

Union scuttles strike against New Zealand school closures

Tom Peters
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New Zealand's National Party-led government announced on February 18 the closure of at least 13 primary and intermediate schools in the earthquake-devastated city of Christchurch. By the end of the year, seven will be closed outright, while six will shut through so-called mergers.

Two other schools have already been closed. The government is also expected to confirm the closure of a further five schools in the impoverished suburb of Aranui, replacing them with one "super-school." While the government claims it will build 15 new schools, its timeframe is 10 years.

The February 2011 quake is being used as a pretext to cut costs and essential services at the expense of vulnerable communities. Two years after the quake, which killed 185 people, local residents face an ongoing social crisis. Of the 18,500 homes which suffered over \$NZ100,000 worth of damage each, just 400 have been repaired or rebuilt. Thousands of people are still living in damaged houses, in overcrowded conditions, or in makeshift accommodation, including tents and cars.

The school closures are part of a global assault on public education, being ruthlessly carried out in the US, Australia, Europe and elsewhere. In New Zealand, National's sweeping education "reform" agenda includes the introduction of for-profit charter schools and so-called performance pay to undermine teachers' salaries. The government has also reduced funding for tertiary education. Christchurch's University of Canterbury is axing 150 jobs over three years and nearby Lincoln University is planning to cut up to a third of its courses and 180 staff.

Education Minister Hekia Parata told Newstalk ZB that 50 school teaching positions would be axed in Christchurch. Total job losses, including among

principals, administrators, teacher aides, cleaners and caretakers, are likely to be much higher. Already, 167 teaching jobs have been cut since the quake. Teachers have widespread support in the working class and among school communities. A Fairfax poll on February 20 found that 71 percent of voters in the Canterbury region wanted Parata sacked.

The trade union covering primary teachers, the New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI), has sought to suppress any opposition to the closures since they were first proposed last September. The NZEI has limited itself to criticising a lack of "consultation"—but not the closures themselves.

At a mass meeting in December, 1,000 Christchurch teachers voted overwhelmingly to strike on February 19 against the school closures. On February 14, without warning, the union unilaterally called off the strike on the spurious claim that the Ministry of Education had given "positive signals... about listening to the teachers and communities." The strike was replaced with an after-school rally, which was attended by about 1,500 people.

Teachers reacted with outrage to the anti-democratic cancellation. On the "Save Our Schools NZ" Facebook page, one teacher, Becky, wrote: "NZEI I am disgusted in your back down, no wonder the government treats us so badly even our union isn't fighting for us. \$520 a year we are paying—for nothing. BOO!"

Lyne commented: "NZEI, how come you've chosen not to listen to your Christchurch members? At the meeting I attended, the decision to strike was almost (if not totally) unanimous. Now, without consulting us again, you turn your back on us all."

Another teacher, Wendy, wrote: "NZEI is totally invisible when it comes to supporting its members." She recalled how the union had "ignored" teachers

when schools were closed under the 1999-2008 Labour government. “The field officer in our area told me and my staff that it made good economic sense to close the schools and centralise ... we told her we didn’t pay our fees for NZEI to be policy makers, we paid them for the union to support us.” While in office, the Labour Party closed more than 200 schools, mainly in rural areas.

Now in opposition, Labour has criticised the government’s “botched process” in Christchurch, but accepted the school closures. Acting education spokesman Chris Hipkins told the *Press* there was “a need for difficult decisions to be taken.” Greens co-leader Metiria Turei merely objected to the timing of the closures, suggesting that the government “should have waited for proper census data before pushing ahead.”

Pseudo-left groups immediately whitewashed NZEI’s betrayal. The Fightback group (formerly the Workers Party) had praised the union for the token one-day strike, saying the leadership “to their credit, did not shrink from the decision to strike.” After the strike was scuttled, Fightback reported that it had been “called off,” making no criticism of the decision or the anti-democratic way it was imposed by the union.

‘Redline’ blogger Philip Ferguson, a Canterbury University academic and former Workers Party leader, blamed teachers, rather than the union leadership, for being “extremely reluctant to take industrial action.” He claimed that teachers “see themselves as professional middle class people who don’t do things like go on strike.”

This is a slander against teachers, who have repeatedly shown their determination to fight in defence of education—in defiance of anti-strike laws imposed by previous Labour governments to ban industrial action except during pay negotiations. The NZEI has played the central role in containing and stifling any struggle. In 2011, the NZEI called off protests at hundreds of schools against the current government’s “national standards” testing in reading, writing and maths—a precursor to performance pay—and shut down a boycott of the scheme.

Since last October an onslaught on jobs, wages and conditions has begun in the public services, manufacturing, engineering, railways, mining, newsprint production and construction. Hundreds of job losses have just been announced in telecommunications

and at NZ Post. At every turn, the unions have come forward to collaborate, acting as “consultants” in carrying through the cuts.

Moves by teachers and school communities to defend education are part of the wider struggle of the working class. To defend jobs and conditions requires a rebellion against the unions, which are tied to the Labour Party and support the austerity agenda being imposed to meet the demands of the corporate elite.

Independent rank-and-file committees of teachers, school staff and parents should be formed in every school to fight the Christchurch closures. They must fight to broaden the struggle to secondary schools, universities and polytechnics, which are all facing government attacks, as well as to other sections of the working class.

Free, high quality education is a basic social right. It can be advanced only on the basis of the fight for a workers’ government and socialist policies to reorganise society to meet the social needs of the majority, not the profit requirements of the wealthy few. We urge workers and young people who agree with this perspective to contact the Socialist Equality Party.



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