

New Zealand teachers reject union-backed sellout

Tom Peters
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A majority of New Zealand's 30,000 primary school teachers in public schools have voted to reject a union-backed offer that would have slashed their wages in real terms, while doing nothing to address the crisis of understaffing in schools.

The result was announced on May 12 following three weeks of voting by NZEI Te Riu Roa union members on what was the third pay offer from the Ministry of Education. The union refused to release the breakdown of the voting.

After rejecting previous below-inflation offers, more than 50,000 primary, secondary and early childhood teachers held a nationwide strike on March 16—the country's largest-ever education strike. This was part of a wave of strikes internationally by teachers, healthcare workers and other sections of the working class, in response to soaring living costs and decades of funding cuts to public services.

The unions, however, have sought to block any movement against the Labour Party government's austerity agenda. After the March 16 strike, NZEI went back into talks with the government and refused to allow primary teachers to join subsequent strikes by their high school colleagues.

The deal presented by NZEI for voting in April was a blatant sellout. It included pay rises of 11 to 14 percent over three years, at a time when household living costs have increased 7.7 percent and food prices have surged by 12.5 percent in the past year alone. The last time teachers had a pay rise was July 2021.

In an effort to pressure teachers that they had no alternative to accepting the deal, union spokesperson Barb Curran declared on April 17: "The NZEI negotiations team believe this is a reasonable offer in the current economic climate."

She hailed a slight increase in classroom release time

for teachers, and a promise that class sizes will be reduced, by just one student, by 2025—a proposal which, even if it goes ahead, is grossly inadequate given the scale of understaffing and overcrowding.

Primary teachers' rejection of this sellout points to growing anger and militancy in the working class, which is being told by the unions that it must sacrifice for the good of the "economy." The Labour government is preparing to announce a budget on Thursday that will impose austerity across the public sector, while refusing to increase taxes on the super-rich, who have amassed unprecedented profits and levels of wealth in recent years.

The NZEI has announced it will survey members on possible industrial action. At the same time, Curran told the media "we want to resume negotiations" with the government.

Education Minister Jan Tinetti, who chaired the NZEI Principals Council before she entered parliament, has not commented on the primary teachers' rejection of the latest offer. Following this month's strike action by secondary teachers, Tinetti told the media, "we can't fix everything teachers want sorted in a single round of bargaining."

On social media, many people applauded teachers for rejecting the sellout. Kat wrote on Twitter: "I'm so glad [teachers voted against it]—that offer was an insult to an amazing sector. You work too hard for me [to] return to intermediate teaching. My hat is off to every primary teacher. You deserve much better than you were offered."

Another person commented: "And the future fallout will be felt by NZEI when the members highlight their frustration by leaving the union as soon as a settlement is reached."

On the *Newshub* Facebook page, one popular

comment said: “Go teachers you deserve every dollar you play a big part in our kids’ lives as well. I SUPPORT THE TEACHERS.” Another, from Claire, said: “Sort it out Labour! Every single one of our essential services is failing!”

The social crisis facing the entire working class calls for the building of a mass movement against austerity. The chief obstacle is the unions, which seek to divide workers and enforce pay cuts and attacks on conditions.

As well as seeking to ram through below-inflation agreements, neither the NZEI nor the PPTA, the secondary teachers’ union, have lifted a finger to stop the rampant spread of COVID-19 through schools, despite teachers being the most susceptible to infection of any group of workers. The unions played a key role in dismantling public health measures and reopening schools in order to remove all barriers to profit-making by big business.

The stand taken by primary school teachers must be the starting point for a rebellion against these bureaucratic organisations, which represent a narrow layer of the upper middle class, tied to the Labour Party and big business.

The Socialist Equality Group calls for the formation of new organisations: rank-and-file committees in every school that will fight to unite primary and secondary teachers, along with other school staff, parents and students. They would also be the means to forge links with workers in other industries, such as healthcare, and with the working class in Australia and internationally, who face the same struggles.

The fight for high-quality public education with small class sizes and well-paid teachers and support staff, must also include demands for the immediate reintroduction of public health measures to eliminate COVID-19 and save lives.

Claims by the unions that these demands are unaffordable “in the current economic climate” are a fraud. During the pandemic, the profits of the banks and big business have been propped up with tens of billions of dollars in subsidies from the state and quantitative easing by the Reserve Bank. Now the Labour government is forcing working people to pay for these handouts, while at the same time increasing military spending to prepare New Zealand to join US-led wars against Russia and China.

The money hoarded by the rich and wasted on

militarism must be redirected urgently to resolve the crisis in public education and healthcare, and to eliminate social inequality. This requires the fight for a workers’ government that will implement socialist policies, to reorganise the economy on the basis of meeting human needs, not the accumulation of profits for a tiny handful of the population.



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