

# New Zealand teachers strike after rejecting pay deal

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New Zealand's 14,000 secondary school teachers will return from their Easter holidays on April 15 to face a sharp battle with the Labour-Alliance government and their own union, the Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA), over pay and working conditions. Just prior to Easter, teachers in Auckland, the country's largest city, took matters into their own hands and refused to teach selected classes, expressing their opposition not only to the government's failure to agree to an adequate employment contract, but also to the PPTA's campaign.

The dispute over the contract has continued for 10 months. In February, teachers overwhelmingly rejected a proposed settlement agreed to before Christmas by union and government negotiators. It was the first time that the members of any of the teacher unions had clearly repudiated a deal that was brokered and recommended by its executive.

In a secret ballot conducted at a series of PPTA stopwork meetings, 57 percent of members rejected the settlement. In metropolitan centres, where teacher shortages, cost of living increases and the impact of rising social inequality on education are most acute, the majority was even greater. In Auckland, Counties-Manukau, Hutt Valley, Waikato and Wellington, there were 3,070 votes against and only 972 for the deal.

The stopwork meetings were marked by anger and frustration. PPTA leaders were roundly accused of operating as government spokesmen when they moved resolutions to ratify the contract. At several meetings, speakers from the floor queued up to criticise the deal and call for its rejection. Speeches from the top table were greeted with jeering and motions to limit the speaking time of union officials. Many individual school branches presented resolutions of no-confidence in their executive members and one Wellington branch delegates' meeting demanded the negotiating team be sacked.

The immediate cause of the opposition was the failure

of the proposed settlement to meet any of the teachers' demands. The original claim was for a rise of \$2,500 per year over each of the next three years—a total increase of about 14 percent. Instead, the settlement offered only 2 percent immediately, with a further 1.5 percent rise from July.

While admitting that the pay offer was inadequate, the union claimed the deal was "historic" because it formally recognised "non-contact" time for lesson preparation and marking. Teachers had sought the change because increased workloads, teaching demands and administration loads have made the job intolerable. However, far from representing an improvement, the contract simply codified existing custom and practice in most schools, and thereby served to entrench current onerous conditions.

The settlement provided for three hours non-contact time each week—nothing more than presently exists in most schools—for the next two years. An extra hour was to be provided in 2004, with a clause that school administrations should "endeavor" to provide a total of five hours from 2005. For teachers faced with implementing a new national qualifications system, extensive internal assessment and administration requirements, the new contract meant heavier, not lighter, workloads.

The stopwork meetings also reflected a deeper malaise. Many younger teachers spoke of the difficulties in establishing themselves while owing \$30,000 or more for their tertiary studies. Others complained of working 50- to 60-hour weeks, of the fact that they could not afford to retire at a reasonable age, and of the increased burdens of paperwork and reporting to government control agencies. The vote to reject the contract thus stemmed from broader concerns about the state of public education after two decades of funding cutbacks by governments, both National Party and Labour.

The PPTA leadership responded to the vote by manoeuvring to contain the anger while continuing to seek an accommodation with the government. Labour's Education Minister Trevor Mallard asserted that there was "no more money" for teachers, but the PPTA officials immediately reentered negotiations. The union called a token one-day strike on March 1, and the following week, without any further mass meetings, conducted a survey of members by secret ballot to determine the most suitable action to "support the negotiations".

The union anticipated that by using the method of the secret ballot it would ensure the least possible support for industrial action. But instead, the result was widespread support for firm action against the government. Almost two-thirds of the members voted and, by a 2-to-1 margin, endorsed a series of options, including further national strikes and various bans. More than half the union members approved an extended strike.

In an endeavour to be seen to do something, the PPTA executive proposed a limited campaign to "persuade the government to increase the 'pot' of money available for a settlement". Rolling one-day strikes were to be held region by region for two weeks, with the executive reserving the right to suspend industrial action in the event that talks were "making progress".

The announcement of the official "campaign" provoked a rebellion among teachers in Auckland. Regional PPTA chairman Kevin Havell told the *NZ Education Review* that many members were so angry they were "threatening to form their own unions". Most of the 105 branches in the region supported the call to refuse to teach selected classes to support demands for an improved contract.

Whatever their professed "differences" with the government, the PPTA leaders' main aim is to isolate secondary teachers and wear down the opposition to the new contract. In doing so, the union is reaching deep into its bag of dirty tricks. To deflect attention from the government, the PPTA has entered into a slanging match with the primary teachers' union, blaming its "pay parity" arrangements negotiated several years ago for making any settlement more expensive. The government has seized upon the fact that any pay rise won by secondary teachers is automatically passed on to their primary colleagues to argue that it cannot afford the teachers' demands.

It is a classic attempt at divide-and-rule. The truth is that public education, along with other essential social services, has been systematically starved of funds by successive Labour and National governments in order to

meet the demands of big business for market reforms and restructuring. The Labour-Alliance government, which came to power in 1999 with the full support of the trade union bureaucracy, is no exception. Its 2001 budget, which determined the present levels of spending in health and education, was distinguished by the fact that it reduced state sector spending, as a percentage of GDP, to its lowest level since 1977.

Secondary teachers should emphatically reject any attempt to set them against primary teachers, or any other section of workers. Those responsible for the appalling state of public education are the present and previous governments, and the union leaders who have played the essential role in imposing successive cutbacks over the last two decades. All the unions accepted the basic premise that public spending had to be slashed to boost private profits and make New Zealand capitalism "more competitive," and argued for one rotten deal after another on the basis that "nothing else was possible".

One response among teachers to the PPTA leadership's latest stance is to argue that all that is required is more militancy. The advocates of this approach point to the 1996 campaign, when, against the wishes of the union executive, a campaign for a 21 percent pay rise was authorised and prosecuted. The resulting 12 percent increase was no victory, however. The settlement ushered in the system of performance pay, annual professional appraisals and performance-related promotions that are largely responsible for the current heavy workloads.

Militancy by itself is not enough. Teachers can only succeed in reversing the deep inroads into public education to the extent that they base their struggle on an independent political perspective—one that directly challenges the prerogatives of big business and insists that the needs of teachers for decent conditions and students for high quality education must come before the requirements of corporate profit.



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