New Zealand primary teachers' union cancels strike, pushes new sellout offer

Tom Peters
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On May 28, the primary teachers union NZEI cancelled a strike planned for May 31, which had been voted for by a majority of 30,000 teachers. The union bureaucracy then presented teachers with yet another repackaged sellout offer from the Ministry of Education, which once again fails to provide a real wage increase or address the crisis of understaffing and lack of resourcing in schools.

About 50,000 kindergarten, primary and secondary teachers held a one-day strike on March 16. The secondary teachers' union, the PPTA, held further strikes on March 28 and last month, which the NZEI did not allow primary teachers to join.

Both unions are working with the Labour Party-led government in an effort to push through below-inflation agreements, which will set a benchmark for attacks on other sections of the working class.

The government announced an austerity budget last month, which included an increase in operational funding for schools of just 3.5 percent in the next year—about half the 6.7 percent annual inflation rate.

While living costs are soaring, the ruling class is determined to make working people pay for its historic bailout of the rich and big business during the first years of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, billions are being diverted from vital services in order to buy new military planes and frigates and to boost recruitment into the armed forces in preparation to join US-led wars against Russia and China.

Teachers' collective employment agreements expired more than a year ago, and their last pay increase was in July 2021. Since then, food prices have soared by about 14 percent and prices for consumer goods overall by 10 percent.

The new offer to primary teachers—the fourth they have received—is a pay cut in real terms. It is a two-year agreement with a salary increase of just 6 percent in 2023, followed by 3 percent in July 2024 and a third increase of between 1.8 and 6.5 percent in December 2024. Instead of back pay for the past year in which their pay has been frozen, teachers will get a lump sum payment of $4,500.

On the NZEI's Facebook page, one teacher commented: "No increase from offer 3 to 4. It's the same basically! Just tweaked to look different!" Another said: "So we cancelled another strike movement and waited an extra 3 weeks for the same rubbish."

One teacher wrote: "NZEI should have never cancelled the strike—why would you do that?" She called on her fellow teachers to reject the new offer: "It does not keep up with inflation, there are not even enough teachers to cover CRT [classroom release time for teachers] now so very unlikely that point will be fulfilled in any case." The NZEI has touted an extra 15 hours of CRT per term in its attempt to sell the revised offer.

She pointed out that much of the 2019 pay increase had been "clawed back" through higher teacher registration fees imposed by the Teaching Council. The teacher asked why NZEI was not doing more to highlight "that the profession isn't even attractive enough to keep teachers, there will be a mass exodus of those retiring and those who go into the profession seem to quit before the 5-year mark."

The NZEI disingenuously claims that it is not making any recommendation for or against the new proposed deal, despite its anti-democratic decision to cancel strike action. The union promoted the previous sellout offer, saying it was "a reasonable offer in the current economic climate." In other words, teachers must sacrifice, even as banks and big businesses have made

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record profits during the pandemic.

Meanwhile, the PPTA has recommended that high school teachers reject a similar offer made to them, clearly perceiving that it would not be able to sell the deal. High school teachers are carrying out limited industrial action, including refusing to teach specific year levels on different days this week.

PPTA president Chris Abercrombie told *Stuff* on Wednesday: “We don’t want to be doing this. We want to be in classrooms teaching. We want to settle. But we need teachers and pay that matches the cost of living.” An increase that matches inflation would still represent a pay freeze.

Neither the NZEI nor the PPTA has made any demand to stop the uncontrolled spread of COVID-19 through schools. Last year, the unions collaborated with the Labour government to remove all restrictions on the spread of the potentially deadly coronavirus; they enforced the unsafe reopening of schools, exposing millions of staff, children and their families to repeated infection.

The unions represent a narrow upper middle class bureaucracy, with close ties to the Labour government; Education Minister Jan Tinetti is a former NZEI official. They are following the same playbook that they did after nationwide strikes in 2019, when a sellout deal was pushed through first by the NZEI, and this was used to pressure PPTA members to accept a similar rotten agreement.

The present dispute points to significant intransigence and militancy among teachers, who are witnessing every day the combined effects of the pandemic and worsening poverty on young people and their families. This week, for example, the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission reported the stark finding that in the past five years the amount of antidepressants prescribed to children and teenagers has surged by 53 percent.

For a real fight against austerity, however, teachers need new organisations, independent of the pro-capitalist unions. The Socialist Equality Group calls for the formation of rank-and-file committees in schools and all workplaces, in order to overcome the divisions imposed by the union bureaucracy.

These committees would provide the means to unite primary, secondary and preschool teachers with workers in the healthcare system, tertiary educators and others who confront the same attacks on their jobs and wages. They would also reach out to educators in Europe, North America and Australia who have been involved in powerful strikes against austerity.

The mantra of the Labour government, echoed by the NZEI and other unions, that workers must accept cuts to wages, jobs and conditions for the sake of “the economy,” must be rejected with contempt. The crisis facing schools and hospitals, and the working class as a whole, calls for the restructuring of society along socialist lines. The unprecedented level of wealth hoarded by the super-rich should be redistributed to fund high-quality public education, healthcare and other vital services, and to put an end to social inequality.

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