

New Zealand high school teachers hold second one-day strike

Tom Peters
29 March 2023

About 20,000 secondary teachers at public schools in New Zealand held a nationwide strike yesterday. It followed a much larger one-day strike on March 16 involving 50,000 primary, secondary and kindergarten teachers.

New Zealand teachers are joining a growing wave of strikes internationally. The working class is being driven into struggle as governments divert ever greater sums of money from public services to prop up the financial elite and to pay for the expanding US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, and preparations for war against China.

In France, millions of workers are protesting against the Macron government's move to cut pensions using dictatorial methods. In Sri Lanka, the government has threatened to ban teachers from striking as it implements brutal spending cuts demanded by the International Monetary Fund. In Los Angeles, 65,000 school workers recently held a three-day strike against poverty-level wages, and the union bureaucracy is now seeking to ram through a sellout.

Educators in New Zealand are coming into conflict with the Labour Party government, which is presiding over the worst cost of living crisis in decades and severely under-staffed, under-resourced schools.

According to the Post-Primary Teachers' Association (PPTA), the government's offer of \$6,000 spread across two years, which teachers overwhelmingly rejected, equates to just 4.4 percent this year and 2.1 percent next year—well below the 7.2 percent inflation rate and the 12 percent increase in food prices in the past year. Given that teachers have not had a pay increase since mid-2021, the offer amounts to a 10 percent real wage cut.

The unions, however, are seeking to demobilise and divide school staff, and to prevent them from unifying

with other sections of the working class who are facing the same attacks.

The primary teachers' union, NZEI, refused to allow its members to join yesterday's strike. Union officials spent the day in closed talks with the Ministry of Education.

A Facebook post by NZEI declaring its "solidarity" with secondary teachers provoked frustrated responses. Sarah commented: "If it's collective solidarity I would have liked to be on strike with them too. We're getting so many questions in our branch about why we aren't or what's next and as an exec member I've got no updates to give them. The momentum was built and our members feel like it's going nowhere."

Dozens of teachers agreed, with one writing: "Even have had parents asking why we're not striking too." Others said there had been no communication from the NZEI about the ongoing negotiations.

For its part, the PPTA avoided a repeat of the March 16 strike, in which more than 10,000 teachers and supporters demonstrated in Auckland and thousands more in Wellington, Christchurch and other centres. The union did not call any mass rallies or protests yesterday; teachers instead held small pickets by the roadside, outside MPs' offices and Ministry of Education offices and train stations.

The union is promoting illusions in the Labour government. The day before the strike, PPTA leader Chris Abercrombie told *One News* there had been "some really positive movement forward" and "great discussion" with the Ministry of Education, without giving any details to support this claim.

Education Minister Jan Tinetti, herself a former union bureaucrat, poured cold water on any prospect of a significant pay rise. She told Radio NZ, "we can't get everything right in one bargaining round, it's a really

tough economic environment.”

The ruling elite are seeking to impose the worsening economic crisis on workers. The Reserve Bank is hiking interest rates to push up unemployment and drive down wages. Meanwhile the Labour government is cutting spending on healthcare and refusing to increase taxes on the rich and the banks, which have made record profits during the pandemic.

There is widespread anger and willingness to fight among teachers. Speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site* before the strike, a Lower Hutt high school teacher said he did not expect a better offer from the government. “They keep saying there’s no money, I don’t have a good feeling about it,” he said.

In addition to low pay, he said teachers faced a “really hard job” with too many students facing serious learning difficulties. “There’s a lot of neurodiverse students in class and some of them are not diagnosed,” he said. Poverty and inequality also placed immense stress on students and teachers because “we can’t change what’s going on at home.” He called for more support, including teacher aides, who are extremely low-paid but were excluded by the unions from the recent strikes.

The teacher also explained that COVID-19 affected many people in the school over the past year, and his wife still has a persistent cough after getting the virus more than a month ago.

The unions are complicit in the rampant spread of coronavirus over the past year. They enforced the reopening of schools for in-person learning and echoed the lies of the Labour government that children would not be severely impacted.

In May last year, Chris Hipkins, then the education minister and now the prime minister, told *Newsroom* there was too much “catastrophising going on around COVID-19” and “I really don’t think parents should be as anxious about that as some are.”

In fact, since the government abandoned its previous Zero-COVID policy in late 2021, nearly 3,000 children under 10 years old, and another 900 between 10 and 19 years old, have been hospitalised for COVID-19. Overall, more than 3,000 people in NZ have died from the virus.

The teachers’ struggle has major implications for the entire working class. As was the case in 2019, when the education unions imposed an effective wage freeze

after a nationwide strike, the government intends to set a benchmark for all workers by driving down teachers’ wages.

To fight back against this agenda, the Socialist Equality Group calls on teachers to rebel against the trade unions, which are seeking to demobilise them and impose another sellout.

Education workers must take control of their struggle, and fight to expand it, by building rank-and-file committees in every workplace. This will provide a mechanism to overcome the divisions imposed by the unions, and to unite with workers in healthcare, manufacturing, transportation and other industries—as well as the hundreds of thousands of striking teachers in the US, Europe, Australia and other parts of the world.

Teachers’ demands must be determined not by what governments claim they can afford, but by the urgent requirements of the entire working class for a high-quality and well-funded public education system. This entails a political fight for the reorganisation of society along socialist lines, including the redistribution of billions of dollars from the coffers of the super-rich and into the school system.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact