

BLACKBALL 2008

A commemoration of the 1908 miners' strike on DVD

Reviewed by Dean Parker

In 1908 three young men in their twenties took work at the Blackball mine. They also formed a Blackball branch of the Socialist Party. At the first union meeting they attended they raised the matter of their lunch break. Miners were allowed 15 minutes to have lunch. The three, Pat Hickey, Paddy Webb and George Hunter, argued for the miners to take 30 minutes. The union members agreed. But when they took their 30 minutes, the three were sacked, together with another four miners. All seven happened to make up the entire committee of the Blackball branch of the Socialist Party. That night the union met and angrily struck for reinstatement of the seven. This was a decision that defied government legislation outlawing strikes. The union was charged with breaching the law and fined. The strike continued. Three months later the company gave in, reinstating the dismissed men and increasing the lunch-break to 30 minutes.

Wrote labour historian Bert Roth, "This victory had an electrifying effect on unions throughout the country."

A federation of militant unions was created, openly calling for the overthrow of capitalism.

A massive strike broke out in 1913, the closest New Zealand has come to revolution.

A Labour Party was formed in 1916 and took office in 1935.

All of this—union federation, Labour Party—stemmed from those 1908 events that took place in the mists of the West Coast.

One hundred years later, over the Easter holidays, Blackball residents organised a celebration which was attended by a range of people who traced their heritage to the militants of 1908. Cabinet ministers, anarchists, coal miners, Save Happy Valley environmental campaigners, city-based academics and unionists from the West Coast and beyond gathered in Blackball.

Blackball 2008 is a 23-minute DVD documentary of those celebrations, a commemorative record of one of New Zealand's defining political events.

A stage play picks up its enthusiastic audience and takes it through the history and characters of the early mining town, with songs up on stage and speeches down on the floor.

Out in the streets there's a parade like the old Labour Day parades of the early twentieth century—trucks and tractors and banners, marchers singing "The Red Flag", others carrying current union banners.

There are poets, a town fair, a sausage sizzle, historians a-plenty.

"Bread and Roses" is sung in a huge marquee as thanks to the cooks.

Above it all, in the mist and the clouds, the old pit-head rears up like a monument of the past. And through it all Choir Choir Pants on Fire leads with labour anthems of the present. This is a celebration of ordinary people, celebrating the year they began to organise industrially and politically.

Blackball 2008 has been produced by Vanguard Films for the Blackball '08 Commemoration Committee and is available from Rod Prosser, PO Box 3563 Wellington 6140 (communitymedia@paradise.net.nz). Price \$15 including postage.