

Kia ora, gday and welcome to the History of Aotearoa New Zealand. Episode 97 – The West Coast Beer Boycott. This podcast is supported by our amazing Patrons. If you want to support HANZ go to patreon.com/historyaotearoa. Last time, we retread some ground to give more details on the prohibition era and the six o'clock swill. Today we talk about the West Coast Beer Boycott which I almost entirely skipped over when we discussed Speight's but it's actually a great story that intersects with the era of strong union solidarity and so I thought it would be great to give it a bit of the spotlight.

The boycott started in September 1947 and was located in the West Coast of the South Island where a ten-ounce glass of beer cost a sixpence. This is important because everywhere else in the country the cost of a 10oz beer had been risen to 7 pence, which was the maximum possible price as set by the Price Tribunal 8 years earlier. By this I mean, the Price Tribunal didn't say you had to make your beer 7d, just that it was the maximum you could put it up to. The local West Coast Licensed Victuallers Association (LVA), who was a corporate group made up of pubs, raised the price of a ten-ounce glass to match that of the rest of the country. All the pubs in the group raised the price at the same time with signs being issued saying "all beer 7d". This was done as a coordinated effort knowing that if they did it individually, patrons would just head to another establishment that didn't raise the price but if they did it at the same time, punters would just have to accept it. That's not quite how it went down though, since beer was the working man's drink and those miners, docksiders, lumbermillers and all sorts of other tradesmen were none too happy. This was the age of powerful trade unions and the West Coast was the birth place of New Zealand's union movement. It's where Bob Semple got his start working for the unions and it's even where the modern Labour Party began. In response to the rise in the price of beer by one penny, the West Coast Trades Council, who represented most unionised workers in the area, called a public meeting to discuss the situation. There they got unanimous support for a boycott of what they called sevenpenny hotels. However, from the perspective of the LVA they were just bringing their prices in line with the industry standard. It should also be noted that in the background of all this, prices were rising generally for all goods since the conclusion WW2. The boycott was said in the *Greymouth Star* to be the Cold War arriving on the West Coast as any large scale union action was seen by some as Russian Communism. This wasn't the case though as it is likely that many of the workers who participated in the boycott were just as against communism as most others in Aotearoa.

There was a bit of skepsim initially as to whether the boycott would actually work but it became pretty quickly apparent that not only were people adhering to it, the pubs were feeling the pinch "A tour of Greymouth hotels about five o'clock yesterday afternoon made it obvious that so far the boycott has been at least fairly successful in reducing custom." Despite this unexpected backlash, the LVA presented a united front, all except one public house. Paddy Keating, the owner of the Central Hotel in Greymouth, decided not to raise his prices, keeping beer at 6d. We don't know why he did this, perhaps he agreed with the boycott or didn't feel the need to raise the ire of his patrons, or maybe he saw a way to make a lot of money by doing nothing. Whatever the case, the small pub did a roaring trade as of course having not raised his prices, Keating wasn't subject to the boycott. The *Greymouth Evening Star* reported that crowds were spilling out onto the street and extra barmen had to be called in to help serve all the punters. Comparatively, the same reporter went to a nearby hotel who was subject to the boycott and only found a lone drinker who was apparently prepared to pay the extra penny to have a cold one in peace. With all this extra demand, Keating was running out of beer to serve, especially since local breweries were backing the LVA by refusing to supply him. And that's where Speight's enters the story being threatened by the Transport Workers' Union who thought they were refusing to supply Keating. Speight's then replies saying we

are supplying all regions as best we can with minimal bias and the union accepts this and backs down.

This is where we stopped the story originally so let's keep going to see how this boycott panned out and what resulted from it. So, with Speight's unable to supply Keating just right this minute (they did eventually send some) a local in Greymouth who apparently just had a keg of beer lying around gave it to Keating so he could keep the workers happy. Things got slightly more interesting when at the end of September the Labour MP for Westland, James O'Brien, died. Since his seat was empty outside of normal election years, a by-election was held. Unlike today, the West Coast at the time was an extremely safe seat for Labour since, you know, that's basically where the party got its start, so the outcome of who would get to represent them in central government was never really in question. But of course they had to go through all the rigmarole of candidates coming to see them, giving speeches and taking questions. As you might expect, a lot of those questions revolved around what the candidates would do about the price of beer. All of the politicians didn't really answer the question in any meaningful way, generally saying they didn't want to be involved. For example, Labour's candidate Jimmy Kent was asked about the boycott to which he replied, "I'm afraid, as it is not a political question, I have not studied it" The person asking followed up by saying that it had likely started as a social question "but had reached the stage where it might form a political one." Kent started his reply with: "I am not a beer drinker myself: I prefer spirits and, being a Scot, that is all right too," He then went on to say that it was a freedom that men could choose what they wanted and did not want to buy. So basically he tip toed around the question by saying it was "outside politics" and he couldn't really do anything about it since the boycott was ultimately just consumers making a choice to not purchase in response to businesses making their own choices about pricing. Politicians were working on something in the background of all this but we will get to that in a minute.

About a month later on the 4th November, Minister of Industries and Commerce Arnold Nordmeyer sent a letter to the Westland Trades Council. The Council, who supported the boycott, had asked the minister for advice on what the price of beer should be, with the minister replying by fully dodging the question. In the letter, Nordmeyer talked about how pubs have actually been able to raise their prices for the last 8 years and the fact that West Coast pubs hadn't done so up until now was really up to them. He also wrote about how the Price Tribunal had set the maximum price based on the fact that back then, pubs tended to serve 12oz glasses but this had slowly fallen out of favour over the years for 10oz glasses. So the decision was based on a cultural norm that didn't really exist anymore. Despite this seemingly showing that he was saying the price should be lower, he said that the Tribunal would be looking into it again based on the smaller glass sizes that were now more common, basically washing himself of the problem.

Getting people riled up to start a boycott is relatively speaking quite easy. Keeping that momentum going over an extended period of time would prove easier said than done since, after the first week, it was clear that the LVA wasn't going to back down. Particularly because if they gave in to mass consumer pressure it could set a dangerous precedent for the rest of the country. It was in mid-October that things heated up a bit. In Kumara, a small town between Hokitika and Greymouth, workers at a sawmill refused to continue working with a man who had been seen breaking the boycott and drinking at a sevenpenny hotel. This became such a point of contention that they walked off the job and forced the mill close temporarily. This became a more regular thing with other businesses, mostly mines, having to stop work six times over the next two months from employees refusing to work with scabs. This was taken even further with what sounds like a bit of intimidation, each worker who was viewed as a scab left their job after being given "a hot time".

However, most of the letters of resignation said that this wasn't the reason they left, possibly out of fear of retaliation. The thing was though that there was currently a labour shortage in the area so it wasn't too difficult for them to find work a couple of towns over but for some the stigma followed them everywhere. Uncharacteristically, one might say, the managers and owners of the mines didn't want to get involved and only did in so far as to ensure the wheels of industry kept turning. If one worker had to leave to ensure the rest would do their jobs, so be it.

As we discussed last episode, West Coast drinkers and outlets thought of themselves as being a bit different. Pubs mostly ignored the six o'clock closing time and of course the price of beer didn't rise with the rest of the country. Rugby was played on Saturdays, with League on Sundays with most blokes playing both, which was controversial at the time. Post League drinks was one of the busiest times for pubs in the West Coast. By in large, West Coasters didn't respect the laws handed down by politicians in Wellington, the union was king here. Being a scab or otherwise ousted from the union could be a death sentence both for your job prospects and your social life. In one case, a miner was seen leaving a sevenpenny hotel and when he admitted he drank there, was told no other miners would work with him. A hotel in Buller also went sevenpenny for a bit until it reverted back because the owner was a member of the miners union and thought it was the right thing to be with his fellow unionists. One source I read even remembers being in line to sign up for a job at the freezing works when another man approached the foreman and pointed out someone in line. The man in line left cause the foreman had just been told that he had scabbed 30 years prior in another job and so his chances of employment were slim.

Overall, things were getting quite hot. Letters were written in to the papers on both sides, or even poems were sent in, one that was 14 stanzas long! The *Greymouth Star* often pushed into articles and editorials that beer was a luxury item that blokes didn't need to drink. As such their claim was that there should be no need to get so heated and have such a large boycott since, basically, who cares? They argued that the unionists should be fighting the rising costs of essentials like food. A fight broke out on 18 Oct at Kumara Junction Hotel when a group of guys offered to pay sixpence for their beer. Glasses were smashed and one guy had a beer bottle broken over his head. These events seemed to have revived the fervour to continue. When the State Miner's Union held a vote to continue the boycott a few days later, it was passed unanimously with 500 in attendance. Other unions had similar votes with strong support for the boycott. Arguments in the papers continued about the men who were 'sent down the road' (kicked out of the union and deprived of work). One man called O'Leary wrote a long letter to the *Greymouth Star* saying he had been 'one of the thousands who left this country in defence of liberty'. This was a reference to those who served overseas during WWII and a jab at those miners who hadn't, since mining was a protected industry from conscription. He also claimed that the union was a dictatorship and used more WWII iconography in his language to hint at a battle coming against the unions from the common people.

Despite the image of a united front, the boycott was run in a grassroots way. Not all was peace and unity in the union camp, in fact, not all unions supported the boycott. The Westland Hotel and Restaurant Workers' Union were the only union of the 19 in the area that were opposed to it since their places of work were the ones being boycotted and they were concerned that the hotels would close up putting them out of a job, so that was pretty expected. But even among the miners and other labourers there was some division. The West Coast Trades Council had a strong presence in Greymouth and the surrounding Grey Valley so that is where the boycott was strictly upheld by locals. Further north though, things got a bit shaky as Reefton gold miners weren't too fussed about the increased price, much to the annoyance of their Waitua comrades. This ultimately led to a split in their union with the Waitua miners forming their own separate one. Heading towards the end of

the boycott, the resolution came from an angle that no one had really expected, the Working Men's Club.

At this point, a few Working Men's Club's, or the Workies, had been established in urban centres across New Zealand. They had been designed to cater towards, well, working class men as a place that they could relax, have a brew, play some pool and maybe organise some activities. There was also aspirations of having them be an educational place too where blokes could teach other younger blokes life skills. Up until this point, no Workies had been set up in the West Coast and this new kerfuffle sparked a bit of a debate as to whether they should maybe give it a crack. The part of the venture that appealed to them in particular was the model of cooperative ownership of the Workies, all members had a stake in it meaning they could somewhat dictate the price they had to pay for beer. There was a slight problem though. The government had not granted any requests to open new Workies since the war and there was still the hurdle of the prohibitionists hanging around that didn't want any new establishments opened that served alcohol. However, remember how I said that MPs were working on something in the background during the by election? Well, they were having a bunch of chats about granting permission for a new Workies to open in Greymouth because they saw it as a potential solution to the problem. Even Prime Minister Peter Fraser got involved saying that as long as all the proper paperwork was submitted, he would personally ensure that it got approved. So with both the community and politicians all well in support, the race was on to find buildings and open a Working Men's Club in every town, the first one opening in Brunner on 21 December 1947 with Greymouth opening the day after and Runanga a few days after that. It wasn't long before most towns on the West Coast had a Workies, including Hokitika and Westport. Not everyone was into the idea though, an editorial in the *Greymouth Star* claiming that the clubs were "communist cells" that were "a golden opportunity for spreading their atheistic and anti-democratic doctrine." This wasn't the case but this was heading into the Cold War so, you know.

The boycott mostly maintained during the time that the clubs were being set up but some business was beginning to return to sevenpenny pubs in the larger towns as patrons' resolve began to wane a bit. In smaller towns the boycott was still pretty strictly upheld but even so, the LVA still wasn't backing down from their one penny increase in price. It wasn't to last though. Pubs were losing money as people began to go Working's Mens Clubs as the opened up and if the sevenpenny hotels didn't do something they would have to close down. One by one, pubs and hotels told the Association that they would be reducing the price back to 6d. Eventually the LVA had to concede and a statement was issued in February 1948 letting publicans know that they could choose whether they wished to serve a 10-ounce glass of beer at 6d or 7. A week later, the *Greymouth Star* reported that all hotels and public houses had gone back to 6d. The workers had won... the battle, but they would not win the war. You see, this saga had taught the booze industry across the country quite a lot, the main thing being that if they wanted to do something that they think will be unpopular they shouldn't declare it, they should just sneakily do it in more roundabout ways. In the 1950s the 10-ounce glass was phased out and replaced with two new sizes, 7 and 12-ounces which had comparatively higher prices per volume of liquid, but you couldn't tell that if you didn't do your homework. Additionally, buying beer in jugs became more common but unlike a glass that has a specific measurement associated with it, jugs didn't have a standardised measurement and pricing, meaning a pub could offer any amount at any price and as long as it seemed to be roughly good value, no one contested it. Especially since there was no form of organised consumer testing. This wasn't the last boycott of booze that occurred in New Zealand, a few more were in communities far bigger than the West Coast, but none were ever quite as successful as the union backed workers of Greymouth.

You're probably also wondering what happened to Paddy Keating of the Central Hotel. Well, unfortunately with the concession of the LVA, he no longer had the advantage of being the cheapest beer in town. As such, patronage to his establishment quickly fell off a cliff except for a few loyal customers. In addition to this, many viewed him as a scab for breaking ranks with his peers so it seems he wasn't well liked in the community from this point on either.

Next time, we will have a dramatic retelling of a Māori story so as usual, if you have any particular requests please let me know!

If you want to send me feedback, ask a question, suggest a topic or just have a chinwag you can find my email and social media on historyaotearoa.com. You can also find helpful resources there like transcripts, sources and translations for some of the Te Reo Māori we have used. You can help support HANZ through Patreon, buying merch or giving us a review, it means a lot and helps spread the story of Aotearoa New Zealand. As always, haere tū atu, hoki tū mai. See you next time.