

52,000 teachers strike in New Zealand

Tom Peters
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More than 52,000 teachers and principals went on strike yesterday across New Zealand. It was one of the country's biggest-ever strikes. In fact, the one-day walkout was an historic event, marking a major escalation in the struggles of the working class, which is coming into direct conflict with the Labour Party-led coalition government.

It was the first time primary and secondary teachers have carried out strike action together. Their separate unions, the New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI) and the Post-Primary Teachers' Association (PPTA), were forced to call the strike because of the growing anger of teachers to their deteriorating conditions. The unions, however, will be working desperately behind the scenes to negotiate a sellout deal to avoid any further strikes and wind down the teachers' movement.

The vast majority of public schools were completely closed, with nearly 800,000 students affected. In Auckland, 15,000 teachers and supporters marched down Queen Street. In Wellington, approximately 5,000 marched to parliament. Thousands protested in Christchurch, Dunedin, Hamilton, Palmerston North, Whangarei, Invercargill, New Plymouth, Rotorua and Nelson. Pickets were organised in many smaller towns throughout the country. Thousands of parents, workers and students joined the protests.

The action occurred on the eve of the government's second annual budget, fraudulently promoted as a "wellbeing budget." The Labour-NZ First-Greens coalition is actually deepening the previous National Party government's austerity measures, severely underfunding healthcare, education and other basic services, while giving billions to the military and police.

The working class is seeking to fight back against these conditions. There has been a wave of stoppages over the past two years, including a nationwide strike last year by 30,000 nurses and healthcare assistants, and

several strikes by 3,000 doctors in response to the crisis in public hospitals. Midwives, ambulance workers, public transport workers and fast food workers have taken industrial action also.

This is part of the upsurge of the working class internationally, in which teachers are playing a leading role. Mass teachers' strikes have been held this year in the United States, many European countries, as well as India and parts of Latin America and Africa.

NZ teachers are demanding pay rises of 15 to 16 percent, a significant increase in staffing, smaller class sizes and reduced workloads. Despite two primary teachers' strikes last year, the government has refused to increase its offer of just 3 percent per year and a token increase in teacher training places. The total offer is just \$1.2 billion, about a third of what teachers are demanding.

Yesterday's strike was initially scheduled for April 3 but the unions postponed it, in an anti-democratic decision, using the Christchurch terror attacks as a pretext. The union leaders are following the example of the New Zealand Nurses Organisation, which dragged out the health workers' dispute and cancelled one strike in order to wear down resistance to a sellout.

Teachers are determined to continue striking. Secondary teachers have voted for a further one-day strike in June, to be held in different areas on different days. PPTA leader Jack Boyle, however, told Radio NZ yesterday "we're desperately hoping" to avoid further strikes. NZEI's Lynda Stuart declared "none of us want to take strike action at all." In recent interviews, neither union leader referred to the teachers' original pay claims, indicating they will settle for much less.

Yesterday's protests reflected growing anger toward the Labour government over its refusal to address the crisis facing teachers and schools. At parliament, thousands of protesters demanded that Education Minister Chris Hipkins come outside to face them,

chanting “Come out, Chris!” When Hipkins emerged, he declared that the “teacher shortage ... was not of this government’s making” and added: “I acknowledge that you want more progress and you want it to be faster and I cannot offer you that.”

Hipkins’ speech was almost drowned out by booing and angry shouts of “Not good enough!” “Pay us what we’re worth!” and “Shame on you!”

NZEI negotiator Tute Porter-Samuels tried to defuse the anger. Lamenting that there was “such a divide” between teachers and the government, she said: “We completely understand that the issues we are faced with today are not of the current government’s doing. And we know, Minister Hipkins, that education means a lot to you and that you want to see the best education for our children. We are in agreement on that.” She asked the government to “please come to the negotiation table” with “an open mind.”

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, who spoke outside parliament to feign support for primary teachers during their initial strike last August, this time remained inside. Instead, she posted a Facebook video from her office, saying “unfortunately” teachers’ demands could not be met because the government had to “juggle so many demands,” including “mental health and wellbeing” and “homelessness.”

In fact, the claim that there is “no more money” has been used to justify the refusal to address the social crisis in *every* area, despite the government presenting a \$5.5 billion surplus last year. It has refused to increase taxes on the rich to fund public services, while funnelling billions of dollars to the military. The \$1.2 billion over four years offered to teachers is less than the \$2.3 billion allocated to pay for four new war planes.

The crisis in schools is the result of more than a decade of attacks by both National and Labour Party governments. The unions have collaborated by suppressing resistance to an effective wage freeze and school closures during the 2000s and following the 2011 Christchurch earthquake. Before last year’s strikes, NZEI had not called a stoppage since 1994.

There is strong support for teachers throughout the working class. A Facebook group established by parents called “I back the teachers!” has quickly grown to more than 10,000 members. Adria commented there yesterday: “Teachers will have to default on rent and

not eat to be taken seriously. You’ll have to walk off the job indefinitely until [the government] comes to the party. One day won’t do it... It’s time for an indefinite strike.”

Scott, a single parent who attended the Wellington strike with his daughter to support her teacher, told the WSWs: “I’ve seen the effort he goes to, spending his own money for kids to have resources. All the people that do the most, like teachers and nurses, are undervalued.” He did not think the government understood “the seriousness of it: teachers leaving their jobs because they feel undervalued. It’s genuinely sad.”

Nik, a teacher with more than 30 years’ experience at primary and secondary schools, said “conditions have got worse.” Wages had not improved in more than a decade. “For the government to say there’s no money is just a blatant lie,” he said.

Nik explained that teachers had to deal with the consequences of growing poverty: “Behavioural and learning disabilities have all increased, the number of incidents of violence has increased, the number of children coming to school hungry, the number of kids without shoes or raincoats has increased.

“Teachers are also spending more time on assessment than they are teaching,” he said. Many did large amounts of unpaid work on weekends and evenings. “The salaries are so low. There are graduates with four-year degrees with over \$100,000 in debt. You can’t save for a mortgage.” Nik said he would support more strikes until teachers’ demands were met.



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