

Ashburton guardian 8/4/03

Couriers caught in sting operation

An investigation into the theft of more than \$1.5 million in goods from New Zealand Post has led to the arrest of 20 people, mostly staff and contractors.

The arrests came after 80 police raided homes across Auckland on Sunday as part of a joint investigation with New Zealand Post into goods going missing since the beginning of last year.

They allege that the group stole property including New Zealand and Chinese passports, credit cards, mobile phones, DVD players, videos, computers and their games, shoes, clothes, gold jewellery, sound systems and projectors.

Those appearing in Auckland District Court yesterday included owner-drivers, couriers and parcel sorters as well as former New Zealand Post employees.

They face charges of stealing New Zealand Post property, and receiving and supplying the drug methamphetamine, commonly known as speed.

One 21-year-old Avondale, in Auckland, man was charged with stealing a carton of 40c stamps valued at \$20,000.

Although the charges mostly date from January last year, one charge of receiving not related to New Zealand Post dates back

to 1997. New Zealand Post said the group was not operating as a crime ring.

Police will not discuss the degree of co-operation between the accused while their cases are before the courts.

More arrests are likely.

Detective Sergeant Andrew Saunders, who headed the police arm of Operation Hunter, said 200 items of stolen property were recovered during the raids, which began simultaneously at 7.15am.

Some items were still in their packaging.

"It was obviously a surprise for them, otherwise they would not have had all that stolen property there," he said.

New Zealand Post spokesman Ian Long said eight employees had been suspended and four contractors terminated since the arrests.

They had asked for police co-operation after a "lengthy and in-depth" internal investigation into the thefts, which were occurring across their three subsidiary courier companies, CourierPost, SkyRoad and Pace.

It is understood that New Zealand Post used undercover agents.

They also relied on the help of other

workers and the "small number" of customers losing goods.

Undercover police were also involved.

Mr Long said they would return any recovered goods to customers and pay compensation for missing goods.

No personal mail had been stolen, and the alleged thefts were not believed to be linked to a recent "cheque-washing" scam that intercepted cheques sent by couriers and involved more than \$1 million.

Mr Long said dishonesty was not "embedded" at New Zealand Post.

Owner-drivers Association, which represents CourierPost drivers, chairman John Royal said New Zealand Post's actions had been "way out of line".

One driver had her contract terminated as she left the police station after questioning, he said.

"These contractors are innocent until proven guilty, yet they have had their contracts terminated. They are left with no income and months to wait until trial.

"This is terrible conduct by New Zealand's biggest state-owned enterprise."

Judge James O'Donovan remanded most of the accused without plea on bail to appear again next month.

- NZPA