

# New Zealand firefighters hold second one-hour strike

Tom Peters

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Around 2,000 firefighters and support staff employed by Fire and Emergency New Zealand (FENZ) stopped work for one hour yesterday, following a nationwide strike a week earlier. More stoppages are scheduled for September 2 and 9.

Firefighters again held protest rallies in all the major cities—Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch—and in Dunedin, Palmerston North, Masterton, Hamilton, Invercargill, Nelson, Tauranga, Taupo, Rotorua, Napier, Hastings, Wanganui, Gisborne, Timaru, New Plymouth and Kawerau.

Passing motorists tooted and members of the public joined the protests in support. The firefighters are striking, for the first time in decades, to fight back against low wages and unsafe working conditions, which affect broad layers of the working class, in New Zealand and internationally.

Annual inflation is 7.3 percent, meaning anything less is a pay cut. FENZ's offer would give most firefighters about 4 percent per year and does not address staffing and health and safety concerns.

The NZ Professional Firefighters Union (NZPFU) said its negotiators last met with FENZ management on August 11 and the agency “is refusing to meet before its application for facilitation is heard by the Employment Relations Authority on the 12th and 13th of September.”

Jan Tinetti, the Labour Party-led government minister responsible for FENZ, feigned sympathy for the firefighters, telling the *Sun Live* website yesterday that their “significant welfare concerns... need to be addressed with urgency. I have been working with both FENZ and NZPFU to try and find a forward.”

However, Tinetti stated: “The offer FENZ has made to union members has now exhausted their available funding.” The agency is funded through insurance

levies and the government has so far refused to provide more funding.

*World Socialist Web Site* reporters spoke with firefighters on strike and protesting in Newtown, Wellington.

Graeme, who has 31 years of experience, said the fire service has never been in a worse state. “My main concern is the equipment that we’ve got,” he said. “We keep going to jobs where our trucks are breaking down,” and not enough tall ladders mean that “we can’t rescue people from buildings that we historically would have been able to do.”

He said management were highly paid, while firefighters are “struggling to maintain staffing levels” by working long overtime hours. “I’ve probably been doing between 14 and 28 hours extra a week, but there’s guys doing lots more than that.”

On some weekends, Graeme said, trucks are running with only two crew members, instead of the four required to operate safely, “and our bosses are saying to the public: ‘There’s nothing to see here, we’re still getting a truck to get to a fire within seven or eight minutes.’ However, they can’t do any rescues until another truck arrives, which might be another three or four minutes.”

Regarding wages, Graeme explained that the FENZ is misleadingly saying that it is offering up to 18 percent over two years, but this only applies to new recruits who make close to the minimum wage.

He called on the government to “put some pressure on FENZ management to sort out all the issues that we have.” These included a lack of support for firefighters with cancer, an occupational hazard that FENZ does not recognise. “At my station here at Newtown, I know at least three firefighters that have had testicular cancer before the age of 40,” Graeme said.

Dom, who has worked at Newtown fire station for three-and-a-half years, noted that “the World Health Organisation has recently identified firefighting as a class one carcinogen. We are at much higher risk of getting cancer, and at this stage we don’t get any support, even if we can clearly relate it to a job that we’ve attended over the years. We have a lot of people fighting for their lives having to try to fight to get some sort of support through FENZ.”

He added that “we want a mental health program” to monitor firefighters’ mental health throughout their careers. “At the moment we can access counsellors, but we need something a bit more substantial than that.”

Staffing was “dangerously” low, Dom said, “because the salary, and the job as a whole, does not look that appealing. Most of our guys who come in to do their training, are taking a significant pay cut. We need better pay, we need better working conditions, to get the people that we need.”

Firefighters around the country raised similar issues. Auckland firefighter Jason Orchard told Radio NZ that the Devonport, Parnell, Onehunga and Papakura stations have been temporarily forced to close due to understaffing, placing communities in danger.

Speaking of the stress associated with attending medical emergencies, Orchard said: “We’ve lost firefighters due to suicide. Firefighters are walking around with things inside their heads which they simply cannot unsee and it’s there for a very long time.”

The Newtown, Wellington rally was attended by a group of Green Party MPs, including co-leader Marama Davidson. In a statement, Green MP Jan Logie called on FENZ to “agree to give our firefighters the pay, equipment, and conditions they deserve.” The party has also proposed an “independent review” of the agency. The Greens, however, are an integral part of the Labour-led government and have supported its austerity budgets.

The NZPFU, for its part, is limiting strike action to one-hour, once a week, and has made clear that it is willing to compromise on pay. The union previously asked for 18 percent over three years, which would be a wage freeze or a cut, depending on inflation.

Union vice-president Joe Stanley told Today FM that firefighters are so poorly paid that some are relying on food banks. Despite this, he claimed that “firefighters are not as concerned about the pay as we are about our

health and safety, our wellbeing, and our emotional safety when we go to the incidents that we attend. We’ve said that to FENZ all the way through.”

Firefighters, however, cannot accept another two years of stagnant pay in the face of soaring living costs. To take forward the fight for decent wages, a major boost in staffing and safe, properly-functioning equipment, firefighters must break through the isolation imposed by the unions. They must unite with other workers, including healthcare workers who are overwhelmed dealing with COVID-19 cases, and the 145 Essity workers in Kawerau, who have been locked out for three weeks after rejecting a below-inflation pay deal.

This requires the building of new rank-and-file workplace committees, independent of the unions and controlled by workers themselves. Such organisations will provide the basis for a mass movement fighting to put an end to government and corporate austerity, and for a workers’ government and the socialist reorganisation of society.



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