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Volume 32, 1993

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt32rr02>

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Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Taylor, K. (1993). "Jack" McDonald: A Canadian Revolutionary in New Zealand. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 32, 261–268.

“Jack” McDonald: A Canadian Revolutionary in New Zealand

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ON 3 OCTOBER 1921, the *SS Tahiti* arrived in Wellington having journeyed from Sydney. Among its passengers was John Amos McDonald a short, slim, clean shaven 32 year old from Prince Edward Island, Canada. We know this because he was being watched by the local Police who were concerned about his intended activities in New Zealand. His arrival had been preceded by news that he was a “fluent, fast speaker.” To the Police this was particularly problematic, McDonald had been engaged as a lecturer by the Communist Party of New Zealand (CPNZ).¹

The invitation for McDonald to visit New Zealand had been issued in August 1921.² Locals would have learned about him from his extensive writing in the *Western Clarion*, one of the many overseas socialist newspapers circulating within the New Zealand labour movement at that time.³ Reports of his activity in Australia were also contained in the Sydney based *International Communist*. McDonald had been heralded in Sydney as one of the foremost leaders and teachers of the revolutionary movement.⁴ Like their Australian counterparts the New Zealanders considered him a socialist teacher and propagandist of international repute and hoped he would boost their fortunes.⁵ Since its establishment earlier in 1921, the

¹Report of Det-Sg. W.E. Lewis to the Chief Detective, Wellington, 2 December 1921, Police Department (PD) CH74, National Archives, Christchurch.

²Minutes of the Wellington Branch, Communist Party of New Zealand, 27 August 1921, Gerald Griffin (GG) Papers Acc 86-43, 2/20, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington.

³On McDonald and the *Western Clarion* see Peter Campbell, “‘Making Socialists’: Bill Pritchard, the Socialist Party of Canada, and the Third International,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 30 (Fall 1992), 45-63. Campbell suggests that McDonald may have been the single most significant writer for the *Western Clarion*, private letter to the author, 22 March 1993.

⁴*International Communist*, 16 July 1921. Some of the McDonald’s articles from the *Western Clarion* were reproduced in the *International Socialist*, the predecessor to the *International Communist*, for example, 17 August 1920.

⁵*Maoriland Worker*, 2 November 1921.

CPNZ had been anxious to extend their propaganda activity. The sad reality they faced was that very few people even knew they existed.⁶ At that time socialist propaganda activity was severely hampered by the aggressive actions of the New Zealand state, administered by the conservative Reform Party. A ban existed on the importation and distribution of all radical literature and, the boundaries in public speaking were also narrowly delineated. The Government had consolidated and legitimised their powers in this area by passing the War Regulations Continuance Act (1920), which enshrined into statute restrictions adopted during the "emergency circumstances" of the war.⁷ In addition to restrictions imposed by the state, the Communist Party's own lack of resources, both financial and in terms of membership,⁸ proved a further handicap to spreading the gospel of revolution. Dynamic speakers were scarce, and a lack of finance meant that the Party had no newspaper of its own to promote its message. The New Zealand communists greeted McDonald with great enthusiasm, hoping he would spark their movement onto a more positive growth path.

McDonald was only in New Zealand for about seven months, yet his visit left a significant mark on the New Zealand left. While the CPNZ had hired him, the legacy of his visit was not to their liking. By the time of his departure the New Zealand communist movement was considerably more divided than it had been on his arrival. Instead of greater unity, two rival "communist" organizations existed.

I

ON FIRST ARRIVING in Wellington, McDonald gave a series of lectures in the Wellington Communist Hall. Topics included "Unemployment: its cause and cure" and "Property and social unrest."⁹ The focus then moved to a series of larger public meetings, generally held at the large Empress Theatre. Here meetings focused more on the central political issues of the moment, such as banned literature, rather than more theoretical matters.¹⁰ McDonald also appeared as the key note speaker at the larger public meeting to celebrate the fourth anniversary of the Russian Revolution, an event which he considered the workers of the world should admire and be proud of. In communism, he suggested, lay the great hope of the oppressed masses of the world. However, in what should have been a portent of things to come, McDonald articulated a very particular view of the Revolution, suggesting that Russia had yet

⁶Minutes of the Wellington Branch, Communist Party of New Zealand, 11 June 1921, GG 2/20.

⁷John Anderson, "Military Censorship in World War I: its use and abuse in New Zealand," MA Thesis, Victoria College, University of New Zealand, 1952.

⁸Precise figures are not available, but in the first year the total membership would not have exceeded 50 throughout the country. The main centre of the Party in this foundation period was Wellington.

⁹*Maoriland Worker*, 2 November 1921.

¹⁰*Maoriland Worker*, 9 and 30 November 1921.

to achieve communism. This, he argued, was only possible when the means of production had developed to a higher stage.¹¹ This analysis reflected the philosophy of the Socialist Party of Great Britain (SPGB) whose ideas he had absorbed while active in the Socialist Party of Canada (SPC).¹² That this analysis did not send alarm bells ringing through the minds of McDonald's hosts suggests a certain theoretical simplicity on the part of the CPNZ in this period.

Later in November McDonald travelled north to Auckland where the first controversy of the tour erupted. The Auckland communist group asked him to speak from the platform of the local Labour Party which he refused to do, again reflecting the philosophy of the SPGB who saw all parties other than themselves as bogus and tools of the "master class." McDonald was strongly supported in this stand by the Wellington group, who at this time formed the National Executive. They assured him that they did not agree with the Auckland's request,¹³ which was condemned for sinking the individuality of the Party.¹⁴ The strength of their condemnation of the Aucklanders reflected an emerging rivalry between the two communist groups which later broke out into a more open conflict for control of the National Executive. While in the North, McDonald also spoke in Huntly, a major mining town south of Auckland. Here he was rather more impressed by the group,¹⁵ later suggesting it was the only "real" communist group in the North Island.¹⁶

After a short stop over in Wellington, McDonald proceeded south to the West coast of the South Island. Initial attempts to get him down to "the Coast" foundered through lack of funds. While the early North Island meetings had been well attended, the punters did not dig very deeply into their pockets.¹⁷ McDonald eventually arrived on the 23rd of December for the first three sojourns on the West Coast. McDonald spent most of the rest of his time in New Zealand on the Coast, interrupted only by a couple of short visits to Wellington. This was the most intensive section of his visit. In the first half of January he spoke at eleven meetings in eight different centres,¹⁸ most of which were isolated coal mining communities,

¹¹*Maoriland Worker*, 16 November 1921.

¹²On the linkage between the SPC and the SPGB see, Campbell "Making Socialists."

¹³It is ironic that in this period many of the Wellington Communists were themselves members of both the Communist Party and the Labour Party. McDonald and the Wellington communists would later diverge over the correct approach to the Labour Party.

¹⁴Minutes of the Wellington Branch, Communist Party of New Zealand, 18 November 1921, GG 3/1.

¹⁵Report of Det-Sgt. W.E. Lewis to the Chief Detective, Wellington, 2 December 1921, PD CH74.

¹⁶Minutes of the Wellington Branch, Communist Party of New Zealand, 21 April 1922, GG 3/1.

¹⁷Report of Det-Sg. W.E. Lewis to the Chief Detective, Wellington, 5 December 1921, PD CH74.

¹⁸The meetings were reported in the radical labour daily, the *Grey River Argus*.

many with a long history of radicalism and industrial militancy.¹⁹ This frantic pace was maintained until his departure from New Zealand late in May. In total some 88 meetings were conducted in seven months.²⁰

McDonald was not the only "Canadian" visitor on the West Coast in this period. The Police were keeping a close watch on two Belgians who had recently arrived in New Zealand from Canada. Information had been received that they were pro Bolshevik, had been associated with the OBU and IWW, and had apparently left Canada because of political discrimination.²¹ The Police Commissioner in Wellington asked local detectives to pay close attention to the Belgians and determine whether they engaged in any agitating. This was clearly with a view to possible deportation under the Undesirable Immigrants Exclusion Act. The two left for Sydney in May 1922 having made no attempt to contact the local socialist movement.²²

Given this climate of suspicion, it is hardly surprising that all McDonald's meetings were attended by local constables who reported the content to their superiors. According to the Police the meetings were only sparsely attended.²³ However, other reports suggest at least some of his meetings drew large crowds, a meeting at Blackball on 13 January drew more than 200.²⁴ In addition to public speaking "Mac," as he was generally known, also wrote frequently for the *Grey River Argus*, which have further raised his profile.

Even if Police estimates of small crowds were correct, McDonald's activity certainly prompted a revival of interest in Marxism on the Coast. Marxist study groups began, or more frequently revived, in many of the towns where he spoke. In February the Millerton Marxian Economics Class held its first meeting for several years, reporting a good enrolment of new members.²⁵ After a meeting in Ngakawau in March ten members of the audience stayed behind and formed a Marxian Class. The Stockton Economics Class began in the same month.²⁶ There were Marxist Economics classes in nearly every mining town in this period.

Of course McDonald's propaganda was not the only factor at play here. Among certain sections of the West Coast labour movement there was a long standing

¹⁹On the West Coast radical tradition see P.R. May, ed., *Miners and Militants: Politics in Westland, 1865-1918* (Christchurch 1975) and Erik Olssen, *The Red Feds: Revolutionary Industrial Unionism and the New Zealand Federation of Labour, 1908-1913* (Auckland 1988).

²⁰*Grey River Argus*, 22 September 1922.

²¹Report of Det. John Young to the Inspector of Police, Greymouth, 11 April 1922, PD CH74.

²²Police Commissioner to Young, 18 April 1922; Young to Inspector of Police, Greymouth, 3 July 1922, PD CH74.

²³Report of Det. John Young to the Inspector of Police, Greymouth, 20 January 1922, PD CH74.

²⁴*Grey River Argus*, 16 January 1922.

²⁵*Grey River Argus*, 8 February 1922.

²⁶*Grey River Argus*, 15 and 23 March 1922.

commitment to Marxism. Much of the strength of the pre-war New Zealand Socialist Party had been on the West Coast.²⁷ More importantly there had been an attachment to the particular philosophy of the Socialist Party of Great Britain. For example the New Zealand Marxian Association (NZMA), which had been formed at the end of 1918, adopted the principles and objective of the SPGB. The majority of the delegates at the NZMA's foundation conference were from West Coast mining communities.²⁸ Equally significant, several influential figures on the Coast had previously been members of the Socialist Party of Canada. David Anderson, who had been in and around the left in Wellington and on the West Coast since 1913, was one such figure.²⁹ Another was William Balderstone, who had been prominent in the Miners Union and socialist groups at Blackball since at least 1916.³⁰

II

INSENDING MCDONALD to the West Coast the CPNZ had hoped to bring about greater Communist unity. Their intention was clearly that such unity would be within the organizational net of their Party. McDonald was, after all, on their pay-roll. Talk of unity was certainly in the air. Early in March militants at Millerton suggested a grouping of workers should be formed outside the Labour Party.³¹ By the end of the month the *Argus* was reporting that the Millerton Economics Class had agreed to arrange a conference at Easter with a view to forming branches of the Communist Party on the West Coast.³² The expectation that CPNZ branches would be formed was again repeated in early April.³³ The Wellington Party headquarters could have been forgiven for expecting a bank account swollen by new membership fees; however, their hopes were soon dashed. A conference of "Communist Groups" was convened on Good Friday, 14 April 1922, but it rejected the CPNZ in favour of a separate West Coast Communist Federation (WCCF).

While the West Coast radical heritage helps explain the development of a separatist WCCF, McDonald was a crucial catalyst in the equation. The conference, held at the Miners Hall in Blackball, was attended by delegates from four Grey District mining communities. The delegates from Buller, who had missed their

²⁷Bert Roth, "The Distribution of Radicalism in New Zealand," *New Zealand Geographer*, 15 (April 1959), 76-83, and "The New Zealand Socialist Party," *Political Science* (Wellington), 9 (March 1957), 51-60.

²⁸Minutes of the Marxian Students Conference, 28 December 1918, GG 3/2.

²⁹Minutes of the Petone Marxian Club, 24 November 1913, Bert Roth Private Collection; also Minutes of the Wellington Socialist Party, 6 January 1915, GG, 2/18.

³⁰On Balderstone see, Len Richardson, "Class, Community and Conflict: The Blackball Miners Union, 1920-1931," in L. Richardson and W.D. McIntyre, eds., *Provisional Perspectives* (Christchurch 1980), 106-27.

³¹*Grey River Argus*, 11 and 14 March 1922.

³²*Grey River Argus*, 27 March 1922.

³³*Grey River Argus*, 3 April 1922.

train, telegraphed their intention to support the decisions of the conference.³⁴ McDonald was elected conference chairman, and William Balderstone, the former SPC member, minute secretary. George Winter, a former National Secretary of the CPNZ, attended on behalf of that Party but with speaking rights only.

In opening the conference, McDonald informed the delegates of the discussions which had led to it being called, stressing the urgent need to reach agreement on a scheme for unity. Most of the day was spent debating possible directions. Before the delegates lay a motion put by Charlie Saunders, a member of the CPNZ, that organizational links be established with the Communist Party. Two counter motions were also on the table, one suggesting the formation of a Marxian Education and Propaganda League, the other favouring a separate WCCF. The debate polarized around the first and third options, with Winter and McDonald dominating the debate. To the disgust of the CPNZ representative, who stressed the need for national unity, McDonald favoured the motion for a separate federation. Essentially biting the hand that fed him, he suggested that the Communist Party in Wellington was effectively defunct. He attacked leading figures as right-wingers posing as being of the left. Others were condemned as Irish Nationalists.³⁵ At the end of the debate delegates voted 11 to 1 in favour of the establishment of the WCCF. McDonald's crucial role in the outcome was emphasized by appointment as organizer for the Federation and that he was entrusted with the task of writing a manifesto for the new organization.³⁶

Part of the equation leading to a separate organization was a personal antagonism between Winter and McDonald. Winter had doubts about the quality and effectiveness of McDonald's propaganda and freely expressed these views, even to non-party members. McDonald on learning of this attitude dismissed Winter as being unable to "distinguish between what is good and what is otherwise."³⁷ He was still revelling in the subsequent misfortunes of Winter more than a year later.³⁸

More significant that this personal battle was the clash of two quite different political philosophies. McDonald, and the bulk of those at the conference, reflected the views of the SPGB/SPC.³⁹ This marked them in sharp distinction to the CPNZ. In

³⁴Unless otherwise indicated the following account is based on the Minutes of the conference of Communist Groups, GG 3/2.

³⁵Minutes of the Wellington Branch, Communist Party of New Zealand, 21 April 1922, GG 3/1.

³⁶Minutes of the Conference of Communist Groups, GG 3/2.

³⁷McDonald to F.P. Tuohy, 29 December 1921, Conrad Bollinger (CB) MS Papers 2151/442, Alexander Turnbull Library. Tuohy, better known in New Zealand history as F.P. Walsh, was at that time a member of the Wellington Communist Group.

³⁸McDonald to F.P. Tuohy Wellington, 18 January 1923, CB 2151/442. Winter later came into conflict with both the CPNZ and the Communist Party of Australia and was effectively ostracised from the Australasian communist movement.

³⁹McDonald, Balderstone, and David Anderson, a delegate to the conference representing the State Mines, had all been members of the SPC.

particular they rejected the notion of communists attempting to fight the Labour Party from within, a tactic adopted by many in the CPNZ until the mid 1920s.⁴⁰ The WCCF attacked Harry Holland, the leader of the Labour Party, and decided to run a candidate against him in the 1922 General Election.⁴¹ McDonald argued that the Labour Party was scarcely different from the conservative Reform and Liberal Parties. He reflected the essential "impossibilism" of the SPGB/SPC tradition by suggesting that the only immediate demand should be the overthrow of capitalism.⁴² He further distanced himself, and the WCCF, from the mainstream communist movement by questioning the relevance of the Third International, suggesting that it was not something the Federation needed to endorse.⁴³

The CPNZ in Wellington was understandably annoyed at the development of a formal organizational split in the New Zealand communist movement. CPNZ members felt that McDonald had betrayed them and important communist principles. However, they decided to adopt a relatively conciliatory approach and to maintain the friendliest possible relations with the new organization. This move was based on an assumption that the rebels on the Coast would see the error of their ways and eventually join up with the CPNZ. Their analysis of the situation stressed the key role of McDonald in the "split," as they believed that without his presence the WCCF would lack the basis for a separate existence.⁴⁴

III

AFTER LITTLE MORE than a month as WCCF organizer McDonald left New Zealand bound for San Francisco. Earlier he had been offered a post as Director of the New South Wales Labour College.⁴⁵ The reasons for his declining this offer remain obscure. In San Francisco he again took up his trade as a painter, and was active on the left, running an economics class and giving lectures on socialism, although his political activity was curtailed for some time after being run over by a Cadillac.⁴⁶

McDonald's recollections of New Zealand were mixed. He maintained close contact with several people from the New Zealand communist movement, includ-

⁴⁰Minutes of the Wellington Branch, Communist Party of New Zealand, 21 April 1922, GG 3/1.

⁴¹Minutes of the District Council West Coast Communist Federation, 6 August 1922, GG 3/2. McDonald had attacked Holland before the establishment of the WCCF, see *Grey River Argus*, 3 March 1922. The CPNZ did not give totally uncritical support to the Labour Party. They attacked Holland and his supporters when it was believed political principle was at stake, *International Communist*, 20 August 1921.

⁴²*Grey River Argus*, 19 April 1922.

⁴³Minutes of the Wellington Branch, Communist Party of New Zealand, 21 April 1922, GG 3/1.

⁴⁴Minutes of the Wellington Branch, Communist Party of New Zealand, 21 April 1922, GG 3/1.

⁴⁵*Grey River Argus*, 8 April 1922.

⁴⁶McDonald to F.P. Tuohy, 18 January and 16 May 1923, CB 2151/442.

ing a family who had themselves settled in San Francisco, and he occasionally wrote for the *Grey River Argus*. It was of the coal miners, especially those on the West Coast, that he had the fondest memories. In them he perceived a real revolutionary potential and receptivity to socialist ideas.⁴⁷ The respect was mutual. One Millerton communist suggested that McDonald was the "finest exponent of scientific socialism ever heard" in that area.⁴⁸ Yet overall McDonald was critical. He portrayed the CPNZ as small "both numerically and intellectually," prone to hero worship, and a "wearisome repetition of 'Lenin says'." He was equally critical of the Labour Party, seeing it essentially as a party of the status quo.⁴⁹

The long term legacy of McDonald's visit was probably relatively small. The patience of the CPNZ was eventually rewarded, by 1925 the WCCF had withered away as a separate organization. Most revolutionaries on the West Coast were by then within the CPNZ fold. Yet the visit of McDonald was significant in perpetuating, and even for a short while enhancing, a commitment to a particular socialist tradition on the West Coast. A tradition which in other parts of the country had largely died out with the establishment of the CPNZ. It is doubtful whether the WCCF would have got off the ground without McDonald's organizational work and propaganda.

⁴⁷*Grey River Argus*, 22 September 1922. The report was extracted from an article by McDonald in the *Western Clarion*. He rather arrogantly and incorrectly assumed many of the places he visited were "virgin territory" with regard to the message of scientific socialism.

⁴⁸*Grey River Argus*, 20 October 1922.

⁴⁹*Maoriland Worker*, 4 October 1921. This report was also based on that in the *Western Clarion*, and includes some critical comments not reproduced in the *Argus*.