

New Zealand primary teachers reject sellout pay offer

Tom Peters
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On September 26, the New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI), the primary teachers' union, announced that teachers and principals had voted "resoundingly" to reject the latest pay offer from the Labour Party-led government. The NZEI did not release the voting figures.

The proposed deal would have increased pay by 3 percent per year, for three years, for most teachers. This is not nearly enough to make up for a decade-long effective wage freeze while the cost of housing, public transport, energy and other essentials has soared. The offer contained nothing to address the severe staffing shortage in the education system, which has led to oversized classrooms and a lack of attention to children with special needs and learning difficulties.

The offer is the second one rejected by NZEI members, who earlier this year vetoed a proposed increase of just over 2 percent per year. An estimated 29,000 teachers and principals walked out for 24 hours on August 15—the first nationwide strike called by the NZEI since 1994 and only the third in the union's 135-year history.

The teachers' fight is part of a growing movement in the working class. In July, New Zealand nurses held their first national strike in 29 years, having rejected four grossly inadequate pay and staffing offers. Bus drivers in the capital city, Wellington, voted recently in favour of a strike on October 23 in response to attacks on working conditions by the regional council and private companies. Thousands of public servants and nearly 900 BlueScope steel workers have also held strikes in recent weeks.

Throughout the world, teachers are fighting back against austerity measures imposed since the 2008 financial crisis. In the Netherlands, school teachers are playing a major role in widespread public sector strikes

and protests. This follows teacher strikes in several parts of the United States, Mexico, Argentina, Bangladesh and India.

In response to the teachers' vote, Deputy Prime Minister Winston Peters told Newshub bluntly: "The reality is this government is doing all it can in this area." He declared that the offer to teachers was better than those made by the 2008–2017 National Party government and accepted by the NZEI.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, who has been celebrated by the corporate media this week during her visit to the United Nations in New York, has not commented on the teachers' vote. Ardern addressed teachers outside parliament during last month's strike, feigning sympathy for them. However, she made no specific promises to address the crisis in education and declared that significant change would take time.

Claims that there is "no money" for decent health and education services are a fraud. The government is keeping a tight lid on spending on vital social services, while pouring billions of dollars into upgrading the military to prepare for war. It has refused to raise funds by increasing taxes on corporations and the super-rich.

Teachers have widespread public support. An online Newshub poll found that of about 3,300 people, 77 percent would support another teacher strike.

Teachers have expressed considerable determination to fight. In a comment on the media website *Stuff.co.nz*, Erin pointed out that the offer was "essentially a 1 percent pay rise after inflation" and there was "absolutely nothing offered to reduce workload."

Another teacher wrote: "I've had to teach two classes far too often lately because there were no relievers... We're already at crisis point and it's only getting worse. Class numbers are up around 40 in some cases—and that's before the teacher next door is sick,

there are no relievers and the class is split bringing everyone else's numbers up to 50 or 60. If things aren't resolved, this will become permanent."

Schools in working class areas are severely under-resourced and often struggle to support impoverished children. Fairfax Media reported on September 16 that at one Auckland school, teachers "might spend \$1,000 out of their own pockets every year" on food, classroom supplies, sports equipment, clothes, shoes and bus fares. The principal said: "The poverty is just in your face all the time... These kids just don't have anything. You go into the house and there will be nothing there. A couch with a sheet over it and that's it." About one in four New Zealand children lives in poverty.

The NZEI leadership did not make an official recommendation for or against the government's latest offer. The union, however, has attempted to promote illusions in the Labour Party government. NZEI president Lynda Stuart told the media during the strike that the government was "highly aligned with the policies we agree with ... I'm sure that they are listening."

Significantly, the union's press release announcing the rejection of the government's offer said nothing about the fact that NZEI members voted earlier this year to demand a 16 percent pay increase over two years. Stuart did not mention this figure in media interviews over the past week and in a half-hour video posted on NZEI's Facebook page on September 27.

The NZEI has not called another strike, despite teachers overwhelmingly stating during the August 15 strike that they would support further strikes. Union leaders will gather feedback from delegates to its annual conference being held next week before deciding whether to recommend a further ballot on industrial action next term. The outcome of such a ballot would not be known for several weeks from now. In the Facebook broadcast, Stuart stressed that the union was keeping the "door open" for further discussion with the education ministry.

The WSWs warns that the NZEI leadership, despite claiming to be guided by its members, is preparing a sellout. The union bureaucracy has for decades suppressed any resistance to school closures and other right-wing attacks under Labour and National Party governments. NZEI is proceeding in the same manner

as the New Zealand Nurses Organisation, which dragged out the hospital workers' dispute and wore down its members by presenting them with one sellout offer after another, eventually persuading enough that they had no alternative to accepting the government's grossly inadequate deal.

To carry out a real fight against austerity, teachers and other school staff must break from the stranglehold of the unions by forming new organisations: rank-and-file committees controlled by workers themselves. These will unite primary and secondary teachers, as well as public servants, health workers and other sections of workers—in New Zealand, Australia and internationally—who are coming into struggle.

Public education, like healthcare, is under attack in every country because the big business deems it an unacceptable drain on profits. In response, the working class must fight for the reorganisation of society along socialist lines. Education is a fundamental right that must be fully funded by redistributing the billions of dollars hoarded by the banks and the super-rich, and wasted on military spending.



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