

New Zealand students walk out to support striking teachers

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Tens of thousands of New Zealand high school students took part in walkouts last week to support their teachers in a long-running dispute with the Labour-Alliance government over pay and conditions. The student protests began the day after Prime Minister Helen Clark announced that parliamentary elections, due in November, would be brought forward to July 27. With Labour riding high in the polls and seeking to win enough seats to govern in its own right, the demonstrations immediately put its re-election strategy under a cloud.

The student protests erupted after the country's 14,000 secondary teachers rejected, for the second time in the 15-month dispute, a settlement package negotiated by the Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA).

In a nationwide ballot conducted at membership meetings over the past fortnight, teachers voted by a 74 percent majority to reject the deal. This was a significant increase on the 57 percent vote opposing a previous package in February, indicating a hardening of resolve against both the government and the union.

The PPTA proceeded with the ratification meetings in the face of widespread opposition to the deal. In the two weeks following the announcement of the new agreement on May 16, wildcat strikes broke out in schools throughout the country in defiance of union orders that all industrial action be cancelled. Stoppages hit some 50 schools—that is, over 10 percent of secondary colleges. In an attempt to quell the spreading rebellion, the government agreed to a union request to waive the normal 14-day period of notice required for stopwork ratification meetings.

The union announced the ballot results on June 10. On the same day, a special PPTA executive meeting declared its intention to seek yet another accommodation with the government by returning immediately to talks. Education Minister Trevor Mallard, having earlier threatened to respond to a “no” vote by invoking provisions in the government's industrial legislation to enforce individual contracts, promptly agreed to resume negotiations. He emphasised, however, that there would be “no more

money” and that the government would only consider ways to “reconfigure” the package.

At the same time, the union attempted to reassert its authority among its members by announcing the resumption of limited industrial action. It declared that an existing ban on school sports and other extra-curricular activities in the Auckland region would be applied nationwide, and that a program of “rostering home”, in which designated year levels of students would not be taught each day, would begin on June 17.

At that point, the students began to launch protests. On June 12, at the instigation of Riccarton High School students, three colleges in the Christchurch area walked out, angry that the city's traditional inter-school sports fixtures were to be cancelled. In statements to the press, the students made clear that they supported the teachers' struggle and that their action was directed at the government for its failure to settle the dispute.

The following day, hundreds of students from Wellington Girls' College walked out of school to demonstrate in the streets of the capital near parliament. A front-page photo in the *Evening Post* showed an enthusiastic group of the students carrying a large banner declaring they were behind their teachers “100 percent”. Within 24 hours, thousands of students were quitting classes to protest in the main streets and shopping centres, sometimes despite despairing efforts by staff to stop them, and in defiance of threats of disciplinary action by some principals.

On June 14, students from Waitakere College in West Auckland left school in the morning and went to other schools. Students from St Dominic's, Liston College and Henderson High School joined them. Many used mobile phones to send text messages to friends in other schools. In South Auckland, about a quarter of the students at Papakura High walked out, with a student spokesperson telling the press: “We are sticking up for our teachers. We want to help them as it is affecting our education the most.”

The protests quickly spread to other areas. Some 500 Tauranga Girls College students demonstrated with placards

calling on the government to meet the teachers' pay demands. In Hamilton, three of the city's main schools were hit by walkouts, while in Palmerston North, students from all five colleges marched in the central business district. Students from Heretaunga College in the Hutt Valley demonstrated outside the electorate office of cabinet minister and former union official Paul Swain, and other protests took place in Lower Hutt, Napier, Waiuku, Foxton, Dunedin, Wanganui and Paraparaumu. In Christchurch, police were called out to manage what they described as a "messy" protest march by students from Burnside High and to supervise another at Northlands Mall by Papanui High students.

With further protests—including a march on parliament—being planned for this week, authorities began to panic. The president of the School Trustees Association, which represents school boards, proclaimed there was a state of "near anarchy" in the schools. Education Minister Mallard denounced the protests, claiming teachers were encouraging them. PPTA President Jen McCutcheon promptly declared that the union did not support the protests and did not want to see students "rampaging around setting fire to rubbish bins and things like that".

Despite some cynical media suggestions that the students were more interested in time off school than the actual dispute, statements by students themselves invariably confirmed their sympathy for the teachers and anger over the impact on their education. Wellington Girls College student Jo Ryan told the *Dominion* newspaper: "We believe the current situation is unacceptable. Our teachers deserve better and we deserve better." Cacey Blyth, a 15-year-old student at Tauranga Girls College, explained in the *NZ Herald* that teachers worked "extremely hard" and were entitled to every dollar they could get. Hannah Blackwood, also from Tauranga Girls College, said that, while her schoolwork was suffering, she supported the teachers. The government should "pay them what they deserve".

The deal rejected by the teachers provides for a 5.5 percent pay increase over 3 years, an allowance for the introduction of a new school qualifications system called the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA), and guarantees of limited non-classroom time for preparation and marking. In addition, a proposed government-union working party would find a way to break the current contractual linkage between secondary and primary teachers' pay. To deflect attention from its own role, the PPTA blamed the pay linkage for holding back the secondary teachers' claims, seeking to stir up animosity to primary teachers.

Teachers are concerned the deal will only entrench existing conditions of overwork and low pay. The salary rise

is less than the anticipated rate of inflation, while the NCEA allowance is payable only to staff who meet certain criteria and will not extend beyond 2004. After years of increasing workloads, the limited "non-contact" time will exacerbate existing problems as the NCEA, with onerous requirements for preparation and internal assessment, is introduced throughout senior schools over the next three years.

Behind these immediate issues, the teachers' resistance and the student response are signs of the sharp tensions in schools created by two decades of attacks on state education by governments of all stripes. The cancellation of sport and cultural programs, which are mostly run by teachers in their own time, sparked protests because students particularly enjoy these aspects of schooling. But they also confront escalating school costs, sharpening social polarisation, larger classes, declining morale, intrusive testing and assessment regimes, as well as experiencing rising anxiety about the future.

In line with the demands of big business, the Labour-Alliance government has continued to run down government services. Last year's budget reduced state sector expenditure, as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), to its lowest level since 1977, particularly hitting public health and education. Media commentators predicted that Labour would increase spending in the 2002 budget to coincide with this year's election. In fact, the recent budget kept spending low so as to provide for a surplus of \$NZ2.63 billion, almost \$1 billion more than anticipated.

The Labour-Alliance government has repeatedly made clear that it will not be pressured by teachers or other sections of workers to abandon the financial restraints insisted upon by corporate leaders. As has been graphically demonstrated in the course of the teachers' dispute, Labour has directly relied on the unions to impose its agenda and to break up the resistance of workers. What is posed before teachers and students is the necessity of adopting a new political strategy—one that rejects the constraints imposed by the profit system and insists on free, high quality education and decent living standards for all.



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