

New Zealand: Public Service Association complicit in Auckland library job cuts

By Sam Price
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As a restructuring of Auckland's 55 public libraries continues, the Public Service Association (PSA) is collaborating fully in slashing jobs. Some 194 jobs have been or are being eliminated, out of a total workforce of 1,120, to save \$1.8 million per year.

A petition to reverse the job cuts organised by the group Love Our Libraries has gained 4,400 signatures, reflecting widespread support for library workers. Auckland Council, led by mayor Phil Goff, a former Labour Party leader, rejected the petition on May 8. Defending this decision, chief operating officer Dean Kimpton declared that "from early on, the PSA has contributed to [the restructure's] design and supports the process we have adopted."

The union's national secretary Glenn Barclay attempted to save face in an interview with Newstalk ZB on May 29, saying the council "made the statement without consulting us, and we don't think that that's an accurate representation of our involvement." He claimed the PSA had been "advocating strongly for members."

This is manifestly false. The PSA, like other unions, has collaborated for decades with the pro-business downsizing and restructuring of the public service. Nationally, it has already overseen more than 5,000 redundancies since the 2008 financial crisis as part of the government's austerity program. This is continuing at Auckland libraries.

A number of library staff gave anonymous written testimonies as part of a further complaint against the restructure, submitted by Julia Schiller, of the Love Our Libraries group, to the Auditor-General. The complaint was rejected after less than one day. The workers' comments reveal their anger and frustration over the PSA's acceptance of the cuts.

One staff member said the union has been

"ineffectual to say the least" and that "there has been no factual reporting of exactly how the PSA are representing staff interests."

The worker noted that "the PSA have been involved all the way through" in implementing the cuts. Indeed, the council's business case for the restructure, released last December, was written with the explicit assumption that "the PSA will be supportive of the changes we need to make."

The staff member further stated that during negotiations over shift times the "PSA failed to inform staff of the likelihood they would be expected to work late nights and weekends under the new structure." They also criticised the inadequate amount of time staff were given to read through documentation before reapplying for a job.

The worker said that "staff had standard job descriptions to work from which in effect meant they were applying for jobs with only the vaguest notions of what exactly they were applying for." Union delegates were not given more detailed information to answer questions from staff.

Even before the restructure officially began, there had been a hiring freeze since early 2016. A different worker wrote that this "has been called 'natural attrition' but was really just staff getting fed up with the uncertainty and unpleasantness hanging over us, combined with dismal pay, and getting out." This has led to a reduced workforce and increased pressure on staff.

A council document given to library staff indicates that it will pay out as few redundancies as possible, as this is considered a "last resort when all other options have been exhausted." In certain circumstances if a staff member rejects a new role offered to them, they "would not be eligible for redundancy."

The PSA has accepted this condition. Its own fact sheet distributed to members informs them: “If you are offered a role you do not want to accept due to personal circumstances, before declining, please contact your PSA Rep ... as this may affect your entitlements.”

The fact sheet also told workers that when they received their initial work schedule following the restructure “this is ONLY for the first period of time and ... in the future your work location (within a board), days of work and hours of work can still change.” In other words, workers who are rehired have no guarantee of stable and secure hours.

One library staff member wrote that this “first period of time” is only three months, making it impossible for workers to properly plan their lives within their new positions.

The oppressive atmosphere, in which library workers are being forced to compete against their colleagues for the remaining jobs, has reportedly driven some workers to tears. They have been cautioned by the council against speaking publicly or engaging with groups opposing the restructure.

The restructure of Auckland libraries is part of a broad wave of job cuts, including the closure of the Cadbury chocolate factory in Dunedin and the Silver Fern Farm meatworks in Ashburton. Transport workers, meat workers and fast food workers have all taken industrial action in recent months to oppose attacks on wages and conditions.

In every case, however, workers face union bureaucracies which are allied with big business and the political establishment and committed to the defence of the profit system.

Regardless of who wins the upcoming election in September—the current National Party government or the Labour Party—increasingly brutal austerity measures will continue to be imposed throughout the country, with the assistance of the trade unions.

The urgent need is for workers to break from the unions and create new forms of organisation to carry out a struggle against the cuts. Worker-run rank-and-file committees must be formed in Auckland libraries, independent of, and in opposition to the PSA and the Labour Party, to unite workers nationally and internationally who are facing similar attacks.

The demand must be raised for billions of dollars to be spent on new libraries, schools, and other cultural

and educational facilities throughout the country. The fight for these basic rights requires the fight for a workers’ government and a socialist perspective to overturn the profit system and replace it with a planned economy based on human need, not private profit.

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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