

New Zealand secondary teachers' union pushes through sellout

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The Post-Primary Teachers' Association (PPTA) announced on June 28 that it had gained a majority of votes in favour of a sellout agreement reached with Jacinda Ardern's Labour Party-NZ First-Greens coalition government.

The union-backed deal was pushed through amid significant opposition. Under pressure from the union bureaucracy, the corporate media and the government, 65 percent of about 20,000 members voted in favour, while 35 percent rejected the deal.

The New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI) previously announced that its members had "resoundingly" endorsed a similar deal, although it did not release voting figures for the 30,000 primary teachers. The announcement made three days before PPTA members had finished voting, was calculated to isolate and put pressure on secondary teachers to accept the rotten deal.

The union-government sellout follows a nationwide strike by over 52,000 teachers and primary principals on May 29—the first-ever joint strike by primary and secondary teachers and one of the largest strikes in New Zealand's history. It demonstrated the militancy of teachers and the overwhelming support for their struggle among the working class.

The union bureaucracy moved swiftly to ensure that there would be no repeat of this historic action, and to prevent the teachers' struggle from spreading to other sections of workers who are also seeking to fight back against austerity.

Even before members had a chance to see the offer, let alone vote on it, the PPTA leadership presented the deal with the Ardern government as a victory and cancelled strikes that had been approved by members and scheduled for late June. This followed the union's anti-democratic cancellation of strike action following

the Christchurch terrorist attack.

Teachers will receive pay increases of just 3 percent per year for three years. This amounts to a pay freeze compared with soaring living costs, especially for housing, and does not begin to make up for a decade of stagnant wages. Education Minister Chris Hipkins referred to 3 percent as the "benchmark" for pay rises for public sector workers, set by the sellout imposed last year by the New Zealand Nurses' Organisation (NZNO) in the face of bitter opposition from 30,000 health workers following a nationwide strike.

The deal contains nothing to address the crisis of under-staffing and under-resourcing. Figures indicate that nearly half of teachers are leaving the profession within five years due to stress caused by over-sized classes, being snowed under with paperwork, and grossly inadequate assistance for children with learning difficulties and poverty-related issues. Schools in rural and working-class areas in particular struggle with high turnover of staff, and lack basic equipment such as decent computers.

Undoubtedly concerned by the level of opposition to the agreement, PPTA leader Jack Boyle was forced to admit that it was "not what [teachers] expected to address workload or secondary teacher shortages," while still falsely portraying it as "a step forward." Boyle promoted an "accord" signed by both unions and the Ardern government, which he claimed "provides an opportunity to make immediate and sustainable changes" to attract new teachers and reduce the workload pressures.

This is completely untrue. In fact, the four-page accord contains two concrete measures: a token eight additional teacher-only days spread over three years; and a promise to remove the present system of performance appraisals for teachers. The accord states

that “the impact of workload” and class sizes on teachers’ wellbeing, retention and recruitment “will be considered,” a formulation which commits the government and the union bureaucrats to precisely nothing.

Steve, an experienced teacher from a Wellington secondary school, told the WSWS that teachers in PPTA branch discussions and regional meetings expressed “definite skepticism” about the “accord,” which he said would “not address the issue of workload.” Referring to similar union-government working parties in the past, speakers from the floor in one meeting flatly dismissed the proposal as having “been there, done that.”

Steve said teachers were “very concerned about the conditions in schools,” including workload, and in order to address that “you have to recruit more teachers.” There was widespread doubt that the package would achieve that, and considerable opposition to the meagre pay increase.

Union executive members presented a graph at the regional membership meetings showing the long-term decline in teachers’ pay relative to the median NZ wage. In 1998, a teacher’s beginning salary was 15 percent above the median wage. Today, it is 1 percent below.

The PPTA claimed that the pay settlement would “reverse the trend,” but Steve said many teachers were again “skeptical” of this and were “looking for a bigger catch-up,” which was necessary to attract more people into the profession.

Steve agreed that the deal pushed through by NZEI days earlier was a significant factor in pressuring many PPTA members to vote in favour. He said some had wondered: “Would the public continue to back us up if we continued to fight after the NZEI settled?”

The rotten union-backed agreement will only deepen the crisis facing schools. Just as the crisis in the public healthcare system has intensified following the NZNO’s sellout, leading to recent strikes by doctors and other hospital workers, the sellout of teachers will pave the way for a resurgence of struggles in the near future, in even sharper opposition to the Labour-led government and the union bureaucracy that defends it.

Internationally, including in Europe, the US and Latin America, teachers have held major strikes against austerity measures that have been imposed since the

2008 financial crisis. In every case, the unions functioning as defenders of capitalism have isolated workers and pressured them to accept worsening pay and conditions.

Significantly, a tense struggle is currently unfolding in Tasmania, after teachers rejected a union-backed offer amounting to a wage increase of between 7.5 and 8.5 percent over three years, and pay cuts for relief teachers. The head of the state branch of the Australian Education Union (AEU) resigned on June 25 in a desperate attempt to defuse anger after teachers at two schools passed motions of no confidence in the AEU leadership.

The only way forward is through the unification of teachers and the working class as a whole in New Zealand, Australia and internationally, on the basis of a socialist program and the fight for a workers’ government. This requires new rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by teachers themselves and independent of the nationalist and pro-capitalist trade unions.

Appeals must be made to parents and other workers to join in the defense of education as a social right. The government lies, echoed by the unions, that there is “no more money” for decent pay and well-staffed, well-resourced schools, must be rejected. The hundreds of billions of dollars being hoarded by the ruling elite and wasted on the military must be redistributed to fund essential services, including education, healthcare and housing.

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