

After fascist attack, New Zealand teacher unions cancel nationwide strike

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Following the March 15 fascist attack in Christchurch, in which 50 people were killed, New Zealand's teacher unions—the NZ Educational Institute (NZEI) and the Post Primary Teachers' Association (PPTA)—cancelled a nationwide teachers' strike over contract negotiations, which was scheduled for April 3.

PPTA president Jack Boyle told media that the union called off the strike so it could “better support Christchurch teachers.” Boyle declared that schools, which were locked down during the terror attack, needed “support, not further disruption.” He said the union leadership decided the strike would be “suspended” just four days after the attack, but made no public statements because it didn't want to be seen as “leveraging” the tragedy for its “own gain.” The decision only became known to most teachers through media reports on March 28.

The NZEI, the primary teachers' union, earlier cancelled a national series of stop-work meetings scheduled for the week beginning March 18 to vote on the Ministry of Education's (MOE) latest pay offer, which would almost certainly have been rejected, and to confirm participation in the strike. Members are instead currently voting in an online ballot. NZEI president Lynda Stuart said the strike was called off so teachers could “focus on children and their needs,” and “out of respect” for the terrorist's victims.

All of this is a patent fraud to justify the unions' thoroughly anti-democratic decision. Union leaders repeatedly stated prior to the Christchurch attacks that they did not want to strike and were looking for a way to avoid it.

For the past decade the union bureaucracy has worked with governments and big business to suppress any struggle against the austerity measures imposed following the 2008 financial crisis. Like other unions,

NZEI and PPTA support the Labour Party and celebrated the formation of the Labour-led coalition government in late 2017, based on the lie that it would end the severe understaffing and under-resourcing of schools, especially in working class areas.

Last year, as the crisis in schools worsened, New Zealand teachers joined an international wave of teacher strikes for better conditions, pay and in defence of public education. Nearly 30,000 primary school teachers held one-day strikes in August and November 2018—the first held by the NZEI since 1994—after rejecting pay offers of 3 percent per year for three years. The offers, presented by the union, were only slightly above the official rate of inflation and did not make up for a decade-long pay freeze. Some 17,000 secondary teachers voted in November to strike, after rejecting two similar offers.

Tomorrow's cancelled strike, involving nearly 50,000 teachers, would have been the first combined strike by primary and secondary school teachers in the country's history.

The teachers' movement is part of a wave of strikes in recent months, including by tens of thousands of nurses and hospital workers, doctors, ambulance paramedics, public servants, bus and train workers.

Neither teacher union has said if the strike will be rescheduled. Boyle said PPTA was “not ruling out future industrial action” if the MOE's offer did not improve, “but we're not going to plan anything like that this term.” Members' views would be “canvassed again” after the school holidays in late April. Meanwhile, the union is re-entering talks with the ministry.

In late 2017, PPTA and NZEI delegates voted overwhelmingly to demand pay increases of 15 and 16 percent respectively along with measures to address

workloads and the severe staffing shortage.

Writing on the NZ Teachers' Facebook group, one teacher said they were "severely underpaid. It is my firm belief that top band teachers must be paid approximately \$30,000 to \$40,000 more per annum." Pointing to the ongoing housing crisis, the teacher declared "the stark reality [is] that a teacher's salary is being left in the dust when it comes to home affordability. Will 3 percent per annum each year for three years make a difference? No!"

Another said more than one mass meeting last year had declared that NZEI's original 16 percent pay claim was "insufficient" and had voted for "at least a 30 percent increase."

In a repetition of its stance during last year's protracted nurses' dispute, the Labour-led government insists it has "no more money" to fund the teachers' claims. While imposing an effective wage freeze, its offer also does not include any significant increase in staffing or measures to address impossible workloads.

In a joint statement last November, NZEI and PPTA sympathised with the government, saying it had "inherited a teacher shortage and a desperate situation for children with additional learning needs because of the [previous National Party government's] failure to plan and fund education properly and we acknowledge that they are working to try and fix it."

In fact, the government's offer amounts to \$700 million over four years, much less than its budget surplus of \$5.5 billion, achieved by starving essential services and refusing to grant a substantial pay increase to nurses and other public sector workers. Labour and its coalition partners, NZ First and the Greens, have refused to raise money by increasing taxes on the rich and corporations. However, they plan to spend up to \$20 billion by 2030 upgrading the military and preparing for war.

The cancellation of this week's strike has nothing to do with helping teachers or students, or anyone else affected by the terrorist attack. It is intended to shut down the growing rebellion among teachers and prepare for a sell-out deal. The NZEI and PPTA are following the same path as the New Zealand Nurses' Organisation and other unions last year: they have dragged out the dispute for more than a year, isolated teachers from other workers and promoted illusions in the government. The aim of these bureaucracies is to

prevent the emergence of a unified and consciously anti-capitalist movement of the working class against austerity.



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