

New Zealand Symphony Orchestra musicians protest against union

John Braddock
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New Zealand Symphony Orchestra (NZSO) musicians last week voted to drop their union, the Public Service Association, as their authorised wage bargaining agent and passed a vote of no confidence in PSA national manager Joe Tonner.

The move, by 72 of the 90 musicians who make up the country's premier professional orchestra, follows a joint letter from Tonner and the NZSO chief executive Ian Fraser, announcing a commitment "to negotiate a new type of collective employment contract". The letter appealed to the musicians to work with management to resolve the orchestra's "critical financial situation".

The NZSO lost \$NZ1.5 million last year, and faces similar losses in the coming year. Fraser, a current affairs interviewer on national television, was a high-profile appointment to the chief executive's position last year in an attempt by the governing board to reverse the decline in the orchestra's position.

The letter from Fraser and Tonner argues that the current financial situation is "obviously unsustainable" and that there is "no option other than significant change". It makes it clear that the costs should be borne by the musicians themselves. "It is important that a new employment contract is based on a clear understanding of the business imperatives that the NZSO is facing."

Despite their standing as the country's pre-eminent classical musicians, orchestra members are not highly paid. Most are forced to supplement their income from other sources, usually by offering private music tuition. After receiving the letter, the musicians met and voted to take their negotiations out of the hands of the PSA. None have resigned from the union.

Fraser wrote again to the orchestra members last week, saying the "partnership approach" was now finished. He claimed the attempt to "move away from the traditional adversarial model of industrial

bargaining" had failed as a result of the musicians' stand. He warned he was now looking at an "alternative strategy" to deal with the orchestra's "extremely serious".

Tonner tried to make light of the situation, saying the position he found himself in was "strange". According to a report in the *Weekend Herald* newspaper, he said: "Either they don't trust me personally or they don't trust the process that they're involved in".

In fact all members of the PSA, the country's largest public sector union, are entitled to distrust the bureaucrats who run it. Tonner worked his way into the position of "national manager" with the PSA after years in the union bureaucracy. He was a leading member of the now defunct Moscow-aligned Socialist Unity Party, whose chairman during the 1980s and early 1990s, Ken Douglas, was the president of the NZ Council of Trade Unions (CTU).

The union apparatus has been instrumental in imposing the market reforms of the past 15 years on the working class. As the Labour government intensified the assault on workers during the 1987-90 period, forcing down real wages, engaging in mass layoffs and reducing living standards, the CTU deliberately restrained industrial activity and sought to tie workers to Labour through a "Compact", or Australian-style union-government "Accord".

Dissatisfaction within the PSA surfaced late last year in a dispute around the conduct of elections for the presidency, which saw rank-and-file members picket the union's national headquarters in Wellington. The PSA general secretary, David Thorpe, resigned. Tonner is reported to be a possible candidate in the elections for the top CTU positions, which are to be held shortly following the retirements of Ken Douglas and national secretary Angela Foulkes.



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