

Teachers strike across New Zealand over crisis in schools

Tom Peters
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About 50,000 primary, secondary and kindergarten teachers held a one-day strike yesterday in New Zealand, shutting down public schools nationwide, after rejecting wage-cutting offers from the Labour Party-led government. The strike was the country's first major industrial action of 2023 and, with about one percent of the population taking part, the largest since the 2019 teachers' strike.

More than 10,000 teachers and supporters marched down Queen Street in Auckland. About 2,000 rallied outside parliament in Wellington, and thousands more held protests in Christchurch, Hamilton, Tauranga, Dunedin and several other cities and towns.

New Zealand workers are joining a renewed wave of strikes and protests internationally, as the working class seeks to fight back against plummeting real wages and austerity measures to force them to shoulder the burden of the economic crisis.

At the same time as the NZ strike, 400,000 workers, including 200,000 teachers, walked off the job in Britain. One day earlier, hundreds of thousands of public sector workers in Sri Lanka went on strike, and in recent weeks there have been mass strikes in France and Portugal, among other countries.

New Zealand teachers have rejected an offer from the Ministry of Education consisting of lump sum payments of \$6,000 over the next two years, with an additional \$1,300 in one-off payments for primary teachers. For most teachers, this is a substantial real wage cut. Food prices increased by 12 percent in the last year and overall inflation is 7.2 percent.

Teachers are also deeply concerned about chronic understaffing, large class sizes and the lack of resources for students with high needs.

Outside parliament yesterday, Labour's Education Minister Jan Tinetti posed as a supporter of teachers.

She told the gathered strikers: "I know that we have to do better and I commit to you that we will do better... We value you, we absolutely see you and we hear you."

The minister was largely drowned out by boos and chants of "Walk the talk!" Earlier in the day, she defended the wage-cutting proposal, telling One News and Radio NZ it was a "reasonable offer."

Tinetti is a former school principal and was on the national executive of the primary teachers' union, NZEI Te Riu Roa, before becoming a politician in 2017. Standing next to Tinetti on parliament's steps was Labour MP Angela Roberts, who was president of the Post-Primary Teachers Association (PPTA), the secondary union, from 2013 to 2017.

The union bureaucracies' closeness to the Labour government underscores their role as adjuncts of the capitalist state, to wear down workers and convince them that they have no alternative to accepting a sellout. In 2019, the unions imposed an agreement that effectively froze pay against inflation and did nothing to address the staffing crisis, despite widespread opposition from the rank-and-file.

The pandemic has resulted in a further dramatic deterioration in working conditions. Last year, the NZEI and PPTA played a critical role in reopening schools, allowing COVID-19 to spread out of control as the Labour government dismantled public health measures.

After yesterday's strike, the unions announced they would go straight back into talks with the Ministry. PPTA president Chris Abercrombie told Radio NZ: "I can guarantee there won't be any strike action next week." Negotiations for a new contract for secondary teachers have already dragged on more than nine months.

The dispute has major implications for all workers.

The ruling class is relying on the unions to impose a deal that will serve as a benchmark to drive down wages across the public and private sectors.

Members of the Socialist Equality Group spoke to some striking teachers outside parliament and distributed a WSWS article warning of a sellout and calling on school staff to establish rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, in order to expand the strike to other sections of the working class.

John, a former IT worker who has been teaching for three years in Porirua, a working class area north of Wellington, said the job was “more than just 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., it’s the evenings and the weekends as well. You have to put a lot of work in that people don’t see.”

He described the current offer as “in reality, a pay cut” adding: “One of the biggest problems for beginning teachers is that the wages are so low, it puts people off coming into the profession. I was quite lucky because I had previous work experience, but for teachers who are coming straight from university, it’s a struggle for them to survive.”

Teachers also needed more resources to address issues related to broader social inequality. “The experiences students are going through in their everyday life are reflected in the classroom as well,” John said. The widening gap between the resources available to schools in rich and poor areas raised fundamental questions: “What is the point of education? Are we happy with the way it’s going at the moment, where it only really serves the few, or do we want to bring everyone up?”

Mr Mataele, a science teacher in the Hutt Valley with eight years’ experience, said his family was struggling with rising living costs, including for housing and childcare. His school was forced to look overseas for staff because young people did not see teaching as a viable job. “We are struggling to get teachers, particularly in specialised fields like Physics. Looking to the future, when some of our elderly teachers retire, who’s going to replace them? We need young teachers.”

Miss Tuitupou, who teaches in Porirua, said one problem was the high salaries paid to politicians, who were out of touch with the rest of the population. “When teachers have children of their own, how can they make enough to live? Right now we just work,

work, work to survive, we don’t work to have a comfortable life.”

She said even before COVID, young people and their families faced “many financial hardships and the complications of disease, sickness. We can’t fix everything in the classroom.” She called for more teacher aides to assist high-needs students and reduce the burden on teachers.

Molly, an English and Religious Studies teacher, similarly said: “We’ve got increasing neurodiversity, kids with behavioural issues, and the learning support funding isn’t there to help them achieve their best. We need more funding for specialist learning support teachers and better incomes for classroom teachers so that more people join the profession and we can lower class ratios.”

Commenting on the impact of the pandemic, a digital technology teacher in Wellington told the WSWS: “After the government’s COVID response changed to ‘nothing’s wrong, go on with your lives,’ which has never been the case, many of us not only need to teach *both* in the classroom and online. We now have to defensively plan our courses and materials in case we ever have to lockdown again. It’s exhausting. I’m spending more time doing file management than teaching.”

In addition, teachers had to “scramble to catch up when all the kids are sick, when the teachers are sick, and when both parties are not running at full charge for weeks or months after infection. It’s unfair to everybody, but for the government, it’s business as usual. The lack of support and meaningful direction is stressful on us, the kids, and wh?nau [families].”



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