

50,000 New Zealand teachers prepare for nationwide strike against pay cuts

Tom Peters**13 March 2023**

In New Zealand's first major industrial action of 2023, 50,000 teachers at public schools will hold a nationwide one-day strike on March 16, after rejecting proposed wage-cutting agreements from the Labour Party-led government.

This is only the second time the primary and secondary teacher unions, the Post-Primary Teachers Association (PPTA) and NZEI Te Riu Roa, have approved joint strike action. For the first time, they will also be joined by kindergarten teachers.

The last teachers' strike, on May 29, 2019, was part of an international upsurge of working-class struggles that was temporarily interrupted by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

This Thursday's action also comes amid an increasingly powerful wave of strikes and protests around the world. Workers are being driven into struggle by soaring living costs and government austerity, aimed at financing tax cuts for the rich and expanding military spending.

Educators are playing a key role. In the UK, more than 200,000 teachers recently took strike action, demanding a 12 percent pay rise. Mass teacher strikes have also erupted in Portugal, where food prices have increased by 20 percent. In France, around three million workers held a general strike earlier this month against pension cuts—the country's largest strike since 1968.

New Zealand teachers have overwhelmingly rejected below-inflation pay offers from the Ministry of Education. PPTA members were offered lump sum payments totalling \$6,000 spread over two years, while NZEI members declined an initial \$4,000 payment, followed by a \$2,000 payment or 3 percent increase (whichever was higher) in December 2023.

Consumer prices have risen by 7.2 percent, and food

prices by 12 percent over the past year. For a secondary teacher with a few years' experience currently on \$70,000 a year, the pay offer equates to just over 4 percent per annum, a major real wage cut.

Beginner primary teachers who currently receive just \$51,358 a year—\$1.99 more per hour than the minimum wage—were offered 7.8 percent in the first year, effectively a wage freeze. The most experienced teachers would only get 7.6 percent spread over two years.

Prime Minister Chris Hipkins has called on the unions to cancel the strike and "get back around the table with the Ministry of Education so that we can find a way forward." He feigned sympathy for teachers, telling Radio NZ, "We acknowledge... some of the issues that they're raising, including around workload."

In fact, the Labour government is responsible for driving down wages and conditions across the education sector. Following the 2019 strike, the PPTA and NZEI pushed through sellout agreements, in the face of significant rank-and-file opposition. Secondary teachers received just 3 percent per year for three years, with primary teachers getting slightly more. This was an effective pay freeze, which Hipkins, who was then the education minister, described as the "benchmark" for public sector pay increases.

As well as cutting pay, the ministry's latest offer did not address the understaffed, overcrowded classrooms and impossible workloads facing teachers—made worse by constant illnesses due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Labour government has abandoned any pretence of seeking to stop the spread of the deadly virus. Schools were fully reopened last year for in-person learning, with the crucial assistance of the unions, which worked with the government and businesses to

dismantle public health measures.

COVID-19 has spread like wildfire through schools: data released in December showed that 41 percent of teachers had contracted the virus at least once, the highest infection rate of any occupational group.

Understaffing is a major component of the crisis in schools. Wellington teacher Natasha told parenting blogger Emily Writes: “I turned down the offer because it did not, at all, address our most pressing issues such as support for tamariki [children] with extra learning issues. They did not address lowering class sizes, adequate release time to plan for lessons, nor did they address providing the funding to support the ever growing needs of our tamariki.”

There is widespread public support for the teachers, reflecting the fact that all workers are facing similar attacks on their living standards. A popular comment on the *New Zealand Herald* Facebook page, which received 182 likes, stated: “If you had kids during lockdown, you could agree [teachers] need more. Not only that, some teachers act as counsellors and social workers for the students and parents. I back all the teachers 100%. They raise our children too.”

The trade union leaders, however, are reprising their role in 2019. The PPTA previously called for a 7.3 percent pay increase in the first year of the agreement, which would be a pay freeze, while NZEI has not publicly called for a specific figure.

NZEI president Mark Potter said on March 10: “Strike action is the last thing we want to do, but members want to send a message to the government.” The bureaucracy has called the one-day strike to let off steam, after which it will resume behind-the-scenes negotiations to stitch up another sellout agreement.

The New Zealand ruling class is deliberately driving up unemployment through higher interest rates, pushing down real wages, and starving public services, including health and education, in order to make working people bear the cost for the economic crisis.

Workers can only fight back against this ruthless austerity agenda if they rebel against the official unions. These are not genuine workers’ organisations but privileged upper-middle class bureaucracies whose role is to divide workers and subordinate them to the dictates of the Labour government and big business.

The Socialist Equality Group calls on teachers and other school staff to form rank-and-file committees,

controlled democratically by workers and independent of the union bureaucracy. The aim of these new organisations should be to expand the present struggle by uniting teachers with parents, students and workers in the healthcare, transport, food processing and other industries.

Teachers should also link up with university staff, who held a nationwide strike last October. The movement was subsequently broken up by the Tertiary Education Union, which imposed below-inflation pay deals at three universities.

In opposition to the nationalism promoted by the unions, rank-and-file committees would also provide the means for teachers to unite with their counterparts in Australia, the Pacific and other parts of the world in a coordinated global struggle against capitalism.

Public education is under attack in every country because it is incompatible with the demands of the profit system for intensified exploitation of workers, and the diversion of society’s resources into military spending for war against Russia and China.

The only way to defeat this agenda is through the political fight for socialism. Tens of billions of dollars are urgently needed to provide high-quality, free and accessible education to all, with fully-resourced schools and highly-paid teachers and support staff.

Funding is also needed to immediately bring back a scientific COVID-19 elimination strategy. There can be no compromise on measures needed to protect the lives and health of teachers, students and their families.

All claims by the Labour government and its allies that these measures are not affordable are lies. The money must be expropriated from the massive wealth hoarded by the banks and major corporations which have profited from the government’s bailouts, subsidies and ultra-low taxes. All spending on the military and the bloated intelligence agencies must also be redirected to healthcare, education and other vital social programs.



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