

New Zealand secondary teachers' union cancels industrial action

Tom Peters
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Last night the Post-Primary Teachers' Association (PPTA) cancelled industrial action planned for June 11, following a 10-hour-long meeting with Education Minister Chris Hipkins.

Around 20,000 secondary teachers in public schools across New Zealand took partial strike action on June 4 by instructing Year 9 students to stay home. Similar action had been scheduled throughout June, as well as one-day strikes to be held in different regions on different days starting on June 17. The union is undoubtedly preparing to call these off as well.

The cancellation of industrial action that had been overwhelmingly approved by PPTA members, without any demands being met, is flagrantly anti-democratic. It is the latest warning that the PPTA and New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI), the primary teachers' union, are preparing a sellout deal.

Union leaders gave no explanation for their decision. The PPTA, NZEI and Minister Hipkins released a perfunctory statement saying "constructive progress" had been made in negotiations and more details would be announced next week.

The long-running dispute over pay and conditions in schools led to a historic strike by 52,000 primary and secondary teachers and primary principals on May 29, one of the largest strikes in New Zealand's history.

The working class is shifting to the left and coming into direct conflict with the Labour Party-led coalition government, whose promises to address the crises in hospitals, schools, and to reduce poverty and homelessness, have proven to be a fraud. Major strikes have been held over the past year and a half by teachers, nurses, doctors and other workers against the running down of public services and widening social inequality. This is part of a wave of anti-austerity strikes and protests internationally, in which teachers

are playing a leading role.

The chief obstacle facing workers is the pro-capitalist union bureaucracy, which opposes any sustained political and industrial movement against the government. The PPTA and NZEI are determined to avoid any repeat of last month's strike. They are seeking to divide workers and sow illusions in the government in order to wear down opposition to a sellout agreement, just as the New Zealand Nurses Organisation did following a nationwide health workers' strike in July last year.

On June 5, the *New Zealand Herald* noted that 10 months after the first one-day strike by primary teachers last August, the unions "may be ready to settle for much less than they first asked for." PPTA president Jack Boyle's stated last month that, while workload issues still needed to be addressed, "You can't say that the ministry hasn't tried to do a bit of negotiation in the salary space."

In fact, the government has repeatedly offered teachers the same pay increase of just 3 percent per year and a token increase in teacher training places and support staff. Teachers have rejected the offer, which will not begin to make up for a decade-long freeze in pay and school funding.

In recent statements neither Boyle nor NZEI leader Lynda Stuart has referred to teachers' demands for pay increases of 15 to 16 percent, along with significant reductions in workload, more teacher aides and assistance for children with learning difficulties.

Teachers are determined to continue fighting. Many have demanded more strikes, particularly after the government's budget on May 30 did not improve the offer to teachers and delivered a 1.8 percent increase in operational funding for schools, barely above the official inflation rate.

A photo of the *Dominion Post's* front-page “Budget for the people” shared on Facebook by Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, touting funding for new classrooms, prompted dozens of angry comments from teachers.

Caroline wrote that she had supported Ardern but was one of tens of thousands of teachers “who are either in crisis mentally or are on the verge of it... and this isn't going to help us.”

Hannah commented: “New classrooms would be great, but we can't staff the ones we already have! Education is one of the most effective ways to lift people out of poverty. It is impossible to improve well-being while neglecting the education of our kids.”

She pointed out that according to recent statistics half of all new teachers “will quit within the first five years because the conditions are so challenging. Not to mention a lot of beginning teachers can't afford to live in the big cities where the majority of the country's schools are.”

Jamie declared: “I don't think the unions or pay system are working to teachers' benefit and more people need to write to Jacinda to state the obvious about teachers not filling the new classes.”

There is growing anger and frustration with the unions. A May 31 post on the NZEI's Facebook page describing Hipkins' agreement to meet union leaders as “a positive and constructive move” and “a potential breakthrough” attracted several comments denouncing the union and its refusal to hold more strikes.

Leanne stated: “I don't feel excited about this at all. What I want to know is what decisions you have made regarding our next action so you have something to go to the table with... we are making huge sacrifices and you are doing nothing!!!”

Magali similarly responded: “We are just stalling and doing nothing... listen to the MEMBERS—that is what you say you do but you currently are NOT.”

Linda wrote: “I'm getting a bit sick of our union looking like a wet blanket!!!!!! We pay a massive amount for our union fees, how about getting some actual results!!!!!! I'm another teacher contemplating pulling out of our union because to date I'm not impressed!!!”

Unless teachers break from the stranglehold of the unions, their fight will be sold out. These bureaucratic organisations, which have suppressed any fight for

opposite to austerity for more than a decade, share responsibility for the crisis facing schools. They represent an upper middle-class layer that is hostile to the class struggle and supports the Labour government.

The only way forward is through the construction of new organisations: rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by the workers themselves. Such committees would forge links between school staff and other workers in New Zealand, Australia and internationally, who face the same struggle for decent living standards and public services.

The fight for a well-resourced, high-quality public education system raises the need for the socialist reorganisation of society. The government's claim that there is “no more money” to meet teachers' demands is a lie. The billions of dollars funnelled to major corporations, investors and banks through decades of low taxes, must be redistributed to meet basic human needs, including more schools, with well-paid teachers, principals, teacher aides and support staff.



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