

# Stood Loyal Right Through

by David Haigh

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# Article

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*Taken from Johnny Mitchell's recorded reflections (1974) – 179 pages of transcripts. A friend of Johnny's, Rev. Dr Bruce Hucker interviewed him. A group of deregistered waterside workers met the costs of tapes and transcriptions. Johnny gave the transcripts to me (the writer) and said I could use them in any way I thought might be useful. Bruce Hucker introduced me to Johnny in the 1980s, when unemployment had risen again. We formed the Auckland Unemployment Committee, and disseminated information and advocated policies in order to improve the situation for those who were jobless. Johnny was in his element delivering newspaper-style publicity material in the inner city.*

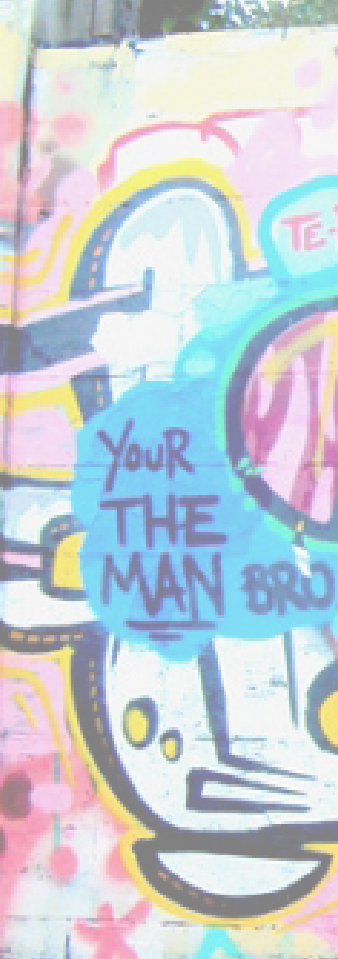
### ABSTRACT

Johnny Mitchell was raised in the East End of London and went to work on the docks and as a seaman. Sailing conditions were poor until he worked for a New Zealand shipping company, and he eventually jumped ship in Wellington to be with the woman he was to marry. They settled in Freemans Bay, but this was the 1930s, a period of deep depression. Johnny found employment as a relief worker for Auckland City Council. Wages were low and working conditions poor. Even though he was communist, he actively supported the election of the first Labour Government in 1935. Eventually Johnny became a wharfie and an active member of the Waterside Workers Union (WWU). The waterfront dispute of 1951 became a significant period in Johnny's life. He held an important position in the union and was involved in illegally writing and disseminating publicity about the dispute. Life became risky as he evaded the police, who were trying to stop this activity. He also was involved in bloody demonstrations during this period. He received recognition from the union for his work during the dispute. Johnny, throughout this period, was also a community worker and community activist (before such terms were invented) in Freemans Bay, opposing those who sought to oppress the poor, seeking better amenities for the neighbourhood and providing opportunities for people to engage in their community.

Johnny Mitchell (1907-1990) was born in the docks area of the East End of London and lived his early years in this poor district. He was one of nine children, and was a Christmas Eve baby. His father was originally a merchant seaman who gravitated to dock work. He was an active member of the Seamen's Union and the Labour Party. As a schoolboy, Johnny remembered visits by royalty to the school, with the lined-up children mostly barefooted because their parents were so poor. He also remembered the outbreak of the First World War and his father being ordered to the Royal Navy barracks. A vivid memory was seeing the shooting down of a German zeppelin by Lieutenant William Leefe Robinson, who received the Victoria Cross for the most conspicuous bravery. *The Times* of London reported that, "He attacked an enemy airship under circumstances of great difficulty and danger, and sent it crashing to the ground as a flaming wreck" ("VC for airman's exploit," 1916).

Another incident during the war he remembered involved the smashing and looting of German shops. Much to his shame, Johnny participated in the destruction of a butcher's shop, owned by a German called Stollenberger. His mother refused to accept the stolen meat from him. Both his mother and local neighbours were deeply disturbed by this sort of violence against the Germans who lived locally.

At 17, Johnny joined the merchant navy as a trimmer, someone who stoked the ship's boilers. He travelled widely around the UK, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Brazil and Argentina. Back



in London, he and his father became involved in the Seamen's Strike in 1925 and joined protest marches against wage cuts of £1 per month. They were also involved in demonstrations relating to the General Strike of 1926. It was these experiences that influenced Johnny and radicalised his views about government and political parties. His views were reinforced by his and his brother's arrest for offences under the Defence of the Realm Act. Johnny received a month's imprisonment in Wormwood Scrubs, sleeping on a wooden bed with no mattress. Memory of his harsh experience in prison lasted the rest of his life. Another experience that lasted was his introduction and welcome to a Black South African family in South Africa. When visiting the country he would go out of his way to mix with Black Africans "...because we knew that the attitudes of most Whites to the Blacks was obnoxious..." (p. 25). In the early 1920s, he also travelled to Hamburg and met with German dockers. They had similar views to Johnny: "...a hatred for war, and a hatred for oppression" (p. 26). In 1929, Johnny sailed on the maiden voyage of the passenger ship *Rangitiki* to New Zealand.

Johnny recorded the harshness of a sailor's life in the 1920s, which he described as medieval. He had to supply his own straw mattress as well as eating utensils for each voyage. Food was poor in quality and quantity. After he came off watch stoking the boilers with coal, there was only one bucket of water to wash the grime off his body. It was their poor working and living conditions that "...brought out the militancy of seamen and was one of the reasons that gave rise to the 1925 strike..." (p. 29). It was not until he joined the New Zealand ships that conditions improved, including showers and better food.

In 1930 he jumped ship to be with the woman who was to become his wife. However, in Wellington, he was arrested by the police and given two weeks' sentence to Mt Crawford Prison. Eventually Johnny ended up married, in Freemans Bay, Auckland. After joining the Seamen's Union he sought employment. He explained the process:

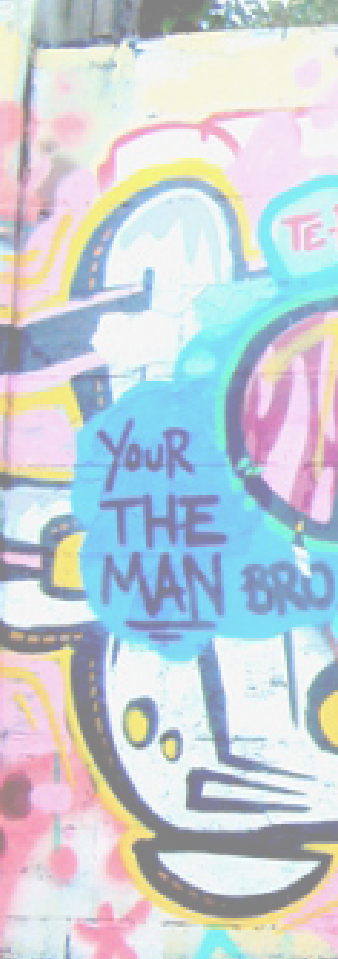
If there were vacancies aboard a ship, you lined up like a group of animals on the dockside, and, depending on what you were, whether you were a sailor or a down below man, if the engineer liked the look of your face, or some other qualification, you were lucky enough to get the job. ... The method was open to vast corruption. (p. 32)

Johnny recalls the lack of support for the unemployed in the 1930s: "...people were living, in some cases, under starvation conditions, maintained almost entirely by charitable aid. I can remember that the Auckland Hospital Board in Kitchener Street were inundated by people applying for some kind of relief" (p. 33). To prevent rioting, government passed the Public Safety Conservation Act (1932) that attempted to stifle discontent.

During the depression of the 1930s, Johnny did relief work and received 14 shillings a day, which was subsequently reduced to nine shillings a day. Workers could only afford to feed their families, hence they were unable to pay the rent. This resulted in attempted evictions by landlords, but they met strong resistance from the Unemployed Workers Union. When the bailiff came around to put new locks on the doors, Johnny explained, "We just pulled them off. Pulled the locks off and put the people back in... and that was a common occurrence" (pp. 37-38). During this period, Johnny was closely associated with such strong personalities as Jim Edwards, Alex Drennan and Mrs Cassie. He explained how the relief workers tried to feed themselves during the lunch break: "Slasher Murray would go into town, and borrow, beg or steal meat, vegetables, and all the bits and pieces that would go into a big Irish stew, what seamen used to call a hoodle."

Food was always in short supply, but one day Johnny struck gold. He was working at Old Mill Road and, "...a duck flew up from the zoo – a beautiful coloured duck... I picked up a lump of rock, aimed at it and I hit it, brought it down, wrung its neck and took it home" (p. 40). Back at work the next morning, zookeepers were seen looking for a prize South African female duck.

In 1932 there was a riot in Queen Street, Auckland. Johnny explained what he saw and knew about the riot. The unemployed workers proposed to have a peaceful demonstration at the Auckland Town Hall with a petition to government. Johnny and his wife had been to the cinema and they came out right in the middle of the riot. "...some people were looting shops" (p.42) and there were assaults on both sides, police and demonstrators. Johnny explained, "On the second night of the riots, which took place in Karangahape Road, my wife and I were both in the thick of it" (p.42). Many people were arrested and some received two years' prison sentence. Jim Edwards was one of the key figures, and was struck with a baton by the police. Johnny reported, "Of course it's history now that Rev. Scrimgeour (Uncle Scrim) hid Edwards away for a while" (p. 43). About this riot, Scrimgeour wrote:



The riot started at the main entrance. I don't think any member of the unemployed carried anything that could be used as a weapon. They weren't prepared for violence but they despaired of food for their families and selves, and their desperation was such that violence could easily erupt. (Scrimgeour, 1932, p. 161) [Scrimgeour noted that the head wound inflicted on Edwards required thirty stitches.]

During the 1930s, the unemployed were victimised. Freedom of speech was illegal and some were arrested, including Henry Mornington-Smith, Gordon Dale, Alec Drennan and Chris Thompson. Two of them were jailed for six months for bringing in left-wing literature from the ship *Niagara*. The workers, in response, set up the Free Speech Campaign and the Legal Defence Fund. Johnny admitted to smuggling tobacco into Mt Eden Prison for his friend Gordon Dale.

In the 1930s, Johnny's wife fell ill and was hospitalised while Johnny was on council relief work. He was not allowed time off to look after their baby girl.

So I used to put my baby daughter into a pram, walk her from Freemans Bay, through Williamson Avenue, out to the Old Mill Road, take the milk bottle, and bits and pieces with me, and my old mate Slasher Murray, who was the delegate on the job, and the general factotum, used to warm up the milk and feed the baby while I was on the job. (p. 50)

The hospital bill was £148, which they paid off in instalments.

Although a committed communist, Johnny actively supported the NZ Labour Party. He became a waterside worker and joined the Waterside Workers Union (WWU). The union had forced an end to the 'auction block' system, whereby an employer could choose who worked and who didn't from the workers who turned up that day; a regime which led to favouritism and victimisation. Later the union established the '30 hour' system, whereby if a person had worked 30 hours that week they stood down to allow an unemployed worker to take over.

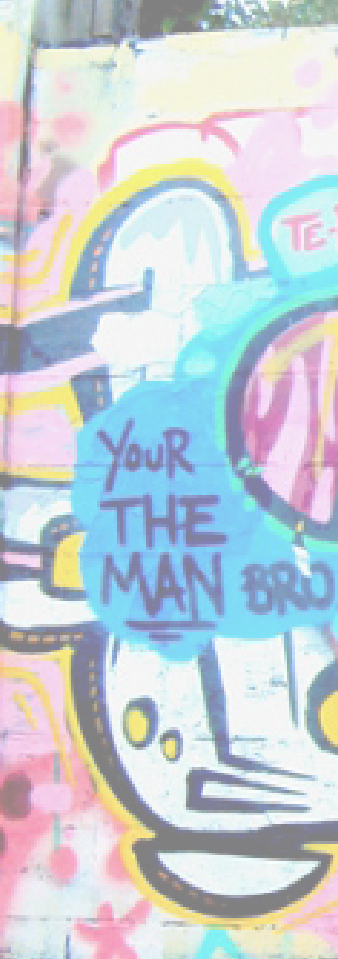
During this time, Johnny became close to Jock Barnes (union leader during the 1951 waterfront dispute). He described him:

Jock Barnes was a very able and capable individual. Obviously he was born for leadership. He was a very forceful and influential speaker. I would say that later as he developed this ability as a speaker both publicly and inside organisations, he would be without peer in New Zealand. He was a very dominating personality, very temperamental and easily upset. Some people found him extremely hard to get on with. (p. 54)

Johnny also commented on the death of Michael Joseph Savage in 1940. "...Michael Joseph Savage was a very much loved Labour leader, and... represented the labour movement. ... The Waterside Workers... lined the route all the way up to Bastion Point" (p. 68).

During the Second World War period, the Soviet Union had signed a non-aggression pact with Germany, and this resulted in hostility towards the NZ Communist Party. Johnny experienced an anti-communist event when the police smashed up the printing machine used to print the *People's Voice*. Johnny described another incident:

Around this time, the Communist Party had convened a public meeting in the Druids Hall in Newton. The hall was packed, it was on a Sunday night. There were a lot of women there, and some children, and after the meeting had commenced, a warning was given to the Chairman of the meeting that soldiers were coming in an organised fashion from Papakura Camp to smash up the meeting, and to assault the speakers and those who were attending the meeting. ... And sure enough, around 8.30pm, the soldiers came charging to the hall. They had been lit up with rum at Papakura Camp before they left. They were brought to the hall in lorries. When they arrived they unbuckled their belts, and attempted to invade the hall. However, we were forewarned, and had locked the front doors. They continued to clamour at the doors, and even tried to get in through the windows. It was a very ugly situation. The police, I might mention, did very little to protect the people in the hall. It was quite a legitimate meeting. We were not violating any laws, but the soldiers were in that frame of mind where they were prepared to do anything.



The Superintendent of the police asked that he be allowed into the hall so he could speak and explain the situation. He was admitted and told women and children at the meeting to leave the hall, but the male members at the meeting would have to take their chances. This was not acceptable, and none of the women were prepared to leave without their husbands... so we took steps to get the women and children out. We got them out through the window, and some of the elderly people, while the younger people at the meeting held the fort at the door. This went on until about midnight, and finally when we had thinned the attendance of the meeting down, those of us who were left threw open the doors, and ran. Some of these inflamed soldiers pursued us. Three of them pursued me up Newton Road. I never ran so fast in all my life. (pp. 71-72)

At the end of the war, the WWU was determined to improve working conditions. Johnny explained that:

They had experienced the new methods of cargo working which were introduced by the Americans, such as fork-lifts, trailers, jitneys and all the modern methods being used on American waterfronts had been introduced into New Zealand, and we were no longer going to accept such things as the old hand-truck which we had to pull and push over antiquated wharves... (p. 86)

To effect this change, Johnny argued that "It was necessary... to build the union into a fighting unit" (p. 87). However, the reaction from the ship owners and others was negative. Disputes arose over safety issues. For example, there was an unsafe gangway to board the ship *Kaikorau*. The defect could have been fixed in a few minutes but the owner refused, resulting in a hold up for many days (p. 89).

Johnny argued (p. 97) that the media (in particular Minhinnick's cartoons) played a key role in depicting watersiders as villains. To break down this hostility, the WWU organised union meetings at the Town Hall. He said, "We supplied [members] with a special card which was punched at every stop-work meeting they attended, and if they didn't attend, they were disciplined by the union" (p. 97).

As a background to the waterfront dispute of 1951, Johnny described Jock Barnes again. Barnes had a strong link with the Labour Party. He had worked in the Department of Lands and Survey but was dismissed because of his Labour Party activities. In 1935, Barnes joined the WWU.

Jock Barnes was a peculiar kind of fellow in lots of ways. He associated with people like Jack Lewin, the lately retired secretary of Trade & Commerce, who was then president of the Public Service Association, blokes like Uncle Scrim and... John A Lee. (p. 105)

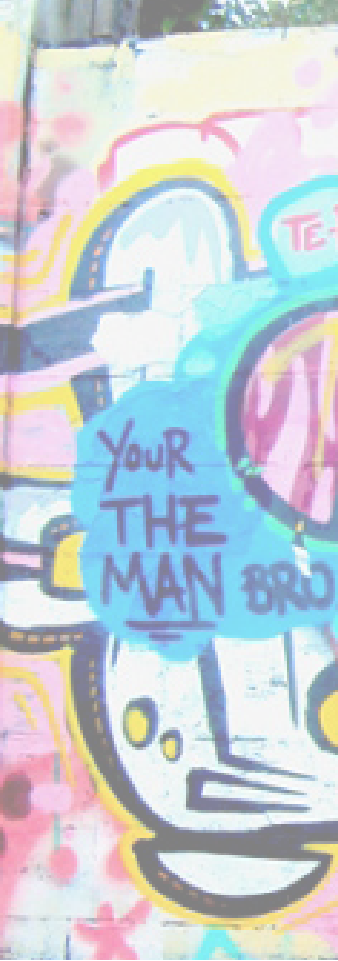
"[In 1950] Barnes was taking examinations in company law. He was in the middle of a serious dispute, but would leave... and go up to University..." (p. 105). Johnny described one incident where Barnes provoked a trade unionist, Noel Donaldson, at an executive meeting. "He [Donaldson] picked up a rather heavy gong, which was used for conducting meetings and hit Barnes across the neck with it" (p.106).

Attacks on Barnes continued. Barnes went for an important meeting to Wellington. Johnny explained, "Arrangements had been made apparently for a woman worker from the Clerical Workers Union office to be planted in Jock Barnes' room at the Empire hotel in Willis Street... and the photographer was going to be there to take the shots" (p.108). Fortunately, Barnes received a tip-off and the plot was foiled.

In 1951, Johnny held important positions in the WWU: member of the Auckland Branch Executive and member of the National Council. He reflected on the reasons for the waterside dispute. At one level, the dispute was about watersiders seeking an increase in wages; this was opposed by the ship owners and the National Government. At another level, the dispute was used by Government to destroy the WWU under its militant leadership.

It was apparent very early that the Government had now made this the time to dispose finally if they could, with the leadership of the WWU. They [the government] had now manoeuvred themselves into the position, knowing that they had some very staunch allies in the leadership of the Federation of Labour [and] some elements of the Labour Party in Parliament. (p. 117)

Barnes agreed with Johnny but went further. He said, "We had clearly been targeted as Public Enemy



No. 1 in the Government's Cold War drive. The US government wanted to ensure unfettered access to Australian and New Zealand ports in the event of a war in Asia, and to do that they had to destroy the power of the waterside unions in the two countries" (Bramble, p. 120). Although he did not specifically mention any link between Washington and Wellington, Bassett (1972, p. 90) makes reference to the fact that 1950-51 was the peak year for McCarthyism. He also shows a photograph (1972, p. 66) of a meeting between Prime Minister Holland and the US President's special envoy, J. F. Dulles, in February 1951. A recent article in the *Sunday Star Times* (Gates, 2017), based on new declassified CIA files, shows that the CIA assisted the government by using its airline, Civil Air Transport, to move people and cargo around New Zealand. This was an attempt to break the deadlocked dispute. It was clear that government was determined to destroy the WWU. Holland made a powerful speech that was used by the media. He said:

There is the enemy within, which is just as unscrupulous, poisonous, treacherous and unyielding as the enemy without. ... The Government is alive to the danger that besets us and is determined to ensure that he does not succeed. (quoted in Bassett, 1972, p. 87)

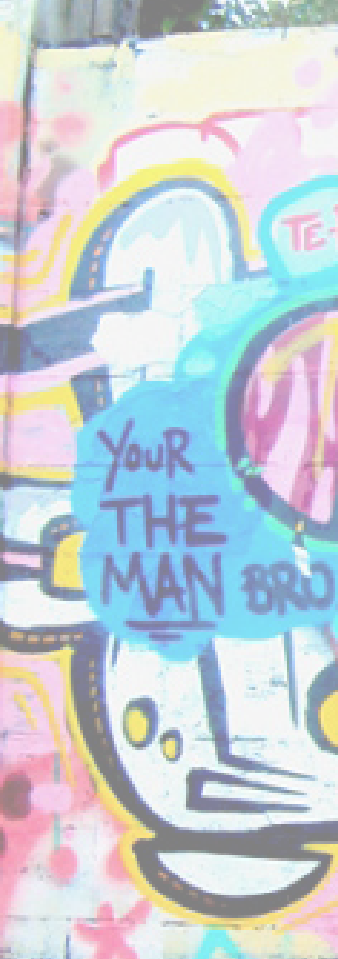
On the question as to whether the dispute was a lock-out or a strike, Johnny responded, "...there can be no question of the character of the dispute. The waterside workers were locked out by the employers" (p. 118). With the employers' rejection of a pay rise, the WWU adopted the policy of a 40-hour working week. The employers responded by introducing heavy penalties for refusing to work overtime. This impasse resulted in a lockout in Auckland (p. 119).

Though the WWU sought arbitration and negotiation, the response from Holland was 'the seven point plan for settlement'. Johnny thought that eventually the WWU would accept all seven points, but by then the government had "...slapped another three points on" (p. 120). Government also used regulations under the Public Safety Conservation Act 1932, which caused a great deal of hostility among trade unionists. He described the details of the regulations:

...the main purpose of the Regulations was to declare illegal, any kind of support whatsoever to the waterside workers during the dispute. It meant that no finance was to be provided and no food. In effect it meant that a sympathiser providing food for a locked-out waterside worker's child was committing an illegal act under the Regulations. Publicity on the dispute was completely banned. ... Public meetings by waterside workers or any supporters of them were illegal (p.121). [However, the regulations] were flouted by the locked-out waterside workers and those who were supporting them, miners, freezing workers, seamen and yes, members of the general public flouted the regulations in many ways. ... For instance, a lot of money was subscribed daily, weekly, monthly, from all sources, from members of the New Zealand public, from organisations within New Zealand, and from overseas a vast sum of money, estimated in the vicinity of £40,000 was collected in Australia and transmitted, illegally of course, because the regulations barred any financial contributions. (p. 122)

Bill Sewell, in a poem called *The Regulations* (2003), put it this way:

Every person who  
discontinues their employment  
makes any payment or contribution:  
prints or publishes any statement;  
for the purpose of counselling or procuring;  
uses, either orally or in writing, any words;  
carries or displays, or drives or causes to be driven  
any vehicle carrying or displaying,  
any banner, placard or sign or other thing;  
fails to comply in any respect  
with the requirements of a direction given to him;  
or whose presence is likely to influence any other person;  
commits an offence.



Johnny noted that donations also came from dockers in England and longshoremen in America. He particularly mentioned the generosity of the Yugoslav community. Amongst other things, they provided firewood, and three acres of potatoes that were dug, bagged and supplied to families. Freezing workers provided meat and the Huntly miners were also helpful. He also mentioned that hotel publicans were active in making financial donations.

The WWU set up a publicity committee of three, chaired by Johnny. One of their tasks was to print *The Bulletin*, a newsletter to keep members informed. Copies of *The Bulletin* are lodged in the Auckland Public Library. Other committees (transport, finance and relief) were set up by the lock-out committee. Also a boot maker and boot repair shop was set up using donated leather.

The aim of *The Bulletin* of April 13, 1951 was to inspire union members. Under the heading 'Solidarity the only Answer', it reads:

The wonderful and inspiring meeting that marked our return to the Trades Hall following our enforced but short evacuation, must serve as a salutary warning to the Government that they are fighting a losing battle against the greatest and most determined body of trade unionists that any NZ Government has yet faced. It is useless for Holland or Sullivan to attempt to bluster their way through the tide of public opinion that is rising against them.

They will obviously resort to more subterfuge and skulduggery but this will not overcome the supreme confidence of the workers who are striking such a mighty blow for Peace, Freedom and Decent Living Standards.

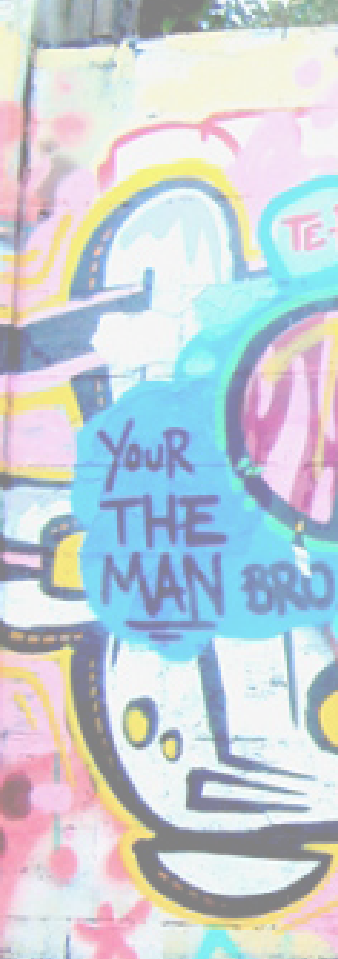
Another responsibility for the publicity committee was to form a panel of speakers and send them to speak at public meetings and also surreptitiously to explain the dispute. One of the outstanding speakers was Jim Knox who later became leader of the Federation of Labour. However, publishing *The Bulletin* was complicated. A young woman from the Carpenters Union office typed the text supplied by Johnny onto stencils. He explained how this worked:

...our headquarters were out in the New Lynn area, and the young lady lived in Avondale, and when she knew the time we were at headquarters, she came over on her bike, and cut the stencil. I placed it in my satchel, we got into Ron Harrington's car, put the girl's bike on the back of the car, took her home, and then went wherever we were producing the Bulletin, and we did it in some very strange places... One time, we produced a Bulletin in a van in Queen Street. We had the duplicating machine inside the van. Ron Harrington drove the van. Red McGrath and myself turned the duplicating machine, and we produced the Bulletin going up and down Queen Street under the noses of the police, and we weren't discovered. Another occasion we produced the Bulletin in a cowshed on a Yugoslav farm. (p. 126)

The committee had two printers (probably the Gestetner-type) whereby a typewriter was used to cut into a thin stencil allowing ink from a drum to print on standard paper. One night, the police, based on a tip-off, raided a house being used for printing. The expensive electric machine was confiscated by the police (p. 127). Johnny's house was also raided by the police but they found nothing. He was warned by a police officer that if he was caught with publicity material he faced a jail sentence of two years. Johnny was also stopped by the police from speaking at Mangakino and at Whangarei. In fact, he was escorted out of Whangarei by the police with the message of 'do not return'.

Through a series of events, Johnny was almost caught out by the police. He explained that during a women's meeting, at which he was the speaker, he noticed in the audience a Canadian woman who was a secretary with the Canadian High Commission office. She was suspected, without any proof, of being a CIA agent. Johnny drew the chair's attention to the woman's presence by slipping her a note with the words: "Fuzz [Fuzz Barnes – wife of Jock], that woman on the fourth row is a police agent" (p. 130). Fuzz read it and passed it back to Johnny who put it in his satchel. Johnny explained the consequences of that note in his satchel:

The next day... was our preparation for the Bulletin, and we followed the usual procedures. ... I put the stencil in my bag... put the satchel on top of the car, and we took off, and I stupidly left the satchel on top of the car. ... Some public-spirited person had picked it up and immediately, of course, handed it to the police. (p. 130)



Three weeks later, Detective Inspector Campin, with four other police officers, arrived at Johnny's home. During this period the police did not need a search warrant. Campin "...threw the satchel on the table and said, 'Bad luck. You lost the satchel, John.' Of course I denied all knowledge of it." (pp. 131-132). The police search revealed nothing. Coincidentally, three of Johnny's friends arrived with some beer from the Rising Sun in Newton. One of Johnny's mates, Des Doyle, noticed a policeman named Goldfield and said, 'Hello, Goldy, what are you doing here? The last time I met you, you were getting some sly grog up at Jumbo Pillinger's in Parnell' (p.131). The police were greatly embarrassed and took off. Johnny heard nothing more of the note in the satchel.

On another occasion, Johnny was involved in an illegal march. He was in the front row but had two very strong men on either side of him. The police grabbed Johnny and tried to pass him back to the police at the rear. But his mates beat the police back and Johnny (who was a small man) was passed by his two bodyguards to the middle of the crowd of demonstrators, out of harm's way.

Johnny explained another incident involving the police and the deregistered workers (p. 133) that had consequences for Jock Barnes. An old man who had nothing to do with the demonstration was knocked to the ground by the police. In a public meeting at the Town Hall, Barnes denounced the action of the police in assaulting the old man. "As a result, Barnes was charged with criminal defamation. He was later convicted... and sentenced to two months' imprisonment" (p.133). The union supported Barnes as best they could. They engaged a lawyer to appeal the sentence but the appeal was dismissed. Barnes completed his two months in Mt Eden prison.

Johnny described the worst incident of police violence against the workers:

The waterside workers had decided to march from Trades Hall up to the Domain through Queen Street, but when they got opposite Myers Park, a cordon of police lined across the road, under the supervision of one Superintendent Southworth, who was well known to watersiders. ... He led the attack on the watersiders at Myers Park on 1 June, and it was a very bloody occasion. Women were assaulted too. There were a number of women in the front of the demonstration – Fuzz Barnes was one. She was assaulted. ... I was able to escort the injured watersiders back to the Trades Hall, and I can tell you it was like a casualty station" (p.135). [Many were taken to hospital for treatment.]

*The Bulletin* of June 4, 1951 explained the attitude of the public to police actions. A meeting was held in the Auckland Domain and 20,000 people attended:

The very fact that more than 20,000 people after 16 weeks [of dispute] are prepared to stand in bitter cold weather for two hours to hear our side of the dispute is indicative of the public feeling. ... Finally the astonishing collection of £340 is sure enough evidence to clinch our claim that our cause is right and that Holland Can't Win.

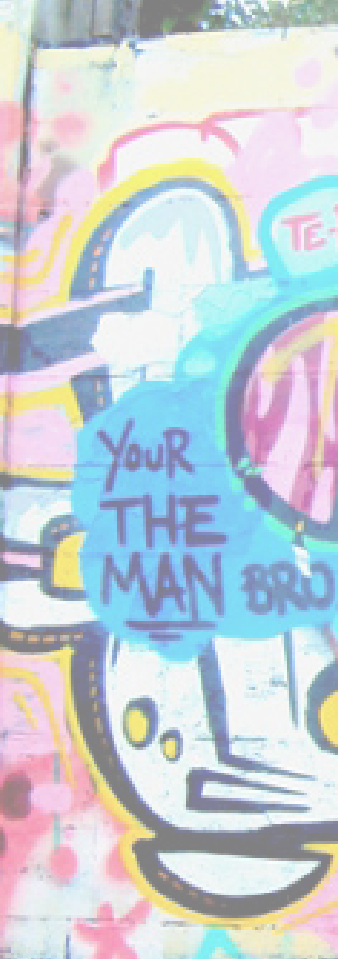
There was also violence coming from the so-called 'scab' union people who "hunted in packs" (p. 136). Deregistered watersiders were attacked on the streets and in pubs. "Watersiders weren't even allowed to have a peaceful glass of beer in a hotel. Another instance was in the Prince of Wales Hotel in Hobson Street opposite the Trades Hall. They came in there and started a brawl. Two watersiders were arrested, but fortunately the publican knew who was responsible" (p.136). The charges were dropped.

On a more positive note, Johnny mentioned particular local people who supported the deregistered WWU: George Sparry was a ship-builder and had constructed landing barges used by the Americans in the war; George Armstrong was secretary of the Hotel & Restaurant Workers Union who supplied food for the families; George Stuckey was an illegal bookmaker and gave most of his earnings to the union.

With end of the dispute in sight, the deregistered workers tried unsuccessfully to get employment back on the wharf. Eventually, with the resignation of Jock Barnes from his position in the union, Johnny was asked to try to re-establish the national WWU. Barnes had established a business in the Waikato. Johnny travelled around the country with expenses being met from a small grant from an Australian union. His extensive work failed to gain traction. He noted, "It concluded any official attempts to carry out the policy of the old WWU to reorganize it" (p.151). Meetings of the WWU also ceased in April 1952.

A consequence of the destruction of the WWU was that some prominent members eventually moved into other influential positions. These included Jim Knox (leader of the NZ Federation of





Labour), Tom Spiller (National President of the NZ Tramways Union), Ron Black (Assistant Secretary of the NZ Seamen's Union), Jim Ellis (organiser for the Auckland Hotel Workers' Union), Frank McNulty (General Secretary of the Meat Workers' Union), Frank Barnard (Auckland President of the Freezing Workers' Union), Ken Fabris (President and organiser for the Northern Drivers' Union), Jackie Wilson (Secretary of the Timber Workers' Union) and Bill Andersen (Secretary of the Northern Drivers' Union) (p.152).

*The Auckland Star* reported:

At the end of the waterfront dispute, the deregistered watersiders held a meeting in the old trades hall. It was on a sunny Sunday morning. The president of the Auckland union, Alec Drennan, presented a card to national wharfies' president Jock Barnes. It was a loyalty card. In black lettering were the words: Waterfront Lockout '51. In red letters the phrase STOOD LOYAL RIGHT THROUGH leaped from the card.

After getting his card – appropriately numbered one – Barnes handed out others to hundreds of wharfies crammed into the dusty hall, among them John Mitchell. (*The Auckland Star*, 18 July, 1986)

When asked what he had learned from the dispute, Johnny made the following points:

Well, the first lesson to be learned, was to ensure that the maximum trade union entity exists before going into action, not only within the particular trade union involved in the dispute, but in the broad sectors of the trade union movement before entering a dispute of such dimensions as the 1951 Waterfront Dispute. The second lesson, I feel is to beware of those individuals inside the movement who would betray bona fide trade unionists. The third lesson I feel is to avoid even under extreme provocation, the splitting of the trade union movement such as occurred in 1950 prior to the dispute when the watersiders and some of their allies left the Federation of Labour. ... The fourth point is the ability of trade union officials to be able to assess the situation at an appropriate time when it may be possible and advisable to withdraw from the dispute, reorganise, fight again. (pp. 152-153)

Like many other ex-watersiders Johnny found it difficult obtaining a job. Below is his recollection of one incident when he was interviewed for a job at a motorcar firm in Auckland:

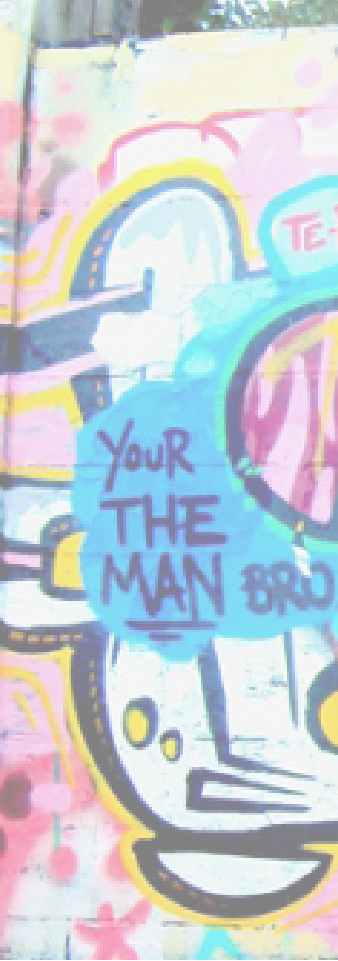
The manager asked, "Where have you been working?" I said, "I'm a deregistered watersider, so I suppose that's the end of the interview." He said, "Oh no, I don't think so, as a matter of fact I've got a couple of your fellows around the plant somewhere. I'm not holding that against you. I don't agree with what you did, but I'm not going to be a party to persecuting you for doing it."(pp.154-155)

After some talk he offered Johnny the job. However, the manager's telephone rang and after a short time he said, "Do you belong to some kind of organisation – some social or political organisation?" He went on to ask, "You might as well tell me the story – are you a member of the communist party?" Johnny replied, "Yes, of course I am – that's not much of a secret in Auckland." The manager said, "Well, I'll tell you something – when that phone rang just now, it was my foreman from the workshop who told me that his staff knew you were having an interview for this job, and they will walk out of the shop. I can't afford to have that – but don't blame me, it's not my fault you didn't get the job. I can't afford to have that kind of strife here" (p.155).

Eventually Johnny obtained a permanent job at Lion Brewery and stayed for five years and then on to the Tepid Baths in Auckland for 12 years as a boiler man. He also continued his work with the trade union movement.

Johnny also reflected on the similarities in 1974 to the trade union situation in 1951. He said:

At present, the trade union movement is under a particular heavy attack. Such attacks are not new. They are old as the Tolpuddle Martyrs. They merely intensify when capitalism is faced with a new crisis. The most bitter attacks are... coming from the traditional enemies of trade



unionism, but they are also being joined by 'Labour leaders' who are again talking openly of deregistration to protect "responsible trade unionism and the Nation". (p. 159)

Johnny described life in working class Freemans Bay from the 1930s. "In my early days in the Bay the struggle was the same as it was for many workers in other parts of New Zealand, to survive, to get enough food for our families. Large numbers were unemployed, some on relief work, some in what we called slave camps, some on sustenance, picking up a day's work here and there." (pp. 165-166). It had a strong Catholic presence but had no religious barriers. Even though he was a communist that never affected his local relationships. It was also a strong Labour Party area and open to radical ideas.

Robbie, the present mayor of Auckland... was a well-known figure in Freemans Bay. I can remember him riding around the area on his old motorbike, wearing his belted-up raincoat. ... I think he learned a lot of his later campaigning in the area of Freemans Bay. (p. 167)

...older residents in the main lived in rented houses owned by pitiless individuals like old Hannah, Fatty Eccles and the like, who never spent a penny piece on the properties they owned. ... It was not unknown for old Hannah, who collected his own rent, to be chased out of Baker Street by irate women who were demanding some improvements to their homes before they paid any further rent. Old Fatty Eccles could be characterised by the fact that he was so fat he travelled around in tramcars in his rent-collecting adventures, and the trammies compelled him to pay two tickets, because he took up a complete seat that was made for two. (pp. 167-168)

The conditions that existed in some houses were almost indescribable, as bad as any I had seen in London, Liverpool, Glasgow, Cardiff or Newcastle. ... There were large numbers of houses that had no baths. Some streets like Killowen Place had not even running water. Most streets had no lighting. (p.168) [Johnny worked hard in the community to improve conditions.] After persistent efforts, we were able to get Auckland City Council to erect hot water showers in the old destructor at the bottom of Union Street, for the free use of residents... and then we succeeded in getting a health clinic established in an old building in Union Street, just below the Robbie Burns Hotel. (p.171)

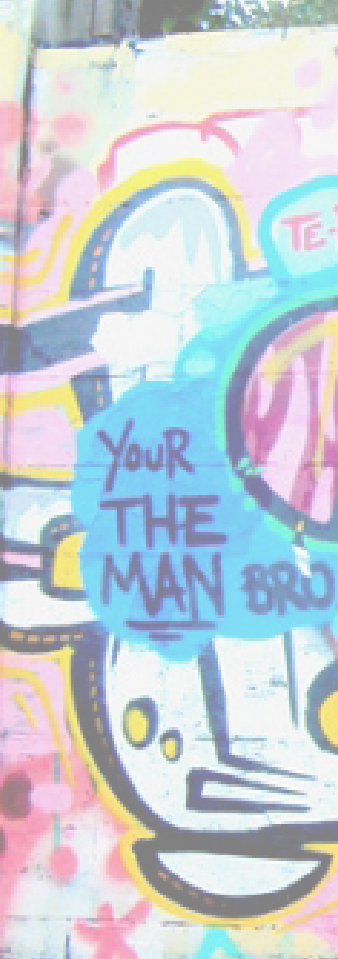
In the 1950s there was a major Freemans Bay slum clearance programme by council. People were being evicted through powers under various statutes. Johnny and others opposed the evictions and said that "...as houses were being locked after having forcibly removed the tenants, we knocked the locks off the doors and put the people back in again" (p. 172).

Johnny helped to set up the Freemans Bay Welfare Association in the early 1950s. Johnny was elected secretary and meetings and events were held at St Thomas's Church hall. The association arranged enormous Christmas parties, presents for older citizens, socials and public meetings. The association advocated to politicians about the condition of houses in the area. The association eventually became the Freemans Bay Community Committee. Sadly, many people were evicted from Freemans Bay and moved into state houses in other parts of Auckland. Today, through a process of gentrification, Freemans Bay and nearby communities have changed radically.

## CONCLUSIONS

Johnny was a community worker, community activist and community advocate before such terms were invented. His passion for social justice came from his early background in the East End of London where he stood alongside his father at demonstrations supporting striking workers. His values matured through his collegiality with others at sea and on the wharf, and through his extensive reading and study. At the local level in Freemans Bay, he was a natural community leader who led by example: opposing those who oppressed the poor, advocating for improved services and facilities, and by providing opportunities for people to engage in an active community life. Johnny was a radical community activist before the ideas of Paulo Freire and Saul Alinsky became popular, and a communitarian-thinker before Amitai Etzioni.

His community activities were closely linked to his left-wing political views. Even though he was a committed communist, he worked tirelessly supporting a Labour victory in 1935. He saw the new Labour Government as an important step towards a better life for people in terms of equality



of access to education, health services and housing. Although he was a member of the Communist Party, this never affected his relationships with local Freemans Bay people.

Johnny was always affiliated with the trade union movement and it was these experiences that filled the pages of his memoir. He was deeply affected by the injustices of the 1930s period of depression, which he saw as a crisis of capitalism caused by economic orthodoxy that drove down wages and employment. Johnny's own personal experiences on relief work capture the injustices of that system. He was a key WWU member of the Auckland executive during the 1951 dispute, organising illegal publicity through *The Bulletin*. He experienced high personal risks from the police pressure to close down such publicity, and the bloody demonstrations in which he participated. Above all, he was solid in his support of the WWU. He rightly earned his title, 'Stood Loyal Right Through'.

David Haigh (b.1938) is a lecturer in the department of social practice at Unitec. He has taught sociology, not-for-profit management, social policy and community development. He has been active in community development for many years and has written extensively on not-for-profit management and community development. He edited *Community Development and Social Change* (2015) and is presently writing and editing a history of Kelmarna Gardens, a community garden that started in 1981.

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