

Library jobs cut in New Zealand's biggest city

By Sam Price
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Auckland City Libraries are currently axing 194 jobs in a city-wide restructure affecting 55 libraries. Last year, 74 staff accepted voluntary redundancy, and the remaining 120 positions will be cut through attrition. The total library staff will be reduced from 1,120 to 926. All 155 casual positions have been eliminated.

The cuts are part of the council's austerity agenda to slash social spending in line with the interests of big business. The assault comes just six months after Phil Goff, a former Labour Party leader, told Newstalk ZB prior to October's council election at which he became the city's mayor: "[S]pending on parks and libraries should not be cut." (See: "Labour Party MP leads Auckland mayoral race")

All staff will be forced to reapply for their jobs, and cannot choose the libraries in which they would like to work. Library workers will also be required to travel between various libraries to cover staff on leave. This will reduce their effectiveness in aiding the education of young people who regularly visit their closest library. It could also mean staff travelling up to 80 kilometres between worksites.

The council has presented the restructure as part of its "Fit for the Future" project, using the pretext of technological changes, such as self-service checkout counters and eBook services, to cut \$1.8 million out of the annual libraries budget of \$65 million.

In fact, only 1 percent of loans from Auckland libraries are from eBooks. More computers are needed throughout the libraries to offer free, public Internet access, and staff are required to provide assistance and technical support. With a population of over 1.5 million, Auckland is New Zealand's largest city and grew 2.8 percent in 2016 alone.

Nationwide library registrations are at two million, up by 5 percent since 2014–2015. The restructure will

only further undermine the ability of libraries to provide improved technological services and accommodate growing library usage.

This is only the latest step in continuing cuts to the country's library services. Budgets for school libraries have gradually decreased. In 2015, the National Library ended a service allowing school children to borrow books needed for their studies—clawing back up to \$400,000. Also in 2015, a proposal to reduce Auckland libraries' opening hours was only abandoned after widespread public opposition.

Anticipating public hostility to its restructure, Auckland Council last October issued staff a list of prepared answers for anyone asking questions about the issue. This included instructions to forward any media enquiries to the council's media team.

An online petition against the cuts has gathered over 4,000 signatures. A comment from signatory Vivien K. reads: "It's so important that our libraries are sacred and are not sacrificed on the altar of 'saving money.'"

Gary wrote: "Our city's population is increasing by 70,000 people a year and Auckland City is cutting back on library staff?"

Adon commented: "The council's reasoning and terms used are modern camouflage for 'downsizing.'"

Brian said: "Libraries are a sign of civilised society and play an important role in the education and entertainment of the city's population."

In January, poet Denys Trussell wrote to library manager Mirla Edmundson on behalf of the New Zealand Society of Authors. The letter opposed the finance-oriented management of the libraries, explaining they "are not supermarkets, but complex social institutions."

The Public Service Association (PSA), which covers library workers, is collaborating in the sackings. In an

April 28 statement, Auckland Council said: “We have been working closely with the PSA throughout ... the PSA made it clear to us that an Expression of Interest (EOI) process was the fairest way for everyone.”

In its own statement on April 10, the PSA promoted the council’s downsizing strategy, declaring: “The PSA welcomes the broad and innovative thinking in the Fit for the Future proposals, including the enhanced digital services and the increased commitment to Maori.”

The PSA admitted that library staff voiced “considerable concerns” about job losses. National secretary Glenn Barclay said: “The PSA had extensive involvement in the process and we acknowledge the Council has listened to some of our concerns ... We are heartened there will be no further job losses.” In other words, the union accepted the present job losses.

The PSA, like other trade unions, is complicit in the rampant destruction of jobs carried out by the conservative National Party government since the 2008 global financial crash. The union has facilitated hundreds of job cuts at Inland Revenue (IRD), and accepted a further loss of 1,500 jobs at IRD between 2018 and 2021. It allowed the Department of Conservation to cut over 100 jobs in 2011, and a further 72 in 2013.

Libraries are not the only council services facing cuts. Auckland Council’s five call centres are being centralised into one building in the outer suburb of Manukau. The number of jobs to go is not yet known, but the merger will require workers to travel up to 60 kilometres.

In another cost-cutting measure aimed at amalgamating maintenance contracts, the company Recreational Services has been axed as a contractor after 23 years working for the council. Mayor Goff is also advocating “a more user-pays oriented system” for transport, potentially including higher charges for motorists and public transport.

During last year’s mayoral election, Goff was endorsed by City Vision, a collective of Labour and Green Party members and their supporters. He has a long history in the most right-wing section of the Labour Party. In the 1984–1990 government, he supported sweeping pro-market reforms, including asset sales and the introduction of the regressive Goods and Services Tax. As education minister in 1989, he

introduced student fees.

The situation in Auckland is a warning that Labour will be just as ruthless as National in imposing the austerity agenda if it wins the national election later this year. The previous Labour Party-aligned mayor in Auckland, Len Brown, presided over massive increases to housing costs, leading to a spike in homelessness. Another former Labour MP, Christchurch mayor Lianne Dalziel, has imposed staff cuts and hiked rates in Christchurch, supposedly to fund reconstruction following the 2010–2011 earthquakes.

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