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A Distant Detachment

New Zealand and the ILO 1919-1945

Paper to the symposium 90 years of the ILO: the significance for Australia and New Zealand, Auckland, November 2009

Steve Hughes and Nigel Haworth¹

A distant detachment

In May 1919 a circular arrived on the desk of the New Zealand Secretary of Labour, F. W. Rowley. It gave notice that in accordance with the Annex to Part XIII of the Peace Treaty, an Organising Committee had been appointed for the forthcoming International Labour Conference. The circular explained that Part XIII provided for the creation of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), which would be a tripartite body made up of government, employer and labour representatives. The ILO would aspire to the maintenance of universal peace based upon social justice and, more concretely, promote social policy of the League's members by means of International Labour Conventions and Recommendations. The forty Articles of the ILO Constitution were contained in section I of Part XIII of the Peace Treaty, the annex to which called for the first Conference of the new organisation to be held in Washington during October 1919. In a letter addressed to the Secretary of the Organising Committee Rowley wrote:

I shall be obliged if you would kindly inform me of the extent, if any, to which New Zealand is affected by the various terms contained in this part of the Peace Treaty. I gather that Great Britain, being a party to the above Treaty, has entered into some agreement respecting the labour conditions but it is not clear whether the Dominion of New Zealand is itself bound in any way.²

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² Letter to The Secretary, International Labour Conference, 12 July, 1919. ILO archives, ORG Series.

In reply the Committee's Secretary was clear:

*I am directed by the Organising Committee to say that as the King has ratified the Peace Treaty on behalf of the British Empire, following on its approval by the Parliaments of the United Kingdom and of the British Dominions, including New Zealand, the latter is bound by the Labour Part of the Treaty in the same way as the United Kingdom and as an original Member of the League of Nations has become under Article 387 a Member of the International Labour Organisation.*³

If being a founder member of the ILO had come as a surprise to the Secretary of Labour, New Zealand's membership and the convening of the Washington Conference also took a while to be understood among New Zealand employer and worker organisations. In August 1919 the International Labour Office suggested in a letter to the Acting Prime Minister, James Allen⁴, that a pamphlet on the labour provisions of the Peace Treaty be given wide circulation in New Zealand, particularly, it emphasised, among labour leaders.⁵

Once the pamphlet was distributed, requests to the government for additional copies were quick to follow. During January 1920, the New Zealand Federated Painters and Decorators Association, the Federated Newspaper Proprietors Association and the Denniston Coal Miners Union, all asked for more. Not surprisingly, the lack of information caused some confusion. In April, the New Zealand Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners sent a letter to Prime Minister informing him that its National Council had passed a resolution demanding that New Zealand be represented by labour delegates at the Washington Conference - an event that had taken place during October the previous year. No doubt using its own channels of information, the Federation of Labour was the quickest to respond to the news of the Treaty provisions. On the 24th September 1919, it sent a telegram to the Prime Minister requesting information on the

³ Reply to Rowley. 15 September, 1919. ILO archives, ORG Series.

⁴ Prime Minister William Massey was still not back from the Paris Peace Conference.

⁵ Letter dated 13 August, 1919. New Zealand National Archive, EA (Department of External Affairs).

ILO and the matter of New Zealand representation at its Washington Conference. With no response, another telegram was sent on the 4th of October. This time the government responded that as no labour organisations had asked to be represented at the Conference, the matter had not been discussed.⁶

The situation was no different among political parties. It was not until November 1920 that a question on ILO membership was raised in the New Zealand Parliament. In a question to the Minister of Labour W. H. Herries, Peter Fraser⁷ asked what was the relationship of the New Zealand government to the International Labour Bureau (sic) which had been created under the authority of the League of Nations? He had in his hand the Proceedings of the International Labour Conference held in Washington during the previous year, which had been laid on the table of the House by the Minister of Labour the day before. Fraser continued:

‘So far the labour organisations of this country had received no indications that such a body as the International Labour Bureau was in existence nor had they been offered the opportunity of being represented at any of the Conferences. Did the Government take the Bureau and the League of Nations seriously? Or did they treat them as a farce?’⁸

The reply from the Minister of Labour, was dismissive. The documents had been laid on the table on the advice of the Crown Law Officers in accordance with the procedures laid down by the League of Nations. Moreover, as to the question of representation at the International Labour Conferences ‘Home representations could be well served by the High Commissioner (in London) rather than go to great expense in sending representatives to every Conference that was held by the League of Nations’.⁹

In the debate that followed, Herries revealed that three conferences had been held, including an International Maritime Conference in Genoa, and admitted that in each

⁶ New Zealand National Archive, EA (Department of External Affairs).

⁷ Peter Fraser was later to become the leader of the New Zealand Labour Party and Prime Minister of New Zealand.

⁸ Parliamentary Debates of the New Zealand House of Representatives, No 41, 1920-21. pp. 963-5. November 11, 1920.

⁹ Ibid.

case the Government had been requested to send representatives from New Zealand labour organisations. Herries stuck to his argument of expense but began to wilt under the pressure of opposition questioning. Prime Minister Massey rose in support:

'With regard to the activities of the League of Nations and the conferences it held, the authorities seemed to forget that New Zealand was twelve to fourteen thousand miles away from Europe and the documents generally arrived too late for action to be taken. This had been the case in regard to the Conference held in Genoa to which New Zealand representation had been requested'

Mr Fraser rose *'How did Australia send a representative?'*

Mr Massey replied *'Perhaps Australia was a little nearer...'*¹⁰

The debate revealed both the position and attitude of the Government to the new Organisation. It had become a founder member of something it little understood or cared for and did not intend to spend either time or money on its affairs. The general question of Dominion representation in the affairs of the ILO had indeed been problematic. In the negotiations that preceded the enactment of Part XIII, the United States had been particularly opposed to having British Dominions on the Governing Body of the ILO, arguing that public opinion in the United States regarded the British Empire as having too much influence in the League of Nations.

The result was a section in the labour clauses of the Treaty which declared that 'no State including its dominions or colonies, whether they be self-governing or not, could have more than one Government representative on the Governing Body'. The purpose was to exclude British Dominions from the Governing Body of the ILO. The Dominions had faced the same problem concerning the right to sit on the League Council. In response, the Canadian Prime Minister Sir Robert Borden managed to push through a Resolution in a Plenary Session of the Peace Conference requiring the Treaty Drafting Committee to make amendments in the provisions setting-up the ILO so that they conformed to the Covenant of the League and the membership of its Council. When the

¹⁰ Ibid.

British Dominions finally got what they wanted in the Covenant, Borden then moved the adoption of the ILO amendment and the United States-inspired clause was removed.¹¹

The Washington Conference of the ILO was the first opportunity for countries to show their support for the new world order which the League of Nations hoped to symbolise. Thirty-nine countries sent delegations including the Dominions of Canada, India and South Africa who appeared as independent entities for the first time.¹² In terms of the aims and aspirations of the ILO itself, it was the first time that governments, employers and workers appeared at an international conference as equal partners. It was the first time that labour had the concept of 'fairness' applied to it in international labour law, and it was also the first time that an institution provided for in the Peace Treaty came into effective operation.

New Zealand viewed these events with a sense of distant detachment. Its economy had entered into a period of prosperity during the 1890's. Rising wool prices and the impact of refrigeration on meat and dairy produce had expanded an export sector that benefited from rising prices on international markets. The Liberal Government, which had won the election of December 1890 with trade union support, introduced a range of labour laws including the Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act 1894. The success of the Act saw New Zealand depicted as a 'country without strikes', attracting the attention of researchers from around the world.¹³ It was from the comfort of this economic and legislative success that New Zealand observed the wider world and questioned the relevance of a distant international body whose purpose seemed to be the promotion of labour standards lower than those prevailing in New Zealand.

The onset of economic depression

¹¹ Antony Alcock, *History of the ILO*, p. 34.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 37.

¹³ Roth, H. 1978, 'The Historical Framework', in John Deeks et al, *Industrial Relations in New Zealand*, Methuen, pp. 25-26.

When New Zealand's economic boom came to an end in the 1920s, it was replaced by widespread disillusionment, political instability and economic insecurity.¹⁴ As a result, relations between the New Zealand government and the ILO became even more distant. In 1922 an internal ILO report noted:

The New Zealand government has hitherto ignored the International Labour Organisation except insofar as it has been compelled to recognise it on account of its Treaty obligations. These, however, as far as the International Labour Organisation is concerned, it is always interpreted in the narrow sense ... As reasons for holding aloof from the activities of the International Labour Organisation, the New Zealand government has alleged, 1) the remoteness from New Zealand conditions the subjects treated at the International Labour Conference, 2) the prohibitive expense of participation. These objectives have been answered by the International Labour Office in many eloquent letters, but as each successive reply from the New Zealand government seems to show a stronger disinclination to collaborate with the International Labour Organisation, and even to understand the elements of its Constitution, for example the difference between Recommendations and draft Conventions, the Office has for a year desisted from attempts to persuade by letter. This restraint is wise as the present Prime Minister, Mr W.F. Massey, a strong imperialist, suspicious of ideas both of international and of industrial relations co-operation, will certainly remain impervious to any arguments which the International Labour Office may use on paper, except such as concern the Treaty obligations of New Zealand. It should, moreover, be remembered that the expense of participation in the Conference, even when the extravagant ideas, which the New Zealand government has on the subject, are corrected, would remain a genuine difficulty, as the government is bent on cutting down every penny of avoidable

¹⁴ Tom Brooking. 1992, 'Economic Transformation', in Geoffery W. Rice (ed.), *The Oxford History of New Zealand*, Second Edition, Oxford University Press, p. 231.

expenditure.¹⁵

New Zealand's attitude toward the Organisation during the 1920s can be gleaned from correspondence between the Department of External Affairs and the ILO. During October 1921 External Affairs took over responsibility for the ILO from the Department of Labour. From then onward, the tone of correspondence seemed to shift from reluctant co-operation to outright non-co-operation. Three examples serve to illustrate this.

A drafted response to an ILO questionnaire surveying views on the reform of the Governing Body's Constitution read:

*I may add that the Governing Body of the International Labour Office is constituted to include twelve persons representing Governments, six persons elected by the delegates to the Conference representing the Workers; and of the twelve representing the Governments eight are to be nominated by the countries of chief industrial importance and four by the countries selected for the purpose by the Government delegates at the Conference. As New Zealand is not represented on the Governing Body, and as no delegates have as yet been sent to any Conference, it does not seem desirable to make any comment on the matter.*¹⁶

The final version of the response personally signed by New Zealand Prime Minister William Massey and in which the final paragraph read:

*'In reply I have to inform you that the Government of New Zealand has no observations to make on the different points raised in the questionnaire'*¹⁷

Finally, in response to a request for observations on unemployment statistics a letter to the ILO read:

Sir,

I have the honour to acknowledge the receipt of your letter of the 16th

¹⁵ 'Relations of the International Labour Office with New Zealand'. Internal ILO Report, 21 September 1922. ILO archives, RL Series.

¹⁶ Memorandum for Under- Secretary, Department of External Affairs. Suggested reply to communication from the International Labour Office, 25 October, 1922. New Zealand National Archives, EA (External Affairs) Series.

¹⁷ Letter dated 31 October, 1921. New Zealand National Archives, EA Series.

September last asking for the observations of the New Zealand Government on the question of statistics on unemployment. In reply I have to state that there is usually very little unemployment in this country and especially in view of the fact that New Zealand is so far removed from Europe it does not appear to be necessary to submit any observations on the proposal.

*I have the honour to be, Sir, your obedient servant*¹⁸

A dubious distinction

At the beginning of 1928, the Christchurch Press commented on the observations of a Dr Hight, a Canterbury University College academic who had recently returned from an exchange visit to the University of Leeds in England. Dr Hight had argued that New Zealand's minimalist policies toward the ILO drew on the smug belief that it still led the world in social reform and had nothing to gain from closer involvement in its affairs. The Christchurch Press quoted him as saying that 'we do not occupy the position we had in the nineties' and that New Zealand was not contributing what it should to 'the political, economic and general intelligence of the world' and needed to 'take a much more active part than we do in the activities of the League of Nations and the International Labour Office'. However, the newspaper's editorial was dismissive:

...it is particularly interesting that he should have said (if he has been correctly reported) that the governments attitude to international gatherings is 'making it very difficult for the people of New Zealand in years to come'. So far as Geneva is concerned, the attitude of the Government has been, to date, that we are taking no great risk in leaving most of the issues raised there to the consideration of the Homeland, and that when Conferences are held at which it seems desirable to be represented directly it is sufficient to have our High Commissioner present ... Dr Hight is on very thin ice when he laments our greater world prominence in the 'glorious nineties'. It is true that we did in the nineties get ourselves accepted abroad, or in some countries, as a community with

¹⁸ Letter dated 17 November, 1921. New Zealand National Archives, EA Series.

*advanced social and industrial ideas which we were successfully applying in practice. But everybody knows today that many of the experiments we made with so much confidence then have been proved since to be blunders and that opinion has hardened against them even during Dr Hights absence in England. It would be no great advantage to us to be still remembered abroad as the community that tried once to fly before it had learned to walk.*¹⁹

By 1930 New Zealand had the somewhat dubious distinction of being, along with San Domingo and Ethiopia, one of only three member States of the fifty-five strong ILO which had yet to attend one of its Conferences. However, with the onset of a world depression, New Zealand's ability to retain a firm grip on the control of its own destiny became increasingly fragile. Mounting budget deficits and rising levels of unemployment prompted a shift from decades of interventionist experimentation and ad hoc social interference to policy initiatives based upon the fostering of an export-led recovery.²⁰ How other economies were responding to the Depression and to what extent their ability to take part in a recovery had been affected became questions directly related to New Zealand's own economic destiny.

As the Depression began to bite, unemployment became a worldwide phenomenon. Countries retreated behind trade barriers both in an effort to protect their own industries and in the realisation that neither the self-healing powers of laissez-faire nor the classic instruments of government interventionism seemed capable of turning the tide. The machinery of world trade ground to a halt as economies retreated from international co-operation and turned instead to the protection of their own national markets. The worldwide depression became the first common problem faced by government, business and labour since the conclusion of the war.

The crisis prompted a renewed search for political as well as economic alternatives as faith in liberal capitalism melted away. Some looked again toward the Soviet Union,

¹⁹ 'NZ and the World'. *Christchurch Press*, 31 January, 1928. ILO archive, CAT series.

²⁰ Tony Endres and Ken Jackson. 1993, 'Policy Responses to the Crisis: Australasia in the 1930s', in W. R. Garside (ed.) *Capitalism in Crisis. International Responses to the Great Depression*, London, Pinter, pp. 148-149.

which observed the chaos from the sidelines, its economy seemingly impervious to the slump.²¹ Others, in Germany, Italy and Japan turned to fascism and began planning the complete destruction of the old liberal system through the rapid expansion of a militaristic empire. Yet while intellectuals of the time wrote in fear for the world as the aggressive expansionism of the radical Right spread into China and Ethiopia, politicians looked upon it as a threat that could be appeased and contained.²² Instead, they saw a greater danger elsewhere, one which had helped in the rise of fascism in the first place and on which they found common ground - the rise of working class power and the spread of communism.

Political consensus held that the Depression and mass unemployment offered a breeding ground for Communism. Speeches by politicians everywhere mixed comments on the slump with references to the threat. They pointed to the growth of the German Communist Party and the 85% unemployed which made up its membership while seemingly ignoring the equally rapid growth of the Nazi Party.²³ Communism was portrayed as the common enemy and guarding against the radical politicisation of the masses played a significant part in stimulating inter-governmental co-operation on the question of mass unemployment. In the face of economic protectionism and the growth of domestic nationalism, the fragile international order, which the League of Nations seemed increasingly incapable of sustaining, found itself on the point of collapse. What helped the continuation of some form of international collaboration was not international concern about militarist aggression of the radical Right but the collective fear of communism. For Hobsbawm,

The Keynesian argument for the benefits of eliminating permanent mass unemployment was economic as well as political. Keynesians held, correctly, that the demand which the incomes of fully employed workers must generate, would have the most stimulating effect on depressed economies. Nevertheless, the

²¹ Susan Curruthers. 1997, 'International History 1900-1945', in J. Baylis and S. Smith (eds.) *The Globalisation of World Politics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

²² Eric Hobsbawm. 1995, *Age of Extremes. The Short Twentieth Century*, London, Abacus, p. 90.

²³ Hermann Weber. 1969, *Die Wandlung des deutschen Kommunismus: Die Stalinisierung der KPD in der Weimarer Republik* (2 volumes), Frankfurt. Quoted in Eric Hobsbawm. 1995, *Age of Extremes*, pp. 93-94.

*reason why this means of increasing demand was given such urgent priority ... was that mass unemployment was believed to be politically and socially explosive, as indeed it proved to be ...*²⁴

A sense of autonomy

If the League was now showing itself to be increasingly incapable of co-ordinating any significant form of international action,²⁵ the ILO provided an alternative forum for discussion of the problem of mass unemployment and offered the opportunity to gather and collate information on national and international responses to the Depression. As Alcock points out 'if Governments, business and labour were in trouble, they needed help and they needed ideas, and the ILO was given the opportunity to take the initiative'.²⁶

Thomas's attempt to inspire a sense of autonomy in the organisation proved to be critical in this respect. Despite the intention of the architects of the Peace Treaty to set up two international organisations that were constitutionally linked²⁷, with the League as the main body and the ILO as part of the 'League system'²⁸, the ILO was quick to stress its autonomy both in thought and action. This it did in a number of ways. First, the key protagonist in this strategy was Albert Thomas himself who from outset - through individual action and force of personality - intended to afford the ILO a sense of purpose and vitality that would distinguish it from the moribund political bureaucracy of

²⁴ Eric Hobsbawm. 1995, *Age of Extremes*, p. 95.

²⁵ For a discussion on the creation and demise of the League of Nations see, David Armstrong, Lorna Lloyd and John Redmond. 1996, *From Versailles to Maastricht: International Organisation in the Twentieth Century*, London, Macmillan, Chapters 1 and 2. William Olsen and A. J. R. Groom. 1992, *International Relations Then and Now: Origins and Trends in Interpretation*, London, Routledge, Chapter 5. Samuel Northedge. 1986, *The League of Nations 1920-1946*, Leicester, Leicester University Press. Ruth Henig (ed.). 1973, *The League of Nations*, Edinburgh, Oliver and Boyd. F. P. Walters. 1952, *A History of the League of Nations (2 Vols.)*, London, Oxford University Press.

²⁶ Antony Alcock. 1971, *History of the ILO*, p. 99.

²⁷ To expand on a point made earlier, membership of the League entailed membership of the ILO; the expenses of the ILO were met out of the League's general budget; the League Council was legally competent to put into force amendments to the ILO Constitution and the ILO's right of access to the Permanent Court of International Justice and to rule on which States comprised those of 'chief industrial importance' (in cases of dispute). Provisions also existed for the General Secretary of the League to be associated with the ILO's administrative and budgetary affairs. See Francis Wilson. 1934, *Labour in the League System. A study of the International Labour Organisation in relation to international administration*, Stanford, Stanford University Press.

²⁸ Victor-Yves Ghebali. 1989, *The International Labour Organisation*, p. 15.

the League. This he saw as vital if the ILO was to establish and retain the support of workers. Second, by setting up direct and independent channels of communication with the labour ministries, employer and worker organisations of member countries, he provided a profile for the ILO he hoped would pay dividends in the years to come. Third, despite the requirement that all members of the League were automatically members of the ILO, the view of Thomas was that the provision did not preclude the right of the ILO to admit its own members. This was a position that challenged both the constitutional links between the two organisations and the senior status of the League. The ILO had already admitted Germany and Austria into its ranks during the first International Labour Conference in 1919 while the League still deliberated over their status. The action prompted friction between the two Organisations but the issue remained academic until Brazil left the League in 1926 but continued to remain a member of the ILO.²⁹ As a result, the membership of the two organisations were effectively de-coupled, paving the way for the ILO to be construed as an international organisation in its own right and accepted as a key forum for international debate on the Depression. Thus, while disillusionment with the League spread, the ILO was sufficiently distanced from it - institutionally and politically - for the international community to continue to support its activities.

As the crisis deepened, inflation became the overriding factor in the economic responses of a number of European countries, prompting a reduction in government expenditure, tight controls on credit and a rise in taxation.³⁰ In New Zealand, the impetus for an export-led recovery was tempered by domestic concerns about increasing wage demands and their impact upon inflation. The onset of the Depression prompted an attack on its underlying causes at home. In examining policy responses to the economic crisis in both New Zealand and Australia, Endres and Jackson point out that, 'Nominal wage levels were attacked in both countries as reaction set in to any deliberate expansion of demand either by fiscal or wage-fixing mechanisms. The tone of

²⁹ The General Secretary of the League made a vigorous protest that Brazil's continued membership of the ILO was 'constitutionally impossible' but he took no further action. See Edward Phelan. 1954, 'Some Reminiscences of the ILO'. *Studies*, 43, p. 253.

³⁰ G.W. Garside (ed.), *Capitalism in Crisis*, p. 3.

policy throughout the Depression years was contractionary, tempered only by the fear of creating social and political upheaval'.³¹ It was in these circumstances, and following a Cabinet meeting at the end of January 1930, that the New Zealand Government finally decided to send a delegation to the International Labour Conference held in Geneva that year.

Edward John Riches

A figure who was to become pivotal in relations between the ILO and the New Zealand Government was Edward John Riches. A New Zealander, Riches joined the ILO in 1927 soon after graduating in Economics from Canterbury University College.³² For the next ten years Riches became the ILO's main liaison with New Zealand, responsible for gathering information on New Zealand labour conditions during a period when such information was a scarce commodity in Geneva. At a time when the work of the ILO was either unknown or misunderstood in New Zealand, raising the profile of the Organisation became an important part of Riches' activities. In his Missions to New Zealand, Riches would embark on a series of speeches and talks to groups and organisations throughout the country. For example, in his Mission Report of 1930 he wrote:

During February, March and April I delivered a total of more than twenty addresses on the work of the Organisation to audiences in nine different centres. The size and character of the audiences varied greatly. The attendance ranged from about a dozen (N.Z. Employer's Federation Executive Council) to over five hundred (secondary school boys), and in most cases was between fifty and one hundred and fifty. The audience included, in addition to the two examples already cited, trade unionists, employer's and manufacturer's association members, branches of the League of Nations Union, Rotary Clubs, Worker's

³¹ Tony Endres, and Ken Jackson. 1993, 'Policy Responses to the Crisis', p. 162.

³² His tutor, the economist J.B. Condliffe described Riches as 'the outstanding economics student of his time'. J.B. Condliffe 30 November 1928 (ILO archive, RL series). Riches appointment at the ILO was won in a competitive examination set and marked in Geneva. Riches performance was such that he attracted offers of positions at the League of Nations and the University of New Zealand. He declined both, preferring instead to develop a career at the ILO.

*Educational Association group's, one University Club, a Women's Institute, University students and public meetings.*³³

In the course of these talks, it had become clear to Riches that general understanding of international affairs among the New Zealand public varied considerable. He criticised a general lack of intellectual leadership in country cut off from international contacts through geographical isolation and preoccupied with the 'pioneering problems of a young and rich economy'.³⁴ He accused the University of New Zealand of being hampered by 'limited resources and inadequate staff' and lamented an educational system that, while highly efficient, 'has not succeeded in supplying the intellectual leadership that is the country's greatest need at the present time'.³⁵

In all respects the importance of the print media stood out. Newspapers remained the only medium through which most of the general public of New Zealand could be reached and were the primary mechanism for moulding public opinion. In this regard, Riches paid particular attention to arranging meetings with newspaper editors whenever he could. The activities of the ILO were outlined and the aims and methods of the International Labour Conference were explained to any editor willing to see him. In the majority of these cases, knowledge of the ILO proved to be scant. Riches' purpose was to 'win over' editors of the leading newspapers in the country and procure greater press interest in the activities of the ILO. In the context of Riches criticism of the general lack of discussion of international affairs at the time, and in the light of continuing attempts to persuade the New Zealand government to send a delegation to the International Labour Conferences, the role of newspapers became critical in winning support for the ILO in New Zealand.

As it turned out, the decision of the New Zealand government to send a delegation to the Conference in 1930 prompted greater press interest in the ILO and led to

³³ Report on Mission (E.J. Riches) to New Zealand, February-May 1930, p. 27. ILO archive XH Series

³⁴ Ibid, p. 23.

³⁵ Ibid, p. 24.

editorials on the issue in a number of leading newspapers.³⁶ There was some irony in the timing of the New Zealand government's decision. While the expense involved had in the past been 'a convenient excuse for not sending a delegation', 1930 proved to be a year when expense was for once a real obstacle. After years of lobbying the New Zealand government to participate more fully in ILO activities, Riches was aware that unfavourable reports from any of the delegates to the Conference would result in the same arguments for non-attendance being employed with considerable force the following year.³⁷

Riches' Mission in 1930 was to be the latest attempt to persuade the New Zealand government to send a delegation to the International Labour Conference and to raise the vexed issue of international labour conventions and their ratification. His intention was to avoid talking to the press until he had the opportunity to talk representatives of the New Zealand Government. When the news of the decision was announced Riches abandoned his plan and instead gave an interview to the press on the advantages and procedures of New Zealand's representation at the next Conference. He also took the opportunity to raise the issue of international trade, 'Because of the ramifications of international trade, New Zealand, with its high standards of living and good working conditions and labour legislation, should have a particular interest in the organisations efforts to raise the standard in other countries'.³⁸

The interview was, as he hoped, widely reported. Although irrelevant to a decision already made, the press reports prompted the Government to despatch quickly circulars calling on employer and worker organisations to nominate representatives. While the nomination of the employer and worker delegates seemed to Riches clear cut³⁹ - T. Shailer-Weston, President of the New Zealand Employers Federation for the Employers and Jim Roberts, Secretary of the New Zealand Alliance of Labour, for the workers.

³⁶ Riches made particular note of the favourable editorial in the 'Dominion' which was otherwise an avid supporter of the Reform Party and critic of the ILO. Report on Mission, 1930, p. 22.

³⁷ Letter to Albert Thomas, 15 May, 1930. ILO archive, CAT Series.

³⁸ *New Zealand Herald*, 28 June, 1930. ILO archive, XH Series.

³⁹ Riches letter revealed that considerable pressure had been put on Walter Nash to accept the nomination as the worker delegate. Nash declined insisting that a delegate from the industrial rather than the political side of the labour movement was far more desirable.

Riches wrote of Shailer-Weston, 'Mr Weston is not noted for his progressive outlook, but is, I fear, in that respect as in others, truly representative of the majority of the employers of this country'. Of Jim Roberts he observed 'Mr Roberts ... will I imagine, in spite of a slight fondness for bluff and a tendency to combativeness (of a rather good natured kind) prove himself to be a definite acquisition to the Conference'.⁴⁰ The nomination of the Government delegate was far more controversial.

The Prime Minister Sir Joseph Ward was, during this period, constantly absent from the House through ill health. Riches requests to meet him were turned down as Ward convalesced in Rotorua on the advice of his doctors. Instead, three meetings with the Minister of Labour, W.A. Veitch, were arranged in Ward's absence. The meeting's proved to be revealing. Riches wrote:

I had three interviews with Minister of Labour ..., in the course of which the relations of New Zealand and the International Labour Organisation were discussed at considerable length. On the first of these occasions (at Christchurch on 4 February) our conversation was concerned almost entirely with the nature, composition and functions of the delegation to the XIV Session of the Conference. Mr Veitch apparently knew very little about the work of the International Labour Organisation and was not greatly interested in it. He showed some desire to hear as much about it as I could tell him in an hour's conversation, but evidently retained at the end of that time his original conviction that New Zealand could gain little except in the most indirect way, from the work of the Organisation, and that consequently it mattered very little what he or his government did about it... I came to the conclusion that the Government's decision to send a delegation to the Conference this year had been dictated by political expediency rather than by any appreciation of the work of the ILO. Facts which have since come to my notice show that the concession of representation was, indeed, little more than a sop to the Labour Party, the support of which is indispensable to the

⁴⁰ Letter to Albert Thomas. 15 May, 1930. ILO archive, CAT Series.

*continuance in office of the present Government.*⁴¹

The United Party had come to power in 1928 to the surprise of those who had predicted a straight fight between the incumbent Reform Party, led by Gordon Coates, and the Labour Party led by Harry Holland - who, along with Walter Nash and Peter Fraser, had transformed Labour from a protest party to a credible alternative government.⁴² The election result turned out to be more a rejection of the Reform Party than a victory for United - a coalition of anti-Coates independents and the Liberal Party led by Joseph Ward. Similarly, Labour's support for Ward's government stemmed more from a fear that a return to power by Reform would lead to an attack on wages than from any punitive perspective on the United Party. In his seventies, Ward thus found himself leader of a minority government dependent upon the Labour Party to stay in power,⁴³ and Prime Minister of a country in the throes of an economic depression. The political uncertainty was exacerbated by Ward's constant absence through ill health and his refusal to delegate any real decision making to those around him. The result was political inertia in the face of an alarming increase in the overseas deficit, crumbling business confidence and rising social hardship among many New Zealanders.⁴⁴

In May 1930, the ailing Joseph Ward resigned. Soon after, Labour withdrew its support for the coalition, leaving a weak and disorganised Government struggling with a depressed economy and facing a very difficult Parliamentary Session. As a result it was in need of all the support it could muster. One consequential outcome was the nomination of Professor A. H. Tocker of Canterbury University College as the

⁴¹ Report on Mission 1930, pp. 6-7. His impression of the Department of External Affairs was somewhat more positive. Carl Berendsen, Secretary for External Affairs, revealed a detailed understanding of the ILO and its activities and seemed 'keenly aware' of shortcomings in New Zealand's relations with the Organisation. Report on Mission, pp. 10-11. For an account of Berendsen's role in the development of New Zealand's Foreign Policy during this and the post-1945 period see, Ann Trotter. 1986, 'Personality in Foreign Policy'. *The New Zealand Journal of History*, 20, 2, pp. 167-180.

⁴² Len Richardson. 1993, 'Parties and Political Change', in Geoffery W. Rice (ed.) *The Oxford History of New Zealand*, p. 222.

⁴³ The 1928 election gave the United Party thirty-four seats, Reform twenty-nine and the Labour Party nineteen.

⁴⁴ Tom Brooking. 1992, 'Economic Transformation', in Geoffery W. Rice (ed.) *The Oxford History of New Zealand*, p. 232.

Government Representative to the XIV International Labour Conference. Harold Butler, the ILO Assistant Director, sent a letter of congratulations to both Shailer-Weston and Jim Roberts. The letter to Shailer-Weston drew attention to the same issues Riches had raised in his interview to the New Zealand Herald a few months earlier, including international trade, 'Asia has now become a competitive field of its own, particularly with regard to textiles...(but)...when they meet with European delegates, the Asiatic delegates are somewhat inclined to sit by and offer the excuse that their countries standards cannot be expected to come up to the European ones'.⁴⁵

Riches was confident that favourable reports from the Conference would be forthcoming from both Roberts and Shailer-Weston. Of Tocker there was less certainty. His nomination came as a surprise to everyone outside of the Cabinet and was immediately the subject of controversy. Minister of Labour W. A. Veitch announced that Tocker had been chosen as the Government representative to the ILO Conference because he was a leading economist who could bring back 'an unbiased report based upon scientific lines'.⁴⁶ A delegation representing the Labour movement protested vigorously against his appointment. They accused Tocker of arguing for the competitive advantage of lower labour standards and the unrestricted right of employers to manage without interference from the New Zealand Government or trade unions. For their part, the Labour Party and some employers expressed their own reservations over the Government's choice.

Despite his position as Professor of Economics at Canterbury University College, Tocker's reputation as an economist was a controversial one. In May 1930 Riches described Tocker as:

...a sincere exponent of laissez-faire doctrines...regarded by the majority of the labour movement as reactionary and incompetent. Most of the employers, though they applaud rather than condemn his point of view, probably share to some extent the labour distrust of his ability as an economist, Neither

⁴⁵ Letter to Shailer-Weston, 17 July, 1930. ILO archive, XH Series.

⁴⁶ *New Zealand Herald*, 6 March 1930. ILO archive, XH Series.

*side is altogether satisfied with his (sic) choice as Government delegate.*⁴⁷

Riches believed that despite the concerns over the choice of Tocker, his report would 'on the whole' be a fair and favourable one. Moreover, he was hopeful that the decision to send a delegation to the International Labour Conference was evidence of a lasting change in the New Zealand Government's attitude toward the ILO.⁴⁸ Two things influenced Riches conclusions. First, he believed that despite Tocker's faith in laissez-faire, exposure to the thinking and experiences of other delegates at the Conference and a closer understanding of the work of the ILO would help modify Tocker's views and have a favourable influence on his report to the New Zealand Government. Second, despite the government describing the delegation as an 'experiment', the outcome of which would influence decisions on whether or not to send future delegations, Riches judged that once the New Zealand Government had committed itself to sending a delegation to the International Labour Conference, the principle of representation would have been established. He reasoned that once this had happened, future Governments would find it difficult to reverse 'for reasons of expense alone'. As it turned out, Riches was wrong on both these counts.

A short fat man with a florid face and a spade-like beard.

At the beginning of October 1930 Riches wrote to Butler informing him of the outcome of a meeting he had arranged with Tocker as the latter was on his way home to New Zealand from Geneva.⁴⁹ The meeting clearly indicated that Tocker's experience of the Conference had not been a happy one and that his report to the New Zealand government, while laudatory of the International Labour Office, would be a critical of the Conference. Riches admitted his hope that Tocker's exposure to alternative thinking in Geneva may have modified his thinking, was 'over-sanguine'. He suspected that Tocker's 'own natural scepticism and deep-rooted faith in laissez-faire', combined with

⁴⁷ Report on Mission to New Zealand, February-May, 1930, p. 3.

⁴⁸ Letter to Albert Thomas, 15 May 1930, p3. ILO archive, CAT Series.

⁴⁹ Letter to Harold Butler, October 3, 1930. ILO archive, XH Series.

the conservatism of the employer representative at the Conference, Shailer-Weston, had 'influenced considerably' his conclusions. Riches continued:

*Tocker's report, if it is as critical as his comments lead me to expect, will probably constitute a fairly serious obstacle - though not necessarily an insuperable one - to the sending of a delegation from New Zealand next year. Newspaper comment on it will be illuminating, but the main determinate of the Government's decision will, of course, be the position and strength of the Labour Party.*⁵⁰

Tocker's comments proved to be critical beyond what Riches had expected. At the end of October, he wrote to Butler again:

*The newspaper account of Professor Tocker's address confirms my impression that his report would be laudatory of the Office and critical of the Conference; but I scarcely expected him to make such sweeping and unguarded statements in public.*⁵¹

Riches' letter referred to an address Tocker had given to the Canterbury Employers' Association at the end of October 1930. The address was reported in some detail by the Christchurch Times - whose editor, Riches believed, was a supporter of Tocker's nomination as the Government delegate to the Conference.⁵² In his address, Tocker described his reactions at the end of the Geneva Conference, 'I left the Conference feeling that it was useless. It was really nothing but a background for flamboyant Continental oratory'.⁵³ He went on:

There was an enormous amount of rubbish talked. The temperature was about 85 degree's in the shade, everybody smoked, and the atmosphere was very thick... One of the British workers delegates, a rather pompous individual, railed

⁵⁰ Ibid, p2.

⁵¹ Letter to Harold Butler, October 30, p1. ILO archives, XH Series.

⁵² Ibid, p. 2.

⁵³ 'Labour Office. Geneva Conference. Fifty Nations Negotiate'. *Christchurch Times*, October, 1930, p16. ILO archive, XH Series.

*against the capitalist system; we got that sort of rubbish again and again. Perfectly fair clauses were thrown out because of prejudice, and a tremendous amount of sloppy sentimentalism was talked... Mr Thomas is a short, fat man with a florid face and a spade-like beard. The gesticulations of the Continental people nearly made us laugh. I tried hard to listen to A. J. Cook, the British miner delegate, but he was so emphatic that he was almost unintelligible. What had the Conference achieved; what could it achieve. Voices: Nothing.*⁵⁴

Despite these comments and the negative perception of Tocker's abilities as an economist, his address to the Canterbury Employer's provides an insight to the difficulties that the ILO was facing at the time. With the onset of economic depression, countries were beginning to shift away from policies of international co-operation in favour of 'national, political and economic autism'.⁵⁵ The shift led to a psychology of mutual suspicion and distrust which permeated the International Labour Conference and undermined its standard setting activities.⁵⁶ Moreover, the Conference's preoccupation with Europe was beginning to divide ILO members and become a subject of real concern for the Organisation's permanent secretariat. On these and other issues Tocker commented:

Many countries consider ratification an expression of sympathy. Several have ratified conventions, but passed no legislation whatever; others have done the same but rendered them inoperative by providing no legislation; and others have even passed the laws but have not carried them into effect. Countries which have ratified the eight hours day convention work a ten, and in some cases a twelve hour day. The Continental countries distrust one another too much to carry them into effect. The Conference is obsessed with Europe. It is really trying to raise the standards of Eastern Europe to those of the West of the Continent. The South American delegates have a pleasant time and voted here and there, but I don't

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ G.W. Garside (ed.). 1993, *Capitalism in Crisis*, p. 2.

⁵⁶ 'Labour Office'. *Christchurch Times*, October 1930, p16. ILO archive, XH Series.

*think they do much afterwards. No great contribution was wanted from New Zealand, and the delegates, I found, were not particularly interested in us.*⁵⁷

Tocker's address was widely reported. However, the response of the New Zealand press was mixed - giving some credence to the effort Riches had devoted in lobbying various editors on the ILO's activities. For example, while the editorial of the Christchurch Times endorsed Tocker's criticisms, the Christchurch Press, erstwhile a supporter of Tocker's views on the New Zealand economy, rebuked him.⁵⁸ Elsewhere, an account of Tocker's criticisms published in the journal *Economic Record* prompted a detailed response by Riches himself.⁵⁹

Tocker's report served to reinforce the New Zealand Government's ambiguous attitude toward the ILO. While it saw value in the research activities of the Organisation, it found little relevance in its Conventions and the activities of the Conference. This position was echoed by Shailer-Weston, Employer representative to the 1930 Conference, 'As far as industrial relations are concerned, New Zealand is ahead of all the nations represented, other than Australia, especially in the spirit of conciliation and confidence now growing up between employers and labour organisations. This is an-all important point, and it will be many years before other countries reach this position'.⁶⁰

In his report Shailer-Weston once again turned to the perennial issue of expense and argued that the 'economies' of sending a regular delegation to the Conference 'were not sufficient' but maintained that New Zealand should keep in touch with the research and reports of the Organisation:

This is the most useful work to New Zealand now being carried out by the ILO. It has become a great clearing house for information upon all industrial and commercial matters. It has some very able and enthusiastic officials at its head.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Letter to Harold Butler, 30 October, p. 1. ILO archive, XH Series

⁵⁹ 'Notes'. *Economic Record*, May, 1931, pp. 102-107.

⁶⁰ Report on the XIV Session of the International Labour Conference. Honourable T. Shailer-Weston, Employers Delegate and President of the New Zealand Employers Federation, July 3, 1930. ILO archive, XH Series.

*Moreover, especially as we go with Japan, China and India, and other eastern countries, it is an important safety valve against Bolshevistic and Communistic activities.*⁶¹

Shailer-Weston's final comment referred to a concern among employers and Government that the 'communist menace' was having an increasing influence in the industrial life of New Zealand. Rising unemployment, and a perception that the Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Amendment Act 1932 and the decisions of the Arbitration Court were the outcome of political attempts to undermine labour, led to a growing disillusionment with the ability of trade unions to defend the interests of their members. Some, such as the coalminers, hoped to rekindle grassroots activism by calling a national strike. Others, such as the freezing workers, simply refused to accept wage cuts of between 16 and 66 per cent for the 1932-33 season. Elsewhere, the dissatisfaction and agitation of the growing army of unemployed saw riots in Dunedin, Christchurch and Wellington and, most seriously, in Auckland as a 20,000 strong protest march against unemployment and wage cuts erupted into riot in Queen Street.⁶² The Prime Minister, G. W. Forbes, attributed the riots to the work of Communist agitators. The various, and often draconian, pieces of legislation that the Coalition Government rushed through Parliament as a result were merely interpreted as panic measures and confirmed a belief that Government inaction in the face of a deteriorating economy rather than Communist agitation was the root cause of the disorder. In reality, the New Zealand Communist Party, despite its growth in numbers, had little impact apart from its influence in the National Unemployed Workers Union who's only really radical demand was the abolition of the Arbitration Court.⁶³

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² See Len Richardson. 1992, 'Parties and Political Change', in Geoffery. W. Rice, *The Oxford History of New Zealand*, pp. 226-229.

⁶³ Bruce Brown. 1962, *The Rise of New Zealand Labour. A History of the New Zealand Labour Party*, Wellington, Price Milburn, pp. 174-175.

The New Zealand Government struggled with an economic depression without parallel in living memory. With a fall in the price of its primary exports - particularly wool, butter, cheese and mutton - a halt on the traditional bale-out of overseas borrowing, a drop in national income and the value of national production, and with the level of unemployment at an historic high, a period of economic and political austerity swept over the country.⁶⁴ In 1933 Riches was moved to write:

In these circumstances, it is not surprising that New Zealand is in the throes of a severe psychological as well as economic depression. The spectacle of a Government whose policy is a curious combination of drift, deflation and doubtful expediencies; the small results from the great expectation of Ottawa;⁶⁵ the repeated failure of international conferences; the lack of agreement among local economists - such factors as these have destroyed public confidence in established leaders and led to wide-spread discontent. To a greater extent, perhaps, than in most other countries, the depression is regarded as a sort of natural calamity, a phenomenon that no amount of human foresight could have avoided; and to this extent the public reaction is one of resignation rather than constructive planning. There is a tendency, not without reason, to regard the causes of the depression as almost entirely international, and the possibilities of recovery as dependent wholly on international co-operation. Lip service to the ideals of freer trade and international co-operation is, however, accompanied, as in other countries, by tariff, trade and currency problems of the very kind which tend to aggravate the world situation. Although some of the recent legislation of the present Government has been radical enough, the main body of opinion in the country is still conservative, and there is an almost hysterical fear of communist ideas.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ For fuller accounts of policy and social responses to the Depression in New Zealand see Endres and Jackson 1993; Richardson 1992; Brooking 1992 and Olssen 1992.

⁶⁵ Agreement on exchange rates reached by Commonwealth Governments, Ottawa, 1932.

⁶⁶ Riches, E.J. Report on Mission in New Zealand, February to April 1933, pp. 26-27. ILO archive, XH Series.

So it was no surprise when New Zealand failed to send a delegation to the International Labour Conference in the years following the 1930 'experiment'. It was a country run by a politically fragile government struggling with an economy in the throes of a deep depression. In sum, Riches' concerns about the reports of Shailer-Weston, and Tocker in particular, had to a large degree been justified. However, perhaps a more critical influence on the decision of the Government had been the resignation of Sir Joseph Ward. Ward's minority United Party had held power after the election of 1928 on the basis of Labour Party support. Among the concessions extracted from Ward in return was the establishment of regular delegations to the International Labour Conference. Once Ward resigned for health reasons in May 1930, the chances of Labour getting similar concessions from his successor, G. W. Forbes, were slight. Labour withdrew its support for United, prompting a new coalition between the United and Reform Parties. In December 1931, a general election saw the new coalition in power and with it the realisation that any further delegations to the International Labour Conference would only be forthcoming following the election of a Labour government.

The inability of the League to deal with the world depression provided an opportunity for the ILO to offer an alternative forum for international discussion on the crisis. In this respect, the ability of ILO staff to gather and collate information on national responses to the Depression, and the determination of Albert Thomas to distance the ILO from the League, institutionally and politically, proved critical. If the Organisation was to retain the support of labour it had to demonstrate a vitality that made the prospect of an international labour standards regime a real and dynamic one. The International Labour Conferences remained a critical part of this process. It was the forum in which government, employer and labour representatives of ILO member states examined the research, debated and finally voted. Thomas viewed this process of interaction, collaboration, and tripartism, as the life-blood of the Organisation. Its function was to generate support for social justice and worker rights through international Conventions and Recommendations. Supported by research from its Geneva-based secretariat, the bulk of ILO activity lay here.

In pursuing social justice, the radicalisation of the working class occupied the minds of political decision-makers throughout the industrialised world. The economic depression, and its most visible face - mass unemployment - became a worldwide phenomenon. The perception of unemployment as a breeding ground for political unrest -from the Left rather than the Right - prompted greater international collaboration. In such circumstances, New Zealand's 'distant detachment' from the activities of the ILO became more tenuous. A politically fragile coalition government struggled with a deteriorating economy which manifested itself socially in rising unemployment and street riots in its major cities.

However, attendance at the XIV International Labour Conference was more an outcome of political expediency than a genuine belief in the value of the ILO to New Zealand. It remained an organisation of which the government and its supporters had little understanding. Except to proclaim that industrial legislation in New Zealand was already in advance of other countries, the ILO was largely ignored. New Zealand government's relative lack of interest in international affairs seemed to reflect the attitude of most New Zealanders.⁶⁷ Even the League of Nations, on whose foundations hopes for lasting peace were constructed, was viewed as a waste of money and nothing more than a dangerous rival to the British Empire.⁶⁸

A muddled benevolence. New Zealand and the question of ratification.

On the 6th December 1935, Labour finally took office as the Government of New Zealand. With the United and Reform parties largely discredited, its strength was unequalled in New Zealand politics since the days of the Liberal Government under the popular Richard 'King Dick' Seddon.⁶⁹ With Michael Joseph Savage as Prime Minister, the principal ministers in the new Government were, Peter Fraser, Deputy Prime Minister with the portfolios of Education, Health and Police; Walter Nash, Finance,

⁶⁷ Angus Ross. 1972, 'New Zealand and the Commonwealth' to 1939, in *The Commonwealth, Past, Present and Future*, Wellington, New Zealand Institute of International Affairs, p. 7.

⁶⁸ Bruce Brown, 1962, *The Rise of New Zealand Labour*, p. 116.

⁶⁹ Bruce Brown. 1962, *The Rise of New Zealand Labour*, p. 182.

Customs and 'everything to do with money'; Richard Semple, Works and Transport; DG Sullivan, Industries and Commerce; H.G.R Mason, Attorney-General and HT Armstrong, Labour.

A brief conversation took place between Riches and Armstrong following the latter's appointment as Minister of Labour. Armstrong told Riches that although he had not yet had the opportunity to examine the general question of New Zealand's relations with the ILO, he assured him that New Zealand would be represented at the next International Labour Conference.⁷⁰ The two met again in January 1936. At Armstrong's request, Riches prepared a five page memorandum on New Zealand's relations with the ILO.⁷¹ Copies were given to Savage, Nash and Fraser. The memorandum had four sections:

- i Representation at the International Labour Conference
- ii Parliamentary Discussion of Conventions and the Reports of Delegates
- iii The Ratification of Conventions
- iv The ILO as a source of information

Riches urged the New Zealand Government to select, as soon as possible, the New Zealand delegates to the Twentieth Session of the International Labour Conference. Drawing on the experience of Worker delegates to previous Conferences, he requested that advisors be appointed to those attending for the first time, in an effort to overcome the problem of representative continuity and delegate efficiency. On the thorny issue of ratification, Riches drew heavily on the article by E.P. Haslam⁷² which compared New Zealand labour legislation with existing International Labour Conventions and argued that a significant number of Conventions could be ratified with little or no adjustment to existing legislation. Riches underlined why ratification was important to New Zealand and the ILO:

⁷⁰ Extract of a letter to Harold Butler from Riches, 9 December, 1935. ILO archive, XH Series

⁷¹ E. J Riches. New Zealand's Relations with the ILO, 10 January, 1936. ILO archive, RL Series.

⁷² See *Economic Record*, December 1935.

*Early ratification of these Conventions by New Zealand would be a valuable gesture and would constitute tangible proof of New Zealand's goodwill toward the objects and work of the ILO. It would raise New Zealand from the undignified position which she at present occupies as one of the few important countries which have ratified none of the Conventions; and it would be a definite contribution towards the effectiveness of these Conventions, and thus toward the general upward influence exerted by the ILO on conditions in backward countries. Moreover, it is worth remembering that even when existing legislation is ahead of the provisions of a Convention, ratification is no mere formality from the point of view of the workers, to whom it provides a guarantee that standards set will not at any later date be lowered.*⁷³

Armstrong kept his promise. New Zealand sent a full contingent of delegates to the 1936 International Labour Conference and brought to an end the political inertia which Riches and others had worked hard to overcome. Yet on the subject of ratification, the new Labour Government remained cautious. In response to questions in Parliament, Savage argued that the matter was under consideration but the legislative programme for the current sitting would concentrate on New Zealand's domestic needs. However, he suggested that specific Conventions could be ratified either without amendment, or with only slight modification, of existing law. The matter of ratification, Savage told the House, would be 'brought up for consideration when the legislative programme for the next session is under review'.⁷⁴

The historian F. L. W. Wood was a regular critic of the Government's policy on ratification. He was particularly critical of the technical advice the Government was receiving from its civil service. In a letter to Riches during February 1937, Wood wondered 'how far a Government is likely to get these days on a basis of good

⁷³ E. J. Riches. 1936, *New Zealand's Relations with the ILO*, 3(a) pp. 3-4. ILO archive, RL Series. The same arguments were conveyed to the MP Robert McKeen when Keen offered to present the case for ratification to the New Zealand Parliament.

⁷⁴ *New Zealand Parliamentary Debates*, First Session, October 1st, 1936. Vol. CCXLVII, pp. 518-9.

intentions, personal ability and energy - not always backed with adequate technical advice.⁷⁵ Wood was Professor of History at Victoria University College and President of the Wellington Branch of the League of Nations Union (LNU). It was the regular practice of the LNU to call on the New Zealand Prime Minister following the conclusion of its annual conference. Wood's letter to Riches referred to the response of Michael Savage when the LNU raised the ratification of ILO Conventions. Wood wrote:

*The Prime Minister was entirely sympathetic - but in a vague and pleasant way only. The New Zealand Government in effect would do all that it was right to do, but would not ratify Conventions which fell below New Zealand's standards and thus endorse 'mediaeval conditions'*⁷⁶

Riches was disturbed by the news. It seemed to contradict Savage's comments to the House on October 1 1936 and represented a sharp contrast to the positive responses he had gleaned from Armstrong since his appointment as Minister of Labour. Moreover, Savage's comments suggested a significant lack in understanding of the rationale for ratifying international labour standards. On April 7 1937, Riches wrote to Wood:

The statement which you report calls for certain comments. In the first place, New Zealand cannot, until it passes further legislation, ratify Conventions which set standards higher than those of existing laws; the only Conventions which it can ratify are those of existing laws; the only Conventions which it can ratify are those which at the time of ratification, are fully covered - which either, that is to say, are identical with or 'fall below' New Zealand standards. Cases of absolute identity are likely to be rare so that if Conventions which fall below New Zealand standards are to be ruled out, the number which it will still be possible to ratify will be very small. To subscribe to the objects of the International Labour Organisation and at the same time to refuse to ratify Conventions which can be ratified without any difficulty would be to show a striking inconsistency. In the second place, it should be noted that the

⁷⁵ Letter to Riches, 15 February 1937. ILO archive, RL Series.

⁷⁶ Letter to Riches, 15 February 1937. ILO archive, RL Series.

suggestion that the ratification of Conventions which 'fall below' New Zealand's standards would involve the endorsement of 'mediaeval conditions' is based on a complete misunderstanding of the nature and purpose of the Conventions. To endorse a certain standard as a minimum below which conditions in no other country should be allowed to fall is not in any sense to imply that higher standards are not urgently desirable. Progress in less advanced countries must be by gradual stages and to set impossibly high standards would be to rob the Conventions of all practical value in the very cases in which they can be of greatest service. A country which ratifies a Convention undertakes to maintain standards at least as good as those set in the Convention. For it, as for other countries, the standards set in the Convention are minimum standards and there is nothing to prevent a ratifying country from enacting legislation of a more advanced type. Paragraph 11 of Article 19 of the Constitution of the International Labour Organisation provides expressly 'In no case shall any member be asked or required, as the result of the adoption of any recommendation or draft Convention by the Conference, to lessen the protection afforded by its existing legislation to the workers concerned.

The ratification by New Zealand of a series of International Labour Conventions would, in fact, have an effect precisely opposite to that suggested in the 'mediaeval conditions' statement. Each additional ratification by a country which effectively observes the provisions of the Convention tends to strengthen the upward influence exerted by that Convention on the standards of more backward countries. The exertion of such an influence is one of the principle objects of International Labour Conventions, and to refuse to make use of them for this purpose would be to rob them of a large part of their value. There is a strong moral obligation on the more advanced members of the International Labour Organisation to make the most effective use possible of these and other methods which the Organisation provides for furthering the objects to which all its members have subscribed; and it would ill become a country who claims to lead the world if it sought to evade its responsibilities in matters of this kind. It was natural enough that the present Government should not be able to find time during its first parliamentary session to

*put through the ratification of International Labour Conventions, but it would be difficult to understand a failure to do so during the session which opens next August.*⁷⁷

Riches' letter represented a detailed exposition of the rationale underpinning the ratification of international labour standards and an insight into the motivations behind the activities of first Albert Thomas and then Harold Butler. In reply, Wood restated his original impressions of the meeting:

*I may have misled you slightly by not attracting an adequate character sketch of the Prime Minister whose remarks I quoted. But I am afraid that his statement gives a true indication of the rather muddled benevolence with which the government views some of these questions, plus⁷⁸ an element of ultra caution which [may] originate in the civil service.*⁷⁹

The letter confirmed the caution Riches had expressed to his ILO colleague W. L. Crocker, who was to visit New Zealand on his way to Australia during the Winter of 1937. In a six page memorandum *Notes for your Mission to New Zealand* - the primary purpose of which was to lobby the Government on ratification, Riches gave detailed advice to Crocker on who to meet and what to do while in New Zealand. Yet Riches was clearly not optimistic on the outcome. He wrote:

If no action has yet been taken, it will be necessary to emphasis that the Office and supporters of the International Labour Organisation in other countries are confident that the Labour Government, which in opposition showed much interest in the work of the Organisation and urged the ratification of Conventions, will not fail to give tangible proof in this from, and during its first term of office, of its goodwill towards the aims and objectives of the Organisation. It was quite well understood that the volume of legislation which had to be handled during their first session and the consequent pressure on the time of Parliament and the Labour Department were

⁷⁷ Riches reply to Wood, 7 April 1937. ILO archive RL Series.

⁷⁸ Underlined as in the original letter.

⁷⁹ Letter to Riches, 24 June, 1937. ILO archive, RL Series.

*sufficient to account for the failure to take action on the Conventions last year, but no such excuse will be available for the session which is due to open August next.*⁸⁰

Riches urged Crocker to try to persuade New Zealand to adopt a formal procedure for the adoption of International Labour Conventions by Parliament. Previous Governments had ignored the ILO's constitutional requirement that each member submit Draft Conventions and Recommendations to their respective Parliaments within one year following the close of the International Labour Conference. Riches added ' If we can get New Zealand to adopt a proper procedure for the consideration of Conventions by Parliament, the chances of satisfactory collaboration in the future will be greatly improved'.⁸¹

There had been some progress earlier. The 1936 Report of the Department of Labour contained a list of the Conventions adopted at the XIX Session and a summary of the agenda prepared for the XX Session of the International Labour Conference. Moreover, the agenda of the Conference, together with decisions taken on Conventions, were printed as a Parliamentary Paper. Yet the all consuming problem remained - no Conventions had been ratified by the New Zealand Government. If Wood was correct in his assessment of Savage's attitude, then the opportunity for securing ratification had once again receded.

As it turned out, Armstrong used the 1937 Conference to announce that the New Zealand Department of Labour was preparing proposals to ratify Conventions which 'could easily applied in New Zealand'.⁸² Armstrong himself had taken an active and energetic part in the Conference, chairing a committee and giving a final speech which presented a very positive impression of the Conference. Nonetheless, Riches took nothing for granted and wrote to Wood suggesting that the League of Nations Union make representations to both Savage and Armstrong on their return from Geneva and attempt to persuade them that the necessary Parliamentary time should be made

⁸⁰ E. J. Riches. 1937, 'Notes for your Mission to New Zealand', p. 2. ILO archive, RL Series

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Speech to the XX Session of the International Labour Conference, 1937. Published in Conference Proceedings.

available to debate the question of ratification.⁸³ Riches was careful to enclose with the letter two copies of the Provisional Record of the 1937 Conference containing the Armstrong speech.

On the March 1 1938, the New Zealand Government tabled a motion to ratify twenty two International Labour Conventions. The debate that followed two days later lasted from 2.30 in the afternoon until 10.30 in the evening but, with MP's calling the Speakers attention to the dwindling numbers in the House, the motion was carried and one of the main goals of ILO activity in New Zealand was finally achieved. In an editorial the Wellington Evening Post wrote:

Ratification by the House of Representatives of 22 Conventions of the International Labour Organisation does not effect labour conditions in New Zealand. The International Labour Conferences have, in a course of years, adopted 62 Conventions fixing standards for the employment of labour. These Conventions are binding upon the member nations only when they agree to accept them. The New Zealand law conforms to 22, probably more, of them, and the effect of ratification is formal notification to other nations of Dominion approval. The domestic significance therefore is not great. Nevertheless, it is desirable that this action should be taken. The great value of the International Labour Organisation is the influence it exercises in improving industrial conditions uniformly. There are many reforms that are desirable and practicable. A nation can be isolated from competition; but they become impracticable if competitive nations lag behind. The reforming nation, therefore, should not only affect reforms in its sphere, but should, for self-protection, put its weight behind a movement to make the reforms generally applicable. This is a consideration that can't be ignored. One of the principle objections to the forty-hour week arises on that very point - that it is too far in advance of the stage reached by competitive countries, and consequently places New Zealand industry under a serious handicap. Support of the work of the International Labour Organisation may help lessen the handicap by bringing the nations into line. In the meantime a day

⁸³ Letter to Wood, 4 July 1937. ILO archive, RL Series

*given to discussion of the work is not wasted, as it is a means of bringing that work under public notice and securing for it a measure of understanding and support.*⁸⁴

By linking the issue of labour standards to international competition, the Evening Post's comments reflected the arguments Riches expressed in his letter to Wood and those expressed by Butler in his correspondence with Jim Roberts. Drawing attention to the potential for labour standards in one country to impact upon the economic performance of another was more than simply an educative process. The observation in 1933 that '...the ILO has done much useful work, though this has been rather in the field of promoting international discussion and spreading information about the various countries than in the direct improvement of industrial legislation'⁸⁵ misunderstood the politically complex nature of ILO activity. Had it been an organisation based purely on information gathering, then it would have not survived its formative years.

Summary and conclusion

The world beyond Europe was growing in importance economically and politically. Both Albert Thomas and Harold Butler recognised that in order to survive the ILO had to reflect this change. They attached great importance to the task of building an organisation that had universal and not just European relevance. Following the death of Thomas in 1932, Butler made the task a priority of his office. A significant factor in this respect was the entry of the United States into the ILO. Butler knew that once the United States became a member, the European dominance of ILO affairs would be broken, changes in the underlying structure of power would become more visible, and broader, more inclusive international coalitions would gradually emerge. As a result, he worked hard to make United States membership a reality. The United States and New Zealand represented two extremes of Butler's task. Both looked upon the ILO with some suspicion. Yet both were vital, in their own way, to its survival. In each case, the issue of state sovereignty rendered ILO membership and the ratification of international labour

⁸⁴ *Wellington Evening Post*, 3 March, 1938. ILO archive, RL Series

⁸⁵ G.D.H Cole and Margaret Cole. 1933, *The Intelligent Man's Review of Europe To-day*, Gollancz, London p. 801, quoted in A. M. Endres and G. Fleming. 1996, 'International Economic Policy in the Inter-War Years: The Special Contribution of ILO Economists'. *International Labour Review*, 135, 2, p. 208.

standards a politically sensitive process. In the years between 1919 and 1934, the United States represented the most important example of these sensitivities. New Zealand, with a mixture of guarded and dismissive responses to ILO questions by its government, represented another.

In both countries, political change was the catalyst for more positive, more proactive, relations with the ILO. Following the election of the Roosevelt administration, entry of the United States symbolised the end of European dominance and began the evolution of the international labour standards regime into a broader, more inclusive phase. In New Zealand's case, the election of a more outward looking Labour government marked the turning point in relations with the ILO. The success of Labour's programme depended on the co-operation of the unions. Part of the price of this co-operation was closer, more active engagement with the ILO who now saw its long years of lobbying for the ratification of international labour standards by New Zealand finally fulfilled in 1938.

The 1940s marked a period of close relations between the New Zealand and the ILO. Following the death of Michael Savage in March 1940, Peter Fraser took over as Prime Minister in the Labour government. Like others in the Labour Party, such as Harry Holland and Walter Nash, Fraser had a keen interest in international affairs and was familiar with the activities of the ILO. Labour had evolved into a broad-based, reformist party with a welfare and development programme that sought to undo the social neglect of the previous government. Its successful 1935 campaign called for state control of the Reserve Bank, credit and currency reform, guaranteed prices to farmers, and a host of welfare and labour reforms. By the end of 1936, it had restored wage rates to the level that operated in 1931, reinstated compulsory arbitration, introduced compulsory unionism, fixed a minimum wage, and legislated a forty-hour week.

Internationally, Labour policy switched from the anti-League rhetoric of the early 1920s to a proactive pro-League position. More broadly, while in the 1920s and early 1930s New Zealand had abdicated responsibility for foreign affairs to Great Britain, under Labour, foreign policy began to develop a more independent outlook on world

affairs. Historically, Labour had always possessed a more international outlook than other New Zealand political parties. For its part, the Federation of Labour (FoL) was quick to offer its own ideas. Quoted in an article described as the first of its kind from the international labour movement,⁸⁶ the FoL called for an International Labour Conference to be held outside Europe, ‘... for the purpose of studying the problems which will arise at the end of the war ... with regard to the future functioning of the International Labour Organisation and its headquarters, the ILO’.⁸⁷ Thus once established in government, Labour’s increasingly independent stance on foreign policy, and the outbreak of the World War II, encouraged a much broader discussion of international issues - most notably, the reconstruction of the post-war world. It was a discussion that the ILO actively encouraged and one in which New Zealand was keen to demonstrate its confidence in taking its place in a new world order.

⁸⁶ Letter to Edward Phelan from M.R.K. Burge, Head of the ILO London Office, 24 September, 1940. ILO archive, PWR Series.

⁸⁷ Quoted in, ‘Reform of the ILO. One of the many problems to be solved tomorrow’. *The International Transport Workers Journal*, August, 1940, p. 67. Also quoted in the *Daily Telegraph*, London (undated), who described the New Zealand trade unions as ‘taking the lead’ on this issue. Both found in ILO archive, PWR Series.