

New Zealand school lunches compared to “dog food” after government cutbacks

Tom Peters
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Schoolchildren, parents and staff across New Zealand have spoken out over the past week against new school lunches, which have been compared to dog food and prison meals.

As part of its sweeping austerity measures, designed to make the working class shoulder the burden of the economic recession, the right-wing coalition government led by the National Party has reduced spending on school lunches from \$8 to \$3 per meal.

Associate education minister David Seymour, leader of the far-right ACT Party, boasted on January 30 that the new program will save \$130 million a year and is “setting a precedent for the government working with businesses to achieve better results.”

These savings are at the expense of 242,000 school students from low-income households who are now receiving smaller and often revolting meals. According to the *New Zealand Herald*, “Auckland Primary Principals’ Association president Kyle Brewerton said kids have been comparing the lunches to ‘dog food’ and refusing to eat it.”

“huhu College student Divya Kumar told Radio NZ her meal was “really bland,” with “overcooked pasta, and I don’t think it provides the nutrition we need as students.” Another student, Heremoko, said it was “like prison food,” adding: “Last year we actually knew what we were eating, we could see it. This year we’re questioning what we’re eating.”

Photos of the meals have been shared widely. One Reddit post from Auckland displayed a picture of an “unidentifiable pasta ball and lentils.” The lunches were delivered two hours late. “Not one child could stomach the food and so after offers to give food away to [the] local community were declined, all several hundred of these went into the rubbish.”

A parent shared a picture of what was “supposed to

be mac and cheese” but “looks and tastes horrible.” They told the *Herald*: “I normally try to not waste food but when I tasted it, it was just so bland. If I guessed it was a white sauce with not much cheese, couldn’t actually taste the ham, and the veg/mac was so overcooked that they were just soggy.”

One Reddit user commented: “This is what they want. They want the food to go uneaten so they can [say] they’re not being eaten and it’s a waste of money. They don’t want to pay for kids to eat.”

Another suggested that “Parliament should be served the same food as our school children get.”

Due to late lunch deliveries throughout the week, which caterers attributed to “teething problems,” some principals reported that they had to buy food at the supermarket to feed hungry children. Some schools asked parents to send their children to school with extra food as a precaution, according to the *Herald*.

Last October it was reported that 75 suppliers would lose their contracts under the previous school lunches program, destroying as many as 2,000 jobs. They were replaced by a consortium led by the British-based multinational Compass Group, and also including the NZ businesses Gilmours and Libelle.

Compass is the world’s largest catering company, operating in 45 countries and providing billions of meals each year in healthcare, education, the military and other sectors. It has been involved in several scandals.

In 2015, Compass subsidiary Chartwells settled a lawsuit over school meals in Washington, D.C. A whistleblower alleged that Chartwells had overcharged the school district and there were repeated instances in which “food was delivered late, the number of meals was insufficient or the food was of poor quality or spoiled.”

In 2021, Chartwells was at the centre of a scandal involving food parcels sent to 1.7 million UK children whose schools were closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The parcels were extremely meagre, prompting widespread public outrage.

Chartwells/Compass is the largest provider of school lunches in the UK, where meals are frequently criticised for their poor quality and low nutritional value. The BBC reported on March 14, 2024, on complaints that meals at Redbridge Community School in Southampton were getting smaller while prices were rising, and were often undercooked. “Chartwells seem to be unable to bake a potato,” the head teacher said.

The New Zealand government and its defenders in the media have responded to criticism by essentially saying children from poor households should consider themselves lucky to get any food at all.

Minister Seymour told Newstalk ZB the media was highlighting “the worst examples that they can find and the worst comments that they can find.” In response to principals saying “this is not good enough,” Seymour called for a “reality check” and said “this is a government with a \$17 billion deficit.”

Far-right blogger Cam Slater posted on X/Twitter that parents unhappy with the lunches their children were getting should “feed them yourselves like you did in the holidays. That is what [is] wrong with this country, too many with their hand out.”

Slater’s comment was shared by billionaire toy company founder Nick Mowbray, New Zealand’s richest man and a major donor to the ACT and National Parties.

The slop now being served at schools is connected to the government’s broader agenda of gutting and privatising the education system and other public services.

The ACT Party is overseeing the reintroduction of privately-run charter schools, with funding provided last year to establish 50 of them. This will divert public funds to private operators, who do not face the same requirements as public schools to follow the curriculum and can set different pay rates for teachers.

In the US and the UK, charter schools or “academies” have played a major role in deregulating education and attacking conditions for school staff. Under the 2008–2017 National Party-ACT government, a trial of charter schools in New Zealand resulted in

financial irregularities and dysfunction, forcing one school to be shut down.

The Labour Party has criticised the new school meals, with education spokesperson Jan Tinetti saying “this government chose cost-cutting ahead of quality.” She declared she was “deeply concerned” about “wider impacts on reducing child poverty” and on children’s ability to learn.

This is utterly hypocritical. In its 2023 budget, the last Labour government increased operational funding for schools by just 3.5 percent—about half the 6.7 percent annual inflation rate. Tens of thousands of teachers repeatedly went on strike to protest against frozen wages, although their struggles were suppressed by the union bureaucracy.

The Labour government also oversaw an increase in the number of children living in poverty. Labour campaigned for deeper austerity measures in the October 2023 election, which it lost in a landslide defeat amid a worsening social crisis, paving the way for the current far-right government.



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