

OBITUARIES

NZ battler for rights of women

Sonja Davies, 81, was as vulnerable to pain as anyone but grew from it, to fight again, more fiercely than most. She was a battler. On the public front the battles she fought for women are still not comfortably won. Her voice and efforts, though, spanned decades in a bid for equal pay, flexible working hours and improved childcare.

She made inroads into institutionalised indifference to gender inequality with her long career as a trade unionist, her historic election as the first woman on the Federation of Labour executive and the first to become FOL vice-president.

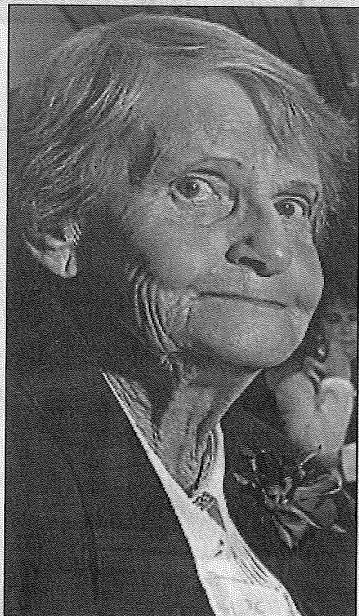
Unswervingly wedded to Labour, she was elected to Parliament when in her mid-60s.

She served on various councils, including the New Zealand Working Women's Council that attended the United Nations Decade for Women conferences in Mexico City and Nairobi. She held an executive position on the World Peace Council. She campaigned for world peace — an impossible fight but that never stopped her.

She decried the increasing gap between the haves and have-nots in New Zealand society, and, as a new Labour MP in 1987, was one of a cluster of unionists who tried to stop the Rogernomics juggernaut, a bigger mission than her celebrated stand against the closure of the Nelson-Glenhope railway line in 1956.

The photograph of her sitting on the railway line, elegantly coated, ankles neatly crossed, is iconic both in the annals of feminism and the protest movement.

She was happy to be called a feminist but happier to be called a socialist, and for all her work for women's rights was well aware that it was not a contest with men. More than 20 years ago, at the height of assertiveness with an anti-male flavour, she noted in an interview: "It's still considered outrageous for men to



Sonja Davies

an illness that cost her one lung. Her husband worked on a small farm and she took jobs in fruit and tobacco fields.

The couple applied for a war rehabilitation loan and when this was not forthcoming, the politically savvy Davies set out for Wellington with a chain in her suitcase, intending to attach herself to Parliament Buildings. The minister obliged with the loan before this Pankhurstian embarrassment could take place.

Her husband became a union secretary and soon after, Sonja Davies, who had only just survived her illness and was still painfully thin, led the protest against closure of the railway line. Building political strength, she became a Nelson city councillor and deputy chairwoman of the Nelson Harbour Board.

Charlie Davies had a heart attack, his second one, and in 1969 they moved to Hawkes Bay, where she

have reany caring attitudes and an appreciation of beautiful things. They're still judged on their sporting prowess or success in business. It doesn't matter if they drop dead in the middle of it with a coronary. I'd be delighted if they had seminars to sort out where they're at."

She was tiny; she was tough; she was not averse to celebrity, but she was not, as a feminist, strident. She did not approve of the fashionable feminist honorific Ms, insisting she be called Mrs Davies.

Husband and family were integral to her public forthrightness. It was in her private life, not in the political arena, that the most desperate of her battles were fought — to overcome the loss of her beloved husband Charlie, the loss of her son Mark, killed in a work accident in his late teens, and of her daughter, Penny, in 1994 from motor-neurone disease.

Her husband died in 1971, a day after she had returned from six months overseas as the first woman trade unionist to win the Imperial Relations Scholarship. Her own health was precarious at times.

Life, in fact, had it in for her quite severely from the beginning. She was the illegitimate daughter of Gwladys Vile, a 26-year-old nurse, and was born at a time when unmarried mothers usually had backstreet abortions or shame-imbedded pregnancies ending in adoption.

Her father was an Irish army major who reacted badly to her mother's news. Sonja Davies was 20 before she knew who her father was and never met him.

After a series of foster homes as an infant, she was installed in her grandparents' Oamaru home. Her grandfather was a newspaperman and a dedicated liberal, who had gone to live in Oamaru as the North Otago correspondent of the Otago Daily Times. When she was four, her mother married the manager of Kodak in Dunedin and she went to live with them.

She was educated at King Edward Technical College in Dunedin. The family moved to Auckland and, rebelling, she dropped out of school at 14, worked in a bookshop, and ran away from home at 16, ending up in a flat in Wellington with a girlfriend. At 17, training to be a nurse, she was briefly married to a former patient.

It was as a nurse that she became aware of the possibilities of collective action. Feeling she had been unfairly treated, she talked to other nurses and was about to brave Trades Hall in Vivian Street to find out how to form a union when she was called in to explain herself to the matron, "who made it sound as if I was starting up a brothel".

It was an early battle she did not win but the appeal of unionism had been established and was fostered during her second, happy marriage to Charlie Davies, an ex-serviceman 10 years her senior.

The couple shifted to Nelson when Sonja Davies contracted tuberculosis,

took over his roles with the Clerical Workers' and Food Processing unions while he stayed home to look after their children, Mark and Penny.

She was a pioneer of early childhood education. She founded the New Zealand Association of Child Care Centres in 1964. In 1976, she began a push for better working conditions for early childhood teachers, which led to the formation of the Early Childhood Workers' Union in 1982 and laid the foundation for better pay in that area.

She was happy to accept the Order of New Zealand but turned down the offer of becoming a dame four times in the 1980s. The honour was not egalitarian, she explained, given that "a dame's husband does not get anything out of it, yet when a man becomes a knight his wife becomes a lady". Besides: "I never wanted to be a dame because I was one," she said, at 76.

She was 66 when she became an MP, wanting to be part of positive changes in health, education and social welfare. It was not the happiest, most productive time of her life.

Idealistically, she made an attempt to visit every person in her electorate. She learned in Parliament, she said, to become more of a pragmatist and she had learned on the FOL executive that "you can't win everything. You've got to learn to fight another day".

She bridled at "ageist" insults to her in Parliament, being called "granny" and "auntie", and once complained about this to the Speaker. She later recalled that Rob Muldoon called out: "If you can't stand the heat in the kitchen, girlie, you'd better get out of it." She did, in 1993.

A few years later, at 73, she was battling to save Masterton Hospital, where she was a patient after collapsing.

In 2003, a gathering in Wellington celebrated her impending 80th birthday and the launch of the Sonja Davies Peace Award for women who advance the cause of peace. The award was to honour her work and provide a lasting memorial to her. Davies, linked peace pragmatically with environmental issues. "It's no use having peace if the world's not there," she had said in 1990.

Her two autobiographical books, the bestselling *Bread and Roses* (1984) and its sequel, *Marching On* (1997), show she was as adept with a pen as she was at politics.

Her achievements, her books, and Gaylene Preston's film based on *Bread and Roses*, ensure her place in New Zealand feminist history.

After she retired from Parliament she shifted from Eastbourne to live alone in Masterton, where she developed a garden at her home, Rangitii.

She died in a Wellington rest home a few months after contracting pneumonia.

—Diana Dekker

● Sonja Margaret Loveday Davies (nee Vile), born Upper Hutt, 1923; died Wellington, June 14, 2005.