Sonja Davies, below, has temporarily pushed aside her trade union activities to spend more time fighting for peace. She tells SUZANNE POLLARD what the word peace means to her.

A fire that burns for peace

PEACE is as much about women being able to walk home safely at night as it is about disarmament and nuclear-free zones, according to peace activist Sonja Davies.

"We can't go on being snugged up about our peace policies if we are becoming a violent country," she says. "I think people are finally beginning to link crime and peace - because they are linked. The growing crime rate is giving people heightened awareness of the whole need for peace, and an understanding that violence begets violence."

Being active in peace, trade union and women's causes, Ms Davies headed New Zealand's 17th National Union of Peace Committee. She has temporarily pushed aside her trade union activities to concentrate on her chief passion.

"Peace is my most over-riding passion because it's the most urgent. What's the point in having a good wage fixing system, and a decent living wage and improved health and welfare services if we're on the verge of being annihilated?"

"You don't stop fighting on those fronts, but you have to put more efforts into trying to encourage people to see peace as the only answer.

"Traveling around the country addressing public meetings, reminders and anyone else who invites her, she has found tremendous support for peace initiatives.

"I'm just so excited as I go around the country by the fact that throughout the country, the New Zealanders have a big part to play in the whole issue of peace.

"That's the most exciting thing, finding people in small towns who really are aware of the mainstream issues and feeling the need for something for peace very strongly.

Typical of the dozens of letters that come across her desk at Peace House each week is one from a young mother in the King Country, asking what she can do to help achieve international peace and a safe future for her son.

"I think most people still tend to feel it's happening over there, and when they know the enormity of the scale of the problem they are involved in, they say, 'Well, what can I do? Leave it up to them.'"

"While there is a growing number of people who say we can't just leave it up to the politicians any more, we've got to make sure we know they want us to do something positive."

Ms Davies wants more time and money spent on trying to understand the causes of violent behaviour, and initiatives to correct it.

"We need to find out why people are violent. There are all these theories about it being violence in film, violence in television, violence in families, violence in homes, different attitudes of parents today toward each other and their children."

"Or is it because materialism has insidiously crept into so that people don't feel they've arrived any more unless they've got a video?"

"She believes the cause is probably a bit of all of those things.

"The maoris in New Zealand who have built up this very desirable and which is instilled in us early on has got to change. They're still supposed to be the ones who go and do the hard things and they're not real room for women at this time."

"I think we've got to say there are different degrees, that it's much better to be a responsible, caring person. We've got to change the whole image. It doesn't mean surrendering sport or anything like that. What it really means is trying to get the peacefulness into everyday life.

"Ms Davies refuses to accept the argument that conflict is human nature and that there will always be wars and violence as a result.

"Men and women aren't born with aggression. They're born with an instinct to protect their own - but that's not aggression, and psychologists have proved that. We shouldn't be doing anything that is going to inflame aggression in people."

Peace education can begin at pre-school age, Ms Davies says. By teaching children co-operative methods of play and teaching them not to hit others when things don't go their way, the groundwork can be laid for a peaceful, caring, non-aggressive adult.

"Children are more aware now of the dangers of nuclear war and the need for international peace than they have ever been, she believes. But they don't usually seem able to make the link between violence in the community and the absence of world peace."

"The呈信 that many people now express about the world's future is something she identifies with. She has no faith in the current leadership of the nuclear powers, and is especially concerned about the huge amount of power held in such a few hands."

"I think we're probably in one of the most dangerous times we've ever been in. I think any time when you've got so much power in the hands of so few that there is the danger of an accidental or an error. Secondly, the spark of nuclear weapons that are now being developed are so terrible that we just can't contemplate what it would be like if they were used."

"I think power is the enemy. There's nothing truer than the expression that absolute power corrupts absolutely. It is the basic