

NZEI pushes through sellout of New Zealand primary teachers

Tom Peters
9 June 2023

On June 7, the New Zealand primary teachers' union NZEI announced that a majority of its membership of about 30,000 teachers had voted to accept a below-inflation pay deal that the union stitched up with the Labour Party-led government.

The corporate media breathed a collective sigh of relief. "Newshub" declared: "Primary teachers are celebrating [what NZEI described as] a 'huge win.'" In fact, the agreement is a sellout that was imposed in the face of widespread opposition from teachers.

This was the fourth offer presented to teachers during a months-long dispute, and was similar to a union-backed deal that teachers rejected last month. The NZEI moved swiftly to push through the repackaged agreement after it unilaterally cancelled a strike that teachers had voted for, which had been scheduled for May 31.

The teachers' struggle points to rising anger and militancy among workers. On March 16, more than 50,000 primary, secondary and kindergarten teachers held the country's largest-ever education strike.

As is the case internationally, New Zealand's ruling elite is using inflation to drive down wages and intensify the rate of exploitation. The government is slashing spending on vital services, including education, partly to fund the military and intelligence agencies to join US-led wars against Russia and China.

The NZEI's sellout demonstrates that the unions are playing the central role in enforcing this austerity agenda and suppressing resistance in the working class.

The NZEI and Education Minister Jan Tinetti, a former NZEI bureaucrat, have trumpeted a pay rise of 18.3 percent for beginner teachers spread across two years. This follows a year in which wages remained static, meaning it is actually an increase of just over 6 percent a year. The average cost of living for

households has increased by 7.7 percent in the last year alone, according to official statistics, while food prices have gone up 12.5 percent.

More experienced teachers will receive just 11 percent by the end of 2024, which is an even more significant pay cut. Teachers will also get \$4,500 in lump sum payments, which are subject to tax and will not make up for the lack of backpay.

The attack on primary teachers sets a benchmark that will be used to intensify pressure on 20,000 secondary teachers to accept a similar rotten deal. This is the tactic used by the unions to impose a pay freeze on teachers following a strike in 2019.

The PPTA, the secondary teachers' union, reported on Friday that its members had voted "overwhelmingly" against an offer almost the same as the NZEI agreement. High school teachers are continuing industrial action, with different year levels being rostered home on some days.

The PPTA leadership, however, says it wants an offer that just keeps pace with inflation, i.e., a pay freeze. PPTA acting president Chris Abercrombie told Radio NZ: "we're not technically asking for a pay rise."

NZEI president Mark Potter admitted to "Newshub" that the union faces opposition among primary teachers, saying there were "a range of opinions on this offer. The majority view—to accept the offer—may be one that some members don't personally agree with."

On the union's Facebook page, one teacher wrote: "What a shame, we had a real chance to make a difference and instead we got swindled by a big carrot dangled in front of us. Please show us the voting statistics."

Another similarly wrote: "I want to see the votes! I can't believe teachers voted to accept this rubbish offer. NZEI Te Riu Roa delegates, you should be

ashamed of yourselves. I hope none of you are part of the negotiating team next time.”

Another stated that the union was playing “very fast and loose with [the] term ‘significant gains’!!! What a bunch of revisionist hoey NZEI.” They predicted a “mass exodus” of union members.

If a majority of primary teachers felt that they had to accept a pay cut, this is because they were worn down by the union bureaucracy, which repeatedly cancelled strike action and divided primary and secondary teachers. The NZEI negotiators described the third offer, which teachers rejected, as “reasonable... in the current economic climate.”

The media also placed considerable pressure on teachers. On June 1, Newstalk ZB’s right-wing host Mike Hosking railed against teachers for having “the temerity to inconvenience so many for their own ends.”

Two days later, the pro-Labour Party *Daily Blog* published a similar rant demanding that teachers “take the deal.” Editor Martyn Bradbury declared: “Teachers are making parents’ lives far more difficult than they currently are and it seems like they are fighting over very little of significance.” He said continued strikes would “hand National the election.”

Teachers and school staff need to recognise that they are engaged in a struggle against the entire political establishment—the Labour-Green government and the opposition National Party and its allies—as well as with the trade unions. The highly-paid union bureaucracy does not represent workers; it is a layer of the upper middle class loyal to capitalism, which works with the state and big business to enforce attacks on working people.

The lesson of the NZEI sellout is that workers need new organisations that they control. The Socialist Equality Group calls for the building of rank-and-file committees in every school, to unite teachers and other school staff as well as students and parents, in a joint struggle against the Labour government’s austerity regime.

These committees would act independently of the unions to end the division between primary and secondary teachers, and to unite all school staff with those in universities—who are facing hundreds of job cuts—as well as healthcare workers and others. In addition, links should be established with the struggles of teachers in Australia and other countries who are

under attack from their governments.

In addition to a major increase in real wages, such committees would fight for a return to a fully-funded COVID-19 elimination strategy. The unions are complicit in the rampant spread of the deadly disease, having supported the reopening of schools and the removal of all public health measures, based on the government’s lie that children and staff could be kept safe.

Tens of billions of dollars are needed to build an advanced public education system with well-paid teachers and support staff. This funding must be obtained from the banks and the corporate elite who have vastly expanded their wealth under the Labour government thanks to ultra-low taxes, subsidies and bailouts. This requires a complete political break from Labour and all its allies, and the fight for the socialist reorganisation of society.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact