New Zealand: Teacher at impoverished school speaks out against conditions that led to last month's historic strike

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The WSWS recently spoke to a teacher at a secondary school in a small New Zealand regional town. In his first year in the profession, the young teacher wished to remain anonymous to avoid repercussions for speaking out. But he described the severe crisis that had propelled 52,000 primary and secondary teachers to embark on their historic strike last month.

One of the largest in New Zealand's history, the strike was part of a resurgence of class struggle by workers internationally against the austerity measures that have been imposed since the 2008 global financial crisis.

In response, New Zealand's teacher unions, the Post-Primary Teachers' Association and the New Zealand Educational Institute, have begun working, behind closed doors, with the Ardern Labour Party-led government, to shut down and impose a sellout on what has become an increasingly militant teachers' movement.

The teacher explained that his school had been deeply affected by the broader social crisis, including widespread poverty, which was especially pronounced in many rural towns. "The current school funding model is broken," he said. While schools in wealthy neighbourhoods were able to draw large amounts of money from parents' donations, "the amount of funding the government gives the poorest communities to try and compensate doesn't even come close to what the high-income schools have."

He said his school lacked basic resources. Students were asked to bring their own laptops or tablets to class, but most could not afford these devices and "the school does not have enough computers. The previous government rolled out high speed internet to schools but the computers we have are incredibly slow and old."

"Nearly all teaching resources are coming out in digital form," he said, but these were often inaccessible to students, who had no computers either at school or at home. In addition, some students "don't have books, they don't have pens, often because they can't get hold of them."

Poverty contributed to learning difficulties and major behavioural problems, which teachers were confronted with every day: "A few of my students come in hungry—a lot are coming in angry. Things are happening at home that shouldn't be happening." Fights were common, and so was drug use, the teacher said: "There are Year 9 students getting stoned in toilets. I think students are getting drunk and stoned younger. There is some level of despair and some level of normalisation of such behaviour as well."

There were serious problems relating to children with undiagnosed learning disabilities, such as dyslexia: "It's really helpful if teachers know that a student has a learning disability, so they can tailor teaching to meet that student's needs. The government isn't funding that adequately. Parents have to pay for a diagnosis, a lot of the time, for their son or daughter. Some parents can't pay that. A student can go through the whole of high school with a severe learning disability, without any support. Often their frustration manifests as lashing out."

Even if a student was recognised as needing additional help due to a disability, funding for teacher aides was grossly inadequate.

The teacher explained that teachers wanted higher pay, particularly to attract more teachers.

"Understaffing is a huge issue in regional schools, where people just don't want to go. So, if someone resigns, you have classes that are just stuck with relievers for months on end, and it becomes a big issue. It really affects students' learning and their motivation."

More money was also necessary because "you end up spending a lot of your own money on classroom resources," while in Auckland and other cities "there are teachers who leave because they can't afford to live there."

Statistics show a steep decline in recent years in the number of people entering teacher training, while, at the same time, nearly half of all teachers leave the profession after five years, due to stress and low pay.

Teachers are also demanding an increase in non-contact time, to be able to deal with "an enormous amount of paperwork. Things like keeping track of every single meeting you have, including all the informal ones. Every beginner teacher has to have a log for the first couple of years. Assessment can take up a lot of time for some teachers. I think the pressure to get students through assessment can definitely impact on students' learning. The NCEA curriculum has created a credit-farming atmosphere, where students aren't learning to learn.

"A lot of time is spent on dealing with bad behaviour in class. That turns into a great deal of paperwork very quickly. So if you have a class in which eight students act up, you have to write a report on each one of the students."

The teacher denounced claims by Education Minister Chris Hipkins that the government's pay offer of a three percent increase per year would eventually give teachers an extra $10,000 per year: "Hipkins is manipulating the data in every interview. He's talking as though all teachers will be in the top pay bracket. Among teachers, there is a lot of anger and disgust with Hipkins."

Teachers were "sad and frustrated," he said, when the PPTA cancelled industrial action that had been scheduled for June 11. The union claimed there had been "constructive progress" in talks with Hipkins, but had not yet released any details.

Commenting on the role of the unions, the teacher declared that teachers were underpaid and schools were in crisis "because the PPTA and NZEI have allowed this to happen with settlement after settlement. This one is not likely to be different. They'll say: three percent per year is the best we could negotiate. If that's only coming once every decade then, of course, our wages fall behind. The truth is they're letting things get worse and they're selling the few, minimal deals that they broker as successes, when they're not."

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