

Title: Wellington: the way we work

- Name of Speaker: Andy Foster
- Position: Mayor of Wellington
- Nationality/ City: New Zealand
- Session: 2

New Zealand has a long history of workers' unions fighting for better pay and conditions and Wellington, as the capital and one of the first areas settled by Europeans, has been at the forefront.

In 1821, Bay of Islands Māori timber workers stopped work because they wanted to be paid in money or gunpowder, instead of food. Schoolboys went on strike in the 1880s against too much homework.

The union movement was strong in New Zealand from the late 1800s and through much of the 1900s. The union-backed Labour Party was formed during World War I and won the 1936 election.

The country was heavily reliant on exports and port workers and miners staged high-profile strikes – the biggest being the bitter 1951 waterfront dispute.

Wharfies refused to work overtime, in protest over a low pay increase.

There was a strong response from the government, which declared a state of emergency and sent soldiers in to load ships. Draconian emergency regulations imposed rigid censorship, gave police sweeping powers and made it an offence for citizens to assist strikers – even giving food to their children was outlawed.

Other unions supported the wharfies, and 22,000 people were out of work for five months before the wharfies conceded defeat.

Towards the end of the 20th Century, the power of the unions was eroded. There was mistrust of unions and compulsory unionism. From 1991, law changes meant

workers no longer had to belong to a union and could bargain with their bosses directly.

New Zealand was also one of the first countries in the world to adopt the eight-hour working day – widely credited to London carpenter Samuel Parnell, who in 1840 migrated to Wellington's Petone and on his first job demanded the limited hours.

Other employers tried to impose longer hours, but Parnell enlisted the support of other workers and incoming migrants were informed of the local custom, which several decades later became law.

In 2012, the Living Wage movement kicked off in NZ. The wage is calculated on expenses of workers and their families such as food, transportation, housing and childcare. This year the rate (\$21.15) is \$3.45 more than the minimum legal hourly wage.

In 2018, after five years of working towards it, Wellington City Council became the first Living Wage accredited council in New Zealand and with more than 1600 employees, also the largest. Since then Porirua and Dunedin City Councils have also become accredited.

For WCC, this affects about 450 people – such as cleaners, security guards and workers who would normally earn the minimum wage.