

New Zealand firefighters hold nationwide strike

Tom Peters
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Last Friday, nearly 2,000 professional firefighters and support staff stopped work for one hour across New Zealand, in what was the first ever nationwide strike by these critical workers.

Firefighters held dozens of rallies in the main cities of Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch, and in the cities and towns of Hamilton, Dunedin, New Plymouth, Palmerston North, Rotorua, Invercargill, Tauranga, Gisborne, Napier, Hastings, Timaru, Nelson, Masterton, Whanganui, Taupo and Kawerau.

The strike points to rising anger among workers over the out-of-control cost of living, including prices for food, housing and petrol, and chronic underfunding of what is an essential, life-saving service. It follows a recent strike by 10,000 healthcare workers. On August 10, the New Zealand Herald reported that Wellington ambulance workers are also considering industrial action after rejecting a 1.5 percent pay increase.

The New Zealand Professional Firefighters Union (NZPFU) has scheduled further one-hour strikes for August 26 and September 2 and 9, which it may yet try to call off. Union secretary Wattie Watson told Radio NZ that the union hoped to “resolve the situation” in talks this week with FENZ, mediated by the Employment Relations Authority.

Talks between the union and FENZ over a new pay agreement have been dragging on for about 14 months. After firefighters rejected an initial offer of a 1.5 to 2 percent pay increase in May, FENZ presented a revised offer this month that it said would amount to an increase of between 8 and 19.1 percent over the next two years, plus a lump sum of \$2,000. The wage rise is not backdated for the past year, and only trainees, who currently receive close to the legal minimum wage, would get 19.1 percent.

Spread across 2021-2023, the new offer does not keep

up with the annual inflation rate of 7.3 percent, making it effectively a pay cut. This follows years of stagnant wages: the last pay increase, in July 2020, was between 1 and 3 percent (depending on the role). The union has asked for a pay rise of 18 percent over three years, which is still below inflation.

Internal Affairs Minister Jan Tinetti, who is responsible for FENZ, has stated that the offer cannot be increased. FENZ and the Labour Party-led government have refused to address other key concerns raised by firefighters about dangerous levels of understaffing, equipment that continually breaks down, and a lack of mental health support.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with firefighters at the rally outside the FENZ headquarters in Wellington.

A firefighter with nearly a decade of experience, Al, said FENZ was lying to the media by “saying that recruits can make \$90,000 a year.” To make this amount of money a trainee firefighter would have to work nearly 100 hours a week.

Fraser, who has been a professional firefighter for three years after volunteering for five, currently receives about \$55,000 (roughly \$26.45 an hour). He said he could get a higher-paying job as a truck driver, without the risks of cancer and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) associated with being a firefighter.

He said firefighters want FENZ “to acknowledge that these problems exist.” The agency was “refusing, point blank, to even put that in writing.”

Fraser explained that it was “not uncommon” for firefighters to work 100 hours a week due to the severe staff shortage. “Because of the nature of this job, we have to have four firefighters on a truck to be safe,” he said. “All of our operating standards are based on a crew of four, and every time we don’t have four on a

truck, that puts us at increased risk, it inhibits our response, because we have to alter our tactics. It's frustrating and it's putting property and lives in danger."

Since May this year, he said, there have been 40 separate shifts in which Wellington City Fire Station has been unable to fully staff its vehicles.

Asked how the crisis had got so bad, Fraser blamed FENZ for mismanagement and prioritising the wrong areas. Across the country, for instance, the fire service only has five operational 32-metre ladders. Like other equipment, these appliances are not properly maintained and are constantly breaking down. One of Wellington's two high-reaching ladders has been out of order for about two-and-a-half years.

He expected the next strike to go ahead on August 26, saying the firefighters' strong support for such action "is a reflection of the frustration we have from not being acknowledged or valued by this organisation."

Bill, who has been a firefighter for 39 years, said he was concerned about trucks repeatedly breaking down. Bill explained that his fire truck, which is 21-years-old, broke down while the crew was at the scene of a fire, creating a "really dangerous" situation. "We've got two guys on the end of a hose that rely on having a constant supply of water to protect them, and they couldn't do that." The crew had to call in another truck to assist them.

He believed the problem was the way FENZ was prioritising its spending. He said the agency had purchased "heaps of new trucks," but these had proven unfit for purpose and broken down, forcing fire crews to rely on the older vehicles.

Bill added that COVID-19 was making staffing problems worse: "Guys are doing 70 to 80 hours a week to try and keep trucks on the run. Trucks are coming off the run regularly."

The Labour government abandoned its elimination strategy for COVID-19 late last year, and has progressively removed public health restrictions, allowing the virus to spread across the country. This criminal decision, which was imposed on workers with the collaboration of the trade unions, has led to millions of infections and about 2,000 deaths from the virus, so far.

While firefighters are determined to fight, the NZPFU has offered unspecified concessions to FENZ in an

attempt to call off the strike action. On August 17 the union revealed that it had "presented an amended set of claims which significantly reduced the overall cost of the NZPFU claim," but FENZ did not respond.

The union bureaucracy shares responsibility for the present crisis, having suppressed opposition from workers for decades. Workers across the country and internationally are facing the same attacks on wages and conditions, but the unions are doing everything possible to keep them isolated from each other and to prevent any movement against the Labour government and big business.

As firefighters were striking, 145 workers in Kawerau remained locked out by toilet paper manufacturer Essity. The company is trying to force them to accept a below-inflation pay rise, and the Pulp and Paper Workers' Union has remained virtually silent on the dispute for the past two weeks.

More struggles are inevitable as workers across all industries confront soaring living costs and unsafe conditions, made worse by the rampant spread of COVID.

The Socialist Equality Group calls on workers to form rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions and Labour and its allies, in order to link up the emerging struggles in a unified fight against government and corporate austerity. Workers must reject the lies that there is not enough funding for hospitals, schools, the fire service and other vital services, and take up the fight for a socialist program to reorganise society, so that resources can be used to meet human needs, not to expand the profits of the super-rich.



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