

New Zealand teachers' union moves to call off strikes

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On October 26, the New Zealand Education Institute (NZEI), which covers primary and pre-school teachers, joined with the Ministry of Education (MoE) to seek urgent facilitation from the government's Employment Relations Authority to settle their long-running pay dispute.

The previous day, NZEI announced that members had voted in an online ballot for a week of rolling strikes. No figures were released, but a series of one-day strikes in different parts of the country was authorised, beginning in Auckland on November 12 and ending with a mass protest in Wellington on November 16.

A proposed pay increase of 2.2 percent and 2.6 percent a year for most staff, presented by the NZEI leadership in August, was overwhelmingly rejected. On August 15, 29,000 teachers and principals joined a nationwide strike, the first called by the union since 1994.

The strike received widespread public support. Thousands of people joined teachers' rallies in Auckland, Wellington and other cities. It followed a nationwide strike in July by 30,000 nurses and healthcare workers in public hospitals, and numerous smaller strikes by public servants and transport workers.

The movement of teachers, nurses and other workers is part of a growing upsurge of the working class internationally following decades of austerity. This year has seen mass teacher strikes in the United States and across several countries in Latin America. Transport workers, public servants and others have also carried out major strikes in Europe, India, Sri Lanka, and many other countries.

The NZEI's original pay claim was for a 16 percent increase over two years. The revised deal, brought forward following the strike, would have increased

salaries by just 3 percent each year for the next three years—about \$4 a day for a beginning teacher. This is woefully inadequate and failed to make up for past salary declines and projected inflation rates.

The offer contained nothing to address the severe staffing shortage, which has led to oversized classes and a lack of attention to children with special needs and learning difficulties. There is an official shortage of 850 primary and secondary teachers and, during the last decade, there has been a 40 percent reduction in the number training to be teachers.

Teachers overwhelmingly rejected the deal in September. Beach Haven School principal Stephanie Thompson told Fairfax Media the “paltry” offer didn't address teachers' workload or wellbeing, and would do little to avert the shortages. “It's a token to get rid of us, it's an insult to our teachers,” she said.

The NZEI did not make an official recommendation for or against the offer. The union has repeatedly promoted illusions in the Labour Party-led government. During the August strike, NZEI president Lynda Stuart said the government was “highly aligned with the policies we agree with” and was “listening” to teachers.

Stuart has reiterated that the government could avoid strike action if it made an unspecified “improved offer.” However, Education Minister Chris Hipkins told TVNZ on October 14; “we can't just immediately wave a magic wand and solve all of [the teachers'] problems overnight.” This echoed deputy prime minister Winston Peters' previous comments that the government has no more money to give substantial pay rises to teachers, nurses and other workers.

This lie was shattered when Finance Minister Grant Robertson announced last month that a strong tax take would see the government's surplus almost double to \$NZ5.5 billion. Robertson declared he will reserve the

surplus for “a rainy day,” a decision praised by big business. The annual cost to settle the NZEI claim in full would be 17 percent of the surplus, or about \$921 million.

While billions of dollars are allocated to military spending and boosting the police force, education is mired in deep crisis. New Zealand has one of the most unequal schooling systems in the OECD. According to new research by UNICEF, the country ranks 33rd of 38 for educational inequality across all school levels.

Stuart told Radio NZ the NZEI “would love to be able to avert the strike [and] reach a settlement with the government.” While calling on the government to “widen the purse strings,” she stressed that “both parties,” the union and the MoE, had to work together with the government’s mediator to find a solution.

Meanwhile, secondary teachers could demand strike action after also rejecting an “insufficient” government pay offer. The offer included annual pay rises of between 2 and 3 percent for three years—far short of the 15 percent increase over one year, and measures to reduce workloads, claimed by the Post Primary Teachers’ Association (PPTA). PPTA president Jack Boyle said the MoE offer had “no real justification other than the cupboards are bare.” He called on the ministry to provide an “improved offer” by November 9.

Education Minister Hipkins addressed the PPTA’s conference last month, calling for a “partnership.” “Occasionally compromises need to be made. Presently, that’s what’s being asked of us both,” he declared. Boyle welcomed Hipkins’ approach but said the union could not accept the current offer. He told media the union is not preparing for industrial action but “cannot rule it out” if members decide it is necessary. Paid union meetings will be held nationwide on November 7.

In line with the unions’ hostility to foreign workers, the PPTA is opposing a move by the government to recruit 400 teachers from overseas to fill the immediate shortage. Implying that overseas teachers would be inferior, Boyle claimed that New Zealand’s “quality teaching practices” and international reputation will come under threat.

Teachers can have no confidence in the unions, which are collaborating with the government to impose sell-out agreements. No attempt has been made to unify

primary and secondary teachers in a combined struggle, along with other sections of workers, parents and students.

The unions are proceeding in the same way as the NZ Nurses Organisation, which dragged a pay dispute out for nearly a year. Union leaders presented five sell-out offers in order to demoralise healthcare workers and finally pushed through a deal that continues to drastically underfund hospitals.

Teachers need to establish new organisations independent of the unions: rank-and-file committees based in schools and controlled by teachers and other school staff. Only in that way can a genuine political fight be waged against the Labour-led government and its austerity measures.

In opposition to the nationalist perspective of the unions, aimed at pitting workers against each other, independent committees should forge links with immigrant workers, as well as teachers in Australia and other countries who face similar attacks on wages, jobs and conditions.

To counter the lie that there is “no money” for essential services, such a struggle has to be based on a socialist perspective for the reorganisation of society to meet basic social needs, not the profits of the banks and big business.



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