

New Zealand firefighters to hold nationwide one-hour strike

Tom Peters
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Nearly 2,000 professional firefighters and support staff in New Zealand are preparing to hold a one-hour nationwide strike on Friday, August 19. A second one-hour stoppage is scheduled for August 26.

The NZ Professional Firefighters Union (NZPFU) gave notice of the industrial action to the government agency, Fire and Emergency New Zealand (FENZ), on August 4 after negotiations on a new pay agreement, which have been going on since the end of June 2021, broke down.

In May, NZPFU members voted overwhelmingly to reject a pay offer of just 1.5 to 2 percent, the first increase since July 2020. This would have been a substantial pay cut, given the soaring cost of living; annual inflation is 7.3 percent. Out of 1,404 firefighters who voted, 1,381 approved industrial action.

Low-level industrial action began on June 13, with workers refusing to carry out administrative tasks including gathering statistics, paperwork, training and attending conferences.

The firefighters' strike vote reflects growing anger and frustration in the New Zealand working class more broadly. Internationally, prices for food, petrol and other essentials are skyrocketing—fuelled by the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, as well as supply chain and production chaos brought about by governments' refusal to take action to stop the COVID-19 pandemic.

The inflationary policies of the Labour Party-led government in New Zealand have exacerbated the cost-of-living crisis. Like its counterparts internationally, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's government responded to the pandemic by handing out tens of billions of dollars in subsidies to big businesses. At the same time, the Reserve Bank distributed billions more to the commercial banks via quantitative easing, stoking an already out-of-control housing bubble.

Firefighters are badly paid, with trainees receiving just \$22.11 an hour—barely above the minimum wage of

\$21.20. This rises to about \$28 after two years' experience, and \$31.25 after five years.

In addition to low wages, a major issue in the fire service is unsafe levels of staffing, caused by decades of underfunding by successive governments. According to Radio NZ, over the past 20 years the number of paid firefighters has fallen from 1,680 to 1,678, while New Zealand's population has increased by 28 percent. NZPFU has stated that Auckland alone needs an additional 90 firefighters to keep up with demand.

This situation has been made worse by the government's criminal decision, in late 2021, to end its COVID-19 elimination policy and allow the virus to spread across the country. Since the lifting of public health restrictions, about half the population has been infected and about 2,000 people killed by the virus.

Understaffing, along with illness, has forced fire stations to close down for periods of 24 hours or longer, including in parts of Auckland, Wellington, Porirua, Dunedin, Christchurch and other centres. This places whole towns and suburbs in significant danger, and there are warnings that a fire could lead to an avoidable tragedy.

To cover the staffing gaps, some firefighters are working up to 100 hours a week. FENZ is also increasingly relying on unpaid volunteers, of which there are 12,000 nationwide. Auckland firefighter Conrad Pentecost told Radio NZ (RNZ) that volunteers were being "called in from out of their own areas... They are not contracted to come out of those areas and work in the central city. Who is covering their areas?"

While staffing numbers have remained virtually unchanged, FENZ has given firefighters additional responsibilities. In 2014, it reached an agreement with ambulance provider St John for fire crews to be first-responders in some medical emergencies, including heart attacks, gunshot wounds and stabbings. Firefighter

Cameron Graham told RNZ this “has seen us faced with some pretty advanced trauma care and we are certainly not provided with the standard training required.”

Another long-standing problem is faulty and old equipment. Last month, Wellington’s two fire trucks with 32-metre ladders both broke down at the same time—posing a major risk in the event of a high-rise fire in the capital. The *Otago Daily Times* (ODT) reported on August 6 that there was just one operational 32-metre firefighting ladder for the entire South Island, after a second one in Christchurch “broke down due to transmission issues.”

The Ardern government is refusing to address the crisis. Internal Affairs Minister Jan Tinetti, who has responsibility for FENZ, told parliament on June 28 that Labour had “inherited a backlog of deferred expenditure” from the previous National Party government. She did not explain why, in the five years since Labour formed government in 2017, conditions have deteriorated further.

In a statement to the ODT, Tinetti said she hoped the strike could be averted. She made clear that the government is determined to continue the austerity regime, saying: “The offer that FENZ has made to union members has now exhausted their available funding.”

The NZPFU stated on August 8 that it was pushing for “guaranteed staffing, proper processes for procuring and maintaining appliances and equipment, and fair wages.” It also called for health programs to assist with occupational cancer, cardiac and other illnesses, and better training for medical responders.

The union, however, has only asked for salary increases amounting to 18 percent over three years, which would still be below inflation, and therefore a pay cut.

As is the case in schools and hospitals, the main reason why wages and conditions have remained frozen for years is the trade unions’ suppression of any opposition to austerity. These organisations have integrated themselves into management structures, working in “partnership” with employers and the government against the interests of the working class.

The NZPFU has not carried out a strike in more than two decades, having collaborated with redundancies and restructuring in the late 1990s. After announcing the upcoming, very limited hour-long strikes, the union immediately went back into negotiations with FENZ, overseen by a state mediator, in a last-ditch attempt to reach an agreement to call off the industrial action.

The NZPFU and the Council of Trade Unions, to which it is affiliated, are seeking to keep firefighters isolated

from other workers in the public sector and businesses, who all face similar attacks.

On August 9, a few days after the firefighters’ strike was announced, 145 workers at the Essity toilet paper factory in the town of Kawerau were locked out after rejecting a pay rise of just 3 percent. Since then, the corporate media and the Pulp and Paper Workers’ Union have not provided any updates, keeping workers around the country in the dark about the lockout.

About 10,000 healthcare workers held a nationwide strike in May over frozen wages and unsafe staffing levels, exacerbated by the pandemic. In June, the Public Service Association persuaded the workers to accept a deal which kept wage increases below inflation for many of these workers. Late last year, thousands of rail workers’ voted to strike, but the action was cancelled by the Rail and Maritime Transport Union, which then presented a sellout deal.

To wage a real fight against austerity, firefighters should unite with healthcare workers, teachers, transport workers and others who are facing the same attacks—in New Zealand and internationally. This requires new organisations: rank-and-file workplace committees that are controlled by workers and are independent of the pro-capitalist trade unions, which seek to divide workers and subordinate them to Labour and the parliamentary establishment.

Firefighters should reject the Labour government’s false claim that there is not enough money to properly fund what are essential, life-saving services. There is plenty of money in the coffers of the banks and big business, which must be urgently redirected into basic services such as healthcare, education and fire brigades. That requires a political struggle for a workers’ government committed to socialist policies.



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