

New Zealand teacher strikes continue

Tom Peters
10 May 2023

About 20,000 high school teachers in New Zealand have taken strike action this week, with different parts of the country stopping work on different days. This follows a one-day strike on March 16, involving 50,000 primary, secondary and kindergarten teachers, and another strike by just high school teachers on March 29.

Teachers have overwhelmingly rejected below-inflation pay offers from the Labour Party-led government. The Post-Primary Teachers' Association (PPTA) has been in negotiations with the Ministry of Education for more than 10 months following the expiration of a previous employment agreement.

On Monday, the PPTA said its leadership would consider a new offer of 11 percent spread across three years, which is still a pay cut in real terms. The union's Chris Abercrombie told Radio NZ the Ministry had "remixed" their previous offer; the new proposal also removes paid non-contact hours for part-time teachers and contains less funding for pastoral care staffing.

The offer falls well below the average 7.7 percent increase in household living costs in the 12 months to March, and the 12.5 percent increase in food prices in the past year.

The government has proposed nothing to address the staffing crisis in schools, made worse by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The trade unions are complicit in the rampant spread of COVID, having supported the unsafe reopening of schools last year and the lifting of all public health restrictions.

According to the PPTA's latest annual staffing survey, one third of advertised teacher positions are not being filled. Out of 127 principals who responded to the survey, one in four said they had cancelled classes because they could not find a specialist teacher, and nearly half said they were employing untrained or unqualified teachers because they could not find trained and qualified staff.

Significantly, the government's new offer to teachers was made on the same day that it announced a \$747 million increase in funding for the military over the next four years. This includes an immediate 10 percent average boost to Defence Force wages in a desperate attempt to reduce attrition. Since 2017 the Labour government has spent \$4.7 billion on new military hardware.

As is happening internationally, funding is being diverted from health, education and other vital public services to prepare for imperialist war. New Zealand's ruling elite is supporting the escalating US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, and is preparing to join the US and Australia in what would be an even more devastating war against China.

The government is due to announce an austerity budget next week, as it seeks to reduce total spending from 35 percent of gross domestic product to around 30 percent. Labour is relying heavily on the trade unions to prevent any organised working class opposition to its right-wing agenda.

This can be seen in the conduct of the teachers' dispute, where the unions are seeking to divide workers. The primary teachers' union NZEI Te Riu Roa refused to call a strike this week for its 30,000 members (except those in area schools, which combine primary and secondary year levels).

On April 17, NZEI presented primary teachers with a pay offer amounting to 11 to 14 percent, spread across three years. Union spokesperson Barb Curran told the media: "The NZEI negotiations team believe this is a reasonable offer in the current economic climate," which provoked several angry comments on the union's Facebook page.

One teacher declared: "Essentially over the 3 years it will be a pay cut... If the deal is accepted, it will only be because teachers feel completely unheard and hopeless." They described a proposal to reduce some

class sizes by 2025 by just one student as a “joke.”

Another teacher commented: “Not happy [with] the way NZEI is selling this. Insult to many teachers’ intelligence... we do teach math you know.”

The NZEI has not announced the outcome of voting on the offer, which was drawn out over a three week period. Education Minister Jan Tinetti has said she expects to know the result later this week.

The PPTA is calling for an offer that matches inflation, which would still be an effective pay freeze for teachers. The bureaucracy’s aim is to repeat what it did following a nationwide strike in 2019, when the NZEI initially pushed through a sellout, which the PPTA then used to demoralise and isolate secondary teachers, placing pressure on them to accept a similar deal that failed to address low wages and the staffing crisis.

The unions have also kept teachers divided from other sections of workers. Thousands of nurses and other health workers protested across the country on April 15, demanding action to address the catastrophic staffing crisis that is endangering lives in hospitals. The New Zealand Nurses Organisation, however, refused to call a strike over the crisis.

The Labour government’s deepening assault on living standards, working conditions and the public services calls for a unified industrial and political fightback by the entire working class. But this requires a rebellion against the trade unions that are seeking to suppress and sell out teachers and other workers.

The Socialist Equality Group calls on primary and secondary teachers, and all school staff, to build new organisations, rank-and-file committees, that will fight to overcome the divisions imposed by the unions. These committees would seek support from parents to expand the teachers’ struggle to other sections of the working class, including healthcare workers and university staff, who face hundreds of job cuts and an ongoing wage freeze.

In addition to wage increases well above the rate of inflation, teachers should demand an end to the union-backed policy of mass infection from COVID-19, which is endangering the lives of children, staff and their families.

Rank-and-file committees controlled by workers themselves would also forge links with workers in Australia, France, the United States and other parts of

the world who are facing the same struggles against corporate and government austerity.

The unions and the Labour government tell workers they must sacrifice because of “the current economic climate.” What this really means is that working people must bear the full burden of the worsening crisis of capitalism and fund the expansion of the military to take part in World War III. Meanwhile, as recent statistics have shown, the super-rich in New Zealand have amassed unprecedented wealth, much of which is untaxed.

We call on teachers, school staff and students to take up the fight for socialism, in opposition to the entire political establishment and its servants in the pro-capitalist unions. The profits of the banks and major corporations, and the money wasted on the military, must be redistributed to fund schools, hospitals, and other vital services, and to eliminate poverty and inequality.



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