

Widening rebellion by New Zealand teachers against government-union pay deal

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Simmering discontent among New Zealand secondary school teachers over employment contract negotiations has boiled over into open rebellion against both the Labour-Alliance government and the Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA). On May 16, union and government negotiators announced a deal to settle the 14-month dispute over pay and working conditions. At the same time, the PPTA executive issued a directive to teachers to cancel all bans and industrial action.

This is the second time that an attempt by the government and the PPTA to enforce a settlement has met with open hostility from rank-and-file teachers. In February, teachers voted by a 57 percent majority to throw out the union's recommendation. In March, two subsequent government offers were rejected by the union executive, fearful that they too would be opposed. Teachers in the Auckland region took unauthorised strike action to protest the union's timid, drawn-out industrial campaign.

The latest deal, which was put together over four days of negotiations involving Prime Minister Helen Clark, Labour Minister Margaret Wilson and Associate Education Minister Marian Hobbs, was signed off on the eve of the Labour Party's election-year congress, held in Wellington over the weekend of May 17-19. A planned picket of the event by Wellington and Hutt Valley teachers was cancelled following a branch delegates' meeting, at which PPTA executive members threatened dissenters with disciplinary action under the union's "Code of Ethics". Strikes planned to begin the following week were also called off.

The agreement provides for an immediate two percent pay increase, backdated to last July, a further 1.5 percent in July 2002 and another two percent 12 months later. This is essentially the same as the government's pay offer in March. It amounts to a 5.5 percent increase over a three-year period—less than the anticipated inflation rate. There is a three-step allowance, totaling \$3,500, as the price for the introduction of new school qualifications, the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA). Under the deal, staffing provisions for 2002 and 2003 will generate

three non-contact hours per teacher each week, with a guarantee that it will rise to four hours in the following year. After that, school administrations will "endeavour" to provide five hours per week non-contact.

The striking teachers are objecting to the fact that the offer is virtually identical with those already rejected. The wage component in the deal is \$NZ45 million less than a "compromise" presented by the union which, after 14 months of talks and sporadic calls to industrial action, was endorsed as "ratifiable" by 74 percent of members—most of whom considered it to be the "bottom line".

After years of suffering deteriorating conditions, greater workloads and cuts to the purchasing power of their salaries, teachers face significant new burdens with the introduction of a new qualifications system, involving increased testing, internal assessment and administration tasks in the next three years. They want extra pay for this work, as well as guaranteed time to carry it out. Instead, the new deal provides for an allowance payable only to those teachers deemed by their principals to have met certain criteria, and will not extend beyond 2004. The workload component does little more than codify existing practices in most schools and will simply perpetuate current conditions.

Almost as soon as the details were relayed to schools, teachers began to walk off the job. On May 17, 40 teachers at Orewa College north of Auckland struck in protest at the "pathetic" settlement. They picketed the school in the rain for several hours and faxed other schools nationwide asking for support. Their local PPTA branch issued a statement repudiating the executive's directive to halt industrial action, saying: "We are sick and tired of our members ratifying an agreement merely because they feel that we won't be offered anything better... We feel that we should fight for what we're worth and not just roll over... and take what we're given... PPTA do not have the right to accept an agreement on our behalf".

The next week, teachers at other schools followed suit. In Wellington, 1,000 students at Onslow College were sent home every afternoon after staff voted for rolling stoppages,

while a strike shut Havelock North High School in Hawkes Bay. On Tuesday, Taita and Nae Nae Colleges in the Hutt Valley region declared they would join the snowballing wildcat action. By the end of the week, stoppages had spread to the South Island and over 20 schools nationwide were participating. Seven more schools have announced plans to go out this week, while staff at schools in the South Auckland region voted to withdraw entirely from administering the NCEA.

The striking teachers have gathered widening support. In Auckland, students in uniform from Northcote College and other schools attended pickets at the offices of Labour MPs. On May 23, over 100 striking teachers from three Wellington schools and their supporters demonstrated outside parliament during the presentation of the Labour government's 2002 budget. The national organisation for teachers of English as a Second Language announced that strike action was likely because the settlement had left its members "out in the cold". A spokesman said that while language teachers, who coach foreign fee-paying students, were supporting the country's "newest billion-dollar industry," they were expected to "perform all the additional assessment required for free".

A key provision in the settlement is designed to save the government millions of dollars into the future, at the expense of the salaries of primary school teachers. A government and union working party will be established to make recommendations on secondary teacher supply and remuneration. Its unstated aim is to establish a mechanism that will be used to sever the contractual links that guarantee "pay parity" between 14,000 secondary teachers and their 40,000 colleagues in primary schools.

A clause in the primary teachers' contract requires any pay rise won by secondary teachers to be passed on to primary teachers. Playing on long-standing rivalries between the bureaucrats of the respective teacher unions, the government has attempted to divide teachers throughout the course of the dispute and justify its refusal to make a significant pay offer on the grounds that it would be too expensive. The PPTA has opportunistically seized on this ploy to run a grubby campaign against parity, arguing that primary teachers are not worth as much as secondary teachers and that staffing shortages in the secondary sector justify higher rates of pay. The union is trying to sell its latest deal by promising that the pay entrenchment clause will be removed, clearing the way for further secondary pay increases.

A significant number of teachers, including some on strike, have fallen for this reactionary line. Many resent the fact that the primary teachers' union, the NZ Educational Institute (NZEI), has used the pay parity legislation to avoid

conducting any industrial struggles. Since gaining pay parity several years ago, the NZEI has settled each pay round as quickly as it could, and then depended on secondary teachers to win additional increases. Should the secondary teachers now win more than the one-off allowance for the introduction of the NCEA, it is quite likely the NZEI would, for its own reasons, seek to prevent this in the courts. Thus, both groups of bureaucrats are responsible for setting primary and secondary teachers against each other in order to defend their own turf, and to deflect teachers' attention from the government's attacks on education at all levels.

The PPTA leadership has responded to rising membership defiance by publicly condemning the strikes. At the same time, it is moving to limit the damage by quickly pushing ahead with ratification meetings. On Saturday May 25, regional representatives were brought to an extraordinary meeting of the executive in Wellington, purportedly to be given an opportunity to air grievances. Immediately following the meeting, the Auckland region chairman released a statement, widely quoted in the media, appealing for "calm" and saying he had been convinced that the government's latest offer was as far as it could go.

Sensitive to the impact of the teachers' wildcat action on broader sections of the working class, the peak union body has rushed to defend the PPTA leadership. Having, for 14 months, shown no interest in the contract struggle, the Council of Trade Unions (CTU) denounced the teachers' strikes as "undemocratic" and divisive. CTU president Ross Wilson went on to suggest the legality of the strikes was a "grey area". Under Labour's Employment Relations Act, which was framed with input and advice from the CTU, it is legal to strike in support of a collective agreement, but not when a settlement has been reached.

The teachers' strike wave throws into sharp relief the widening chasm between the working class and the official representatives of the labour movement—the unions and the self-proclaimed parties of the "centre-left" that form the Labour government. The strikes are being driven by immense anger and frustration among teachers, who know that the settlement will only exacerbate the ongoing decline in living standards, working conditions and the state of the public education system as a whole.



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