

**“Where the light of their glory leads”
– the international context of the Blackball strike**

By Mark Derby

Adapted from a talk given to the seminar to mark the centenary of the 1908 strike, Blackball, 23 March 2008

I want to look at the Blackball strike within the bigger picture of some relevant overseas developments. As the historian Len Richardson has pointed out with reference to Blackball, “the migratory habit was deeply imbedded in the fabric of mining life” and many of the key figures in the strike were recent migrants who brought their political baggage with them. Transnational influences also ran in the other direction – from the West Coast to other countries, as I hope to explain.

My starting point is a cryptic note in the March 1908 issue of the New Zealand Socialist Party’s monthly magazine *Commonweal*. In the section headed, ‘Answers to correspondents’, a writer from Blackball, identified only as ‘P.H.H.’, is told by the editor that, “I have handed your request to the Secretary of the IWW. He will see what he can do to help you.”

The first set of initials refers, it’s safe to assume, to Patrick Hodgens Hickey, the militant NZ-born Blackball miner and head of the local Socialist Party branch. The second set is certainly a reference to the IWW, the Industrial Workers of the World, known as the Wobblies, and this note is the earliest published mention I have seen of their involvement in the Blackball strike. The IWW had been formed less than three years earlier, in Chicago, by representatives of some of the most militant industrial unions in the US. Pat Hickey was still living in the States at that time and may even have been present at the founding of the IWW. The organisation arose as a radical alternative to the conservative and craft-oriented American Federation of Labour. It was founded on the principles of industrial unionism – organising across entire industries rather than in specific trades – and on direct action at the point of production, including strike action if necessary, rather than arbitration or other employer-friendly strategies which were out of the hands of the workers themselves. Within a few years of its founding in Chicago, individual Wobblies were establishing IWW branches in Canada, Australia, South Africa, New Zealand and many other countries.

So at the time of the Blackball strike there was a branch of the IWW in Wellington, where the *Commonweal* was produced, but none on the West Coast. In the first weeks of 1908 the Socialist Party’s organiser, Comrade Fitzgerald, made a tour of West Coast mining towns. Here at Blackball, he was given a splendid reception by a crowded hall. The *Commonweal* wrote, “There is a stirring of the dry bones ... everybody is now talking Socialism or Anti-Socialism.” Just three days after that meeting, Hickey and the Socialist Party comrades who helped organise Fitzgerald’s visit were sacked. According to *Commonweal*, “these comrades actively assisted [Comrade Fitzgerald] in his work. That their doing so was distasteful to their employers, and is the real cause of their being ordered to ‘move on’, we have little doubt.”¹ So what kind of messages did Fitzgerald give the Blackball miners? Well,

¹ ‘The Miners’ Strike at Blackball’, *Commonweal*, March 08

the final stop of his West Coast trip was Denniston, “which was a great success in every possible way.... Comrade Fitzgerald ... showed the fallacy of arbitration and also the need for a branch of the IWW at Denniston.” There is every reason to think he also pushed the IWW direct-action message at Blackball.

Hickey’s letter to the editor of *Commonweal* was most likely to have been a request to send IWW literature, since the distribution of propaganda such as its famous *Little Red Songbook* was the main activity of New Zealand’s IWW at that time. The songbook included songs like ‘Solidarity Forever’, written by the Wobbly Ralph Chaplin. Although the organisation was still in its early years even in its birthplace of the US, there was an active branch of the IWW in Wellington, based among the wharfies and led by a well-known soapbox orator named John Dowdall. Also in that March 1908 issue of *Commonweal* was a report of a recent Sunday night meeting of the Wellington branch of the Socialist Party at which ‘our platform was given up to the IWW. Comrade Eagle... dwelt on ... the need of building up a new economic organization of the Working Class to do in the industrial field what the Socialist Party proposed to do in the political field and to work in harmony for the overthrow of capitalism.’ After this speech, “the meeting was thrown open to the audience and a very profitable hour was spent in the interchange of ideas between members of the IWW and leaders of various craft unions in Wellington. Meetings such as these do a wonderful amount of good.” So we get the sense of a symbiosis between the Socialist Party and the IWW at that early stage, and also of overlapping membership, since Tom Eagle, the spokesperson for the Wellington IWW, was also on the executive of the Wellington branch of the Socialist Party, just as Hickey and the other sacked Blackball men were on the executive of their local branch.

Later in March Fitzgerald made a return visit to Blackball, where “the main topic of the day down here is strike.... The propaganda work that has been down here during the last few weeks has had the effect of putting the Socialist movement on a very strong footing.” That propaganda work may well have included the distribution of the IWW literature which Hickey inquired about. The following month Hickey himself was in Wellington to support for the Blackball miners and he “urged the Workers to organise along the plan of the Industrial Workers of the World, the address being very well received.”

A week later, at its first Easter conference, the Socialist Party endorsed the preamble of the IWW, which begins, “The working class and the employing class have nothing in common.” They again sent their tireless organiser down south, this time to east coast towns like Christchurch, and he reported, “We are also keeping Industrial Unionism before the eyes of the Workers, and although we are handicapped for want of literature, a short time will see the formation of an Industrial Club on the West Coast.” In fact that doesn't appear to have happened until some years later, but I believe the effectiveness of the Blackball strike was seen by many New Zealand unionists and radicals as a vindication of IWW-style direct action tactics. The rapid formation of the Miners Federation and the ‘Red’ Federation of Labour, which also adopted the IWW’s preamble at one point, were broadly in line with IWW industrial unionism strategy, and also with its emphasis on seeking gains for workers’ through syndicalist organisations rather than Parliamentary representation.

This brief era of anarcho-syndicalist successes very nearly received a huge boost in

the form of a speaking tour by the woman who was possibly most famous anarchist of the time, Emma Goldman. The December 1908 *Commonweal* reported that “Emma Goldman will shortly leave America for NZ and Australia and expects to arrive here in February. She intends to deliver lectures in the principal cities with a view to educating the Australian mind on Anarchism and kindred topics.” That tour was cancelled at short notice because the US government withheld Goldman’s passport and revoked her citizenship. What isn’t widely known is that, working closely alongside Goldman in New York at this time was a woman from the West Coast of New Zealand, the daughter and the ex-wife of a miner. Her name was Lola Ridge, although she also went by other names. She went on to become a leading figure of the intellectual left in the US, and I want to trace this link between the West Coast mines and the radical milieu of turn-of-the-century New York.

I’ll start with part of a poem which appeared in the *Canterbury Times* in 1892:

Her sons shall toil at that furnace
Where the fuel is thoughts and deeds
And follow the heroes of ages
Where the light of their glory leads
Injustice shall fall by the swords of the brave
With the fetters of class in an honourless grave
O’er the ruins, let Freedom and Brotherhood wave.
On, Zealanda!²

This is admittedly a rather over-the-top piece of late-Victorian revolutionary bombast, but if you read the lyrics of ‘God Defend New Zealand’ for the first time, without the music, they might seem pretty silly too. And it was written when its author, Lola Ridge, was just 19. Her early life reads like a real-life version of *The Denniston Rose*. She arrived here at the age of 13 from Ireland, with her mother. In a later series of poems about her childhood, Lola Ridge wrote:

When you tell mama
You are going to do something great
She looks at you
As though you were a window
She were trying to see through,
And says she hopes you will be good
Instead of great.

Her mother’s hopes were to be disappointed. Lola Ridge was never very good, but in some ways she achieved greatness.

Her mother married a gold-miner named Donald McFarlane and the family lived at Kaniere, near Hokitika. When Lola was 22 she also married a miner, Peter Webster, who ran a successful gold-slucing operation at Kaniere. Their son Keith was born in 1900. The marriage was not a happy one. Peter Webster seems to have been a heavy drinker and at the age of 30 Lola divorced him and moved with her mother and son to Sydney in 1903. When her mother died a few years later, Ridge and her son moved again, this time to the US. She settled in Greenwich Village and became active in the

² *Canterbury Times*, 25 August 1892

thriving anarchist movement. Her poem 'The Martyrs of Hell' appeared on the cover of *Mother Earth*, the anarchist monthly edited by Emma Goldman.

Ridge was never a member of the IWW or any other political movement but was an early advocate of women's rights, and of equal rights for blacks, and for Jewish and other immigrant groups. She was known for her intense revolutionary zeal. Apparently "People felt the necessity of either defending or abusing her whenever her name came up." To begin with she supported herself by factory work and modelling, and only after ten years, when she was 45, was her first collection of poems published. Called *The Ghetto*, it described working class Jewish immigrant life in New York. It created an immediate sensation.

Lola Ridge wasn't an armchair revolutionary but was always prepared to roll up her sleeves and get her hands dirty for a cause she believed in. In the mid-1920s she was very active in defence of Sacco and Vanzetti, Italian anarchists who were wrongly convicted of robbery and murder, and sentenced to death. The sentence was carried out, even though someone else had earlier confessed to those crimes and said that the two Italians were not involved. In 1927 Lola was part of a large group of people holding a silent vigil outside their prison in Boston, on the night before their execution. As the crowd built up outside the prison gates, mounted police charged the protestors to move them back across the road. According to an eyewitness: "One tall, thin figure of a woman stepped out alone, a good distance into the empty square, and when the police came down at her and the horses' hooves beat over her head, she did not move, but stood up with her shoulders slightly bowed, entirely still. The charge was repeated again and again, but she was not to be driven away. A man near me said in horror, suddenly recognising her, "That's Lola Ridge."

Throughout her life she wrote and published modernist poetry, and eventually published five collections of her work and won several national poetry awards in the US. But she managed to combine this minority-interest activity with her very high-profile political activism. Ridge was also in the front row of the campaign for the release of the radical labor leader Tom Mooney, a wharfie from San Francisco, who was framed on a trumped-up charge and sentenced to life imprisonment. She wrote a poem for Mooney called 'Stone Face', which appeared on a poster distributed across America in tens of thousands of copies, to raise money for Mooney's release. This is perhaps the most widely distributed poem by any New Zealander, and it eventually achieved its objective. Mooney was released and given a full pardon, but only after spending 23 years in jail.

When she died of TB in 1941, the *New York Times*, hardly a radical organ, described Ridge as one of America's 'leading contemporary poets'. She has quite a high reputation in the US, some of her work has recently been reprinted there, but she is practically unknown in this country.

Finally, I want to briefly mention yet another West Coaster who also became a leading figure in the radical wing of the US labour movement. Len de Caux was born in Westport in 1899, the son of the local Anglican minister. He was educated at elite private schools in New Zealand and England, and went to Oxford University on a scholarship in 1919. De Caux was radicalised during summer holiday trips in Europe, for example in Turin in 1920 which he visited during a strike and workers' occupation

of the giant Fiat auto factories. Immediately after graduating, he says he “brushed from me the cobwebs of Oxford and emigrated to the United States... I’d come to join the working class in a country where class struggle was more brazenly brutal than in England or New Zealand.”

Soon de Caux was writing on-the-job articles for the IWW paper *Industrial Solidarity*, on Great Lakes shipping, Chicago packinghouses and Detroit steel mills, and dodging shotgun-wielding guards in order to ride freight trains to the Midwestern grain harvest. He eventually became one of the most influential radical journalists in the US and the author of several books including a history of the IWW. In the 1930s he was appointed publicity director of the Congress of Industrial Organisations, the CIO, which was then the leftwing trade union organisation in opposition to the American Federation of Labor. The AFL was still very conservative as it had been in the days when the IWW was formed, and by the 1930s it was also very corrupt. During the McCarthy era of the early 50s De Caux was witch-hunted out of his job and blacklisted by the House Unamerican Activities Committee, headed by Senator Joe McCarthy. After that he was never again able to find fulltime paid work.

De Caux returned to New Zealand in 1959, and when he revisited his hometown of Westport he saw an old photograph of the town as it was at the turn of the century. “It was so startlingly similar to Western American towns around the same period, where the IWW had its start, that I realised for the first time that the Wobblies might have had roots in like pioneering conditions in both countries.”

That’s the main point I want to make in this talk - that the Blackball strike did not take place in an historical vacuum but formed part of a wave of similar activities in this country and right around the world, by workers facing much the same sorts of condition and pressures. And I think it’s important to recall and celebrate the response of groups like the IWW, internationalists by name and nature, to those conditions and pressures which led to the presence of New Zealanders at the centre of some of the most significant political events happening around the world.

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