

New Zealand primary teacher union pushes through sellout pay deal

Tom Peters, John Braddock

26 June 2019

The New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI) announced today that a majority of roughly 30,000 primary teachers had voted in favour of a union-backed pay agreement with Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's Labour Party-NZ First-Greens coalition government. Voting by more than 20,000 secondary teachers on a similar agreement is continuing until Friday.

The deal, backed by the NZEI and the Post-Primary Teachers' Association (PPTA), is a sellout, which has been pushed through in order to suppress the most significant wave of strikes in decades. On May 29, 52,000 primary and secondary teachers, along with primary principals, walked off the job in one of NZ's largest ever strikes. This was part of an international movement of teachers against austerity and in defence of public education, and followed twelve months of struggles by major sections of NZ workers, including 30,000 nurses and health workers.

Fearful that the teachers' struggle could erupt beyond their control and spread to other sections of the working class, the union bureaucracy has moved quickly to prevent any further strikes and protect the Labour-led government.

The Socialist Equality Group (NZ) denounces the union-government agreement, which will do nothing to reverse the effects of a decade-long funding freeze and is almost identical to previous offers that teachers rejected. It does not meet their demands for drastically improved wages and conditions to address the long-standing crisis in education, which has been under political attack by successive National and Labour governments, producing declining wages, vastly increased workloads, under-resourcing of schools and an exodus of staff.

In opposition to the unions, the Socialist Equality Group calls on secondary teachers to decisively reject the union-backed deal. Such a stand must be seen as the starting point for a mass political and industrial campaign against

austerity.

The NZEI claims that primary teachers voted "resoundingly in favour" of the deal, but has not released actual voting figures. The result will now be used by the union bureaucracy and the media to intensify pressure on secondary teachers to accept the offer. Significantly, a similar union-backed offer to just under 2,000 primary principals has been rejected, and the NZEI is now calling for urgent negotiations with the government to resolve the dispute.

The unions are fraudulently presenting the settlement as a victory, with NZEI calling it "a big win." A week before the latest offer was announced, PPTA leaders unilaterally cancelled industrial action, including a series of regional one-day strikes that teachers overwhelmingly approved.

The government's marginally increased offer, announced on June 14, maintained pay increases of just 3 percent per year: essentially a pay freeze relative to the cost of living, and well short of demands by teachers for 15 to 16 percent. Primary teachers will receive slightly more, around an extra 2 percent, to bring their salaries into line with those of secondary teachers.

The total value of the union-backed agreement is less than half what teachers had demanded. There is nothing to reduce overwhelming workloads, just empty promises that the issue will be reviewed. The union bureaucracy, however, will have its coffers boosted by a new \$5 million annual fund for conferences and seminars, administered jointly by the PPTA and the Ministry of Education.

The SEG's call for teachers to reject the deal and politically break from the unions and the Labour Party drew a hostile response from PPTA vice-president Melanie Webber. In the Facebook group "NZ Media Teachers," Webber said the SEG's statement "demonstrates little understanding of how the secondary

teachers' union operates." She claimed that "PPTA is not endorsing the deal, and are insisting on paid meetings at which it can be discussed face to face." (The Facebook group's administrators have since deleted the SEG statement post and comments, in a clear act of censorship).

Webber's comment is thoroughly misleading. While the PPTA has told teachers it is not officially recommending the deal, the bureaucracy is clearly presenting it as a victory. Education Minister Chris Hipkins, Radio NZ, TVNZ, Newshub and Fairfax Media all stated that both unions were recommending the government's offer. PPTA made no attempt to deny these statements because they are essentially correct.

PPTA president Jack Boyle stated on June 14 that the strike "did the trick," adding: "We are very pleased to have an offer to take to our members to consider, after months of negotiations."

On June 14, NZEI leader Lynda Stuart told Radio NZ her union's executive "decided to recommend" the deal, and Boyle said that "like our colleagues at NZEI," the PPTA leadership "endorsed this as something that needs to be put in front of our members." He praised Hipkins for offering a meaningless "accord" to discuss "workload pressures" and an insignificant addition of eight teacher-only days spread across three years.

Neither union leader challenged Radio NZ's repetition of Hipkins' false claim that the proposed deal contained an 18.5 percent pay increase for most teachers. This inflated figure is arrived at by factoring in progression up the salary scale over three years.

In order to isolate and place pressure on teachers to accept the deal, the NZEI and the PPTA failed to organise any combined mass meetings to debate its merits. The NZEI's voting process was profoundly anti-democratic. It refused to call any membership meetings and instead held an online ballot, which took place in an atmosphere of misinformation about the offer from the media, the government and the union itself.

The PPTA is holding 35 separate regional two-hour meetings for members to vote. The WSWS understands that union officials are choosing their words carefully, stating that the PPTA is not taking a position for or against the deal, while nevertheless effectively promoting it. At one meeting the main speaker falsely asserted that the pay increase would equate to 15 percent over three years, rather than around 9 percent, and promoted illusions that the union-government "accord" would address workload problems.

After listening to Boyle answer questions at one school, one contributor to a PPTA Facebook forum said they had concluded that "there really is no more [money] in the govt coffers for a better monetary offer," and any further strikes would be futile.

The claim that there is "no more money" to properly fund education and other essential services is a fraud. Similar statements were made by the NZ Nurses Organisation (NZNO) to impose a "<https://www.wsbs.org/en/articles/2018/08/18/nzno-a18.html>" sellout on 30,000 hospital workers last year, which Hipkins described as the "benchmark" for teachers and other public sector workers.

Ardern's promise of "transformational change" has proved to be a total fraud. While the Labour-led government refuses to increase taxes on the rich, and is pouring billions into the military, homelessness is rising, one in four children lives in poverty and many come to school hungry and with serious learning difficulties. Meanwhile, the super-rich are amassing staggering wealth. Those on the *National Business Review* Rich List more than doubled their combined fortunes last year from \$44.4 billion in 2008 to \$100.8 billion.

A high-quality, free education system requires a conscious struggle for socialist policies, in opposition to the Labour Party-led coalition and every parliamentary party. This involves a rebellion against the pro-capitalist trade unions and the building of independent rank-and-file committees in every workplace. This is the only way to unite the working class in New Zealand and internationally to abolish the source of social inequality and austerity: the crisis-ridden capitalist system, which subordinates everything to the accumulation of profits by a wealthy few.

The authors also recommend:

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

[11 June 2019]



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsbs.org/contact