

New Zealand unions enforce school returns, mass layoffs and wage cuts

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Schools across New Zealand have been open for the past week after the Labour-led government eased its COVID-19 lockdown and nearly all businesses resumed operations.

The government began easing restrictions on April 27, including a call for schools to reopen. However, unwilling to place their children's health at risk, parents largely ignored the move and many schools remained deserted for two weeks while teachers conducted lessons online.

Throughout the world, working people are now being told they must either sacrifice their living standards or risk their health by returning to work before it is safe.

In New Zealand, the back-to-work campaign is underpinned by the false contention that COVID-19 has been suppressed. While new case numbers have fallen in the past fortnight, the continuing risk was highlighted by the recent discovery of a new case from the Auckland Marist College cluster, bringing the total within that school community to 96.

Meanwhile, corporations that have received billions in handouts from the government are using the COVID-19 crisis as the pretext to slash jobs, wages and conditions.

The head girl of Aorere College in South Auckland, Aigagalefili Fepulea'i Tapua'i, posted on Instagram that her school's first day back was marked by students leaving so they could work to support parents who had lost jobs or were in low-paid work."

"Money is low & mouths gotta eat," she declared. "It's ironic how NZ wants to rebuild, but it's on our backs." Her post, which highlights growing class divisions, has been shared more than 5,500 times.

The trade unions are blocking any organised working class resistance. The New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI) and Post-Primary Teachers' Association

(PPTA), which opposed calls for the closure of schools before the government's lockdown in March, endorsed the reopening. The PPTA advised any members feeling "nervous" about returning to school to read their school's Health and Safety plan and talk to co-workers to see "if they have any tips."

Council of Trade Unions (CTU) president Richard Wagstaff welcomed "the opening up of our society." He advised workers to "talk with your health and safety representatives... and actively engage with your employer about issues of health and safety."

Speaking to the *Rural* on May 21, Meat Workers Union (MWU) national secretary Daryl Carran praised businesses for "abiding by all the rules and taking the necessary steps to ensure the safety of workers."

In fact, the MWU ignored a petition signed by thousands of workers calling for factories to be closed due to unsafe working conditions. At least one meatworker, at the Alliance Group's Smithfield factory, contracted the coronavirus in April, but the factory was not shut. Internationally, meat factories are major centres for the spread of the virus.

The unions' corporatist perspective is underlined by the Labour Party-affiliated E Tu union's "Rebuild Better" campaign. E Tu asserts that "workers"—meaning the union bureaucracy—"must be there as an equal partner" in the "implementation of company decisions and policies" and in government initiatives.

In plain language, as workers in every industry are made to pay for the economic crisis, the unions are playing the critical role in enforcing wage cuts, mass redundancies and unsafe working conditions.

E Tu and the Air Line Pilots Association have accepted thousands of redundancies and wage cuts at Air New Zealand. The national carrier, which is 52

percent owned by the government and has received more than \$70 million in wage subsidies plus a \$900 million government loan, confirmed on May 21 that it was laying off more than 1,300 cabin crew. E Tu called for a “better process,” while negotiating a document that will allow the company to furlough crew for three years or longer.

Fletcher Building, the country’s largest construction company, announced it will axe 1,000 jobs in New Zealand and 500 in Australia after receiving \$67.7 million from the government’s wage subsidy scheme. Fletcher has implemented a 12-week pay cut, with staff who were not working or part-time receiving just 65 percent of their pay for two weeks. Wages then drop to 50 percent for a month, and by 70 percent the following month. The Amalgamated Workers Union declared that workers were “nervous” about the future of their jobs, to justify their passive acceptance of the massive wage cuts.

The Unite union is likewise collaborating with businesses that are using the COVID-19 crisis to slash costs. Unite has for years postured as a “left-wing,” “activist” union, covering workers in the hospitality and entertainment industries. Prominent figures include Joe Carolan, a leader of the pseudo-left Socialist Aotearoa group, and Unite’s director Mike Treen, a former leader of the now defunct Socialist Action League.

Auckland casino operator SkyCity recently announced 700 redundancies, on top of 200 confirmed last month, affecting a third of its workforce. Carolan told the media that Unite had been involved in organising the redundancy package. He blamed the job cuts on a “drop in international business,” social distancing requirements and people having less money to spend.

Writing on the *Daily Blog* on May 12, Treen extolled Unite’s new three-year collective agreement with McDonald’s as a victory, saying it would help workers who want to increase their hours. If a worker quits, McDonald’s must now offer their hours to existing staff before hiring anyone new. This mechanism can, in fact, be used to reduce hiring, despite reports of fast food outlets being chronically understaffed.

Treen noted that “one disappointment” in the agreement is that the margin above the legal minimum wage for new employees is “trimmed” from 30 cents

an hour to 10 cents. While this is in the context of a recent \$1.20 increase in the minimum wage to \$18.90 per hour, it means wages for predominantly young workers remain pegged to the bare minimum for at least three more years.

McDonald’s clearly appreciates Unite’s assistance in maximising profits at the expense of workers. The company’s new staff app, used to organise rosters and provide information to workers, includes a feature that allows workers to easily join the union.

The unions no longer even nominally represent the basic interests of workers. They are an upper middle-class bureaucracy, with close ties to the Labour Party and corporations, whose aim is to defend the crisis-ridden profit system and New Zealand capitalism in particular, so as to maintain their own privileged position. As the COVID-19 crisis deepens, these organisations are playing an ever-more naked role in defending the existing order.



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