

Union agrees to "performance pay" for New Zealand teachers

A correspondent
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The union covering secondary school teachers in New Zealand, the Post Primary Teachers' Association, has completed a deal with the National Party government to introduce a system of performance-related pay for teachers. With the primary sector union having already come to a similar agreement last year, in return for pay equalization across the two sectors, all New Zealand teachers are now covered by employment contracts based on having their pay linked to so-called "professional standards".

The PPTA deal comes at the end of an 18-month period of contract negotiations, during which union members were disoriented by an unprincipled faction fight within the top leadership and worn down by the total abandonment of any perspective of industrial action. The one strike that was organized by the union, a desultory one-day affair in April of last year, was only supported by 60 percent of teachers. This was then used by the leadership to declare that any attempt to organize a militant campaign over pay and conditions was doomed to failure.

In the previous contract round, concluded in 1996, provisions were introduced for all teachers who were moving up the 11-step pay scale to be tested against criteria that had existed for some time in an appendix to the contract. The system required an annual endorsement by a supervising teacher before the next step on the salary scale could be reached. The criteria included classroom management, preparation and planning, relationships with students and professional relationships within the school.

The new agreement now extends the performance assessments to all teachers, including those at the top of the pay scale and senior teachers with management units, while establishing a new set of detailed and prescriptive performance measures. Every teacher will be assessed every year, as part of the school's appraisal and performance management system.

To ensure that the new system is put in place to the government's satisfaction, half the pay increase negotiated as part of the deal will be withheld until next April. It will only then be paid out when teachers have been through their first

performance assessment under the new criteria.

The new system divides teachers into three levels of experience: beginning teachers, classroom teachers and "experienced classroom teachers". There are also additional requirements for teachers who hold management units. For each of these levels, nine separate "dimensions" are set out, ranging from teaching techniques, student management and motivation, through to "effective communication" and "contribution to wider school activities".

Far from being "professional standards", the performance criteria are based on the assumption that teachers are not professionals and cannot be trusted to undertake their teaching duties without giving a whip-hand to school administrations to force teachers to "perform". The standards documents are replete with right-wing management buzzwords such "high levels of commitment", "refined strategies", "demonstrate ... success", "demonstrate ... flexibility" and so on. The requirements will give principals stronger powers to make inordinate demands on staff, such as the prescription that teachers must "contribute towards the effective functioning of the total school operation".

Under conditions where teacher workloads have become virtually unmanageable, where funding cuts have been progressively imposed, and teachers increasingly subjected to a regime of externally imposed compliance through the activities of the Education Review Office, these new contract provisions will be used to further break down conditions of work while making it possible for school management to isolate and victimize individual staff members.

The contract is entirely consistent with the prevailing right-wing attitude that the crisis in education is caused, not by government policies and the growing social inequality, but by failing schools and under-performing teachers. It sits alongside other current government moves, such as the Austin Committee inquiry into the length of the school year, which has recommended extending the amount of time students must spend "under instruction", and a regulations

review that will widen the scope for private competition in education. Reinforcing this atmosphere, the Educational Review Office has recently declared that “failing” schools should simply be closed down, threatening the jobs of teachers and the educational rights of students in working class.

Not only has the union failed, over a period of years, to effectively fight attacks on teachers' conditions of work, with this settlement it is complicit in exacerbating the workload crisis. At the outset of the contract round, a minimal claim for 1,200 new teachers to relieve workload pressures was included in the union's claims. However, when the Education Minister refused to negotiate on this issue, saying that staffing levels were not a matter for industrial negotiations, the union simply accepted the government's position and agreed that the workload claim be moved to a “discussion” forum, where it will be effectively buried.

The contract settlement will immediately deepen the attacks on teacher workloads, not only through the implementation of the new professional standards, but by doubling the time, from 5 days to 10, that teachers can be called back during their holidays for the purposes of professional training and school administration.

Education Minister Nick Smith welcomed the settlement, saying he was “relieved and pleased” that the agreement with the PPTA, which presents itself as one of the last remaining militant unions, had been reached. Referring to the absence of industrial action during the 18 months of negotiations, he said: “Not only have we avoided the all too common disruption to schools but we have reached an agreement that will better deliver a quality education for our children”.

Smith also served notice of the potential of the new procedures to be used against individual teachers. He referred to a highly publicized case in which a Fijian-Indian immigrant had falsified his qualifications in order to gain a teaching position, which he had then managed to hold for several years before his recent discovery. Despite the fact that this case is the first of its kind in a national teaching force of 43,000 teachers, Smith went on to claim that the new pay scale would “flush out the Magnesh Reddys of this world”.

The PPTA declared the settlement to be a qualified victory. *PPTA News* proclaimed in its lead article that given “the harsh industrial climate we are operating under ... we believe we have achieved a very good result”. Much of this is attributed to the pay settlement, which ranges from 17 percent for beginning teachers through to a 7 percent increase for those at the top of the basic scale, bringing it to \$50,300. In addition, there is a 17 percent increase for “management” units, which will now be worth \$2,750 each.

These increases are certainly larger than most pay increases won by public sector workers in the recent period, and follow a 12 percent increase in the 1996 round. However, as the pay rise was not won as the result of any industrial fight, it is clear that this was simply the price the government was prepared to pay in order to have the union recommend the performance pay system to its members. The union carried out this task dutifully, securing an overall ratification vote of 90 percent in favor of the settlement, a notable exception being in the Wellington region where 40 percent of members opposed the deal.

The value of having the collective contract settled in this manner is already apparent in meetings where school managers are being advised on implementing the new pay system. Against protests by principals that the performance standards were imposed without any discussion with the profession and that they would further divide school management from their staffs, Ministry of Education officials have been able to argue that the contract negotiations involved “consultation” with the union, which “represents” teachers as a whole, and that the negotiated agreement is now a firm basis for proceeding with the new system.

What is also clear is that the government, with the compliance of the union, has opened the door for deepening attacks on teachers in further pay rounds. Future demands, some of which have already been prefigured in the recent negotiations, are likely to include: intensifying the requirements of teacher performance, establishing a mechanism for reducing pay for teachers who are deemed to be “under-performing”, moving to a complete performance pay system, and establishing faster processes for carrying through sackings. With the opposition Labour Party already having re-cast itself in the mould of Britain's “New Labour”, this agenda will proceed regardless of which party forms the government after the national elections, due later this year.



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