

Did not know dockers were at work in Mahia's hold

Stevedore foreman's story

THE foreman of stevedores on the *Mahia* told the Court of Marine Inquiry yesterday that, though he had warned his own men that the deck cargo they were unloading was dangerous, he was unaware that painters and dockers were then working at the bottom of No 5 hold.

The foreman, Edwin Rowehl, said he did not learn of the presence of the gang of dockers in the hold until 1pm. Had he known they were there he would not have put the hatch covers on the hold and would have held up the unloading of the sodium chlorate drums until the men had come on deck.

It was a standing order that while deck cargo was being discharged the covers should be on all hatches in the vicinity.

Rowehl said the drums were being taken from the stack and rolled to the loading tray, when he saw one of his men apparently having difficulty with one drum, which seemed to have stuck to another.

When he looked again the drum had rolled after the preceding one and had struck it. Smoke and pink flame came from the bottom of it. The explosions followed a few moments later.

Thomas Cozens, boatswain of the *Mahia*, said his first warning of the fire was hearing someone shout: "Fire! All up from down below." He ran along the deck with a hose, played it on the flames, then handed it over to one of his men.

There was a small explosion, and all the drums shifted outward. The chief officer thereupon ordered everyone away. "Had he not done so," witness said, "I wouldn't be here today, for a moment later the big explosion came."

Flames leapt as high as the top

deck. He saw men coming out of the hatches and assumed that everyone was on deck.

Oliphant Bamford, supervisor in charge of the unloading of the ship on August 7, the day of the disaster, said that practically all deck cargo was looked upon as dangerous, but he knew nothing of the properties of sodium chlorate.

He was aware of his responsibility for the safety of the men working under him, but he did not think that that responsibility was entirely fair in the circumstances.

The hearing was adjourned until 10.30am today.