Most Hauraki miners shared the same attitudes as their Australian counterparts, and their union behaved just like its Australian precursor.

Endnotes

¹ *Observer*, 10 September 1904, p. 17.

² J.H.M. Salmon, *A History of Goldmining in New Zealand*, Wellington, 1963, pp. 192, 264.

³ H. Roth, *Trade Unions in New Zealand: Past and Present*, Wellington, 1973, p. 13; for the development of the first unions, see pp. 4-14.

⁴ See in particular Len Richardson, *Coal, Class and Community: The United Mineworkers of New Zealand 1880-1960*, Auckland, 1995.

⁵ J.D. Salmond, *New Zealand Labour's Pioneering Days: The history of the Labour Movement in New Zealand from 1840 to 1894*, Auckland, 1950, p. 37.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.38.

⁷ Editorial, *Thames Star*, 14 November 1883, p. 2; *Thames Advertiser*, 14 November 1883, p. 2, 10 December 1883, p. 2; editorial, *New Zealand Herald*, 27 November 1883, pp. 4-5; Waiorongomai Correspondent, *Thames Star*, 8 December 1883, p. 2; *Te Aroha News*, 15 December 1883, p. 2; H.A. Gordon (Inspecting Engineer, Mines Department) to Under-Secretary, Mines Department, 20 May 1884, *Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives* [hereafter *AJHR*], 1884, H-9, p. 1.

⁸ *Thames Advertiser*, 8 January 1884, p. 3.

⁹ 'Nemo', 'At the Corner', *Thames Star*, 12 January 1881, p. 2.

¹⁰ *Auckland Weekly News*, 19 January 1884, p. 24; *Freeman's Journal*, 28 March 1884, p. 13.

¹¹ *Labour*, 31 January 1884, p. 5.

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