

Union seeks to divert New Zealand teachers' protests

Our reporters
16 April 2013

An estimated 10,000 primary school teachers and early childhood workers and their supporters held protest rallies in 26 centres across New Zealand last Saturday.

Auckland's Queen Street was closed as 4,000 people marched with banners, placards and whistles to Aotea Square. In the capital, Wellington, some 2,000 gathered in parliament grounds. Dunedin saw 500 rally at the Octagon, while in Christchurch several hundred converged on cabinet minister Gerry Brownlee's local office. Hundreds more rallied in provincial towns.

Struggles by teachers and students have emerged in many countries during recent months against an international onslaught on public education. In New Zealand, the conservative National government is pushing through measures aimed at subordinating education to the needs of business, including a "national standards" testing regime in reading, writing and maths, the publication of school performance "league tables," cuts to early childhood education funding and a looming privatisation program based on the establishment of Charter schools.

There is also anger among teachers over an ongoing debacle with the Ministry of Education's trouble-plagued payroll system, Novopay. Introduced six months ago, it has resulted in thousands of teachers being incorrectly paid, and in some cases not paid at all.

Saturday's rallies were organised by the NZ Educational Institute (NZEI), the union covering teachers and support staff in primary schools and pre-school centres. Far from advancing a political program to fight the attack on public education, however, the union organised the protests to divert a growing rebellion among its own members against its complicity in the government's measures.

A discussion has emerged among teachers on web sites and in social media over the NZEI's refusal to conduct any struggle or take strike action over the serious issues faced by teachers. NZEI's own Facebook page has attracted a litany of complaints about the union's inaction and reports of growing discontent, with teachers saying they are considering resigning membership. Failure to initiate any action over Novopay has been a prominent reason.

Frustration and alienation was heightened in February, when the union scuttled a one-day strike over the government's decision to close or merge 19 schools in the earthquake-ravaged city of Christchurch. The strike had been overwhelmingly approved before Christmas by a mass meeting of more than 1,000 Christchurch teachers. The NZEI has not opposed a single school closure, instead calling on the government to involve it in "consultation" over how the cuts are to be carried out.

The union has also blocked any action during its employment contract negotiations with the government, which have been in progress since mid-2012 and are likely to result in a zero real pay increase and cuts to working conditions. A series of bitter Facebook entries last month demanded to know why "NZEI have threatened so much action" but refused to put a strike resolution to the vote at mass meetings.

The NZEI has suppressed any struggle against the onerous conditions prevailing in schools. In 2011, it isolated and shut down a boycott of national standards testing. In 2012, its first year of implementation, the testing regime proved to be unscientific and unreliable. Yet, it was used to dragoon teachers into increased workloads and a creeping process of teaching-to-tests. It is now being used to publicly vilify "failing schools" and to pave the way for so-called performance pay for

teachers.

Saturday's protests were designed to put on a hypocritical show of "opposing" the government. The union made hollow calls to "defend our world-beating education system from failed overseas policies based on privatisation, competition, and a one-size-fits-all approach to children's learning."

A union speaker at the Wellington rally claimed that a tactical retreat last year by the government over increasing class sizes, in the face of mass public hostility, was evidence that it "will change under pressure if enough people fight back." In fact, the unions and their apologists are smothering resistance to the government's agenda and allowing it to proceed unchallenged.

Speakers for Labour and the Greens, and at one rally, the right-wing populist NZ First, were given platforms to issue statements about standing "with NZEI" in defence of public education. In reality, Labour and the Greens have accepted the school closures in Christchurch. Labour's education spokesman Chris Hipkins declared that Labour would not introduce Charter schools. As Hipkins stated earlier this year, however, Labour's policy is that "we already have enough schools, and in some areas, we may even have too many"—indicating support for further closures.

The pseudo left groups again acted as apologists for the union. The International Socialist Organisation lavished praise on NZEI, claiming that its "inspiring stand" showed "we can defend our public education through union power." Socialist Aotearoa maintained that the unions could "show the way for all those other workers angry at the government but unsure of what to do." The Fightback group similarly promoted NZEI, covering up its betrayal over the Christchurch strike as a "mistake". The Redline group flatly denied that the government would proceed with a sweeping privatisation agenda, because it would be "hugely unpopular".

These are entirely bankrupt perspectives. The defence of public education requires a conscious political break from the unions, which are tied to the Labour Party and support the austerity agenda being imposed on the demands of the corporate elite. The struggle must be broadened to other sections of the working class entering into struggles over jobs and living standards. The social right to free, high quality education can be

advanced only on the basis of the fight for a workers' government and socialist policies.

The WSWS spoke to several teachers after the Wellington rally.

Theresa, who teaches in the working class suburb of Wainuiomata, said the national performance standards were "absolutely disgusting". She said it was "heart-breaking for parents to read that their kids are failing against some bar that might not even be of any relevance." She explained: "The scary thing about national standards is the computer system, which will effectively label students and take the teacher's decisions away. Teachers know children. Nobody always does the best they can do on a test."

Gary said that under national standards "education is reduced to performance along three lines, reading writing and maths ... That sort of campaign has always been associated with a hard-right government, a government that does not want to cultivate in its citizens a capacity to think independently." He said it was "horrible", that "primary schools are moving to produce consumers and taxpayers" and "the idea of having an education which produced a well-rounded, balanced child who can think critically is being discarded."



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