LYNDA DRUMM goes in search of the peace marchers and finds that the movement is being held together by a new breed of business-like activists.

Holding the front for peace

A PLASTIC GUN lies on the floor of Hamilton peace worker May Bats' River Rd sitting room, confiscated from her children.

"I explained to them the home is a war toy-free zone — and they are beginning to come around," she says.

Confiscating war toys is just one part of the full-time effort May Bats has dedicated to the peace movement since 1981, beginning eight years after she moved from London to New Zealand.

She started working in the peace movement in Dunedin, Christchurch then Hamilton, where she became Waikato co-ordinator for United Nations International Year of Peace, 1986.

"The whole community became involved in peace issues that year, places like women's refuges I mean for non-violent all joined us."

But times have changed in the peace movement. There is nothing left of the flower power days of love and peace. The movement today is a serious business which attracts professionals and business people.

National Peace Movement Aotearoa coordinator, Wellington's Stephen Dixon says this trend might have turned some groups away from the peace train since he set up the Victoria University peace group in 1987.

"There are a lot of highly educated people in the Peace Movement now, so we have sometimes missed the working class."

He has noticed increasing apathy towards peace issues since the movement peaked in New Zealand during the nuclear dispute of the mid-1980s.

"We convinced 76 per cent of the population 10 years ago, but now the general feeling is people would much rather not be involved." May Bats says public enthusiasm for the peace movement is sporadic.

"It is in cycles — but there is still the hard core of the peace movement that is still very much there if there was a need for it."

This apathy is "part of the whole disillusionment with politics" and "general demoralised feelings" among New Zealanders, says Stephen Dixon.

"People think they are simply not being listened to by the politicians."

"Where necessary we will wave banners, go on ships and do our marches, but the opinion is now that unless we can generate a big march — don't bother. If there are only 200 people it appears they are the only ones that care about an issue."

Results from the Government's Special Committee on Nuclear Disarmament are expected by next month, so Stephen Dixon has toured the country updating New Zealanders on today's anti-nuclear campaign.

The Government committee is charged with receiving public submissions and researching safety, environmental and technical issues relating to nuclear powered ships.

Prime Minister Jim Bolger says disclosure of confidential information would "undermine the ability of the committee to carry out its designated task in an undisturbed and orderly fashion, and thereby prejudice its ability to give the Prime Minister its best advice."

But May Bats says the Government is conducting a secret "orchestrated campaign" to reverse New Zealand's anti-nuclear policy and keeping the public in ignorance.

"They are trying very, very carefully to manipulate public opinion to bring this change about."

The peace movement, shifting away from mass protest, has learned to work smarter to get its message through.

Stephen Dixon: "We contact each MP at least half a dozen times about an issue before it comes to caucus, and we get influential people — like Owen Jenkins (National Federation of Farmers president) to make statements supporting us."

And more emphasis is placed on education. A travelling peace van visits New Zealand schools to "show the kids there's a way to solve things without violence."

"We would much rather be putting our time into schools and education. Instead we have to spend time holding on to what we have got."

May Bats says peace education in schools "in a non-political way" is the first step towards solving international conflict.

She sees New Zealand with a vital international role in the future as an expert in conflict resolution and with an increased role in the United Nations.

But even May Bats is planning to move away from the movement.

She has given up her responsibility as editor of nationwide peace magazine Peacelink, not because of growing apathy in the region but because the peace worker has had enough.

Peacelink will now be based in Wellington and, as originally planned, will move to different centres around New Zealand every few years.

"After 5½ years you get stale and are no use to anybody — I felt that I really needed a change. Her is instead looking towards working for the environment, conservation, and art promotion issues.

"I am looking for something totally outside of the area I have worked in but where I can still deal with important issues and concerns."

"I have always seen art as a positive force. The (peace) movement was sometimes quite negative in saying what we didn't want, Artists see what we could be."