

New Zealand Labour government makes ‘left’ feint on education

John Braddock
14 May 2018

As in the United States and across more than a dozen countries, teachers and other public sector workers in NZ are beginning to mobilise against declining living standards and the ongoing assault on public education. Under the recently-installed Labour-NZ First-Green Party coalition government, rail workers, bus drivers and port workers have recently taken strike action. This will likely be followed by the country’s 50,000 primary and secondary school teachers, who are set to be pitched into struggle next.

Last year, at national conferences of the education unions—the NZ Education Institute (NZEI) and the Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA)—teachers overwhelmingly voted for pay claims of more than 15 percent in coming negotiations.

Onerous workloads, stagnant pay rates and deteriorating conditions have made teaching increasingly unattractive, with the 2018 school year opening with a critical teacher shortage. One in five schools has reported cancelling classes or transferring students to distance learning because specialist teachers cannot be found. Some schools have no relief teachers.

The Labour-led government, undoubtedly watching global developments with significant nervousness, is moving to head off the rising tide of worker militancy. In education, it has implemented a string of measures designed to take steam out of the highly pressurised situation before contract talks begin.

Education Minister Chris Hipkins announced in February that “Tomorrow’s Schools,” the right-wing framework introduced in 1989 under then Labour Prime Minister David Lange, is to be “reviewed.” “Tomorrow’s Schools” established governing boards of trustees tasked with imposing business “disciplines” into education and shifting financial and administrative responsibilities away from central government. It produced increased competition amongst schools at the expense of overall education results.

The review, to be carried out by a five-member panel of current and former principals and academics, will involve the entire public system from early childhood education

through to tertiary. According to Hipkins, it will examine how educational institutions can “interact differently with their communities, with other schools, with employers, and with other government organisations.” Undoubtedly, the interests of business will be at the forefront.

A priority, Hipkins said, will be “to be more responsive to the needs of Māori and Pasifika children and those children needing learning support.” His statement underscores the current obsession with identity politics and so-called “institutional racism.” It will do nothing to address the fundamental chasm between working class students and the more privileged social layers, exacerbated by deepening economic inequality.

In the primary sector, the National Standards testing regime in reading, writing and maths has already been scrapped. Similar to NAPLAN testing in Australia, the system was imposed by the conservative National Party government in 2011. Hipkins admitted that the compulsory reporting had become “little more than a compliance exercise and was a major distraction to schools.” Schools and parents “had lost confidence” in the standards, he declared.

National Standards were bitterly opposed by teachers, but, less than a year after their counterparts in Australia, the NZEI isolated and shut down a boycott of the testing regime, which soon proved to be unscientific and unreliable, and used to dragoon teachers into increased workloads and a creeping process of teaching-to-tests. The standards were designed to publicly vilify “failing” schools and pave the way for so-called performance pay.

Claims that National Standards would boost achievement have been thoroughly discredited, prompting concerns in ruling circles that NZ’s “international competitiveness” in education is being eroded. A Progress in International Reading and Literacy Study, released last November, revealed NZ literacy levels ranked 33rd out of 50 countries, eight places lower than in 2011, the lowest on record. Recent Program for International Student Assessment Tests (PISA) in reading, maths and science, show NZ has one of the

biggest variations in student achievement, with the gap in average scores for students from poor and rich backgrounds the equivalent of more than three years of schooling.

In the secondary sector, Hipkins has launched a review of the central qualifications system, the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA)—introduced by Labour in 2002 and promoted by PPTA—amid widespread claims that it is responsible for the overassessment of students and excessive teacher workloads.

Another recent initiative—doing away with 11 US-style Charter Schools—is further designed to appease teachers. As in the US and Britain, publicly-funded, privately-run Charter Schools have been used to undermine public education and establish a bridge-head for privatisation. The policy was smuggled in as part of a parliamentary deal between National and the far-right ACT Party, following the 2011 election.

Charter Schools were not required to use the national curriculum, employ qualified and registered teachers, or be accountable under the Official Information Act to disclose documents. They set their own salaries, the length of the school year and selected which students to admit.

While declaring that there would be no new Charters, Hipkins threw the existing ones a lifeline by declaring they could apply, on a “case by case basis” to become part of the system of Integrated Schools. These allow religious schools to “integrate” into the state system, and receive public funding, while retaining their “special character.” The manoeuvre allows existing Charters—including two Vanguard military academies run on army-style discipline—and schools run by Maori trusts, to continue operating. All the owners are moving to strike deals with the government.

Hipkins is depending on Labour’s union allies to control the explosive opposition building up among teachers and to corral them behind the government. The education unions have warmly welcomed Labour’s announcements, while NZEI has declared it “never gave up the fight” against the National Standards, and that their dumping was a “day of celebration.” The PPTA boasted that it was already in on the “ground floor” with representatives on the NCEA review panel. Both unions are lining up to be “consulted” and involved in all forthcoming government initiatives.

None of these measures will prevent the looming battle over teachers’ jobs, conditions and salaries. Finance Minister Grant Robertson has admitted that teachers and nurses are overdue for pay rises. He told TV3 on March 11 the government was “acutely aware” that over a long period they had not “received the dividend that we’ve seen from the growth in the economy.”

With the May 17 budget looming, Labour has sought to

dampen expectations. Prime Minister Ardern delivered what the *New Zealand Herald* described as “a gloomy warning” on April 10 that there were “larger-than expected funding gaps in health and education” to fill, with under-investment in both infrastructure and the “ability to pay staff.” According to Hipkins, schools need more than \$1 billion just to absorb a surge in student numbers and to repair ailing buildings.

However, Labour is refusing to increase taxes on the rich. Speaking to a Westpac business breakfast on May 1, Robertson re-assured the audience that he would adhere to “budget responsibility” rules, requiring the paying down of debt, and promised to return a surplus across the economic cycle. *Herald* columnist Bryce Edwards previously noted that Labour was “essentially running austerity economic policy,” meaning “it will continue to underfund areas like health and education.”

Teachers should place absolutely no confidence in the unions or Labour, who have already led them into one betrayal after another. In conditions of deepening capitalist crisis and the drive to war, Labour’s education restructuring will produce no “progressive” outcomes. Instead, it will further subordinate education to the profit system and intensify the assault on the social rights of the working class.

As the unfolding struggles of teachers in the US have demonstrated, teachers must develop an alternative perspective to fight these attacks by establishing independent rank and file committees, made up of parents, teachers and students, that are completely independent of the unions. The struggle for teachers’ rights, as well as those of all students to a high quality public education, requires the development of a struggle against the capitalist profit system itself, on the basis of a socialist program aimed at unifying the working class throughout New Zealand and internationally in the political struggle for a workers’ government and socialist policies.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact