

‘The camaraderie and the whakawhanaungatanga’

WORK, CULTURE AND COMMUNITY IN THE NEW ZEALAND FREEZING WORKS, 1970s AND 1980s



HENARE NGAERA O’KEEFE (Ngāti Kahungunu, Ngāti Porou) began work at the Tōmoana freezing works at the start of the ‘killing season’ in late 1971. It was the ‘University of Life’, O’Keefe explained, ‘I went in there a boy and came out a man’. As a young Māori man, O’Keefe joined many others of his generation who took up jobs in the seasonal industry in the 1970s. O’Keefe and his whānau migrated south from Ruatōria to Hastings, the site of two major meat plants. ‘There wasn’t a hell of a lot going on in our hometown’, he recalled, ‘so we all moved to the urban areas and went into the meat works’. Arriving outside the gates of the works for the first time, O’Keefe recollected, ‘you just stood in a queue until you got a job and inevitably they would hire you’. O’Keefe worked his way through different departments, eventually ending up as a slaughterer on the mutton chain, the heart of the freezing works. The slaughterers on the mutton chain were the elite in the freezing works, the best paid, and the most active in the union. It was challenging work, physically demanding, but also ‘bloody boring’. Despite this, the workplace had its redeeming qualities:

Best thing about it was the people, of course. I loved the culture there. I loved the camaraderie and the whakawhanaungatanga, the closeness, the intimacy of it all. The camaraderie was the biggest thing. We worked together, we slept together, we socialized together, and there was two-thousand of us. It was a real family: an absolute, total family.¹

Like O’Keefe, Maurice Davis (Ngāti Whanaunga, Ngāti Maniapoto) started at the freezing works in the 1970s. He migrated from Otorohanga in the King Country to Auckland, ‘from the country to the smoke’, to work in the urban Westfield meat works in the Ōtāhuhu–Penrose area. Like O’Keefe, Davis waited outside the gates. ‘I just stood in a queue. Those were the days without CVs’, he recalled. ‘I was a sprightly, nineteen-year-old boy who thought he was a man’. Despite their geographical separation, both O’Keefe and Davis reflected on their time in the meat works in a strikingly similar manner. Davis called the Westfield freezing works the ‘University of South Auckland’, and said ‘I went on the job and I loved it. I loved the culture. I loved the people. I

loved the camaraderie'. O'Keefe and Davis would both work at the freezing works for the next 20 years, taking up roles as union delegates, taking part in sports teams and wider community events, standing on the picket line for three-month strikes, and losing their jobs when the factories closed.²

The oral histories of O'Keefe and Davis speak to the experience of the many men and the few women who worked in the freezing industry during this period. This was a workforce that was largely male, multi-ethnic, predominantly Māori; it was seasonal and precarious, and the workplace culture and camaraderie, alongside union militancy, were central elements to workers' lives. In a workplace dominated by speed, regimentation and monotony, workers encountered and sustained a workplace culture that emphasized occupational solidarity and wider community connections, autonomy and ownership over the job, and a desire to transform the workplace to suit the needs of workers, their homes and their families. The workplace culture also underpinned the tradition of strong unionism in the freezing works. Labour historians have focused on political and economic change, the strike-wave that characterized the 1970s, and the crushing defeats of the late 1980s and early 1990s for organized labour. However, there is little analysis of what shaped and sustained unionism within the workplace during this period. Similarly, there are few historical insights into workplace cultures that existed in many large-scale, multi-ethnic, blue-collar workplaces, and the wider community connections that enabled workers and their families to endure drawn-out industrial disputes. This article analyses the various expressions of workplace culture in the freezing works in relation to ethnicity and gender, how it underpinned unionism in the workplace and how it evolved over time against the backdrop of profound changes in the industry and the economy more broadly.

This article is part of a broader research project that traces the rise and decline of freezing workers' unionism between 1973 and 1994.³ By the 1970s, workers in the industry exercised massive industrial power, at times accounting for more than half of the nation's strikes and stoppages.⁴ Workers frequently challenged the employer's prerogative and asserted their own control and autonomy on the job. Issues of heat, speed, unfair dismissals and safety inspired stop-work meetings and wildcat strikes, while the negotiations around the award contracts regularly led to protracted strike action. In the 1970s and 1980s, however, freezing worker militancy occurred against the backdrop of economic and political change and a two-decade period of transition in the meat industry, sparked by both international and domestic forces.⁵ In 1973, Britain joined the European Economic Community (EEC), cutting off free access to the British market, while new hygiene regulation

impacted the profitability of the meat industry. The period witnessed at first an upturn in strike action by freezing workers to protect themselves against the erosion of their wages and maintain autonomy in the workplace. But this militancy failed to survive into the late 1980s and 1990s as plants closed across the country and the state dismantled the broadly supportive system of industrial relations.⁶ Indeed, the insecurities for workers in the meat industry caused by the recession was intensified by structural changes within the economy, including the deregulation of the meat industry in 1981 and the removal of subsidies for farmers in 1986. Closures, mergers and redundancy quickly followed, alongside clawbacks on working conditions and pay, the enforcement of new discipline, and the introduction of new technology in the workplace. Between the 1973 and the 1991, freezing workers sustained, attempted to defend, and then lost much of their power.

During this period, freezing workers acquired a reputation as a workforce disengaged from their work, strike-prone, overpaid and greedy. In a 1976 *Listener* article entitled ‘So what’s wrong with being a freezing worker?’, industrial relations scholar J.H.K Inkson wrote that in the public eye, the freezing worker is ‘one of lowest status individuals in our society, a rough, irresponsible layabout who jeopardises the economy out of sheer greed and goes on strike – egged on by communist agitators – at the drop of a hat’.⁷ In 1981, Prime Minister Robert Muldoon described freezing workers as ‘intransigent’, with ‘no loyalty’ and ‘over-paid’, and in 1988, the editor of the *New Zealand Meat Producer*, Anita Busby, wrote that freezing workers ‘are generally regarded as the real villains’ and cast as an ‘illiterate, unskilled lout who is out to grasp everything for himself and to hell with everyone else’.⁸ Because meat-freezing remained New Zealand’s key export industry, strike action by freezing workers posed a direct threat to the ‘national interest’, and thwarted the hard work of the farmer, popularly understood as the ‘backbone of the economy’.⁹ Thus, freezing workers garnered the ire of farmers, the general public and the state, inspiring calls for anti-union legislation and leading to several instances of state intervention to clamp down on wildcat strikes and to bring an end to protracted disputes.

But while the popular image of freezing workers was that of a greedy and uncompromising workforce, oral histories tell a different story: one of camaraderie and community, of union pride and solidarity in the workplace and of community support during long strikes and challenging times. Freezing workers’ militancy was built on a workplace culture that emphasized autonomy on the job, one that was fiercely defended when it came under attack, as it increasingly did in the late 1980s. In its use of the term ‘workplace culture’, this study draws on Patricia Cooper’s definition as ‘the patterns of daily

work into which any newcomer would become initiated after a time — the unwritten rules, the ways of doing the job, and how one thought about his or her work'. Workplace culture, according to Cooper, consisted of a 'coherent system of ideas and practices through which workers modified, mediated and resisted the limits of their jobs'.¹⁰ Oral histories provide opportunities to explore workplace and union culture, and what Anna Green calls the 'textures' of everyday life in the past and 'the often unrecorded private dimensions of family, working and community relationships'.¹¹ In doing so, oral histories also allow historians to underscore the 'horizontal linkages' in a person's life, and thereby 'prevent the analytic compartmentalisation' of work from community, home from society, and ethnicity from class and gender.¹² Such an approach is essential in understanding the fluid, complex and contradictory nature of how workers expressed their identities along the lines of class, ethnicity and gender. Neville Kirk argues that by 'mistakenly seeing differences among workers as, *ipso facto*, evidence of division and conflict, and falsely positing necessary antagonisms between class and gender, class and ethnicity', historians tend to 'present unbalanced and somewhat negative and pejorative pictures of working-class life'.¹³

Historical writing on workplace culture and on working-class culture in general is limited in New Zealand, with only a few historians making it the focus of their inquiries, and much of this literature has focused on the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with few historians analysing the post-war decades.¹⁴ In the New Zealand historiography, much of the focus is on leisure, sport and war as sites of masculine identity, and discussions of class, again, are primarily focused on the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹⁵ Deborah Montgomerie suggests that 'it is surprising that more attention was not given to paid work and work-based culture as a defining ritual of male culture'.¹⁶ There are a few exceptions. Anna Green demonstrates how unionism on the New Zealand wharves built on a strong workplace culture, which in turn grew out of a particular set of labour conditions.¹⁷ Internationally, historians have long demonstrated how workplaces serve as key sites for the construction of class and masculinity.¹⁸ More recently, Melissa Matutina Williams has called for the study of workplaces in Māori history.¹⁹ Using the concept 'workplace-whānau', Williams suggests that the meanings underpinning the concept "'whānau" extended beyond kinship to include ethnic, gender and occupation-based bonds in the workplace'. Māori workers transformed physically demanding, monotonous and impersonal workplaces 'into bearable, sometimes fun and culturally familiar spaces of community engagement'. Williams's work highlights the potential of viewing workplaces as sites where 'inter-racial unity and stability were sought by

Māori workers’, and as ‘sites of Māori resistance to racial and cultural discrimination’. Workplaces, Williams continues, ‘and their relevance to Māori and New Zealand history in general, should not be underplayed or confined to the pages of New Zealand labour history’.²⁰ More research is required to examine workplaces in post-war industrial centres where ‘a sense of working-class identity’ transcended ethnic boundaries among both Māori and Pākehā.²¹ This is not to suggest that ethnic and regional identities were not important, but rather, as Cooper writes, that ‘work itself forged identities at least as strong’.²²

This article begins by exploring the employment practices and work conditions at the freezing works. The casual and seasonal nature of the job, intergenerational employment and work conditions significantly shaped the rhythms of freezing worker life and the attitudes of the men and women in the industry. While workers gained little satisfaction out of the work itself, they shaped the culture of the workplace to suit their own needs, and carved out a space for themselves that reflected shared values and traditions. As a largely male workforce, with a significant proportion of Māori workers, ethnicity and gender played a role in the expression of this workplace culture. At the same time, occupational solidarity subsumed ethnic differences as workers reflected on the solidarity inherent in the work process and workplace culture. Following a discussion of the ways in which ethnicity and gender played out in the workplace, the article discusses the various ways in which workplace culture was reflected and reinforced within the community, building what Lucy Taska calls the ‘sources of integration’ between work and home that underpinned workers’ ability to endure long strikes.²³ The article ends with a discussion about how workplace culture changed over time as the fundamental shifts in the economy and in the meat industry transformed the working lives of many freezing workers.

By the 1960s and 1970s, the meat industry ranked as New Zealand’s largest sector of manufacturing and the country’s most important source of foreign income, contributing about 40% to the total export revenue of New Zealand.²⁴ It also employed the largest number of workers of any manufacturing sector, and a meat works was a familiar landmark in many areas of the country, providing employment for entire communities. Getting a job at the freezing works was not a complicated process and, as many recall, relatively easy by the 1970s. Like O’Keefe and Davis, new workers lined up outside the gates at the start of each ‘killing season’, while foremen or company workers chose from those among the crowd, a tradition that most of those interviewed remembered clearly. John Leckie began working at Westfield in 1977 and lined up outside

the pay office with other new workers, where they were 'assigned on the spot'. 'Westfield was a big shed', he said, 'and it took on large numbers of people at the start of the season'.²⁵ Helen Mulrennan started at Tōmoana in 1978, and recalled that getting a job 'consisted of hanging around the employment office, with many others hoping to catch the eye of the foreman ... there was no CV, no interview, no references. You'd just rock on up there and they'd come out the office and say [pointing] "you, you, you"'.²⁶ Meanwhile, experienced workers with seniority received telegrams, calling them back to work for the new season. Seniority, a key provision won by the union and enshrined in the 1958 National Award, provided job security in the precarious and seasonal industry.

The 'killing season' spanned from around October to April and significantly shaped the rhythms of the freezing workers' lives, workplace and union culture. In analysing the causes behind the 'strike proneness' of the industry, industrial relations scholars at the time pointed to the seasonality of the work in creating 'casual relationships between workers and employers' and a lack of loyalty of workers towards company and company towards workers.²⁷ Frank McNulty of the Meat Workers' Union argued in 1974 that the 'economic insecurity arising from the effect of seasonal employment is one of the major factors in bad industrial relations in the meat freezing industry', while another anonymous senior union official asked 'how can you owe responsibility to an industry when it doesn't ensure a man a living?'²⁸ In a 1989 interview, one freezing worker claimed that while you made 'damn good money', there was 'no real easy way out of the freezing works nightmare ... you get trapped into this cycle of rich – poor – rich – poor. It happens to guys'.²⁹ But while the seasonality of the work could have a disruptive impact on families, especially when many members of the same family were laid off together, others came to like the seasonal nature of the work, particularly younger workers. 'You'd work hard, earn a lot of money, and then get the fuck out of there for a few months and have a rest and take a break from it for a while', explained James Robb.³⁰ Even those with family accommodated the seasonality of the work. Jean Te Huia and her husband (also a freezing worker) 'got used to the life-style'. 'We used to save as much as we could during the season', Te Huia said, 'pay all our bills in advance, and then in the off season you never knew when you'd be back at work, so you'd just live out on your money until you ran out'. The seasonality of the work also gave Te Huia time to spend with the family throughout the winter. 'It was winter you were off, so you could spend time with your children, stock up on your firewood and squirrel away for the winter'.³¹

Familial recruitment and intergenerational employment was a common practice and reinforced the occupational clustering of groups of workers, particularly among Māori.³² Jean Te Huia found acquiring a job at Tōmoana

difficult because she had no immediate family employed there. 'It was quite an elitist occupation.... If you don't know anybody or you didn't have any family ties it was quite difficult. You had to be known to get in there'. It was only after working for some time that Te Huia realized that many of the workers were related:

After a while working there and after getting to know the people that I worked beside, you realize that the person working beside you was the daughter of the guy on the other side, and there was the sister and brother of the person who worked on the detain rail; the guy down on the floor sweeping was her brother; his wife was on the other side; their mother was the cleaner; their father was the board walker and the union delegate. And you realize actually that it really was a family affair.

Once Te Huia had made these connections, however, she came to understand the family aspect of the works as underpinning both the 'community' of workers, as well as workers' pride in their occupations and identities as freezing workers. 'Generations of families worked there', she said, 'and were proud of their jobs and really put their heart and souls into it', she explained. 'It was a community'. Family members also helped one another when it came to up-skilling on the job, even if it meant risking their position on the chain. Labourers who wanted to become butchers would be helped along by 'a relative or a father', though this was done 'sneakily' and occurred out of sight of the foreman, because, according to Henare O'Keefe, 'if you got caught, you got chucked off' the chain for the day.

The conditions of work and the work process defined a set of prerequisites for those employed in the industry: the ability to deal with blood and guts, speed and physical strength. The work was hard, fast and, by its nature, stomach churning.³³ Unionist and meat worker Frank Barnard called it 'filthy, soul-destroying, boring and dangerous'.³⁴ In addition, freezing workers operated in conditions of either extreme heat or cold. Freezer hands worked in 'corridors filled with ice mist, moving carcasses along overhead rails into the freezers, where the temperature is more than 12 degrees below zero', while those on the mutton floor worked in 'hot, steamy, noisy and often stinking' conditions.³⁵ Heat could be an issue for safety on the job as well as hygiene. The introduction of new hygiene regulations in the early 1970s required windows to be closed and the use of hot water for cleaning and sterilizing knives, which 'turned some workplaces into a sauna in the summer', the peak of the killing season.³⁶ However, under the Meat Inspectors' Award, meat inspectors who were employed by the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (MAF) could not work over a certain temperature, a clause freezing workers

took advantage of. 'Everyone would start calling out to the meat inspectors when it got too hot', remembered James Robb, 'they'd say "too hot! too hot!" If it got too hot, work ended for the day'. George Rarere remembers that 'you couldn't work over a certain temperature. Humidity made you sweat and your knives became slippery'.³⁷ Beside the extremes of cold and heat, the environment of the workplace was not particularly pleasant, though some freezing workers expressed a masculine pride in being able to handle what Frank Barnard called a 'hard, blood and guts industry'.³⁸ Barnard claimed that 'if you are a softie in the stomach, you don't go for it'.³⁹ According to John Leckie, the killing box where the animals' throats were cut before entering the chain represented 'the sharp end of the freezing works'. 'Over the years', Leckie said, 'there was many a fulla who would turn up for his first job [on the killing box] and last 'til morning tea or smoko'.

For those working on the chain, the work required constant coordination as slaughterers on the beef and mutton chains worked directly alongside one another. 'It was a coordinated thing', Leckie explained. 'The chain is inexorable and you've got to do your job and keep up and follow the sequence'.⁴⁰ 'For most people it was constant work', according to James Robb. Helen Mulrennan remembered that 'you'd have to desperately try to keep up! And keep your knife sharp'. In addition to the speed, the work was also physically demanding. 'You worked; you *really* worked', Maurice Davis emphasized. For Peter Gosche, unless you could keep your knife sharp, 'your arms would ache every morning'. Gosche resented what he saw as the smug assertion that freezing workers were paid well for doing nothing, a familiar motif in the press's attitude towards the militant workforce. 'They always said that freezing workers made good money', Gosche recalled, 'but you only made good money while you were working, and you had to work bloody hard'.⁴¹ The work was also deeply monotonous. Jean Te Huia recalled that the work 'was really dreary. There was never a change. When you're on the chain killing thousands of sheep day after day after day, nothing changes.... The work on a chain is broken down so much, so you'd do eight a minute and do one particular job eight times a minute'.

But while workers gained little enjoyment or satisfaction from the work itself, they created and sustained a workplace culture that transformed the monotonous and the unpleasant environment of the workplace. Labour historians locate workplace culture in the labour process. Patricia Cooper claims that work culture was 'forged in the context of the work process'.⁴² Similarly, Colin J. Davis suggests that because dockworkers relied on one another in the production process they maintained what he calls 'a communal sense of work and responsibility to one another'.⁴³ In the freezing works,

becoming a part of this workplace culture required a period of sometimes brutal initiation into both the job and the culture of the workplace. Mulrennan recalled that walking onto the mutton slaughterboard for the first time ‘was a pretty overwhelming experience ... the place would just go silly when the newbies came on the chain’. Freezing workers banged their knives on the steel ‘which would make an incredible racket, but that was sort of a tradition’. Bruce Stobie recalled that in his first week, ‘I buggered one [carcass] up and [my tutor] said to me: “get your skinny white arse out of here and don’t come back for a week”’. They liked to do it right. They were proud of their work and they wanted you to *do the same thing*.⁴⁴ Like the initiation process, practical jokes also served the same purpose. Humour was a ‘commodity highly valued’ in the workplace, and workers often played practical jokes on one another, particularly on new staff.⁴⁵ Jean Te Huia recalled:

One day I walked along the chain ... and all along the chain, I was either subjected to bits of fat put on my hat, things tied to my apron strings, whistles and cheers and banging on the steel bars, so as you walked along the chain, this horrific noise accompanied you. And it was because they were bored. It was something to break their boredom and you became the butt of the joke. So you just kind of laughed, tolerated it, and moved along as quickly as you could.

However, Robb explained that this kind of teasing had its limits. ‘If it got beyond those limits, people would step in and put a stop to it’. Mulrennan recalled that it was ‘nothing sort of nasty; it was always good humoured’. Playing practical jokes functioned as a way of both putting someone in their place and initiating new workers to the works itself or to a particular department. Mulrennan said that this took some getting used to. ‘As I got up on the chain, I developed a thicker skin’.

Conversation on the job also served to offset the monotony. Kevin Amanaki remembered that ‘[t]he day went a lot quicker when you had someone to talk to with similar stuff in common; a mix of conversation with a good sense of humour helped lessen the impact of the boring, repetitive work’.⁴⁶ Helen Mulrennan explained that the best jobs in the works were those that allowed you to talk with fellow workers. ‘Working on the broom was always good because you could wander right up the chain and talk to people and you weren’t tied to the chain’. James Robb explained that ‘most jobs you’re working close to somebody and you could just talk all day, if you’re not struggling to keep up with the work’. Jean Te Huia remembered how the ‘people made it fun’ and, through conversation and humour, transformed the workplace into a space of community, social and family life.

There were days where it was so boring, day after day, and so you found ways of keeping yourself interested and occupied on the chain. Lots of things were going on, even though it was a freezing worker chain and it was a kill chain, people were selling raffle tickets, people were having love affairs, guys were singing and dancing, people were telling jokes; women were showing off their latest jewellery items or talking about their night out. And so there was a whole range of activities going on at one time to overcome the boredom — because it could get pretty damn boring. People made it fun. On every chain, there was a couple of jokers who kept the whole chain laughing.

Through conversation and gossip, the ‘supposedly separate worlds of work and home life’ intersected, helping to build bonds of solidarity and community between workers.⁴⁷ As Te Huia recalled, ‘[i]t became a lifestyle thing where people became very personal to you; you knew about people’s lives and their connections with each other’. In another way, workers reclaimed a portion of their time from employers, ‘appropriating workplace spaces for non-work purposes’.⁴⁸ At the same time, many remembered that working alongside each other on the chain allowed opportunities to ‘talk union’.

Workplace culture had subversive elements, as freezing workers exerted what Anna Green calls ‘informal control over the work process’; the strong workplace culture and union encouraged and allowed for this kind of control.⁴⁹ Workers insisted, for example, that smoko rooms were for workers only. Helen Mulrennan claimed that ‘the bosses weren’t allowed in the smoko rooms... it was the workers’ smoko rooms’. In early 1985, a union delegate at Westfield, Wayne Ripikoi, expressed concern at a union meeting about a foreman entering the workers’ smoko rooms. Workers then passed a resolution ‘to restrict access by foremen to the amenities during smokos and meals’ following ‘the provocative actions of foremen entering as a group at this morning’s smoko’.⁵⁰ While management (with foremen as their workplace representatives) decided on the arrangement of the workplace, workers also made informal ‘arrangements’ about who did what work. ‘If you’re on the gut block’, James Robb recalled, ‘you’d do half an hour for each job and then swap around. Those were arrangements that the workers came to themselves’.

Moreover, alongside informal upskilling, intergenerational employment and ‘covering’ for fellow workers, ‘perk culture’ was a common aspect of a job in the freezing works and served two functions. As Green writes, it remained a part of the broader struggle for control over the workplace, while Grace Millar writes that it served as ‘a way of shaping the workplace to the needs of the home’.⁵¹ Most interviewed recalled the theft of meat. ‘It was just something you could do and get away with’, explained James Robb, while Helen Mulrennan recalled that such items were ‘raffled off at the pub’. That

the meat was raffled at the pub suggests that such stealing was open and largely accepted by workers. For the company, regulating such behaviour proved futile, as Jean Te Huia explained, ‘it wasn’t worth saying “whose are these”, because no one would own up anyway... there were times where you turned a blind eye because there was just nothing you could do about that’. However, limits did exist on this control, and workers could be and were fired for breaking rules. In the late 1980s, the Westfield freezing workers union minute books contained numerous examples of police being brought onsite to check workers’ lockers and cars for stolen meat, often unsuccessfully. It is also important to note that such informal practices were matched by formal resistance and protest, in the form of wildcat strikes, or ‘homers’ as they were called, over workplace matters, a topic that is beyond the scope of this article.⁵²

Employment in the freezing works brought Māori, Pākehā and Pacific Islander workers together in one workplace. Henare O’Keefe remembered the diversity of the workforce: ‘you had Tongans, Samoans; you had Greeks, Italians; you had all races, creeds and colours’. Some ethnic groups clustered in certain departments, while others scattered throughout the works. John Leckie recalled that at Westfield ‘the core of the rendering department was Pacific Islanders [and] the [union] delegate was a Cook Islander’. However, on the chain ‘you’d find everybody there’ and in the stockyards ‘it was a complete mixture’. In both Auckland and Hawke’s Bay, Māori made up a substantial proportion of the workforce. By 1981, 53% of Southdown’s workforces were Māori, while 30.8% were Pākehā and 14.5% were Pacific Islanders.⁵³ ‘I’d never worked in a workforce like Tōmoana’, recalled James Robb, ‘where the vast majority were Māori, about two-thirds’. Robb explained that Māori workers made up most of the younger workers: ‘There were a lot of older guys there who’d been there for 20 to 30 or even 40 years and the older workers were much higher percentage Pākehā, but the younger workers were almost all Māori’.

The oral narratives of workers suggest that Māori culture had the most dominant influence over workplace culture in the sheds. For Hape Huata, the freezing works was a ‘home away from home’ for iwi everywhere. ‘It had the prestige, the mana, the wairua. It was a way of life. We all looked forward to going to work because it was whānau’.⁵⁴ And for many Pākehā, the freezing industry was their introduction to Māoridom. The 1960 Hunn Report predicted that Māori employment would provide the ‘catalyst agent for dissolving social distinctions’ between Māori and Pākehā.⁵⁵ However, at the freezing works, Māori and Pākehā relationships reflected what Williams

describes as a sort of 'reverse-integration'. In a case study of the Power Board, Williams found that the company's 'dependence on a Māori workforce left it little choice but to accommodate and participate in the cultural customs of its employees'.⁵⁶ In the freezing works, this 'reverse-integration' occurred on a workplace level on the ground in the day-to-day relationships between Māori and Pākehā and in the ways Māori shaped workplaces, making them 'culturally familiar spaces of community engagement'.⁵⁷

Hape Huata said that 'the Pākehās become Māori when they come into the freezing industry'.⁵⁸ There is some truth in this statement, as far as freezing workers themselves recalled. Jean Te Huia recalled that 'the majority of workers were Māori and there was a huge need to be part of a group so Pākehā adopted their ways, adopted their language, adopted their humour and everyone got on and they were all kind of the same'. Pākehā workers fit in, according to Te Huia, if 'they played rugby just as well, played guitar just as well, sang just as well, could joke just as well'. '[For Pākehā] it was the introduction to a culture', Te Huia continued, 'because you shared your food, you shared your love of each other, you became whānau, you were part of that family and you were adopted into it'. For James Robb, a Pākehā worker, Māori 'were so much a part of it, and predominated in the whole place.... The Māori aspect was special'. Teina Nanai, a Cook Island worker at Tōmoana, considered himself 'one of the bros... because I was brought up with the Māori guys at school, at home, at work'.⁵⁹ Frank Barnard said that in working alongside other ethnic groups, 'you learn the other side of life... I know I'm a better man than if I'd just worked in my own honky world'.⁶⁰

At the same time, oral histories suggest that occupational and class (and, indirectly, gender) solidarity transcended ethnic differences and the common identity of freezing workers based on class and occupation 'drew on, co-existed with and at time subsumed differences' of ethnicity and, to a lesser extent, gender.⁶¹ For George Rarere ethnic differences 'didn't matter' and for Henare O'Keefe, they 'didn't exist' within the confines of the freezing works. 'You were Pākehā, I'm Māori', O'Keefe added. 'You were my workmate.... You didn't see colour. You just saw your mate'. Many claimed that there was no racism within the confines of the workplace and, if there was, it was self-regulated by workers. Rarere explained that '[i]f you [were racist] you were out. The union wouldn't tolerate that sort of thing.... Or if the union didn't control it, someone would control it. Families would control it and deal to it'. Jean Te Huia claimed that you 'wouldn't survive' in the works if you were racist. Helen Mulrennan remembered that at the Whakatu plant, workers walked off the job in a wildcat strike after a foreman called a Māori worker a 'black bastard'.

For many, the breakdown of these distinctions and differences in particular, and the workplace culture in general, originated in the work process itself. For Bill Hillman, ‘[y]ou learnt very early that if you stuck together, you’d do better. Even as a team workwise. You soon found out that you couldn’t operate individually’.⁶² ‘I guess it comes down to what you did’, said Kevin Amanaki, ‘you worked alongside each other, relied on the next person on the chain to do their job to make your job easier. So everyone just respected each other in those ways’. Similarly, John Leckie claimed that ‘[t]here wasn’t a distinction or a separation. It was partly because you were working alongside and relying on one another’. Gosche, too, remembered that ‘everyone got on. Whatever colour you were; you’re all mates’. In this sense, there are two co-existing and competing narratives in the memories of freezing workers. One the one hand, workers recognized differences and understood the importance of the various culture, and, in particular, the significant contribution of Māori and Māori culture to the works. But this idea rested alongside a sense that workers ‘were all the same’, ‘all mates’, united by a common work process, occupational solidarity and workplace culture.

However, a difference which was not entirely subsumed by occupational solidarity in these descriptions was the gendered identity of workers. The freezing works was conceptualized as a ‘man’s world’. For women, such as Helen Mulrennan and Jean Te Huia, who entered the works in the 1970s and 1980s in greater numbers than before, the freezing industry workplace was a largely male space. For Mulrennan, the workplace was ‘a very male environment, of course.... The whole chain was male until you got to the end [where the tagging was done] and there’d be some women’. Where women did work on the chain, they were usually concentrated into jobs like ‘tagging’ because, according to Mulrennan, ‘they weren’t knife jobs. They were seen as jobs women could do’ and workers, as well as management, made decisions about who worked where. Similarly, Jean Te Huia remembered that at first being taken seriously by her male co-workers was an issue. ‘As a woman, it was difficult at the beginning... because there were guys in there that didn’t want to hear from you; they didn’t want you to say nothing’. Workers had quite variable memories of how welcoming the workplace could be for women in this period. While the gendered hierarchy in the labour process remained intact by the 1970s, James Robb claimed that the workplace at Tōmoana was not ‘one of those oppressively male-only workplaces’ despite the large proportion of men. However, Tracey McIntosh, whose father was a freezing worker, recalled the issue of the banning of sexist calendars at Westfield. The display of these calendars was challenged by women in the union, ‘who were few in number’. ‘It was largely the men’, McIntosh

claimed, 'who didn't support it [and] they didn't think women should be telling them what to do and felt they [could] put up any bloody calendar they wanted'. McIntosh's father remained ambivalent on the issue, and refused to say which way he would vote on the issue. He 'didn't think it was a major union issue; he maybe thought it was trivializing the main union issues', McIntosh recalled.⁶³ Mulrennan claimed that there was sexism in the works, 'but not sexual harassment', while Te Huia recalled 'whistles and cheers' from male workers when she walked down the chain.

The degree to which women were included in freezing works culture, then, is complex. Women in the 1970s began to challenge their relegation to the less skilled — and therefore lower paying — jobs in the freezing industry. This agitation could put them at odds with the prejudices or territorialism of male co-workers and management. Yet this push towards equity of employment was not a result of women being entirely excluded from workplace culture and the push towards greater employment equity did not necessarily make workplace culture less masculine, either. The increasing presence of women in the works in the 1970s did not challenge or change this working-class masculine subculture, but neither were women entirely excluded from it. Like Hauta's claim that workplace culture led to Pākehā 'becoming' Māori, women described becoming 'one of the boys', rather than 'feminizing' workplace culture. As one woman from the Whakatu freezing works recalled, 'I was one of the boys, we all were'.⁶⁴

At the same time, workplace culture drew on local cultures specific to time and place.⁶⁵ It did not begin and end at the shed gates, but extended beyond the freezing works itself, spilling over into the community and social life of workers, while community and social life were, in turn, reflected and reinforced within the workplace. 'There is tremendous comradeship within the plant', remembered Hape Huata. 'But it doesn't stop there. It goes into the community as well. That's part of the freezing industry'.⁶⁶ The *Meat Workers Journal* in 1966 picked up the centrality of work to a workers' home, community and social life in its defence of the seniority system: 'The longer a worker works for an employer, the more closely his life becomes invested in that employment', an article in the magazine read. 'Where he lives, his friends, his habits, his sleeping and eating times, his entire physical and emotional well-being and other aspects of his family's life are each greatly influenced by his job'.⁶⁷ As a child of a freezing worker, Tracey McIntosh claimed that the freezing works had a 'strong culture' that 'flowed from the industry into the home and back again, just constantly'.⁶⁸ McIntosh wrote:

I grew up in a street nearly cut in half by the main trunk railway line, in which nearly all the Maori men (like my Pakeha father) worked at one of the three freezing works in the Otahuhu-Penrose area. Some were seasonal workers rather than ‘permos’, but still whole families had allegiances to particular works.... The works were all dense communities made up of chain workers, tradesmen (such as my father, a mechanic), women in the office and the laundry, bosses in the office and many other people that made up this complex organisation. This community extended far beyond the abattoir walls, reaching out to many parts of South Auckland.⁶⁹

For Māori in particular, ‘the works’, as an intergenerational employer, remained central to their conceptions of community and home life. Some of those interviewed expressed an almost tribal affiliation with ‘the works’. For Jean Te Huia, the freezing works was ‘woven into the heart of Māori families’, while Tracey McIntosh has said that the Westfield freezing works ‘is part of my whakapapa’. McIntosh claimed that ‘in the same way I was snobbish about being Tūhoe through my mother, I was also snobbish about being Westfield through my father’.⁷⁰ Henare O’Keefe reflected on the importance of the freezing works to the largely Māori and working-class suburb of Flaxmere in Hastings:

It employed most of the people here. It clothed our family, it housed us, it fed us. It furnished us, it educated us. It gave us a sense of value and affirmation and importance. It provided a social life for us here in Flaxmere, and others.⁷¹

It was ‘vital, absolutely vital’, O’Keefe claimed, ‘as vital as the air that we breathe’.⁷² For Peter Gosche, the freezing workers ‘kept Ōtāhuhu going. It was the hub of South Auckland when I was a kid’. During difficult financial and emotional times, such as when a worker had suffered a death in the family, freezing workers often helped each other, setting up koha funds. Syd Taukamo claimed that ‘[i]f anything happened to a workmate they felt for that person as if it were his brother or sister... if one of your numbers went down, you felt it right where it hurts. And you felt the same way that person felt for his family’.⁷³ George Rarere claims that ‘you looked after each other there... that’s the closeness of the workplace... if you got sick or your family got sick, they’d rally around to support you’.

The connections between workplace, home and community were reinforced in a number of ways. Events organized by workers drew in families. McIntosh recalled that the Christmas parties for the families were ‘quite major milestones in my growing up’ and ‘highlights of my growing up’ as were the picnics at Point Chevalier or Motuihe Island. Such events were worker-led and organized and paid for on a contribution basis, ‘which was part of the ethos’ according to McIntosh.⁷⁴ George Rarere remembered that during the winter, workers in the

freezers 'managed their proceeds to make sure that every weekend every family in the works had the opportunity to get together as a community and celebrate'. The 'perk culture' discussed above also connected the workplace and home life. 'The job had its perks', McIntosh claimed, 'and that perk culture came into the home'. The McIntosh family had a regular 'perk night' on Friday nights. 'Friday was perk night... perk night was our night — family night', while 'Thursday was pub night'. Indeed, drinking and rugby culture were central elements of the masculine social life of freezing workers. After working hard all day, freezing workers 'drank hard' at night. Maurice Davis claimed that after union meetings, 'everyone would unfortunately lose their way on their path home' and end up at the pub. In Hastings, the social life 'centred around the pubs and parties after the pub', explained James Robb. 'You could go into any pub in Hastings and there would be people you knew there. It was good'. Similarly, sport played a major part in cementing connections outside of work. Freezing workers organized departmental rugby league games, while an inter-freezing works tournament brought freezing workers together from across the country, which Henare O'Keefe called 'the Olympics for freezing workers'. At Westfield, Peter Gosche and Maurice Davis remember rugby league as an important aspect of freezing worker culture and working-class culture in general. 'There was a culture of rugby league', Davis claimed. 'Wharfies and freezing workers were league players. League was *our* game'.⁷⁵ Indeed, whether a union official running for election was a league player was important to many freezing workers, who considered golf the sport of management.⁷⁶

Between work, home and the community, freezing workers maintained a strong social life. It was a 'really good social network', Rarere explained. 'Everybody knew everybody'. These networks, which overlapped with many facets of a worker's life, reinforced the workplace culture and the sense among many interviewees that the workplace was a 'second home' with a 'family atmosphere'. Henare O'Keefe explained that Tōmoana was 'a real family. An absolute total family'. Kevin Amanaki echoed this sentiment: Westfield 'was like a big family'; George Rarere explained that Tōmoana 'became part of my family'. For Jean Te Huia, the workplace culture was an all-encompassing aspect of the job. '[T]here was a sense of being a part of that culture', she claimed. 'Because it was a culture. You couldn't go there and be an individual. You had to be part of the culture of it'. Tracey McIntosh said that there was an 'incredible community, with its own conflicts, its own functions and dysfunction', while Te Huia explained that the comradeship among the 'guys and girls' was 'something quite special; it kind of held it all together' and made the workplace a 'living environment'. Almost all interviewed described work at the freezing works as a 'way of life'.

But by the late 1980s and early 1990s this ‘way of life’ was under threat. Redundancy, factory closures and hard times for working-class communities swept New Zealand and, indeed, most industrial societies in the final quarter of the twentieth century and ‘the collapse of big old factories meant the end of workplaces where workers were so numerous that they formed a social world of their own’.⁷⁷ In the meat-freezing industry, closures and restructuring predated the neoliberal policy revolution, but structural changes after 1984 in the economy spurred mass closures and redundancies as well as a deliberate strategy by the major companies to move away from large works in the cities to smaller satellite works in small town and country areas. The removal of Supplementary Minimum Prices (SMPs) in 1986 saw stock numbers plummet, and between 1986 and 1990 the meat freezing industry workforce of 31,000 halved.⁷⁸ For those who retained their jobs, companies attacked working conditions, pay and jobs, and asserted greater control and discipline over the workplace, while government legislation severely curtailed the ability of freezing workers’ unions to maintain a position of strength within the industry. In the 1990s, real wages for freezing workers declined, while defensive strike action for redundancy became more common.⁷⁹

It was in this context that many recalled significant changes to the workplace culture and a declining morale. ‘Workers didn’t have the same pride’, Helen Mulrennan claimed. ‘People would talk about it being a shit job’. Mulrennan continued:

That was something that struck me at first, that there was a real sort of pride in what they were doing, which you often don’t get in factory jobs where people see themselves at the bottom of the heap. You never found that in the freezing works. It was neat. When you went in there, you had a sense of dignity. But that did start to fade. Before, people would get their kids up there and want their kids to work at the freezing works. But that changed.

Similarly, James Robb recalled:

There was a great spirit of solidarity in the workforce and then it all came to a sharp halt and the self-confidence and humour of the workers vanished overnight when plants started closing.

Closure brought an end to intergenerational employment as the hiring of new people ‘fell away’.⁸⁰ The atmosphere of the workplace changed, too, with stricter rules and tightening of informal workplace practices. Bill Bennett, a long-time unionist in Hastings, claimed that ‘it became more rigid. It became less human to the individual that worked there’.⁸¹ Tracey McIntosh explained that workers’ autonomy saw the end of its ‘heyday’ in the 1970s. ‘Before it

was a perk and then it became theft... they start bringing in police, charging people. They started to check cars'. The changes also had a chilling effect on freezing workers when it came to job security. 'I think when it was not just Southdown, but then Patea and then Gear and then a whole lot of others, then people started to really fear for their job', recalled James Robb. Companies took advantage of this fear, using the threat of closure to force cuts in wages and mannings and to 'clamp down on "restrictive" practices'.⁸² The Westfield freezing works closed in 1989, while Tōmoana closed in 1994. Freezing workers, their unions and communities had experience in sustaining and supporting workers and their families during drawn-out industrial disputes. This experience proved central when it came to industrial action for fair redundancy pay and the establishment of resource centres following closure.

At its root, workplace culture and the 'sources of integration' that connected work to the home and the wider community functioned to make the work enjoyable, to shape the workplace to the needs of workers, and it operated 'according to a set of collectively defined norms, values, beliefs and obligations'.⁸³ For many interviewed, this represented the real ownership or control by workers over their day-to-day working lives.⁸⁴ However, workplace culture was not enough to assert control in the workplace and in the industry more broadly. Workplace culture provided what labour historian Paul Taillon calls the 'raw material' for underpinning a strong union organization.⁸⁵ Moreover, the social, community and family life that accompanied employment at the freezing works underpinned struggles in the industrial arenas and the ability of freezing workers to hold out during long strikes and support workers and their families and communities.⁸⁶ The institutional role of the union was central, of course, but a focus on workplace culture gives us a sense of what shaped and sustained unionism at a local level in the workplace, in the pub, on the picket line, in the resource centres and strike committees, in the community and the home, and even on the sports field.

The popular perception of freezing workers as an over-paid and overly militant workforce ignores or overshadows the close-knit communities and culture that freezing workers sustained in their workplaces and communities. In their oral history testimonies, freezing workers were well aware of the negative portrayal of freezing workers as lazy, dissociated from their place of employment, militant and rough. In this sense, the oral histories provide a counter-narrative or what Anna Green calls a 'confrontation with discourses of power'.⁸⁷ It would perhaps be easy to dismiss such sentiments as merely nostalgic. Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott warn against what they

call 'smokestack nostalgia'. 'We have to strip industrial work of its broad-shouldered, social-realist patina', they write, 'and see it for what it was: tough work that people did because it paid well and it was located in their communities'.⁸⁸ While the work did indeed pay well, freezing workers expressed no nostalgia about the work. It was 'filthy, soul-destroying, boring and dangerous'. However, freezing workers spoke about their workplaces as something unique; other jobs did not come close to the freezing works, according to many accounts, and even though many did not enjoy the work, they kept coming back each season. For Peter Gosche, 'going back to the freezing works became a bit of a bad habit. I knew the job and I knew the people, so I gravitated back, because of the people'.

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NOTES

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