

New Zealand primary teachers hold nationwide strike

Our reporters
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Around 29,000 public primary school teachers and principals across New Zealand struck for 24 hours on Wednesday over pay and conditions. It was the first nationwide strike called by the trade union, the NZ Educational Institute (NZEI), since 1994 and only the third in its 135-year history.

More than 1,400 schools closed, affecting around 400,000 students. An estimated 10,000 teachers and supporters marched in Auckland, 4,000 rallied in Wellington, 3,000 in Christchurch, 500 in Dunedin, and hundreds more in other towns.

NZEI originally called for a three-hour stoppage, but demands for stronger action at membership meetings in June forced an online ballot that overturned the recommendation. Still seeking to avoid the strike, NZEI entered mediation with the Ministry of Education (MoE) but talks broke down last week.

Teachers are joining the global resurgence by the working class, including teachers' strikes across several states in the US, against austerity measures imposed following the 2008 global financial crisis.

The nine month-old Labour Party-led government is confronting a growing movement for better wages and conditions. Nearly 30,000 nurses, healthcare assistants and midwives struck on July 12, for the first time in 30 years. The NZ Nurses Organisation (NZNO) pushed through a sellout agreement last week.

Following resolutions passed at a NZEI national conference last year, the union lodged a claim for a 16 percent pay increase over two years, renewal of "pay parity" with secondary teachers, more staff and reduced workloads. The government has offered a derisory pay increase of around 6 percent for most teachers, spread across three years.

Teachers are determined to fight. In Auckland and Wellington, NZEI officials asked the thousands gathered if they would support a further two-day strike. They were

greeted with loud cheers. Later, NZEI president Lynda Stuart reassured Fairfax Media that "we don't want to go into that space." She sought to promote illusions in the Labour government, saying it "is highly aligned with the policies we agree with ... I'm sure that they are listening." No date has been set for another strike and the union has re-entered negotiations.

Outside parliament in Wellington, NZEI bureaucrats gave a warm welcome to Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and Education Minister Chris Hipkins, who addressed the strikers. Ardern cynically thanked teachers for their work, saying there were "very few" protest signs with which she disagreed. "We know there's a lot to do," she said, but "unfortunately, sometimes radical change takes time."

South Wellington Intermediate teacher Matt Bouche, who spoke to the crowd, responded: "Chris Hipkins says he is disappointed that we want more than a few token scraps. Yeah, well we are more than disappointed, we are outraged."

Socialist Equality Group members spoke to several teachers in Wellington and distributed WSWs articles warning that the union bureaucracy was preparing a sellout.

One senior teacher from a school north of Wellington said: "Conditions for teachers have got worse, in terms of the lack of time to do the job properly." He said he had taken a second job and it was "quite common" for teachers to resort to charity to feed their families.

The situation facing students was "horrendous," he continued. "Special needs are very high and we're just not getting the funding to support them. All teachers I know have spent their own money on their classrooms, they'll bring clothes and food. Kids come to school without having food because parents can't afford it." One in four children in New Zealand lives in poverty.

The teacher had no faith in Labour, saying: "MPs are only in parliament to feather their own nest." He wanted

more strikes but said this was unlikely because the NZEI was “basically a Labour union. They will be told to accept the offer because there is nothing else available, which is nonsense. There’s so much money in the budget, it’s just being spent in the wrong places.”

Ursula, an associate principal from the suburb of Churton Park, said she was “constantly apologising for asking staff to do more than they should be doing with the resources they have. There’s a lack of support for children with learning difficulties and students who speak no English.”

She added: “I know teachers at my school who struggle with the cost of living and who have to pay huge amounts in childcare.” Rents have soared in Auckland and Wellington due to rampant speculation in the housing market.

Ursula had “a lot more faith in this government” than the previous National Party government, but added: “Telling us that they hear us, is not enough. They have to do something. We need action. Teachers are saying ‘enough is enough, we have to take a stand.’”

NZEI has nearly 50,000 members, but teachers from rural area schools, kindergartens and early childhood centres, who are covered by other contracts, were not involved in the strike.

After rejecting a 4 percent government pay offer, 850 learning support specialists, including psychologists, speech therapists and early intervention teachers, are voting whether to strike on August 21.

NZEI sealed a “pay equity” deal with the MoE on Tuesday for 329 mainly women support workers who assist young children with learning and behavioural problems. Their hourly rate will rise from between \$16.77 and \$19.87 an hour to a maximum of just \$25.70 an hour after 10 years’ service. Ardern praised the increase in the miserly rates as an example of “fairness.”

The Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA) began negotiations last week for a new contract covering 27,000 secondary school teachers. Secondary teachers are demanding a 15 percent pay increase. The MoE’s counter-offer has an average salary increase of just 6.1 percent over three years. Hipkins ruled out teachers’ demands, describing them as “unreasonable.”

The unions are complicit in the worsening crisis facing schools, having suppressed resistance for decades, including during the 1999–2008 Labour government, which closed around 200 schools, mainly in rural areas.

When union members voted to strike in 2013 against the National government’s proposed school closures

following the Christchurch earthquake, the NZEI called off the strike at the last minute, allowing the closures to proceed.

The NZEI will now follow the same strategy as NZNO. The nurses’ union waged a months-long campaign of attrition, seeking to isolate health workers and presenting one sellout offer after another, while falsely claiming there was “no more money” to improve wages and conditions in the underfunded public hospitals.

The Socialist Equality Group calls on teachers to break from the unions and form independent, rank-and-file committees to organise a real fight against social austerity and the Labour government’s big business program. These committees, controlled by workers themselves, will fight to end the isolation imposed on teachers by the NZEI and PPTA. Primary teachers must unite with secondary teachers, early childhood teachers, school support staff, students and parents in a joint political and industrial campaign for free high quality public education.

Above all, a socialist political program is needed to address the crisis in education and the broader social crisis, including child poverty and homelessness. Billions of dollars hoarded by the super-rich must be redistributed to upgrade and expand schools, hire thousands more teachers and support staff, on high wages.

The authors also recommend:

New Zealand Nurses Organisation rams through sellout pay deal

[8 August 2018]

New Zealand teachers join growing wages movement

[6 August 2018]

New Zealand Labour government makes “left” feint on education

[14 May 2018]



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