

# New Zealand primary teachers' union presents sellout offer

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On September 11, the New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI), the primary teachers' union, announced it would present a revised pay offer from the Ministry of Education to around 29,000 teachers and principals.

The proposed annual pay increase of 3 percent a year over three years for most teachers is a sellout that should be decisively rejected. The offer is less than half the 16 percent increase over two years which the NZEI told its members it was seeking from the Labour Party-led government.

Pay for teachers and other staff has stagnated amid rising living costs, especially housing, which has increased 62.9 percent over the past decade. School buildings and resources have also been starved of funding. Many schools rely heavily on donations from parents and charities.

The new proposal is barely an increase on the previous offer of 2.2 percent and 2.6 percent a year for most staff. Teachers and principals rejected this offer and held a one-day strike on August 15, the first walkout called by the NZEI since 1994.

The teachers' dispute is part of an international upsurge of class struggles after a decade of austerity measures following the 2008 financial crisis. Teachers have organised strikes in many parts of the United States, against the will of the unions, which have intervened to shut down industrial action. Teachers have also recently held strikes in Mexico, Argentina, Slovenia, Bangladesh, the United Kingdom and India.

In New Zealand, nurses and other public hospital workers held their first nationwide strike in 30 years last July. Public servants and transport workers have also taken action, and secondary teachers are demanding a 15 percent pay increase.

During last month's strike, New Zealand Prime

Minister Jacinda Ardern hypocritically claimed to sympathise with teachers. She insisted, however, that "radical change takes time" and teachers' demands for decent pay and conditions could not be addressed immediately. NZEI bureaucrats applauded Ardern, claiming Labour was "listening" to teachers.

The union, while making no official recommendation for or against the new proposal, is nonetheless bringing the offer to its members in a ballot to be held from September 18 to 25. The NZEI has made no commitment to hold another strike if the deal is rejected.

The NZEI is following the same playbook as the New Zealand Nurses' Organisation (NZNO), which presented five sellout offers and dragged out negotiations for almost a year. The union sought to demoralise health workers by repeating the government's lie that there was "no more money" to address the crisis caused by the chronic under funding of the health system.

NZEI president Lynda Stuart admitted the latest offer did not address teachers' demands for improved wages, more support staff and smaller class sizes. A recent survey by the union found 52 percent of schools do not have all the teachers they need and 28 percent have had to increase class sizes this term.

Stuart told the *New Zealand Herald*, however, "We are not going to be able to do everything that requires extra staffing all at once." Union leaders "have been really clear around the importance of being able to stage things," she said.

There is an urgent need for a combined political and industrial fight against austerity uniting the entire working class. The NZEI is seeking to isolate its members from other workers, including secondary teachers and nurses. As they have done for the past

decade, the unions are continuing to enforce austerity on behalf of the government, which is under funding health, education and other services, in order to keep taxes low for the super-rich, while allocating billions to the military and police.

Teachers are determined to fight for a better deal. The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke to a teacher from a working class school in South Auckland who said she intends to vote against the new offer, along with everyone she works with.

“I didn’t go on strike because I’m greedy,” the teacher, who wished to remain anonymous, stated. “I went on strike to show that we’re at crisis point within the teaching profession, because teachers are leaving, because they can’t get the support they need to do their job.”

She explained that due to staff shortages, teachers often worked when they were sick. She said young children “require more one-on-one work, so if you have anything over 20 [in a class], you’re basically almost babysitting. It’s like trying to herd cats.” Some classes at her school had around 30 students.

The teacher had seen “more and more children with behaviour and learning needs and we don’t get the support that we require to help those children.” Students whose cognitive abilities had been affected by parental drug use “don’t qualify for any extra support.”

The teacher said some children “come to school hungry and we’re really lucky we have charities that can help us to feed them.” Many teachers had bought food for children in the past. Some also spent “thousands of dollars” on classroom materials.

The teacher was pleased the NZEI had called last August’s strike. In previous years, she said, “we would go to union meetings and say, ‘Let’s go on strike because we’re not happy,’ and we were told, ‘Just take the deal.’”

She added that the NZEI “doesn’t always listen to the demands and suggestions that we put forward, which is very frustrating. For instance, a colleague of mine suggested that student teachers be paid [during their in-classroom training].” Paying student teachers, who often give up jobs in order to study, would encourage more people to take up the profession, “but this was a suggestion the union wasn’t going to hear about.”

The South Auckland teacher had been “excited” when the Labour Party-led government was installed

last year, promising change. She said the crisis had developed over many years and that now “the Labour government is having to deal with teachers who are beyond the point of frustration.”

She did not accept the government’s claims that there was not enough money to address the problems facing schools. “It’s all about prioritising their funding,” the teacher said. “What they have to think about is that the children who are in our classrooms today are our future leaders and right now we’re failing them.”

The WSWS warns that to carry out a real fight for decent, well-funded education, workers must politically break from the Labour Party and the pro-capitalist trade unions. Teachers need new organisations: rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the NZEI, and controlled by teachers, school support workers and parents.

Such committees will seek to unite teachers with other workers, in New Zealand and internationally, based on the fight for workers’ governments that would implement socialist policies, based on the needs of ordinary people, not the profit demands of a tiny corporate elite. Billions of dollars must be redistributed from the banks and the super-wealthy to guarantee the social right to decent healthcare, housing and education for all.

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