

Australian library workers fight cuts to jobs and services

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Staff at Sydney's State Library of New South Wales recently took industrial action over job losses—their first such action since the strikes that followed the dismissal of the Whitlam Labor government in 1975. Librarians and administrative staff refused to answer the phones and handed out leaflets to members of the public, denouncing the staffing and service cuts.

Together with protests from academics over cuts to the library's acquisition budget, and the resignation of four of the library's fundraisers, the dispute points to an emerging crisis at the State Library and in the public library system as a whole.

The State Library of NSW is one of Australia's premier cultural establishments. The oldest public library in Australia, originating in 1826, it is also one of the largest. Each year more than a million people visit the State Library, situated in the centre of Sydney's CBD, to access some of the more than four million items in the general reference library or the Australian history section in the Mitchell wing.

Sixty-one librarians and clerical workers—around 15 percent of the library's total staff—have been made redundant. The 380 remaining employees, initially told they would not have to perform extra duties, have now been advised that their workloads will increase to cover the staff reductions. Management told them “we would get used to it,” one staff member told the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Public Service Association (PSA) acting general secretary Maurie O'Sullivan told the media that state Labor Premier Bob Carr had recently increased spending on the Sydney Olympics by \$140 million to cover a budget blowout. “Yet when the State Library overspends its budget by \$1.6 million, 61 members of the PSA must lose their jobs, and the public have restricted access to library services.”

O'Sullivan, however, dropped any further mention of the Labor government and sought to blame the retrenchments on mismanagement. “It is outrageous that our members have their jobs cut and services to the public are withdrawn because management at the State Library was not able to manage their budget,” she said.

The source of the current crisis is not an inept Library administration, but the systematic running down of the entire public library system. Library budgets have dwindled over the past decade, while public demand for services has soared. In order to sustain their activities, libraries have been obliged to engage in fund-raising by setting up commercial ventures and attracting sponsors and donors. According to the latest statistics, Australian public libraries now derive about 10 percent of their income from such sources.

As long ago as 1990, in its annual report, the Library Council warned that “there is a limit to what can be achieved in the face of continued reductions in funding”. The following year, the Council stated that years of government-imposed “productivity savings” were “progressively weakening the Library's ability to meet the information needs of the people of the state”.

“Without any increases in staff numbers,” it continued, “marked increases in demand were handled: 21 percent increase in inter-library loan requests, 50 percent increase in users of the copying service in the general reference library, 100 percent increase in the Mitchell Library, 35 percent increase in loans of materials for people with disabilities, 228 percent increase in children attending school holiday activities...”

Since the early 1990s, rising demand for Internet access has added to these pressures. A State Library spokesman reported that over the past three years, web users had increased more than 16-fold to 14 million

annually. Because of the Internet, “more people use libraries than attend sporting events” in Australia, according to a recent letter to the *Sydney Morning Herald* by academics protesting against cuts to the State Library's book buying budget. “The Internet is driving people back to libraries,” the letter commented.

Despite this trend, staffing levels have not risen. Moreover, parsimonious government grants for computer hardware, covering only a small portion of the operational and service costs associated with providing computer facilities, have left libraries to work out how to remain solvent. Many are forced to charge their users for access to the World Wide Web.

Library workers have borne much of the brunt of these trends, suffering a steady decline in salaries and working conditions. Without any real opposition from the unions, library managements have cut costs by imposing retrenchments, employing cheaper casual staff and outsourcing library services to low-paid contract workers. Nearly half the workers employed in libraries throughout Australia are now part-time.

In addition to the state government's annual demand for 5 percent “productivity savings” from all government departments, the PSA and the Carr government recently signed a new award for a 16 percent pay rise over four years, of which six percent must be financed by further “efficiencies”. The salary increase will do little to make up for past losses—even the state's industrial commission acknowledged that library wages were seriously undervalued—but it will cut deeper into services and working conditions.

On top of this, the federal government's 10 percent Goods and Services Tax, introduced on July 1, taxes all library purchases, including books. In effect, library acquisition spending has been slashed by 10 percent. In addition, the decline in the Australian dollar has effectively raised the cost of subscriptions to international journals, with single subscriptions costing as much as \$5,000 a year.

Yet the state Labor government has decided to reduce the State Library's acquisition budget from \$4 million to \$3.7 million. In their letter to the *Herald*, academics appealed to Premier Carr “to immediately raise the State's Budget to at least \$10 million”. They pointed to a “serious collecting backlog due to years of inadequate acquisition budgets” and called for “a special grant to make up for this deficiency”.

Following a row between State Library management and its Board, four board members formerly involved in fund-raising have resigned. In a revealing comment, the board's chairman said the Library had been forced to compete with other cultural institutions for sponsorships. “Now organisations like Opera Australia are forging ahead, and the library is at risk of being eclipsed in the social sectors that can afford to give.”

Sau Foster, a member of the State Library's workplace committee, explained the staff's concerns to the WSWS. “Generally speaking, we're not a radical mob, but we've had enough. We could see this coming 10 years ago when the administration said we must raise money from the wealthy. Money previously allocated for public services is now used to help business. The budget in the year 2002-2003 is in serious trouble.

“One of the reasons for the budget deficit is that some of the staff working in the commercial operations aren't funded by the government. One of our demands is that these people are immediately transferred into the public service. The management tried to bring in casual reshelvers but we succeeded in stopping it. We are determined to take more industrial action. We need better hardware and more training.”



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