

Hundreds of jobs to be axed in New Zealand media restructure

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In the past two weeks, New Zealand's two major mainstream television stations, Three and TVNZ have announced drastic reductions to their news and current affairs programming that will see the elimination of basic services and cuts of between 300 and 400 jobs.

Three's owner Warner Bros. Discovery (WBD) announced on February 28 that it plans to shut down the channel's *Newshub* operation on June 30, ending all news broadcasts and online news. Three will become a vehicle for pre-recorded variety programs, mostly sourced from offshore.

WBD, a giant multinational corporation created through the merger of Discovery Inc. and WarnerMedia in 2022, owns CNN, HBO and numerous other TV networks in the US, as well as film production studios. It has engaged in a series of brutal cost-cutting measures and the destruction of jobs, while also facing mass strikes last year by highly exploited actors and writers.

Some 300 journalists and production staff will be affected by the end of Three's news programming, which began with the introduction of commercial television in 1989. Doubt also hangs over the future of local entertainment shows like "The Block" and "Married at First Sight." WBD blamed an economic downturn and decline in advertising for the decision.

The announcement of *Newshub*'s shutdown foreshadowed that state-owned TVNZ and Māori Television would remain the sole national broadcasters of television news programs. But on March 7, TVNZ announced that it would cut 68 jobs, 9 percent of its staff. Journalists account for over half the sackings.

Four of TVNZ's flagship shows are affected, including long-standing investigative programs "Sunday" and "Fair Go," along with midday and late-night news bulletins. "Sunday" staff said they were "devastated" their roles are being disestablished and "deeply concerned" at the degradation of the fourth estate.

TVNZ's youth news platform "Re: News," launched in 2017, is also impacted: its team will be reduced from 10 to

6, meaning a sharp decline in services.

TVNZ chief executive Jodi O'Donnell told staff that "tough economic conditions and structural challenges within the media sector" had led to reduced revenue and "difficult choices need to be made" to keep the broadcaster "sustainable." She bluntly declared: "We are a commercial business. That's the remit we need to work with."

While TVNZ is publicly owned, it operates on a mix of minority government funding and advertising revenue. Currently, it earns about \$200 million a year, but receives just \$44 million from the state, mainly in the form of support for specific programs.

TVNZ's interim financial results released on March 1 showed the company's total revenue had fallen 13.5 percent from last year to \$155.9 million. Its net loss for the six months ending December was \$16.8 million, compared with a profit of \$4.8 million the year before. Advertising revenue fell 14 percent to \$147 million.

O'Donnell said the decision was partly based on which shows would work in a "digital world." The media industry had to "work together" to offset the growing dominance of global giants, such as YouTube, Disney and Netflix, she said. Google reportedly captures about 55 percent of digital advertising revenue in New Zealand, while Facebook takes about 6 percent.

The assault on jobs and news programming was met with undisguised glee by the right-wing National Party-NZ First-ACT coalition government and a gaggle of far-right commentators who dishonestly claim the mainstream media is infused with "left-wing" bias.

ACT leader and cabinet minister David Seymour told *Stuff* that affected journalists should reflect on their "behaviour," saying they were displaying "enormous self-pity."

Seymour said some journalists had directed "anger at politicians for not giving them enough sympathy" and that a "delightful lack of self-awareness" was a big part of the problem facing the media. Seymour sneeringly criticised TVNZ senior political reporter Benedict Collins for "grinning" during a recent report on prime minister

Christopher Luxon's accommodation allowance.

Seymour further declared: "Companies such as TVNZ have to adapt. They're going to have leaner structures than they used to, because they no longer have this miracle technology of television, which gives them the near monopoly on the news."

In fact, the "monopoly on news" is decided by the commercial interests and vast global conglomerates that dominate the media landscape. Business owners have always set the editorial directions of their media outlets. Now, to maximise profits, the public's ability to access news, current affairs and investigative reporting on free-to-air platforms will be drastically reduced.

On Wednesday members of the E t? union, which covers journalists, voted unanimously to reject TVNZ's restructuring plans. However, E t? negotiator Michael Wood had already made it clear the union will mount no fight to defend jobs. Last month, a union spokesperson merely told the *Post* that they were "dismayed" by the closure of *Newshub*.

In a statement, union negotiator Michael Wood, a cabinet minister in the former Labour Party government, appealed to TVNZ "to work with staff," i.e. consult with the union bureaucracy, rather than "dictate and predetermine the outcome." He told Radio NZ that the union accepted that TVNZ was in financial difficulty, which had to be addressed, but disagreed with axing programs that were still profitable.

In short, hundreds of staff will be thrown on the scrap heap with E t? accepting that job losses are inevitable. The union merely asks to be involved in the "process" so it can better enforce the redundancies.

The cuts are part of a broader restructure of the entire media landscape. The *New Zealand Herald's* Shayne Currie noted last August: "Just about every media business in New Zealand is undergoing transformation and reducing costs, partly because of the economic climate, but also to meet changing audience demands and the rise of the likes of [artificial intelligence]."

The issues are global. Newspaper publisher *Stuff's* owner Sinead Boucher told a parliamentary committee last week that the advent of generative artificial intelligence looked "increasingly like an extinction-level event" for news publications. Journalism "is in a fight for its life" and "clinging on by its fingertips... against some of history's biggest companies," she said.

Legacy media is meanwhile losing ground to online sources. Radio NZ recently reported that from 2000 to 2020 the number of enterprises engaged in newspaper publishing declined by 32 percent. Census data showed journalist occupations decreased by about half between 2006 and

2018, from 4,284 to 2,061. Last year New Zealanders spent more time using digital than traditional media, according to NZ On Air.

The popularity of alternative and independent media sites is a result of both the expansion of the internet and widespread hostility to the role of the media companies as news "gatekeepers" that uncritically promote the claims of governments, the intelligence agencies and big businesses.

Annual surveys by Auckland University of Technology's Centre for Journalism, Media and Democracy show that four years ago more than half (53 percent) of respondents said they trusted most of the news most of the time. In 2023, that figure had dropped to 42 percent.

Far from being "left wing," corporate and state-funded media outlets alike have operated as craven mouthpieces for the ruling class. In their coverage of the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, and Israel's genocidal onslaught against Gaza, every major media outlet in New Zealand has lined up with US imperialism and its allies, publishing war propaganda and censoring critical journalists.

But with millions of people involved in global protests against war, austerity and threats to democracy, there is a growing worldwide audience for objective, truthful news and critical commentary, as well as serious films and television.

The jobs bloodbath will further reduce what little independent-minded, investigative reporting remains; it will result in the even greater concentration of corporate and state control over the media. This is of a piece with the escalation of online censorship by major tech companies and governments, as the ruling classes internationally turn towards authoritarian measures aimed at suppressing growing social and political opposition.

To carry out a real fight against this agenda, workers at Three and TVNZ must unite with others across the media and entertainment industry—in New Zealand as well as Australia, the US and other countries where thousands of jobs are being destroyed by governments and corporations alike.

For such a struggle, workers need new organisations—rank-and-file committees democratically controlled by workers and independent of the corporatist trade unions—and a political perspective based on socialism, which places workers' jobs and conditions ahead of corporate profit.



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