

New Zealand trade union endorses government's war agenda

John Braddock
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New Zealand's largest trade union, the Public Service Association (PSA), is fervently supporting moves to roughly double the military budget in preparation for war.

Under the guise of seeking to protect jobs in the NZ Defence Force (NZDF), the union has denounced the National Party-led government, from the right, for not maintaining a strong enough military to join the coming US-led war against China.

The NZDF confirmed on July 21 that it intends to cut 255 civilian jobs. They include roles in the army, air force, strategy, financial, health and safety, defence college, joint defence services, joint support group, chief of staff office and veterans affairs. It brings a total of one in ten positions axed in the last year, including "voluntary" redundancies. A further 45 may also be cut.

At the same time, a major escalation of military front-line capability, equipment and weaponry is under way. With the support of the opposition Labour Party, the government plans to nearly double defence spending from just over 1 percent to 2 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), a \$NZ9 billion increase, in line with demands of the US Trump administration and NATO powers.

Defence Minister Judith Collins last month told graduating army recruits to prepare for the real possibility of combat "as the world faces its most complex and volatile global environment in decades." Nearly 700 NZDF troops in July and early August joined the massive Talisman Sabre exercise in Australia, a multi-national dress rehearsal for war against China.

A NZDF spokesperson told *Stuff* they were "reprioritising" the workforce to focus on "maintaining combat readiness" and "delivering core military activities." It is establishing 276 new civilian roles while disestablishing 281 currently filled with a further 250 vacant positions not replaced.

The PSA criticised the cuts from the standpoint of promoting the government's vast military buildup. The

union's national secretary Fleur Fitzsimons condemned the cuts as "incredibly shortsighted" and "not how you build a modern, combat-ready defence force at a time of rising security risks."

Fitzsimons added that civilian defence workers were needed to support new investment in military equipment and technology and warned the cuts would force "those in uniform to pick up the work of the civilian workers. That is not what they signed up to do and won't help NZDF improve retention."

Fitzsimons commented: "This is all about saving money, not strengthening security. It doesn't make any sense when tensions are rising across the Asia Pacific area and in Europe... It was only a few months ago that a warship from China was in the Tasman Sea."

In February a "live fire" exercise by three Chinese warships in nearby international waters was seized upon by the New Zealand and Australian governments, along with the corporate media, to stoke hysteria about an escalating "threat" posed by Beijing and to justify the military spend-up. The US and its allies routinely carry out naval drills in waters close to the Chinese mainland.

The pro-war position advanced by Fitzsimons is thoroughly anti-working class. It expresses the reactionary nationalist outlook of the labour and trade union bureaucracies at home and abroad that are closely integrated with the capitalist state.

In May, Spain's General Union of Workers (UGT) and Workers' Commissions (CCOO), the two largest trade union federations, threw their full support behind the European Union's plans for mass rearmament, aligning themselves with the European establishment's preparations for war against Russia. In the US, the leader of the United Auto Workers Union, Shawn Fain, a rabid Trump supporter, has cited the collaborationist labour mobilisation of the American economy during World War II as the model for today's trade unions.

There is mass opposition to war, witnessed in the ongoing protests against the genocide in Gaza. In every country, however, including in New Zealand, the union bureaucracy has refused to take any action to stop the supply of weapons and other materials for Israel's war machine.

All the imperialist powers are involved the rapidly escalating wars that are engulfing the globe. New Zealand is no exception. A minor imperialist power in the Pacific and a US ally, it is part of the US-led Five Eyes spying network; NZ troops are in Britain training Ukrainian conscripts to fight Russia; and NZ forces are involved in repeated provocative military exercises aimed against China.

The trade union apparatus supports the war drive of its "own" national bourgeoisie because it represents the interests of a privileged layer of the upper middle class, whose wealth is bound up with enhancing the position of NZ imperialism.

Unmentioned by Fitzsimons and other union leaders is the fact that the massive armaments upgrades can only be carried out at the expense of the social conditions and basic rights of the entire working class.

The PSA is an accomplice in the deepening attacks on jobs and conditions among public sector workers. Prior to the 2023 election the union openly supported Labour's own plan to slash public service budgets by up to 4 percent as "a prudent move to tighten the belt"—as PSA leader Duane Leo put it in a Radio NZ interview. Fitzsimons was a Labour candidate in that election.

In the past 18 months, NZ's far-right government has launched a scorched earth policy against all the social services on which the working class depends. Over 10,000 public sector jobs have been eliminated with no serious resistance from the PSA, which has over 95,000 members, or any of the unions.

With unemployment increasing from 3.6 percent in 2023 to 5.1 percent in the March quarter and forecast to continue rising, the government is increasingly despised. The right-wing nationalist NZ First and libertarian ACT Parties—which are part of the National-led coalition government—are leading the assault on the working class, despite gaining only 6.08 percent and 8.6 percent respectively of the popular vote in 2023.

A broad-based mobilisation against job losses in the public and private sectors would win widespread support in the working class. The government's 2024 budget was handed down amid nationwide protests. In the capital, Wellington, a crowd of 7,000 descended onto parliament

grounds while protests coincided with a two-day strike over pay by 2,500 junior doctors. Since then, the unions have dissipated the opposition, with the Council of Trade Unions boasting a purported new "policy vision" that will be unveiled for the 2026 elections.

The corporatist unions have enforced the thousands of job cuts. The PSA's strategy has been to take a handful of legal cases in the Employment Relations Authority, including against the Ministry of Education (MoE) and Health NZ, over the way in which the cuts have been managed.

Instead of challenging mass layoffs, the union insists that they are carried out according to provisions in employment agreements which require "consultation" with the unions. PSA spokesman Leo declared the MoE had rushed through its restructure without complying with the collective agreement, which requires the MoE and PSA to first "try to agree to the outcomes of cost-cutting exercises and present that view to the management of the MoE."

The fight against austerity cannot be separated from the struggle against war. The demand must be raised for the vast resources being wasted on the military to be redirected to solve the crisis in public education and healthcare, and to put an end to poverty and homelessness.

But to carry forward a real fight against war and austerity, workers and young people must recognise who their enemies are. They face a political struggle against not only the National Party-led government, but also the opposition Labour Party and its allies—the Greens, Te Pahi Māori, the various pseudo-left organisations—and the union bureaucracy.

The PSA's open support for escalating war preparations against China underscores the urgent need for workers to build new organisations that they themselves control. Rank-and-file committees should be established in every workplace, independent of the union apparatus, to mobilise the working class against militarism and war, and to defend jobs, working conditions and vital public services. This fight must be informed by a socialist political perspective, aimed at putting an end to the capitalist system, which is plunging the world into war.



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