

New Zealand teachers' strike: Break from Labour and the unions! Unite the working class against austerity!

Socialist Equality Group (New Zealand)
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About 52,000 teachers and some principals are preparing for New Zealand's biggest-ever education sector strike on Wednesday, involving every state-run school in the country. It is the first time primary and secondary teachers have held a joint strike. Mass protests will be held to demand better wages and an end to the understaffing and under-resourcing of schools.

The one-day strike reflects the deepening shift to the left by the working class internationally following more than a decade of austerity designed to make workers pay for the crisis of capitalism. Millions of teachers have gone on strike, including 70,000 so far this year in the United States.

In Poland, 300,000 held a powerful 17-day strike last month, which was shut down by the unions without any demands being met. Teachers have also walked out in parts of Australia, India, Brazil, the Netherlands and many other countries.

In New Zealand, primary teachers have already held two strikes last year. Tens of thousands of nurses, doctors and hospital workers staged nationwide strikes. Paramedics, public servants, transport and fast food workers have taken industrial action. Young people are also becoming radicalized: many schools were deserted last Friday as tens of thousands of students joined a second global student strike to demand action to halt catastrophic climate change.

The Socialist Equality Group (New Zealand) calls for the broadest support for teachers from workers, students and youth. The struggle for decent wages and conditions, and in defence of public education and other social rights, places workers in direct conflict with the Labour Party-NZ First-Greens coalition government and its allies, including the trade union

bureaucracy.

Labour's 2017 election promises to address inequality and poverty stand exposed as a fraud. Labour and its allies are continuing the previous National Party government's program of low taxes for the rich, starving public services and wasting billions on the military.

Teachers are in the forefront of the wave of strikes internationally because they are exposed every day to the worsening social crisis. One in four children in New Zealand grow up in poverty and many go to school hungry and unable to concentrate. Schools in working class areas are underequipped and overcrowded, and lack the resources to deal with severe learning difficulties, behaviour problems, poverty-related illnesses and chronic absenteeism.

Teachers voted overwhelmingly to strike after rejecting grossly inadequate offers. Education Minister Chris Hipkins says \$1.2 billion has been allocated over four years, touting this as "the best offer in a decade." This amounts to pay increases of 3 percent a year for three years, which does not begin to make up for the pay freeze imposed since the 2008 financial crisis, let alone the soaring cost of living, especially housing. Beginner primary teachers are paid just \$47,980 a year, which equates to \$23 an hour (\$5.30 above the minimum wage).

The government has pledged to train 3,280 extra teachers over the next four years in addition to 600 learning support coordinators. This is a drop in the bucket compared to what is needed. Each year between 6 and 11 percent of teachers, approximately 3,000-5,700, leave the profession. Nearly half of new teachers leave within five years due to stress and low

pay.

Teachers have demanded a \$3.9 billion settlement—more than three times the government’s offer—including significantly reduced workloads and a pay increase of 15 to 16 percent.

Last Tuesday Hipkins bluntly told parliament that “there’s not going to be any more money” and the current offer to teachers was it. On May 25, he told Newshub this was because money was needed to “properly fund” hospitals and mental health services, fix the “housing crisis” and “lift children out of poverty.”

Such claims are a complete fraud. In fact, the government reported a budget surplus of \$5.5 billion last year, achieved by starving education, hospitals, welfare, housing and other public services. Meanwhile, \$2.3 billion was committed to buy four new Air Force planes, and a total of \$20 billion will be spent by 2030 on upgrading the Defence Force to help integrate NZ into US war plans against China.

The working class overwhelmingly supports teachers, with one union survey finding 89 percent agree they deserve pay rises. The Post-Primary Teachers’ Association (PPTA) and the New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI), however, are seeking to impose a sellout. The unions are following the same playbook used by the New Zealand Nurses’ Organisation (NZNO) during last year’s dispute involving 30,000 hospital workers. The NZNO isolated workers, cancelled one of two strikes, and repeated the government’s lie that there was “no more money,” in order to push through a miserable wage increase of 3 percent per year and a promise to increase staff levels by 2 percent.

The NZEI and PPTA are similarly dragging out their dispute, which has already lasted 18 months in the case of primary teachers, while emphasising that they do not want to strike. The unions had originally scheduled a strike on April 3 but this was called off in a thoroughly anti-democratic decision, using the Christchurch terrorist attack as a pretext.

In a joint statement last November, NZEI president Lynda Stuart and PPTA president Jack Boyle promoted illusions in the Labour government, saying “we acknowledge that they are working to try and fix” the teacher shortage and lack of support for children with additional learning needs.

At a press conference on May 12, Boyle indicated that the PPTA could back away from the 15 percent pay claim endorsed by its members, saying: “It’s not like we’ve decided this is the line in the sand and we’re going to hold fire until we get what we want.” Such statements are a serious warning that a sellout is being prepared behind teachers’ backs.

If the struggle remains in the control of the union bureaucracy, it will be strangled. For decades these organisations have suppressed resistance to the restructuring of schools along business lines, and accepted hundreds of school closures and other attacks by Labour and National governments. The Socialist Equality Group calls on workers to break from the unions, which represent a privileged upper middle-class layer, committed to defending capitalism.

New organisations are urgently needed in every school: rank-and-file committees, controlled democratically by teachers and other staff. These committees need to forge links with parents, students and other sections of the working class, including doctors and health workers, in opposition to the unions, which seek to divide workers from each other.

A joint struggle for a workers’ government and socialist policies is necessary to overturn capitalism which is the root cause of the global drive for austerity. Above all, the teachers’ struggle must become part of a conscious fight for socialism and internationalism, in opposition to Labour and the entire political establishment. Teachers in New Zealand should combine their strength with those in Australia and other countries who face the same crisis.

The provision of high-quality public education, with well-resourced schools, fully staffed by well-paid teachers, is incompatible with a system in which everything is subordinated to the profit interests of the wealthy elite. Billions of dollars must be redistributed immediately from the coffers of the banks and major corporations to fund schools, hospitals and other services.



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