

New Zealand teachers join growing wages movement

Our reporters
6 August 2018

Over 50,000 New Zealand primary school teachers voted last week to strike for 24 hours on August 15. A secret ballot of NZ Educational Institute (NZEI) members returned what the union said was a “resounding yes” to strike over the Labour Party-led government’s latest collective agreement offer.

The vote was, in fact, a rebuff to the union leadership. Initially, NZEI proposed that teachers stop work for just three hours, but calls for stronger action at membership meetings held in June forced last week’s ballot. It is the first national strike called by the union in 24 years.

The union is still trying to prevent a strike. The day before the result of the vote was announced, NZEI agreed to enter mediation with the Ministry of Education (MoE) over the pay negotiations. The talks broke down after two days, but are expected to resume this week.

Teachers are joining the global resurgence by the working class, including by teachers in the US, in response to more than a decade of austerity supported by the entire political establishment, and enforced by the trade unions. The wave of teachers’ strikes that began in West Virginia in February and spread to many other US states has had an international impact.

In New Zealand, a growing strike movement is confronting the nine month-old Labour-led government. Bus drivers, rail workers and retail workers have all taken action in recent months. Some 30,000 nurses, healthcare assistants and midwives struck on July 12, for the first time in 30 years, after rejecting a fourth sell-out deal recommended by the New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO).

As teachers were voting last week, 3,000 public servants from the Inland Revenue Department (IRD) held a nationwide half-day strike. This followed

stoppages on July 9 and 23, which were limited to two hours by the Public Service Association (PSA). Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment workers joined in the first cross-department strikes for many years. IRD staff are demanding better pay, with a quarter of workers paid less than \$48,000, and less onerous “performance” demands.

Business leaders have expressed alarm. “We’ve had more strikes in the last six months than we’ve had in years,” Canterbury Employers Chamber of Commerce manager Leann Watson told Fairfax Media. Manufacturers and Exporters Association chief executive Dieter Adam warned the government against granting significant pay rises, saying: “When employees in our sector see a bunch of state employees getting these high settlements, the logical question is ‘why not us?’”

Following resolutions passed at a NZEI national conference last year, the union lodged a claim that includes a 16 percent pay increase over two years, renewal of “pay parity” provisions with secondary teachers, significant staffing increases, and reduced workloads.

The MoE’s counter-offer, including an average salary increase of 6.1 percent over the three years, is derisory. Education Minister Chris Hipkins said that over the past eight years teachers had received an average annual pay increase of 1.2 percent. “The offer on the table now is double that on a yearly basis,” Hipkins declared.

Deputy Prime Minister Winston Peters, leader of the right-wing populist NZ First Party in the ruling coalition, contemptuously dismissed the strike threat. “It’s not going to get them anywhere,” he told TV3. Peters questioned what teachers were doing during the past nine years, when the previous government “shut

their cause totally down.”

In fact, there was no lack of willingness by workers to fight the conservative National Party government, but any opposition was suppressed. In the schools, a struggle erupted in 2010 over National Standards—a testing regime designed to underpin the public reporting of “achievement” data. There was widespread opposition from teachers, school boards, academics and parents. Some 80 schools vowed to boycott the policy, while hundreds of teachers signalled their refusal to attend MoE workshops.

The NZEI, however, emerged as the government’s key ally. It scuttled the opposition by raising the demand for a “trial” of National Standards. A nine-week bus tour visited hundreds of schools around the country, under the slogan “Trial National Standards, Not our Kids.” It culminated with a rally at parliament where NZEI presented a petition demanding the “trial.” The government flatly refused, and the program went ahead.

The union also suppressed opposition to school closures following the 2011 Christchurch earthquake, cancelling a strike in the city in February 2013.

The NZEI, like the PSA, has intimate links with the Labour Party and has for years been at the forefront of union-employer collaboration. Under “pay parity,” which NZEI negotiated with the National government in 1998, linking primary teachers’ salaries with those in the secondary sector, the union has consistently used the automatic flow-on provisions to avoid any unified struggles alongside secondary teachers over pay and conditions.

There is deepening dissatisfaction among teachers. Trainee numbers have plummeted by 40 percent in recent years, causing serious staff shortages. Wainuiomata Primary School deputy principal Tute Porter-Samuels told the *Dominion Post* that conditions had deteriorated to such an extent that it affected teachers’ health and well-being and created “a negative learning environment” for students.

The growing wages push among broad layers of workers is producing desperate moves by sections of the union bureaucracy and their pseudo-left apologists to head off an independent movement of the working class.

The repeated sellouts by the NZNO of nurses’ demands have seen mass alienation by members from

the union. There are growing calls for health workers to switch to another union or form a new one.

The lesson of the nurses’ struggle is that trade unions, individually and collectively, will not carry out a political struggle against the Labour government, which is dedicated to imposing ongoing austerity.

Teachers and other workers coming into struggle must be under no illusions. What is required is the unification of the working class in a political and industrial struggle against the Labour-led government and the ruling elite that it serves. This will require new forms of organisation—genuine rank and file workers’ committees, organised independently and in opposition to the unions—based on the perspective of socialism and the fight for a workers’ government.

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