

## A Synopsis of the “Hobbit Dispute”

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### Abstract

The dispute between New Zealand Actors Equity (NZAE) and The Hobbit Film Production appeared to industry outsiders to have come out of nowhere. However, it was actually the most high profile of a number of actions taken by NZAE to negotiate collective contracts for its members. The intense media interest combined with unexpected cultural and political forces to impact upon the resolution of this industrial dispute. This synopsis surveys media coverage to introduce the main parties to the dispute and draw a chronological overview of the events that led to the National Government changing employment law with regard to film performers.

### Summary

The Hobbit employment dispute, in 2010, involved the New Zealand actors’ union, New Zealand Actors Equity (NZAE)<sup>1</sup> and The Hobbit Film Production. It initially centred upon moves by the actors’ union to negotiate a collective agreement with the films’ producers. Previously, NZAE had tried, without success, to negotiate standard contracts for actors in a number of local productions. The New Zealand production companies and directors argued that performers’ rights were protected by the voluntary industry code known as ‘The Pink Book’. The actors’ union, however, was not satisfied by the code and was concerned by the fact that performers had little recourse when its guidelines were not adhered to. After unsuccessful attempts to negotiate with local productions, NZAE pursued the matter with an international production. When NZAE believed that performers’ contracts for *The Hobbit* production failed to adhere to ‘The Pink Book’, the actors’ union joined forces with international actors’ unions in an attempt to get *The Hobbit*’s producers to engage with the actors’ union representatives.

The following is an outline of the progression of the dispute which is drawn primarily from published media reports at that time.<sup>2</sup>

### Key Figures in the Dispute

#### *Actors’ Union Representatives*

##### New Zealand Actors Equity (NZAE)

- President: Jennifer Ward-Lealand
- Equity organiser: Frances Walsh
- Member and public spokesperson: Robyn Malcolm

##### Council of Trade Unions (CTU)

- President: Helen Kelly

##### Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA)

- National Director: Simon Whipp

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International Federation of Actors (FIA)

- FIA represents actor unions in 100 countries, including the US, the UK and Canada.

### *Key People and Businesses in The Hobbit Production*

Film Director: Sir Peter Jackson

Executive Producer and Screenwriter: Fran Walsh

Co-producer: Philippa Boyens

Production Company: Three Foot Six Ltd (owned by Warner Brothers)

Film Studios: Warner Brothers, New Line, MGM

### *Film Industry Representatives*

Screen Production and Development Association of New Zealand (SPADA)

- Chief Executive: Penelope Borland
  - o Lobby group that represents New Zealand producers and production companies

## **The Dispute**

In 2010, renowned New Zealand filmmaker, Sir Peter Jackson, Director of the successful *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy, is working on adapting J.R.R Tolkien's *The Hobbit* into two films for Warner Bros. He intends to film these in New Zealand, as the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy was, and the work provided by such a big budget production is hotly anticipated by film industry workers. In May 2010, The Hobbit production sends contracts to NZAE and actors' agents for their consideration. NZAE believes that the terms and conditions of these contracts do not comply with 'The Pink Book' and do not include residual payments (i.e. a share of the film's profits, including those accruing from subsequent marketing of films as DVDs, games and so on). The union approaches international actors' unions for support in seeking collective bargaining. As a result, in June 2010, the International Federation of Actors (FIA) instructs its members and affiliate unions not to sign contracts until The Hobbit production enters into a collective bargaining agreement. Contracts for The Hobbit production continue to be issued to actors internationally for consideration.

A letter from the General Secretary and President of the FIA is sent to the US directors of Three Foot Six Ltd, the production company producing *The Hobbit*, on 17 August, advising that it has instructed its members not to agree to act in the films until the company enters into a collective bargaining agreement. A copy of this letter is also sent to the Director, Peter Jackson. It notes that previous attempts by the local unions to address the current industry standard of non-union contracts have been resisted by both independent productions and the body that represents New Zealand producers and production companies, SPADA. NZAE argues that these non-union contracts do not provide actors with guaranteed wages and working conditions, and do not contain residual or cancellation payments. The FIA argues that a collective agreement would provide minimum wages and working conditions as well as ensure that performers receive entitlements from "the exploitations of these productions in markets beyond their theatrical release" (Luquer and Haaland, 2010: 1). The company is requested to contact the MEAA's national director, Simon Whipp, to negotiate an agreement regarding terms and conditions for all performers.

Three days later, seven English-speaking unions affiliated with the International Federation of Actors – AFTRA (US), SAG (US), Canadian Actors' Equity Association, MEAA (AUS), Actors' Equity Association USA, ACTRA (Canada) and Equity (UK) – write to Three Foot Seven Ltd advising that they are instructing their members to follow the FIA resolution.

On 31 August, Simon Whipp of the MEAA writes to MGM Studios and New Line Cinema executives advising that the FIA and English-speaking unions are seeking a union-negotiated agreement for performers and enclosing the letters already sent to the production company for their information. In response, a lawyer representing Warner Bros. writes to MEAA advising that the company will not bargain with the union on the grounds that it is not legally permitted to under the New Zealand Commerce Act.

NZAE receives its own legal advice (from law firm Simpson Grier), which offers a different interpretation of the application of the Commerce Act, proposing that the Act “does not absolutely prevent the producers of *The Hobbit* movie from entering into a union-negotiated agreement obtained through collective bargaining” (Craig and Murray, 2010: 1). Craig and Murray argue that if performers are hired as employees, the Commerce Act does not come into play, and that even if performers are hired as contractors, there are exceptions to the relevant section of the Commerce Act that could be applied. The New Zealand union advises its members, on 24 September, that the makers of *The Hobbit* are refusing to meet with the unions to negotiate an agreement and announce a meeting will be held for performers in Auckland in four days’ time.

On 27 September, Jackson releases a four page statement to the media announcing that the FIA has told members not to act in *The Hobbit* until they get a union contract. He argues that the unions’ criticism of his production is driven by a political and financial agenda and reveals a deal for residual payments for non-union actors which he characterises as “Warners doing the decent thing” independent of any union pressure (Jackson, 2010 as cited in 3news.co.nz, 2010). He describes the consequences of the unions’ boycott as not only a potential loss to New Zealand of *The Hobbit* film production and the thousands of jobs it would create but also significant damage to the New Zealand film industry. Suggesting that the loss of *The Hobbit* would leave New Zealand “humiliated on the world stage” and “Warners would take a financial hit that would cause other studios to steer clear of New Zealand,” Jackson blames this development on the MEAA, characterising them as the ‘Australian bully boy’ motivated more by their own industry interests than worker solidarity (ibid.). He then warns that “[i]f *The Hobbit* goes east (Eastern Europe in fact) – look forward to a long, dry, big budget movie drought in this country” (Jackson, 2010 as cited in 3news.co.nz, 2010).

On the same day, the Chief Executive of South Pacific Pictures, a prominent local production company, alleges that production companies cannot legally enter into any agreements with NZAE because it has not registered with the Registrar of Unions in the Department of Labour for the last three years, as it is required to do by the Employment Relations Act 2000 (ERA) and that the union, therefore, has no legal standing.

New Line, Warner Bros. Pictures and MGM announce on, 28 September, that their general policy is to avoid filming in locations where “there is a potential for work force uncertainty or other forms of instability” and they are exploring other locations for making the film (New Line, Warner Bros Pictures and MGM as cited in NZPA, 2010). Other countries reported to be lobbying for *The Hobbit* include Scotland, Ireland, Canada, Australia and the Czech Republic. NZAE president, Jennifer Ward-Lealand, is reported as saying that the union had been trying to meet the producers for over a month as it is “concerned that local actors working on the production receive a fair and equitable contract, just as their international colleagues will do” (ibid.). Jackson disagrees, saying the union is demanding a collective agreement covering all performers. He contends that actors are not employees but are instead independent contractors. This, therefore, would make union representation illegal under New Zealand law as negotiating en masse would constitute anti-competitive price-fixing, a view supported by SPADA’s chief executive Penelope Borland.

At this point, the Council Trade Union (CTU), the union body with which NZAE is affiliated becomes involved in the dispute. Helen Kelly from the CTU arranges a meeting with Peter Jackson. The CTU also meets with NZAE union officials prior to the union’s meeting with its Auckland members. Approximately 400 actors attend this meeting. As a result the union’s official resolution is that it

recommends that all performers wait before accepting any engagement on the production of *The Hobbit* until the production has advised whether it will enter into good faith negotiations with NZ

Actors' Equity with respect to the minimum conditions of engagement under which NZ Actors' Equity will recommend performers work on the production *The Hobbit*, including minimum fees, conditions of engagement, professional protections and residuals. If the production advises it will not enter into such good faith negotiations then NZ Actors' Equity should make a further recommendation to performers on what action should be taken at that time before performers accept engagement of the production (Actors Equity NZ, 2010).

The Office of the Minister of Arts releases a media statement on 29 September, concerning the Crown Law Office's opinion regarding the effects of the Commerce Act. The Minister, Chris Finlayson, reports that this opinion is that the Act prohibits *The Hobbit's* movie producers "from entering into a union negotiated agreement with performers who are independent contractors" (as cited in Bennett, 2010). NZAE respond that their legal advice contradicts this stance. Helen Kelly later alleges that this legal opinion must have solely been formed "on the basis of facts supplied by Peter Jackson; no approach was made to any one of the unions for the facts" (Kelly, 2011). Opposition politicians urge the producers of *The Hobbit* to meet with NZAE to ensure the movie gets made in New Zealand, citing the potential loss of jobs and millions of dollars to the economy.

On 1 October, Helen Kelly (CTU) meets with Peter Jackson (Director), Fran Walsh, Wingnut Films, and Philippa Boyens (Producer) in an attempt to resolve the dispute. There are also phone conversations between Gerry Brownlee, the Minister of Economic Development, and Jennifer Ward-Lealand, NZAE President, during the weekend.

Ward-Lealand announces in a statement that NZAE has been advised by Miriam Dean QC, a senior barrister specialising in competition law, that the law does not prohibit the union from discussing pricing in general terms with the producers. Even if workers are contractors rather than employees, the union can assist contractors with negotiating individual contracts and the union accepts these would be "recommended prices – nothing more" (Ward-Lealand, 2010). Ward-Lealand appears on TV3's *The Nation* the following day, arguing that there has never been a boycott: "We have never said there's a boycott ever. All we have asked for in anything is a meeting and until we get the meeting for our members to hold on signing. That is all" (as cited in Smellie, 2010). She asserts that actors are not seeking collective bargaining but standard terms in a contract for services (that is, as contractors) and says that although NZAE was briefly deregistered for failing to file annual returns in three consecutive years, it is currently registered.

The following statement is released on 3 October after some negotiation: "Helen Kelly, CTU President has met with Peter Jackson and Fran Walsh and we are hopeful that a meaningful dialogue between Equity, SPADA, and Three Foot Six can be established" (CTU, 2010).

On 4 October, Peter Jackson and Fran Walsh meet with Ministers Gerry Brownlee and Chris Finlayson, briefing them on the background to the dispute. On the same day, the movie's Co-producer and Co-writer Philippa Boyens tells Radio New Zealand that at least half a dozen countries, including Australia and the UK, are lobbying to win the right to film *The Hobbit* and alleges that the MEAA made the decision to issue a boycott of the film without talking to NZAE. Concerned that Boyens' comments undermine the outcome of her meeting with Jackson and Walsh, Helen Kelly contacts Jackson. After some discussion, Kelly is advised via email that "any meeting to be held in New Zealand was to be between SPADA [the body that represents New Zealand producers and production companies] and NZ Equity, and that Three Foot Six's involvement would have been simply in an observational capacity" (Kelly, 2011), a statement she interprets as the company backtracking on its agreement in the statement released the previous day to dialogue with NZAE.

Jackson is reported in *The Dominion Post* on 11 October arguing that the NZ film industry is only viable if staff are hired as contractors and that this is also the preference of crew members since they receive higher

wages as contractors. In the same article, a former employee of Three Foot Six Ltd, who worked on all three of *The Lord of the Rings* films, disagrees with Jackson's claims regarding workers' preference to be hired as contractors. Jon Woolf argues that actors are not given a choice and are not in a position to negotiate a contract – "it was a case of taking what he was given" (as cited in Rothwell, 2010).

On 14 October, Minister Gerry Brownlee facilitates a meeting for SPADA, CTU and NZAE. They announce to the media that they have agreed to "work together to update the conditions of engagement for performers in the New Zealand screen production industry" (Brownlee, 2010). After this meeting, NZAE agrees to recommend to the FIA unions that, since the dispute is being settled, the resolution for union members not to sign contracts can be withdrawn.

On 20 October, film workers are invited to a meeting at Weta Workshop, a Wellington visual effects company closely involved with numerous films directed by Jackson (and co-founded by Jackson). After the meeting, 1500 workers march through Wellington protesting against the industrial unrest amid fears that the US\$500 million film will be lost to another country. NZAE has a meeting planned in Wellington that night to discuss the planned negotiation with SPADA, but after actors dining in a Wellington restaurant are abused by angry film technicians the meeting is cancelled.

The following day, Kelly announces that the boycott has been lifted, saying that the issues had been largely resolved. Specifically, she asserts

1. NZAE wanted to negotiate conditions as an industry standard rather than a collective agreement and that good progress is being made on this through revising 'The Pink Book'.
2. Warner Bros. were advised several days earlier, on 17 October, (American Pacific Standard Time) that NZAE had asked SAG to lift any "don't work" orders. The union also prepared a media statement; however, Warner Bros. wanted to make the announcement. Warner Bros. then delayed releasing this information by several days. Kelly claims that Wingnut, therefore, knew the boycott had been lifted when they met with technicians the previous day but did not pass on this information.

Kelly suggests that the union was being framed by Warner Bros., who had already decided to move the production to a country where it could get bigger tax incentives and pay lower wages. In response, Peter Jackson and Fran Walsh assert that the lifting of the union blacklist "does nothing to help the films stay in New Zealand" because the damage "is long since done" (as cited in Cardy and Johnston, 2010). The local producers union, SPADA, issues a media release agreeing with Jackson and Walsh's assertion that the lifting of the boycott does not change the tenuous position of *The Hobbit* production.

In that release, SPADA also outlines their account of the sequence of meetings with the union. They argue that they asked NZAE the previous year, in February 2009, to meet to discuss 'The Pink Book', but that NZAE would only meet to discuss an industry-wide agreement with conditions equal to those in Australia (as negotiated by MEAA), a condition SPADA considered unworkable due to NZ law. SPADA says that more recently it offered to meet NZAE representatives on 1 October, 2010 with no response, and again on the 12<sup>th</sup>. A meeting finally took place on 14 October when they agreed to renegotiate 'The Pink Book'. The SPADA media release also reported that NZAE agreed at this meeting to rescind the 'no sign' order and that it would not attempt to negotiate or initiate industrial action against individual productions during the period of 'The Pink Book' review.

NZAE spokeswoman, Frances Walsh, announces that a planned meeting of actors in Auckland has been cancelled in light of actors being threatened by protesters in Wellington.

Prime Minister John Key offers to meet Warner Bros. representatives when they visit the following week on the grounds that “[t]his is a very successful growth area for New Zealand and to have the film industry destroyed on the back of the actions of the unions is, I think, reprehensible” (as cited in Cardy and Johnston, 2010). Key suggests the film studio is concerned not only about the boycott, but also about a 2005 Supreme Court ruling that a model maker on the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, who worked for Wellington production company Three Foot Six, was an employee, not a contractor. Key announces that he will seek advice on a possible law change that would remove the ‘ambiguity’ in the ERA regarding the difference between an employee and a contractor. Key also suggests that Warner Bros. may be after greater tax breaks.

Fran Walsh, the producer of *The Hobbit*, tells Radio New Zealand that the films could be made at Lavesden Film Studios, a former Rolls-Royce factory north west of London owned by Warner Bros.

Warner Bros. Confirms on 22 October that it is looking at offshore locations. Referring back to the union assertions that the company withheld information about the union boycott, Warner Bros. reject the union’s claims that the union boycott was lifted on 17 October and that Warner Bros. had asked to delay this announcement. It claims, instead, that confirmation of the boycott being lifted was not received from SAG and NZAE until a day later, on 21 October, and that it was still awaiting retractions from other guilds.

Helen Kelly warns against rewriting employment laws to please Warner Bros., saying the dispute is not about employment status but about whether independent contractors can bargain collectively.

Jackson comments on Warner Bros.’ concern about New Zealand employment laws, saying that actors citing the Bryson v Three Foot Six court case have raised concerns for the studio: “Now they are saying: ‘What if an actor working on *The Hobbit* wakes up in the night and decides they are an employee, not an independent contractor, just like that other guy?’” (as cited in Cardy, 2010).

On 25 October (Labour Day), approximately 1000 people rally in Wellington to keep *The Hobbit* in New Zealand. Weta Workshop managing director Sir Richard Taylor, *The Hobbit* casting director Liz Mullane, and Wellington mayor Celia Wade-Brown all speak. Taylor reads out a letter from Peter Jackson at the rally where Jackson thanks people for their support, saying New Zealand is “where Middle Earth was born and this is where it should stay” (as cited in Wenzlick, 2010). Jackson also asserts “[w]e don’t open the door to an Australian trade union who will never put the interests of Kiwis first and invest that union with the powers to destroy everything that we have built” (ibid.) and argues that “[t]urning us into another state of Australia under the sway of a destructive organisation carries the very real risk of destroying the great big heart that beats inside our films” (as cited in Broun and Watkins, 2010). Other rallies are held throughout the country, with 1500 people attending a rally in Auckland and smaller groups of people protesting in Christchurch and Queenstown.

Warner Bros.’ staff, including New Line Cinema president, Toby Emmerich, and the company’s chief legal counsel, arrive in New Zealand on 26 October to meet with John Key and Government Ministers Gerry Brownlee (Economic Development), Steven Joyce (Transport Minister) and Chris Finlayson (Arts Minister). Prior to the meeting, John Key asserts that he is not prepared to participate in a bidding war for the films but notes that the high exchange rate may influence a decision to film elsewhere.<sup>3</sup>

Following a two-hour meeting with the Warner Bros. executives, Mr. Key reports that industrial relations law and financial incentives were the two issues driving the studio to consider shifting the production of *The Hobbit* movies overseas. He describes the central problem as the legal precedent (Bryson v Three Foot Six Ltd) that meant that workers could be legally seen as employees even if their contracts specifically called them contractors:

They’re not arguing people can’t be employees. They’re just saying that if someone is engaged by their production company as a contractor, they want to know if that’s how it’s going to end up, and if

it doesn't, that has other economic consequences for them. They're out of here, if we can't give them the clarity. There's no question about that (Key as cited in Cheng and Harper, 2010a).

There is no decision following the meeting and negotiations continue.

On the evening of 27 October, John Key announces that *The Hobbit* will be made in New Zealand and that legislation, which will only apply to the film industry, will be introduced under urgency to Parliament. The ERA will be amended so that a worker engaged in an independent contract is not able to go to court and claim employee rights and conditions. In addition, *The Hobbit* production will gain increased subsidies. In return, New Zealand will be promoted in all DVDs and other material used to publicise the films with every DVD and download of *The Hobbit* featuring a Jackson-directed video promoting New Zealand as a tourist and filmmaking destination. The movie will also premiere in New Zealand, with the Government planning a major tourism campaign to coincide with its launch. A memorandum of understanding with Warner Bros. is signed.

Parliament debates the Employment Relations (Film Production Work) Amendment Bill on 28 October, a Bill which would make every worker in the film industry an independent contractor. By 10pm when the House adjourned, the Bill has passed its first and second readings. This Bill covers all workers who "engage in film production work as an actor, voice-over actor, stand-in, body double, stunt performer, extra, singer, musician, dancer or entertainer" or who are "engaged in film production work in any other capacity" (Roberts, 2010). Workers and performers involved in television broadcast are not affected by this amendment. While film workers could still attempt to negotiate employment agreements, employers would be under no legal obligation to do so. The Employment Relations (Film Production Work) Amendment Bill passes into law on 29 October after passing its third and final reading. Key and Brownlee decline to release further details about the deal with Warner Bros, citing commercial confidentiality.

Political debate about the dispute resurfaces in December with the release of relevant documents to Radio New Zealand under the Official Information Act. In an email to Minister Gerry Brownlee dated 18 October, Jackson wrote "[t]here is no connection between the blacklist (and it's [sic] eventual retraction) and the choice of production base for *The Hobbit*" (as cited in Cheng, 2010). He goes on to warn that Warners Bros., having previously lost the *Bryson v Three Foot Six* case in the Supreme Court, wants certainty that workers hired as contractors will be legally recognised as contractors in order to protect its business interests. This communication contradicts Jackson's numerous public assertions that union action was to blame for Warner Bros.' looking at alternative filming locations. It also reveals that he was aware that the 'do not sign' order had been lifted prior to the film technician rally and the public rally on Labour Day, despite saying in television interviews on 21 October that he was unsure if the blacklist had been lifted.

Helen Kelly responds to these revelations by asserting that Warner Bros. used "the dispute to ratchet up both money and employment law reductions for workers in the industry" (Skelton, 2010). She questions the Government's refusal to release the Crown Law opinion regarding the legality of the union's requests for collective negotiation, suggesting this indicated that its contents differed from what was announced publicly. Peter Jackson responds to the release of the documents via email to Radio New Zealand, alleging that the MEAA had been manipulating NZAE in order to unionise the film industry and only dropped the blacklist because it faced being sued by Warner Bros. He reasserts that

[t]his is why Warner Bros lost all confidence in filming in New Zealand – because they had just witnessed how a tiny and capricious union, manipulated by an offshore agency, could bring a multimillion [dollar] production to its knees – for no legitimate reason" (as cited in Cheng, 2011).

There is disquiet amongst some of the Government's coalition partners who supported the legislative change, as well as the Opposition. However, Minister Gerry Brownlee announces that he is happy with the Government's course of action and refuses to comment further.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> In 2005, the New Zealand actors' union NZAE became an autonomous office of MEAA, an Australian union. In practical terms, NZAE still negotiates with producers and directors for New Zealand actors but with the backing and support of the MEAA. While MEAA was involved in the origins of this dispute, the actual negotiations are between NZAE representatives and *The Hobbit* director and executives, even though the latter's criticism frequently focuses on the MEAA rather than the NZAE.

<sup>2</sup> As the dispute played out, it became clear that there was little common ground between the union and film representatives, with both parties having conflicting views on the basis and origins of the disagreement.

<sup>3</sup> The New Zealand dollar had been at 55c to the US dollar when the company first planned filming the movie in New Zealand but was now at 75c.

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