

Library staff cut in New Zealand's biggest city

Sam Price
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Auckland City Libraries are currently axing 194 jobs in a city-wide restructure affecting all its 55 libraries. Last year 74 staff accepted voluntary redundancy, and the remaining 120 positions will be cut through attrition. The total number of 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 reduce social spending and meet the interests of big business. The assault comes just six months after Mayor Phil Goff, a former Labour Party leader, told Newstalk ZB prior to the council election last October that "spending on parks and libraries should not be cut. We need expanded public open spaces, not reduce them, as our population and intensification grows."

All staff will be forced to reapply for their jobs and cannot choose the specific libraries they would like to work in. 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 travelling up to 80km between work sites.

The restructure has been publicised by the council 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 from the \$65 million annual budget.

In fact, only 1 percent of loans from Auckland Libraries are from eBooks. More computers are needed throughout the city's libraries to offer free, public internet access, and staff are required to offer assistance and technical support to users. With a population of over 1.5 million, Auckland is New Zealand's largest city and last year grew by 2.8 percent. Nationwide library registrations are at 2 million, an increase of 5

percent since 2014–2015. There is no evidence to suggest that the restructure will help staff in providing improved technological services or to accommodate the growing library usage.

The job cuts, in fact, are the latest step in an ongoing reduction in the country's library services. Budgets for New Zealand school libraries have gradually decreased and in 2015 the National Library ended a service allowing school children to borrow specific books they need for their studies, saving up to \$400,000. Plans to reduce Auckland libraries' opening hours in 2015 were abandoned after widespread public opposition.

Anticipating widespread hostility to its so-called restructure, the Auckland Council last October issued staff a list of prepared answers for anyone who questioned them on the issue. This included instructions to forward any media enquiries to the council's media team.

An online petition against the cuts has gathered around 3,000 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 writes, "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 a critical letter to library manager Mirla Edmundson on behalf of the New Zealand Society of Authors. The letter opposed the business-like management of the libraries, explaining that they "are not supermarkets, but complex social institutions."

The Public Service Association (PSA), the union which covers library workers, is actively collaborating with the mass sackings. In a statement issued 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."

Acknowledging that library staff had voiced "considerable concerns" about the job losses, PSA 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."

The PSA, like other New Zealand unions, is complicit in the rampant destruction of jobs carried out since the 2008 global financial crash. The union has facilitated hundreds of job cuts at Inland Revenue (IRD) and accepted the elimination of another 1,500 positions at the IRD between 2018 and 2021. It has also assisted the Department of Conservation axe over 100 jobs in 2011 and a further 72 in 2013.

Libraries are not the only council services facing reorganisation and cuts. Auckland Council's five call centres are being centralised into one building in the outer suburb of Manukau. The number of job losses involved is not yet known but the merger will force many workers to up 60km to the new worksite.

In another apparent cost-cutting measure, the Auckland Council has ended its 23-year maintenance contract with Recreational Services. The decision appears to be aimed at amalgamating the council's maintenance contracts.

Goff is also advocating "a more user-pays oriented system" for transport, which is likely to see higher charges for motorists and public transport.

During last year's mayoral election, Goff, who has a long history with Labour's right-wing, was endorsed by City Vision, a collective of Labour and Green Party members and their associates. In the 1984–1990 government, Goff supported sweeping economic reforms, including asset sales and the introduction of the regressive Goods and Services Tax. As education minister in 1989, he introduced the student fees.

The situation in Auckland is a warning that Labour will be just as ruthless as National in slashing social

spending if it wins the national election in September this year. The previous Labour Party-aligned Auckland mayor, 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 order to fund reconstruction following the 2010–2011 earthquakes.

Goff will respond to the social crisis in Auckland with what he is best known for: austerity measures and asset sales. The cuts by the Labour-led and Greens-backed council is yet another demonstration that there is no real difference between these parties and the National Party government.

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