

# **New Zealand teachers' struggle at a crossroads**

**Tom Peters**

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On November 23, the Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA) announced that a majority of its 17,000 secondary school teacher members had voted for a one-day strike early next year, after rejecting a second pay offer from the Labour Party-led coalition government.

The vote follows a nationwide strike by 30,000 primary school teachers in August and a second strike in November. Primary and secondary teachers have rejected pay increases of 3 percent per year for three years. The offer is slightly above the official rate of inflation and does not make up for a decade-long pay freeze.

Secondary teachers are calling for an immediate 15 percent increase, while primary teachers in the New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI) union have demanded 16 percent over two years. Teachers also want more staff and smaller class sizes to address a crisis of under-resourcing, over-crowding and unmanageable workloads.

New Zealand teachers have joined a growing wave of strikes and protests internationally, as workers seek to fight back against austerity measures imposed in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis. Teachers struck across France on November 12 against plans by Emmanuel Macron's right-wing government to cut thousands of jobs in public and private schools. In the United States, the teacher unions shut down a wave of strikes earlier this year, falsely claiming that teachers could resolve the crisis in schools by voting for the Democrats.

In New Zealand, after years of virtually no industrial action, tens of thousands of workers have struck in recent months, including nurses and hospital workers, ambulance paramedics, court staff and other public servants, bus and train workers.

The Labour Party-led government of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, which took office just over a year ago, is continuing the same pro-business program of austerity as the previous National Party government. It is refusing to seriously address the crisis of homelessness, low wages and the high cost of living, while continuing to starve healthcare, education and other public services of funding.

The union bureaucracy is seeking to contain the growing strike movement and prevent it from becoming a consciously anti-capitalist political campaign against the government. The unions have dragged out disputes, isolated striking workers from each other, and sought to promote illusions in the Labour Party.

The NZEI held a series of one-day strikes from November 12 to 16, with different regions striking on different days. Teachers had initially indicated support for a two-day strike, but the NZEI rejected this. At the same time, the union presented the Ministry of Education's third offer to teachers and will announce the results of voting on December 4. The offer is almost identical to one that teachers overwhelmingly rejected in September, and is the same as a sellout deal imposed on nurses and other hospital workers by the New Zealand Nurses Organisation in August.

Feilding Intermediate Principal Diane Crate wrote on Facebook that a beginning teacher would receive "around \$19 per week from this offer straight away," while a teacher with 10 years' experience would receive \$27 per week. She criticised the government's announcement of 600 extra learning support staff, saying these would be spread across 2,500 schools and "there is very little information about what this might look like in reality." Thousands of existing teacher aides, who "earn only a fraction over minimum wage," were offered nothing.

Crate observed that the starting wage for a police officer was over \$56,000 plus allowances and overtime, while a beginning teacher is paid \$47,980 and has large student loan repayments.

On the NZEI Facebook page, Halim Sheridan commented: “The offer does not go anywhere near enough. The salary offer is far too low. There was no extra release time offered. There was no increase in staffing... The minister claims there is no more money. I dismiss this claim. They have cornered themselves fiscally by their own design. There’s money, but they have simply self-imposed austerity. We, our families, our students, New Zealand’s future are worth more... We must not back down.”

On November 9, the government’s Employment Relations Authority urged primary teachers to accept the offer, calling it “a handsome and competitive proposal in the current fiscal environment.” It told NZEI that teachers’ demands were “unrealistic.”

The claim that there is “no more money” is a lie. The current offer to teachers amounts to \$700 million over four years. The government has a budget surplus of \$5.5 billion, achieved by starving essential services and refusing to grant a substantial pay increase to nurses and other public workers. The government has refused to raise money by increasing taxes on the rich and on corporations.

In addition, Labour and its coalition partners NZ First and the Greens have allocated \$2.3 billion to buying four new air force warplanes, as part of plans to spend up to \$20 billion by 2030 on upgrading the military and preparing for war.

In an attempt to prepare teachers for another sellout, union leaders expressed sympathy for the government’s position. In a joint statement on November 16, NZEI and PPTA said: “We know that this government has inherited a teacher shortage and a desperate situation for children with additional learning needs because of the failure to plan and fund education properly; and we acknowledge that they are working to try and fix it.”

PPTA President Jack Boyle told TVNZ on November 18 “we absolutely are behind Minister Hipkins, who acknowledges the challenges in education,” while saying the rate of teacher recruitment was “not good enough.” He added: “We absolutely know that [Hipkins] is committed, as are we, to making New

Zealand the best place to be a child.”

Political commentator Matt McCarten, a former Unite union leader and Labour Party strategist, noted that the two unions were being “extraordinarily polite” and “playing very nice” with the government.

Education Minister Chris Hipkins bluntly told TVNZ that the government would not increase its offer due to “financial constraints.” He said teachers’ grievances about low pay could not be achieved “overnight.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* warns that in order to wage a real fight against austerity, workers need to organize independently and rebel against the union bureaucracy. Rank-and-file committees should be formed in every school, including teachers, support staff and parents. These should be democratically controlled by the workers themselves and completely independent of the Labour Party and all the parties in parliament.

Such committees must proceed on the basis of a socialist perspective, aimed at uniting teachers with health workers, transport workers and other sections of the working class in a joint political and industrial offensive against the government and the capitalist system. The billions of dollars hoarded by the super-rich and wasted on the military must be redistributed to address fundamental social needs, including the right to a decent education.

*The author also recommends:*

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