

# Belligerence sparks union career

Pretty much every aspect of the meat industry was blood and guts when Graham Cooke started working at Horotiu in 1968. And that was just the employer-employee relationship. On the eve of his retirement the national secretary of the Meat Workers Union tells **Neal Wallace** that in later years those relationships have mostly improved.

IT WASN'T a social justice or political calling that led Graham Cooke to a career as a trade unionist but the actions of a belligerent union branch secretary.

Cooke, who retires on April 28 as the New Zealand Meat Worker's Union national secretary, was raised in a family that was not politically active and traditionally voted for the National Party.

Politics never interested him. He never voted as a young man, even when he was a university student and was exposed to more radical political activity.

Cooke says he is driven by a conviction everyone should be treated fairly though he did not see that or any other aspects of life as a political issue.

That changed when he unseated a belligerent union secretary in branch elections.

"I didn't see room for politics in the union. When I was elected I realised politics goes into everything we do."

Cooke started his meat industry career as a seasonal worker in the fellmongery at Affco's Horotiu works in 1968.

One of 1651 employees, it was a means to fund his business management studies at Victoria University but it nurtured a deeper interest in the meat industry.

In 1978 he went to the Ruakura Farmers Conference to listen to the then Minister of Labour Peter Gordon, Meat Industry Association chief executive Peter Blomfield, Federated Farmers chairman J B Falconer and Meat Workers Union secretary Blue Kennedy.

Cooke was so impressed by Kennedy's speech he suggested to the Horotiu sub-branch secretary that Kennedy be invited to speak to the workers.

He got a less than cordial response and, unbeknown to Cooke, he had stepped into the bear pit of inter-union politics. Kennedy represented a separate union entity. There was little love between Kennedy's union and

Cooke's Auckland and Tomoana Freezing Workers Union.

So disgusted was Cooke by the response he successfully stood against the incumbent secretary, starting a lifelong career in the union management.

His business management degree was initially abandoned by the challenge of funding the purchase of a share in yacht to sail to the America's Cup then by marriage and the rapid addition of two children.

One of his first challenges as a union official was dealing with the fallout from the 1981 Meat Act, which deregulated the meat industry and saw Affco close its Southdown plant.

The closure became a flashpoint in a nationwide dispute between employers and unions over the obligations of paying redundancy.

In 1987 Cooke was elected secretary of the Auckland and Tomoana Freezing Workers Union and became one of 10 union assessors negotiating the NZ Freezing Worker's Award with employers.

He described some of his union colleagues at that time, such as national secretary Jack Scott, as rugged individuals, which meant relative youngsters like Cooke had to learn how to rephrase and promote ideas to win the support of their superiors.

Cooke is not a fan of the use of strikes.

"The employers lose out, we lose out and it wasn't a satisfactory way of resolving issues."

But that did not preclude strikes as a tactic for making a point or changing the way employers look at a point.

As a union assessor and collective agreement negotiator Cooke and nine union officials sat opposite 10 meat company representatives and it was there Cooke met a formidable negotiator.

Former lawyer Anne Knowles was employed by the meat industry as its industrial executive and legal adviser. On

already employed in Hastings while shortages also start to bite in Auckland and Christchurch.

Hastings Mayor Sandra Hazlehurst has added her voice to calls for more staff to support essential food producing companies in the region.

She is focusing on ensuring people who have lost their normal jobs are aware of other opportunities.

Hawke's Bay Regional Councillor Jerf van Beek, who was



**TOUGH EDUCATION:** Retiring Meat Workers Union secretary Graham Cooke was schooled in meat industry politics in its blood and guts days but prefers the more harmonious and collaborative atmosphere that now prevails.

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## Graham Cooke Meat Worker's Union

her appointment union leaders joked that having a woman at the negotiations might reduce the amount of swearing.

It did, but she was so imposing and able the unionists also concluded she had ice in her veins.

Cooke says she researched every arbitration decision by the then

equivalent of the Employment Relations Authority to see if it could be applied to the meat industry in the employer's favour.

That approach had a negative impact on the industry because it tried to screw the advantage in favour of employers.

The 1991 Employment Contracts Act also screwed the scrum in favour of employers, which, Cooke says, took years for employment conditions to recover though not to the level they were before the legislation.

Because it restricted union coverage those working for a new business could be paid less and with poorer conditions than those working for the same company in an existing role or site.

The 1999 the Helen Clark-led Labour Government changed the legislation and Cooke says the union was able to renegotiate some parity.

By 1994 meat workers were served by two unions but the collapse that year of the Weddel meat company, which overnight lost Meat Union Aotearoa's 2200 members with the closure of the Tomoana, Feilding, Aotearoa, Whangarei and Kaiti works prompted the unions to restructure.

In 2005 Meat Union Aotearoa joined the NZ Meat Workers Union as a branch.

"This transformed the way the union operated.

"Meat companies found it easier to work with one union than a disjointed and undisciplined bunch of members.

"The NZ Meat Workers Union found one voice and delivered better results."

In 2012 Cooke was appointed the union's national secretary, which confirmed for him a trend that he had been observing: workplace relations with most companies had markedly improved.

"There seems to be a diversification of people running the meat companies that see an importance in working together. It is a change on 40 years ago which, to put it bluntly, was a blood and guts industry."

He singled out Anzco chief executive Peter Conley and Simon Limmer, the chief executive of Silver Fern Farms as initiating sector co-operation.

Virtually all companies want to work constructively with unions in areas such as productivity instead of slashing wages and conditions, Cooke says.

There is lingering animosity with Affco, which, he says, is anti-union and highlighted by a lengthy dispute that culminated in the 2012 lockout of workers.

Cooke describes it as the most vicious dispute he dealt with, splitting families in small communities such as Wairoa.

On one side were those who had signed individual contracts with Affco and on the other those who had signed the union's collective agreement.

Cooke has a love of yachting which he will pursue in retirement.

His two sons Rohan and Simon both represented NZ in yachting at Olympic level, sailing the 470 class.

Now he is looking forward to teaching his grandchildren the art of sailing.

# Tomato crop demands more staff

**Richard Rennie**  
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A BUMPER tomato crop is creating a shortage of workers to harvest and process the fruit.

An exceptional growing season and surging supermarket demand have put pressure on Wattie's staff, particularly in the Hastings processing plant.

The demand and crop size have the company seeking 200 extra staff to join the ranks of the 1000

instrumental in establishing the Recognised Seasonal Employer scheme, is confident the jobs will ultimately be filled.

"Once we get to Anzac Day we will have most of the apple harvest completed and RSE workers can move to other jobs being essential workers. I do also believe the people will be there for these jobs.

"At present the wage subsidy may be holding some back, taking a wait and see approach on their old jobs. But in coming weeks

they may find those jobs are not there and people don't want to be heading into winter unemployed."

An increasing amount of RSE accommodation is becoming available though not all is suitable for people with families.

Heinz Watties managing director Neil Heffer said with tomato harvesting scheduled to continue until April 22 social distancing requirements have had to extend to field harvest operations.

Precautions have extended to shift changes, operation distancing in processing areas and seating arrangements in staff cafeterias.

"Our people there and in the other plants have been amazing and we take our hats off to them. They have had to deal with altered family situations, households in lockdown and new workplace protocols and they come to work eager to do what they can."