

Port worker's wife killed on New Zealand picket line

John Braddock
5 January 2000

The year 1999 came to a close in New Zealand with the death of a port worker's wife who was run down and fatally injured on a picket line at the Port of Lyttelton. Christine Clark, a 45-year-old mother of two, died on New Year's Eve in Christchurch Hospital's intensive care unit, seven hours after the life support system, which had kept her alive for the previous three days, was turned off. It was the first death on a picket line in New Zealand since the Waihi miners' strike of 1912.

The incident in which Clark was injured occurred while port workers and a strong group of local supporters were picketing over a decision by the Lyttelton Port Company to contract out its coal loading operations. The picket was established on Boxing Day and had been running for two days. The port workers were slowing traffic in and out of the port by stopping vehicles and handing out leaflets.

At midday on the second day, a four-wheel-drive sports utility, which had already been through the picket several times, approached again. The driver, a 51-year-old owner of a Christchurch importing business, abused the pickets when forced to stop. Clark was positioned in front of his vehicle with her hands on the bonnet. According to one witness, a worker who was standing next to her, the driver deliberately ran Clark down. "He looked her straight in the eyes and booted it. He went right over the top of her," the witness said.

The vehicle then drove off at speed leaving Clark sprawled unconscious on the ground. She suffered serious head injuries and a badly lacerated leg and never regained consciousness. The driver was subsequently located by police within the port and escorted away. He was charged with dangerous driving causing injury, and will appear in court later this week. Police have indicated that more serious charges could be laid once a coroner's inquiry establishes the official cause of death.

The dispute began earlier in the week with considerable media publicity that the picket represented a new

"tougher" line by the national union leaderships, under a more "union-friendly" Labour-led coalition government. It was the first major industrial dispute after the new government was elected on November 27. The port company's proposal to contract out coal loading operations meant that a South Island West Coast based contractor, G.S. Smith, would take over the jobs of the Lyttelton port workers.

With much fanfare, the Council of Trade Unions' (CTU) new president, Ross Wilson, flew to the picket accompanied by Seafarers' Union President Dave Morgan. Morgan is a leader of the Trade Union Federation, which was set up as a "left" alternative to the CTU after the 1991 passage of the Employment Contracts Act. He claimed that the presence of Wilson on the picket line signified an "important change" in the CTU's approach to labour disputes. It suggested a "stronger leadership" for the working class and that the CTU was "prepared to act as well as talk".

Certainly there was no shortage of talk. Waterfront Workers' Union national secretary Trevor Hanson said the dispute represented a fight for every job in New Zealand threatened by contracting out. The union claimed that it was prepared to escalate the dispute and promised more pickets, roadblocks and other action to prevent the contracting company entering the port. The central theme of a number of meetings held around the port was that the dispute was a "focal point" for the union movement.

Port unions' spokesman Paul Corliss also praised Wilson's visit to the picket saying that it would hopefully signify a "closer involvement" by the CTU "at grass-roots level". Yet statements by both Corliss and Wilson soon revealed that the unions' perspective was not to win the dispute and defend watersiders' jobs, but to put pressure on the new government over the terms of its proposed reform of the Employment Contracts Act.

Wilson's main criticism of the port company was that it

had failed to involve or even inform the unions of its plans to contract out the watersiders' jobs. He emphasised that the Labour government's introduction of provisions for so-called "good faith bargaining" would have required the port company to reveal such information.

Corliss said that the unions had to put the government "under strong pressure" over the reform of the Employment Contracts Act. "If we don't make our point now, rest assured the Employers' Federation and Business Roundtable will, and they will be trying to spike our guns", he was reported as saying. The action over the contracting dispute was designed to "send the right message" and "scare the s... out of them (the port company)".

Yet within two days all the same union leaders were moving to close down the picket. Even as Christine Clark was lying injured on the roadway, port union officials were in discussions with management over proposals to end the dispute.

As a result, the port company will suspend the loading contract with S.G. Smith for one month. During this time, union workers will continue handling the coal but the union has committed itself to find ways of cutting costs and assisting the port company remain "competitive". Management and unions will negotiate lower rates for the work and discuss further reducing coal-handling costs.

In other words, the union is vying to replace the contractor as the agency for destroying jobs and conditions on the waterfront. Lyttelton Port Company managing director David Viles has made this clear in a statement outlining the deal. According to Viles, the contract is "on hold" in order to see "what port workers can come up with." If, at the end of this period the union can't match the agreement signed with the contractors then "it will be reinstated".

Immediately after the agreement was signed the coal ship *Sea Swift*, which had been unable to berth during the port workers' action, was cleared to enter the port, with another coal ship due the following day. Viles expresses relief that the port was working again and praised the agreement as giving the "parties some breathing space".

The death of Christine Clark is being presented in the media as an unfortunate isolated incident. This is far from the case. It is a sign of the intensifying class antagonisms and widening social polarisation produced by a decade and a half of unprecedented assaults on the jobs and social conditions of working people.

The same day that Clark was being run down by a businessman in his four-wheel drive vehicle, the

government's Ministry of Social Policy released briefing papers warning of "social chaos" if the country's economic stagnation and the gap between the rich and poor continues to grow. The market reforms of the past 15 years have seen economic gains for the top 10 percent of households, the next 20 per cent "just holding their own", with the bottom 70 percent worse off than 10 years ago. About 25,000 families are classified by the briefing papers as at "high risk" of "ongoing disadvantage", while a further 45 percent of families face "some risk factors".

The unions have been a fundamental part of the process of job destruction, productivity drives, privatisation and the slashing of working conditions. The unions' response to the Lyttelton dispute proves that nothing has changed. Under the newly-elected Labour-Alliance government, their role as enforcers of the interests of employers will only be strengthened.

Having betrayed the struggle that Christine Clark died for, union officials are claiming her as their own. Waterfront Workers Union president Les Wells declared that she would be "viewed as a martyr and rallying point for the whole trade union movement in New Zealand". Clark's husband, Glen Cameron, however, said that this would be unfair. "Chris may end up being a martyr in one sense but not so much in the union cause. She was a champion for the underdog, whoever they might be".

There have been no statements regarding the death by any government spokesperson. The official New Year's Day speech, delivered by Labour leader and Prime Minister Helen Clark the day after Christine Clark died, was centred on the need for the country to enter the new millennium on the basis of "national unity".



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact