New Zealand teachers' union calls off industrial ban in long-running pay dispute

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The New Zealand Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA) last week ended a key industrial ban after thousands of high school students took to the streets to protest against the Labour-Alliance government's refusal to meet teachers' demands over pay and working conditions. Early on June 17, the PPTA announced suspension of plans to "roster home"—that is not teach selected year levels of students each day—citing the interests of "student and teacher safety".

The union's real concern, however, was the political health of the government. By June 14, just six weeks out from national elections, Labour and the Alliance faced a potentially damaging situation with the possibility of further student protests as well as continuing industrial action. The School Trustees Association had declared that the country's schools were "close to anarchy".

The union's management committee held an emergency telephone conference over the weekend of June 15-16. PPTA president Jen McCutcheon then announced that, in an attempt to "restore some calm to the schools", the union had decided to suspend the rostering home from June 18. "We don't want a repeat, or worse, an escalation of the student protests last week," she said. The union hoped the suspension of its plans for industrial action would "take some heat out of the situation". A ban on school sports and extra-curricular activities remained in place.

PPTA branches from at least six schools decided to defy the union directive. In protest over continuing high workloads, teachers at Edgewater College in Auckland and Waiheke High School kept rostering home going for the remainder of the week, as did four schools in the lower Northland region. Waiheke branch chairman Pieter De Jong told the *NZ Herald* that one teacher was "almost in tears" after discovering that the union had called off the industrial ban.

The formal suspension of the action led to the resumption of talks with the government in a further attempt to impose a settlement in the 15-month dispute. The union convened a series of branch-based stopwork meetings to try to gain support for a revised claim to take to the negotiations. PPTA members had previously twice voted to reject deals agreed between the union and the government. Wildcat strikes broke out in 50 schools during the last two weeks of May in protest against the previous package, which was rejected by a 74 percent majority.

While agreeing to talks, Labour's Minister of Education, Trevor Mallard, voiced his impatience with the union's inability to bring its members to heel, saying that negotiating with the PPTA was like "dealing with blancmange". Prime Minister Helen Clark made clear that the government was "not particularly open" to a settlement that would require it to put more money "in the pot". She said the government would re-enter negotiations only on the basis of the "reshaping the elements of the package".

The new proposal presented to PPTA branch meetings kept intact the basic claims on pay and conditions agreed with the government in May. The one change proposed by the union was a $2,000 increase in an allowance for the introduction of a new senior school qualification, the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA). The rise would have brought above base-rate payments to $4,500 over 18 months. By increasing allowances and not the base rate of pay, the union was seeking to save the government money by avoiding triggering a "pay parity" clause, under which pay increases won by secondary teachers flow through to primary teachers.

This amended claim, however, failed to win approval from a clear majority of the membership. While refusing to divulge the precise voting figures, the PPTA leadership announced that members were "split down the middle" on the new proposal. As a result, the union returned to negotiations with an amended claim based on an NCEA implementation allowance of $6,000, divided into two tranches of $3,000 each for this year and next.

Speaking at the School Trustees Association annual conference on June 22, Education Minister Mallard denounced the new proposal as being from "cloud cuckoo land", claiming it would raise the cost of the pay package to $NZ140 million. After holding a closed session with

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Mallard, a number of school board representatives told the press that they would be prepared to bypass restrictions in the State Sector Act and begin locking teachers out if the dispute continued.

The resistance of teachers to union/government attempts to impose a settlement has posed considerable political difficulties for the government. Labour and the Alliance, which have traditionally boasted of being the parties of "health and education," have entered an election campaign at loggerheads with 14,000 secondary teachers. Last week, nearly 4,000 nurses in the Auckland region voted by a 95 percent majority to initiate escalating industrial action, including strikes, over their pay claim.

Moreover, the government, which is under pressure from big business not to make any concessions, is relying on a union apparatus that is increasingly discredited in the eyes of its members. There have been a number of votes of no confidence in the union executive. Teachers at one secondary college have set up their own website and in the country's largest city, Auckland, definite moves are underway to establish a breakaway union.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to a number of teachers in the Wellington region over the past week about their views on the dispute. Many identified the growing workload facing teachers and the lack of sufficient time outside of classes as one of the major issues that the union/government agreements have failed to address.

Linda, a teacher of English and economics, carries a number of middle management responsibilities within her school, including duties administering the NCEA and liaison with the NZ Qualifications Authority. She is the main income earner for her household, and has a young child.

"At the moment, I wake up most nights worrying about all the things I have to do. I don't have proper time allowances to do everything I'm responsible for. If I could give some of them up, I would. I really don't want to die before I'm 60, but I'm seriously afraid that this will happen with the current amount of stress I work under," she said.

Linda spoke out against accepting the latest settlement at one of the main regional union meetings. "I feel we should not keep accepting less than we're worth. The presentation from the executive was complacent; they tried to convince us the settlement was a victory when it wasn't. Workload is the real issue, but the three, four and five hours non-contact time they've agreed to over the next four years won't change anything. We need seven, eight and nine hours to be nearer the mark. We need a settlement that will make an actual improvement to our working lives," she said.

David, a teacher of Mathematics and Physical Education, was also opposed to the settlement. He believed the union had accepted it because "they simply started from what they thought was the best they could get, not on the basis of what levels of pay and working conditions are needed to solve the real long-term problems of recruiting and retaining teachers." David said that he would not commit himself to "signing off a deal that is not going to do the job". He agreed with others who thought it was necessary to keep strong industrial action going "until we get what we need".

Katherine, an English teacher, agreed that workload was the main issue and added that it had been "discussed long enough to understand how much of an issue it really is. We can see that by the failure to keep people in the profession—30 percent of those who started two years ago have left. Now the introduction of the NCEA is an historic change to the education system, but it is not being matched by any real commitment of resources from the government."

Katherine said she found it an "easy" decision not to accept the settlement because "it won't fix anything". The big question teachers had to ask themselves was whether they were ready for a "long and large amount of industrial action that people are prepared to sustain. We have to be prepared to match our aims with our methods. We have to be able to contest for everything, and be sure we can sustain a long fight".

Anne, a recent teachers college graduate, is now in her second year teaching English and Social Studies. She was particularly concerned that the proposed allowance for the NCEA would only be available to teachers who were attested by their principals as meeting particular criteria. "If we accept this, we accept the principle of pay differentiation," she said. "There is no safety in leaving the decisions in the hands of principals; we would be in the position from school to school of fighting each principal over who should get the allowance and who shouldn't."

Expressing support for the industrial action, Anne said: "This is all new to me, but I feel very strongly about workload and the quality of education we can give to the students. It's important that we teach by example. By undertaking the rostering home action, we are taking control of our workloads—by refusing to do more work than we are reasonably able to. This puts us in the position of actually being able to teach better".

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