

New Zealand government drops school class size increases

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Facing deep public hostility, New Zealand's conservative National Party-led government this month rescinded a plan to increase class sizes throughout public schools. Teachers and school communities had been joined by parents and students in bitterly denouncing the move.

Education Minister Hekia Parata had told a briefing of business leaders on May 16 that a cap on teacher numbers would be imposed via changes to teacher-student ratios. The standard ratio for Years 2 to 10 would be raised from 23 to 27.5 students per teacher. Years 11 to 13 were to be standardised at 17.3 students per teacher. The government said the move would save \$174 million over four years.

According to one trade union, the Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA), 2,067 of the country's schools—83 percent—would have been forced to make staffing reductions in 2013 unless enrolment growth offset the losses.

Intermediate schools with students at years 7 and 8 would have been the hardest hit. About 245 schools stood to lose up to seven teachers each. Technical classes—woodwork, metalwork, electronics and cooking—faced being wiped out. In the capital, Wellington, three technology centres catering for 2,400 students were threatened with closure.

The cuts were part of the government's "zero budget" in May, which froze expenditure and deepened attacks on public services.

The government, which claimed the school staffing cuts were "modest", was unprepared for the response. About 120 teachers from Porirua schools protested outside a Chamber of Commerce breakfast on May 31, heckling Parata as she arrived to deliver a speech. The NZ Association of Intermediate and Middle Schooling (NZAIMS) denounced the "savage attack" on staffing

and asked members to place bans on all Education Ministry initiatives. Polls showed 80 percent opposition to any increase in class sizes. For the first time since it assumed office in 2008, the government began losing substantial poll support to Labour and the Greens.

Shaken, the government initially announced a three-year "transition period", during which no school would lose more than two full-time equivalent staff. The changes, however, were still due to take full effect after this, and Prime Minister John Key refused to rule out even more severe cuts.

On June 7, Parata suddenly announced that the class size increases would be rescinded. Writing in the *New Zealand Herald*, Unite Union leader Matt McCarten claimed that the debacle had ended in an "unconditional surrender" by the government. Following suit, pseudo-left groups proclaimed a victory for protest politics, promoting it as a model for pressuring the government on other issues, including study fees and asset sales. During a demonstration at Wellington's Victoria University against attacks on tertiary education, a speaker from the so-called Workers Party demagogically asked: "Who says protests don't achieve anything?"

Such claims are a fraud, designed to sow complacency and corral working people and youth behind the unions and the parliamentary parties. While the government was forced to make a tactical retreat, it has no intention of drawing back from funding cuts, which are part of the offensive against living standards and public services to impose the burden of the global financial crisis on the working class. Key still insisted that the class size initiative was "correct" and declared that "something has got to change." Parata said \$114 million in cuts would have to be found elsewhere in the education budget.

The attack on schools is only one aspect of a raft of measures seeking to dismantle the basic education rights of the working class. These measures, which were never revealed before last November's general election, include establishing US-style profit-driven Charter schools, scrapping student allowances for thousands of tertiary students, introducing draconian new repayment rules on student loans and freezing funding in early childhood education.

Fresh emphasis will be given to undermining teachers' rights and conditions through the introduction of a performance-based pay system, under the fraudulent claim that this will improve the "quality" of teaching. Parata revealed that parents and students would get the opportunity to review teacher performance, and that the National Standards testing regime, rammed through last year over opposition by teachers and school boards, would be a "definite contributor" to teacher appraisals. Key signalled that this policy would be extended through the introduction of public "league tables" in primary schools, forcing them to compete against each other for students.

The government has now invited unions and other groups to collaborate in implementing its changes to education. During the dispute, a self-appointed "education leadership group", comprised of the two teachers' unions, principals' associations, NZAIMS and the School Trustees Association, sought to divert the wave of opposition into safe channels.

The group's spokesman Ian Leckie, president of the NZ Educational Institute (NZEI), the union that covers primary teachers, urged the government to enter discussions on "how to sustain and continually improve the quality of teaching and the achievement of students." Leckie denounced calls for industrial action as "premature", saying: "Let's start with the dialogue and look for the solutions, rather than having people walk the streets." NZEI and PPTA leaders joined with the principals in declaring their willingness to talk with the government about "how to make savings in the education sector." One divisive proposal was to sack Education Ministry staff instead of "frontline" teachers.

Key stressed the need to involve the unions in future forums, and suggested that Parata had erred in not involving them from the beginning. "It is important she engages with them," he said, adding that the administration of government policy "happens through

schools themselves, and the unions play an important role in that." Last year, the NZEI closed down a campaign over the introduction of National Standards testing in primary schools, paving the way for the government's further offensive on "league tables".



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