

New Zealand teachers, health workers strike

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A series of strikes by New Zealand public sector health workers and teachers has broken out in opposition to the austerity measures being imposed by the National Party-led government of Prime Minister John Key.

Medical radiation technologists in Auckland hospitals walked off the job for three days on September 3 after last-minute talks between the Association of Professionals and Executive Employees (Apex) and the country's 20 District Health Boards (DHBs) failed to break a contract negotiation deadlock. The strike was followed by a 24-hour nationwide walkout on September 7.

Laboratory workers at 13 DHBs and the NZ Blood Service continued industrial action after rejecting the employers' latest pay offer. Over 400 laboratory workers in Auckland walked off the job on September 10. Three DHBs had earlier stood down up to 30 laboratory workers for six hours a day for taking industrial action, which included bans on answering phones and some tests. On September 20, the Blood Service suspended seven striking workers in Auckland and Palmerston North, while the Counties Manukau District Health Board suspended eight from Middlemore Hospital in south Auckland.

In the education sector, secondary school teachers held a one-day national strike on September 15, also following a breakdown in contract negotiations. It was the first strike to close schools in eight years. Over 2,500 teachers from 75 schools marched through central Auckland, and in Wellington 1,000 rallied at parliament, in both cases drawing a supportive response from onlookers. Marches and rallies were held in many regional centres.

Industrial action will continue into the next school term, with teachers refusing to teach different year levels of students on specified days. The action will start with year 11 pupils on October 14 and finish with year 9 pupils on December 1. Teachers will also not take part in meetings after 5 p.m. The ban will remain in place until January 27. The Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA) said that the vote to approve the action was carried by over 95 percent of its 18,000 members—the largest majority in the

union's history.

While the strikes have been called over stalled contract negotiations, workers have broader concerns over the government's sweeping spending cuts and attacks on wages and conditions. The budget, handed down in May, paralleled austerity measures carried out in Europe and elsewhere. International agencies had warned that the New Zealand's debt-laden economy was vulnerable to any financial turbulence. Gross government debt is still relatively low at 28 percent of Gross Domestic Product, but is forecast to rise to 33 percent in 2014. Net foreign debt is running at 94 percent of GDP—one of the highest among industrialised countries.

Finance Minister Bill English last month warned that more "belt-tightening" and job losses are on the way and that public sector workers could not "wait out" the current round of cost cutting. Surpluses of at least 2 percent of GDP would be needed before spending could be significantly increased, English said, adding that this "may not occur in the professional lives of a large group of middle to senior civil servants".

Despite calling the government's budget "unfair," the opposition Labour Party fully agrees that workers must bear the cost of the economic crisis through spending cuts and taxes on working people. While promising to remove the regressive Goods and Services Tax (GST) on fruit and vegetables, Labour has made clear that it has no plans to rescind the government's increase in the tax from 12.5 to 15 percent. On September 26, Labour's finance spokesman David Cunliffe told TVNZ that any tax changes implemented by Labour if it is elected next year would be "fiscally responsible".

In the health sector, this year's budget has provided less new money than in previous years. A \$512 million boost barely covered inflation and population growth and is \$100 million less than needed to maintain services at the existing level. Earlier this month, the CEO of the Capital and Coast DHB, which covers the capital Wellington, quit his job. He said he resigned because he could not see where any more "efficiencies" could come from "without

negatively impacting on services”. Last year, the DHB finished the financial year with a \$47.5 million deficit. This year, the board unveiled plans to cut another \$27 million from its budget.

Deeper attacks have been foreshadowed. The DHBs are seeking to rip up the existing employment contracts for resident junior doctors, saying they are an “impediment” to the efficient running of hospitals. The DHBs want more “flexibility” to the hours that junior doctors work, and changes to overtime payments.

The Resident Doctors Association (RDA) has so far rejected the proposals, with president Curtis Walker saying it would mean “unprecedented clawbacks to current terms and conditions”. Earlier this month, union members voted 80 percent in favour of a strike, but the RDA has not issued a strike notice. On September 27, RDA spokesman Dr Philip Daniel told the *Rotorua Daily Post*: “We want to avoid a strike—that’s the last thing we want.”

The unions are playing a key role in suppressing any independent action by workers. Led by the Council of Trade Unions, they have, since the onset of the 2008 financial crisis, defended employers and the “national economy” by collaborating in the imposition of shorter work weeks, layoffs and cuts to wages and conditions. One way or another, they all accept the nostrums that the “cupboard is bare” and therefore that working people have to sacrifice.

Apex, which represents 1,000 radiation technologists, has reduced its pay claims three times since rolling industrial stoppages began in February. It has now settled for an increase of just 2 percent. Unresolved claims remain about better terms and conditions, better rest breaks and proper allowances.

When teachers announced they would be going on strike for a 4 percent pay increase, the Ministry of Education (MoE) retorted that the “going rate” in recent settlements, including for nurses, senior doctors and the police, was between 1.5 and 2 percent. The MoE offered a 1.5 percent pay rise this year and another 1 percent next year, along with clawbacks to conditions. With inflation expected to peak at up to 6 percent in the coming year, these figures represent a substantial cut in real wages. Working people are about to be hit with an increase in the GST to 15 percent on October 1.

Education Minister Anne Tolley dismissed the teachers’ pay demands as “ridiculous”, and called on the PPTA to “get back around the bargaining table and to recognise the difficult economic circumstances the country is facing”.

Tolley’s stance was endorsed by the media. *Herald on Sunday* columnist Kerre Woodham branded the strikes “unpatriotic” in the wake of the Christchurch earthquake and with the “country... strapped for cash”.

PPTA leaders agree that the objective is to return to “bargaining” as quickly as possible. Far from mobilising teachers in a conscious political fight against the government, the limited campaign is oriented towards bringing “pressure” for a negotiated deal. Union president Kate Gainsford said the PPTA would be “back at the table” when the government demonstrated it was “listening to a number of things we are raising”.

The PPTA leadership is already playing down the demand for a 4 percent pay rise, and insisting that a commitment to address class sizes, teacher retention and recruitment as a “whole package” is central. While it is true that teachers are extremely concerned about workload and class sizes, the agenda behind the union’s mantra that the strike is not primarily about “the money” is to prepare the way for a sell-out.

Labour’s education spokesman Trevor Mallard has criticised the government for “refusing to take a constructive approach to the PPTA negotiations”. He claimed that Labour had “deliberately invested in paying real wage increases for groups like teachers and nurses” when it was in power. In fact, Labour has a long record of starving both the education and health sectors of funds. In the 1980s, the Lange Labour government’s “Tomorrow’s Schools” plan established schools and universities as independent units with principals acting as CEOs, opening the door for the subsequent savage assault on public education.

A recent international report revealed that after years of co-operation between teacher unions and the previous Helen Clark-led Labour government, New Zealand teachers are among the lowest paid in the OECD, while working more hours than most of their overseas counterparts. The annual “Education at a Glance” report, which compares the education systems of the 29 countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, found that after 15 years’ experience, a New Zealand teacher makes \$10,000 a year less than OECD counterparts on average.



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