New Zealand university staff hold nationwide strike

Tom Peters
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About 7,000 lecturers, researchers, tutors and non-academic staff at New Zealand's eight universities held a half-day strike on October 6 to demand decent pay increases that keep up with the soaring cost of living.

Protest rallies took place at Auckland University, Auckland University of Technology (AUT), Massey University, Waikato University, Victoria University of Wellington (VUW), Canterbury University, Lincoln University and Otago University. Staff were joined by significant numbers of students and other supporters.

According to the Tertiary Education Union (TEU), its members, and university-based members of the Public Service Association and E t? union, voted 87 percent in favour of strike action. This is an indication of the immense anger that has built up over decades of underfunding, pro-business restructuring, constant waves of staff cuts and years of stagnant wages.

The unions have called for an 8 percent pay increase, which is barely above the annual inflation rate of 7.3 percent. At present, pay offers are significantly below inflation: Auckland University, for instance, has offered 9 percent spread across two years.

The crisis facing higher education has worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to a precipitous drop in international student numbers. While the details vary in different institutions, pay has essentially been frozen and hundreds of staff have been laid off over the past two years. Job cuts are continuing, with AUT recently announcing 230 redundancies.

Last Thursday's strike is part of an upsurge in the class struggle internationally in opposition to soaring living costs driven by the pandemic, the state bailouts of big business, and the US-NATO war with Russia over Ukraine. Thousands of university workers have taken strike action in Britain and Australia, among other countries.

The New Zealand strike coincided with week-long action by thousands of nurses, who refused to work extra shifts to protest against a pay cut and dangerous levels of understaffing. Firefighters have also held nationwide strikes after rejecting a below-inflation pay offer.

According to *Stuff*, Education Minister Chris Hipkins "was reluctant to give a viewpoint on the strike action, given the government didn't employ university staff and were not a part of the bargaining process." Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said: "We have increased the subsidy rate from central government in order to support universities with their additional costs."

In fact, the Labour Party-led government is starving essential services, including education, in order to maintain low taxes for the rich and to force the working class to pay for tens of billions of dollars in subsidies for big business over the past two years. This year, the government increased tuition and training subsidies for tertiary education by just 2.75 percent, well below the inflation rate. Labour has reneged on its 2017 election pledge to fund three years of free tertiary education; domestic students are eligible for just one year of fees-free study.

A lecturer in the VUW Centre for Science in Society, who attended Thursday's rally, told the WSWS: "There's been a persistent failure to recognise that university staff have been overworked for many years and that workloads increased during the pandemic because of things like moving online, the pressure of family life, the general anxiety of existing during the pandemic."

Tutors, paid as little as $22.22 an hour, have been offered a zero increase from VUW for the next two years. The lecturer said: "I just want to point out the irony that the university markets its degrees as valuable

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and competitive to students, [who] pay tens of thousands of dollars to get a qualification from one of New Zealand's leading universities." Then VUW "turns around and pays [close to the] minimum wage" to postgraduate students who become tutors.

Dolores Janiewski, a lecturer in the VUW history department, said she was most concerned about tutors, "the lowest paid and most precarious staff members." She believed the university leadership viewed staff "as a cost, and the fewer of us the better because the books look better, even though that isn't necessarily delivering quality education. Attrition and voluntary redundancy are part of the problem: there are fewer people having to do just as much work, and as a result workloads are getting bigger, and there aren't people to do it."

Janiewski said VUW's decision to dock its workers' pay for the duration of the 4.5 hour strike was "antagonising staff even further" and showed that the university did not understand how staff work. She would still have to do the same amount of work to prepare for her upcoming lectures.

She questioned the claims that there is not enough money for a meaningful pay increase, saying: "I would really like to know how much money is being used on central administration, and what the salary scales are. What are the overheads? How much do the faculties have to subsidise the central administration?" Janiewski also said the national strike action was sending a message to the government, and she called for funding per student to increase.

Across the country, striking workers made similar statements. Radio NZ reported that one Auckland University staff member said: "They told us things would be tight during COVID, and then they've told us about all the profit they made… Over the last few years, in real terms, our pay has maybe fallen by 17 percent." The university reportedly made an after tax profit of $100 million last year.

The strike revealed determination among university workers to fight for decent pay and conditions for themselves and for students. The government and university administrations, however, are relying on the unions to limit the action as much as possible and to prevent university staff from linking their struggle with that of healthcare workers, firefighters, schoolteachers and others who face the same assault on their standard of living.

The TEU's leadership, which supports the Labour-Greens government, has called for tripartite talks with Minister Hipkins and the universities to resolve the dispute.

Highlighting the role the union has played in keeping wages down, TEU national secretary Sandra Grey told Newshub on October 4 that over the past two years it has accepted "the lowest pay increases of any workers in New Zealand, because we actually said to our employers: we understand COVID's hard on the universities and on the polytechnics, and we did our bit."

The immense anger among workers forced the TEU to call a nationwide strike for the first time in 20 years. However, the union's current wage claim would still keep wages basically frozen relative to the cost of living and do nothing to make up for more than a decade of cuts.

A recent study commissioned by the TEU found that salaries fell by 10 percent at the University of Otago, 12.2 percent at Canterbury and 17 percent at Auckland University between 2007 and 2021. During this time, there were no nationwide strikes and the union bureaucracy's typical response was to accept job and wage cuts as necessary.

This record shows that any real fight against austerity requires new workers' organisations, independent of the union bureaucracy, the Labour Party and their pseudo-left allies. The Socialist Equality Group calls on workers to form rank-and-file committees in universities which will fight to link their fight with that of students and other workers throughout the country and internationally—not just against the university administrations, but against the entire capitalist system which subordinates education to the interests of big business.

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