

real life on the DPB (cont.)

to pay them \$30 a week which they were regularly getting anyway!

AWSM: So WINZ haven't helped?

Kaye: Not really. There are a few decent individuals but they are constrained by what they have to work within. I've been refused food grants because "you haven't done anything to improve your situation". They did refer me to a food bank but the rule is you can only go there once every 6 months.

AWSM: What effect has your overall situation had on you personally?

Kaye: I've had depression at times and felt stressed. My finances are always on my mind. Every time the phone rings I wonder if it's a debt collector. I'm constantly juggling bills. My son's autism means he experiences problems at school. Sometimes he wants to invite friends home but I have to weigh up whether there will be food to offer them. If there is fruit I give it to him and go without myself but sometimes neither of us can have any and he can't understand why I have to keep saying "no" when he wants things.

AWSM: This year there will be an election. What's your view of that?

Kaye: There's not much choice in the parties out there. Obviously I

won't be supporting National or ACT though! [laughter]

AWSM: So what's your view of 'the big picture' as it were? The way things are in society as a whole?

Kaye: Over the past couple of generations things have moved away from the idea of minimising the income gap between people and the idea that society and its institutions exist to support you. 'Socialism' has become a dirty word. Instead we're getting this neo-liberal model of the 'deserving poor' that is a throw-back to the Victorian era. The individual is somehow to blame for his/her situation because he or she is lazy, rather than seeing it as a structural thing. John Key says being on a benefit is "a lifestyle choice", WINZ and the government make out that getting a job is some kind of panacea but a minimum wage job makes no change to people's situation.

AWSM: How do you see the future?

Kaye: The present system seems insane! Just because industrial capitalism has been around for a couple of centuries, it doesn't mean we are incapable of changing things for the better. There are different ways of doing things. We don't have to destroy the environment in pursuit of an empty consumerism. What about people?

AWSM: Thanks for your time. Good luck.

CHCH NATIONAL PARTY WELCOMING COMMITTEE

ON 5 SEPTEMBER, over 40 people protested against the National Party cabinet, which was meeting in a hotel in West Christchurch one year on from the September 2010 quake. PM John Key and other ministers had slept over at the Copthorne Hotel the night before 'in solidarity with the people of Christchurch.' How far west can you go away from quake ravaged east Christchurch? How superficial can you be? This meant that it wasn't possible to protest them entering the hotel but various politicians who turned up in cars were yelled at. There were kids and balloons and heaps of hand-painted banners. There was a strong contingent of Unite union members, along with members of the Tertiary Education Union -- who are currently undertaking industrial action at CPIT (Christchurch Polytech) -- and other unions.

People in Christchurch are pissed off with the light-hearted manner Gerry Brownlee has talked about the red zone (in which over 5000 houses will need to be pulled down), the paltry government offers on red zone houses, the treatment of workers since the quakes, the lack of genuine input from people into the government's relief and rebuild operations,

and the huge power of the big corporates in rebuilding the city. Masses of bosses have made workers redundant due to the quakes. On top of all this, as one community worker said, the issues in Christchurch are the same as anywhere in the country (e.g. rising prices, low incomes, cuts to working for families, attacks on beneficiaries) -- they have just been brought to the foreground by the quakes.



In a city where every fourth car (or more) was tooting in support -- many, many people are fuming, and probably a good proportion of those would be keen to turn up to a protest where it's so tangible -- the National Party (Key, Brownlee, Tolley etc) were right there in town. It seems that a year on, lots of people are angry and willing to voice that anger -- when earlier perhaps for some they

were just in survival mode. In the coming months, it will be great to see the joining of the various issues and networks, and hopefully some larger protests.

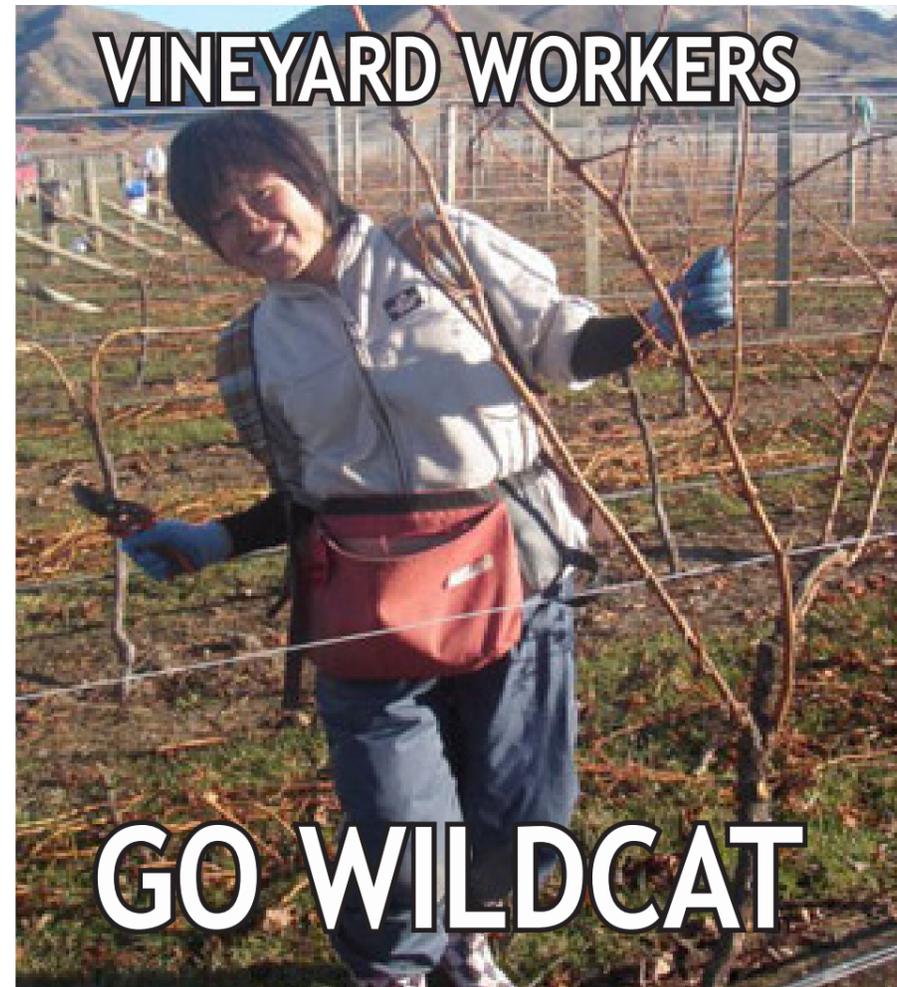
FURTHER COMMUNITY RALLIES

SINCE THE ABOVE protest, at least two small community rallies have been held in September namely one in the suburb of Avonside and another in the satellite town of Kaiapoi. Press reports claimed that about 200 people attended the Avonside one, and over 100 the Kaiapoi one. Both protests were about the paltry offers the government's CERA (Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority) have made to 'buyout' red zoned land. Other issues include deficient valuations, and a lack of access to detailed geo-technical information. The government is forcing these residents to leave, and if they refuse their offer, they will offer them a much worse deal. Yet many angry residents at the protests said that they will refuse the offers until their concerns are addressed. It is a disgrace that they have been treated this way by this vicious anti working class government after they have experienced the trauma of the quakes and the now compulsory demolition of their homes.

SOLIDARITY

Issue 17 - October 2011 - Free!

Newsheet of the Aotearoa Workers Solidarity Movement



ON FRIDAY 22 JULY some forty contracted pruners and wrappers went on strike against our contractor, Kiwi Bunkhouse, Ltd. Our demands were an increase in our per-plant rate, guaranteed minimum wage for workers who didn't reach the threshold on their own, and to be treated with respect by our employer. This action was prompted by our contractor refusing to pay many workers the minimum wage. Trying to justify their actions, KBH accused "lazy people" of costing them money by intentionally not working hard.

We know that all workers must be paid the minimum wage, there's no grey area there. I think there are a couple of reasons why our contractor tried to get away with this, and why many other contractors in

the industry continue to do so. Most seasonal workers are foreigners, many of whom speak English as a second or third language and some who barely speak it at all, and this inability to communicate effectively makes exploitation by the employer easier. Additionally, with the increasing popularity of the Recognised Seasonal Employer Scheme to bring poor Pacific Islanders to New Zealand for seasonal work, there aren't as many jobs for backpackers and the labour market is flooded. Both of these situations play in to the employers favour.

Kiwi Bunkhouse workers receive our payslips after work on Thursdays. On 21 July many of us saw that we had been paid less than the minimum wage -- the most extreme case was one person who had

received a total of \$74 after deductions for tools. Because most of the pruners were earning above the minimum wage the majority of the affected workers were wrappers, most of whom are women. But it was largely through the efforts of one pruner that the strike action was realised. R., a Belgian, organised a number of fellow workers in his hostel and later visited the other two where KBH employees are living. At each he announced there would be a strike the following day for the reasons mentioned above and left it to these workers to discuss and debate the action and prepare for the next day.

About forty workers struck, more than half of Kiwi Bunkhouse's workforce. We met early, before work, and walked to the office where the supervisors gather before leaving for the vineyards. R., our spokesperson, informed D., the head supervisor, that we would not be working until our grievances were addressed. D., clearly caught off guard, gave an order that we would work and he would take our concerns to the owner of the company, S. Most of the striking workers responded, "No, we're not working today," and R. reiterated our grievances. D. relented, saying he would try to set up a meeting with S. that morning. We left and parted company back to our respective hostels. Several hours later D. made the rounds with a written "staff memo" from Kiwi Bunkhouse, declaring the wrappers would receive an increase in their per-plant rate and the minimum wage top-up would be reinstated for the remainder of the season. However, a couple of workers, including our spokesperson, R., were terminated as a result of their perceived organizing actions. Some strikers wanted to stay out until these workers were reinstated, others wanted to go back since those who were fired didn't really want their jobs back anyway, and quite a few remained on the fence, unsure of what to do. As we tried to decide what our next steps would be we received word that some other workers, acting independent of the strike and trying to resolve their own concerns over the contract, had relayed our story to the local newspaper, the *Marlborough Express*.

CONTINUED OVER

VINEYARD WORKERS' WILDCAT (cont.)

The *Express* had called Kiwi Bunkhouse for comment, prompting them to quickly apologise and re-hire the workers fired during the strike. By that evening our contractor conceded to our demands and, satisfied with the results of our action, work resumed the next day.

In the grand scheme of the Marlborough wine industry this means nothing, but it makes a huge difference to all of us who work for Kiwi Bunkhouse. And now the level of solidarity among Kiwi Bunkhouse workers is high, certainly as high as it's been all season. We've seen what happens when we stand together and we're prepared to maintain what we've won. In the past few weeks since the strike we've seen our contractor treating us with more respect (although the general consensus is it's for appearances only, we're okay with that), and those of us with contacts on other vineyards have been trying to spread the word to other seasonal workers.

Before and after the strike I spoke with many of my co-workers, either trying to get them to join the action or trying to understand the reasons why some refused. There seemed to be two dominant discouraging factors. Either they were worried about being fired, unable to find work again with so many new people on the market, and therefore losing the opportunity to extend their visa; or they were earning above the minimum wage already and didn't feel they were affected by our contractor's actions. The fact that we didn't have solid numbers of how many workers were actually going to strike made a lot of people timid, and the whole action

was so spur-of-the-moment that many strikers didn't even decide to participate until that morning. Whereas the former group was sympathetic to the strike and supportive to the extent that they thought they could be, I struggle with not knowing how to reach people in the latter group. Many of these people tend to view the situation through a different lens; not one of solidarity, all for one and one for all, but one of individualism. How do we change a person's mindset?

WHAT'S A WILDCAT STRIKE?

A WILDCAT STRIKE is a strike that is unauthorised by union officials. Because it is organised by workers themselves, and not union bureaucrats, wildcats more accurately express the feelings of workers on the shop floor than top-down union run strikes. They have much potential and show that quickfire unannounced action, shop-floor solidarity and direct action can get results against bosses. They also show we can by-pass ineffective unions (who have been shackled by neo-liberal legislation and in any case are often unwilling to organise effective opposition to bosses), and the legal machinery of the state (in NZ wildcats are illegal).

This story is very heartening in today's deep recession and right-wing climate. We hope to see more wildcat action in NZ – in fact, in non-unionised industries like the wine industry it is a necessity. Despite wildcats historically being subject

to various penalties, NZ used to have a strong tradition of wildcats, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s. A great example of this was the mass strike in 1974 against the jailing of union bureaucrat Bill Andersen for the Northern Drivers' Union taking solidarity action with the Seamen's Union over a dispute on the Waiheke ferry. Upon hearing this, many drivers simply stopped their trucks, got out, and hitch-hiked home. The spontaneous action spread like wildfire, and many factories closed. The *Auckland Star* estimated 40,000 workers went on strike on the first day, and 50,000 the day after, a massive amount by today's standards. The stoppage threatened to become a general strike, but a compromise deal was patched up by the government. However, the action still represents one of the finest displays of class solidarity in NZ history.

SEND IN YOUR STORIES

WE'D LOVE TO hear more reports and stories like this one or the one on the next page about life in today's workplace or on the benefit. Send in your stories about how you've been treated, and your methods of resistance. Or get in touch if you want to be interviewed. We aim to make these reports a regular feature of this newsletter. Most of the left look down on workers, seeing us as a dumb or passive blob that needs to be organised by small elite groups of union or party bureaucrats. The left also ignores beneficiaries. We want to make *Solidarity* more into a paper by workers and beneficiaries, and not for workers and beneficiaries.

REAL LIFE ON THE DPB

INTERVIEW WITH KAYE RICHARDS

AWSM: Let's start with a bit of background information. Can you tell us who you are?

Kaye: My name is Kaye Richards. I'm 40 and a solo mum living in Naenae, Lower Hutt.

AWSM: Where did you grow up? What was it like?

Kaye: I mostly grew up going back and forth between Wellington and Palmerston North because of my father's jobs. We weren't a rich family but we weren't extremely poor either. We always had stuff to eat, clothes and heat, you know.

AWSM: What about school and your initial working life?

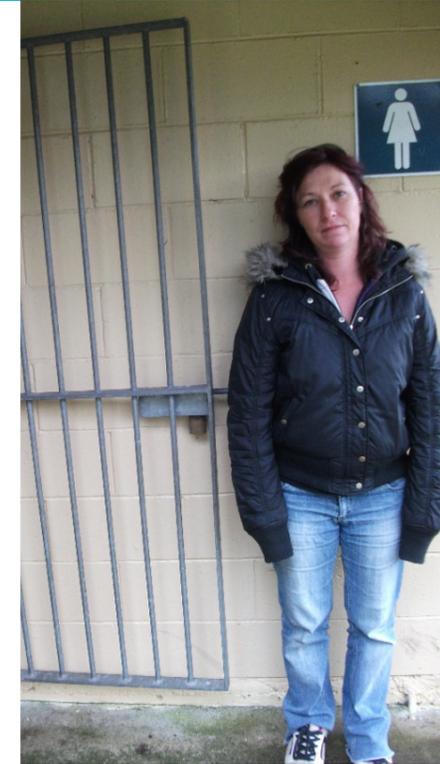
Kaye: I left school at 17 because I got a cabinet making apprenticeship. I was always kind of practical as a kid so it made sense and I was happy with it at first. I never finished the apprenticeship though.

AWSM: Why didn't you finish it?

Kaye: Well, it was a combination of things. It was partly because the boss was dodgy and he ran the company into bankruptcy but also there was a lot of sexism and that got on my nerves anyway.

AWSM: So what happened after that?

Kaye: I went to work at a clothing retailer in the Wellington CBD. I was there for a couple of years and did o.k. at it I guess. They kept promising a promotion but it never materialised. Then I worked at my partners spray painting business for a few years. We worked all night and the weekends and holidays for no real return. It caused a lot of stress. After that I was at a petrol station.



AWSM: How was that job?

Kaye: Early starts. It was dirty, smelly and boring. [laughs] I'd rather not think about it! After that I worked as a postie which was alright when it wasn't raining and it kept me fit. Then I had my son so gave the job up. I decided I would have to get better qualified so I could apply for jobs that paid decently and help me provide for him. I made up my mind to go to university.

AWSM: What was your time at university like?

Kaye: Not easy as a solo mum. It took me 10 years altogether to get my degree. When I started I didn't need to pay course costs up front. That meant I could get jobs in the holidays (I worked in a bar) to meet most of the costs and the rest was covered by the Training Incentive Allowance. Unfortunately the National Party abolished the TIA, so last year I was forced to get a student loan. I did Women's Studies and Sociology so I could speak a lot from personal experience and I mostly received A or A+ results. I graduated at the begin-

ning of this year and have been job hunting since then.

AWSM: How has your job hunting been now that you're better qualified?

Kaye: It's hard at this age and employers expect prior experience when you go for white collar positions. A lot of other jobs require weekend and night shifts or are only short term ones anyway. Though I suppose all jobs are potentially short-term now there is the 90 Day Act [laughs]. None of this makes it easy to get after school care for my son and since he has autism, the situation is even more complicated. In short, I haven't found anything yet.

AWSM: How do you find the cost of living?

Kaye: [laugh] Where do I start?! The cost of rent, food, petrol and electricity have all gone up but the benefit or wages haven't kept pace with that. The accommodation supplement for example, is not realistic it doesn't reflect the market for rent. Recently I was denied a \$36 overdraft from the bank. When you can't get loans or credit that means taking stuff to the pawnbroker and they charge 416% p.a. I'm either taking things in there or taking them out every week. Just about everything that isn't nailed down goes on Trade Me and that sometimes makes the difference between paying rent or not. I've had trouble with Baycorp too.

AWSM: How did the Baycorp problem arise?

Kaye: I owed \$500 to the power company. I had an arrangement through WINZ that \$30 a week came out automatically from my benefit to manage the debt. I was able to reduce the debt down to \$197 so I was clearly making progress. Then without warning the company just suddenly took the debt to Baycorp. They added on collection fees. The result is I now have a bad credit rating for the next 5 years. The irony is, that being on a fixed income and having all the costs I do, means I'm still only able

What is AWSM?

The Aotearoa Workers Solidarity Movement (AWSM) is an organisation working towards a classless, stateless society: anarchist-communism. We are a small national organisation with members in Wellington and in a few smaller cities and centres.

As class-struggle anarchists our priority is active involvement in workplace struggles and industrial action as well as community based campaigns in our neighbourhoods. We are currently involved in a variety of struggles, including protests against the government's austerity cuts and more. We encourage working class people to organise themselves against capital and the state. We do not seek to paternalistically organise people from the top down.

To become a member of AWSM, you must agree with our Aims & Principles (available at <http://www.awsm.org.nz>), and be involved in the life & activity of the group. If you're interested in joining or just finding out a bit more about us, e-mail or write to us – see our contact details in the next column. We look forward to hearing from you!

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