

New Zealand teachers to strike over 1 percent pay offer

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Secondary school teachers throughout New Zealand have voted to strike on August 20 after overwhelmingly rejecting a derisory one percent pay offer from the far-right National Party-led coalition government. The offer represents a significant pay cut; in the year to March 2025, the annual inflation rate was 2.5 percent.

The Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA), which has 20,000 members, indicated that the offer from the Ministry of Education (MoE)—one percent per year for three years—was “overwhelmingly” rejected in a membership ballot.

In addition to the one-day strike, teachers also endorsed a program of rostering students home and not teaching specific year levels on specific days in the week beginning September 15.

A PPTA statement declared the offer “in no way addresses the core issues of teacher recruitment and retention and unmet student need.” The union had called for a 4 percent increase each year for 3 years plus another 4 percent in lieu of a pay equity claim for historic gender-based underpayment, which was blocked by the government.

PPTA president Chris Abercrombie told reporters that the pay offer “is the lowest in a generation and comes at the same time as teachers face the biggest changes to secondary education in a generation.” There is a shortage of about 800 secondary teachers. He declared the government should “stop funnelling hundreds of millions of dollars into charter schools, for which clearly there is no appetite, and put it where it needs to be—in public education.”

The NZ Educational Institute (NZEI), with 50,000 members in the primary and early childhood sectors, also announced on August 7 that a similar one percent MoE offer was rejected by a membership vote. The offer also follows the scrapping of the union’s pay

equity claim.

The NZEI announced that paid union meetings will be held around the country from August 18–29 to decide on their “next steps.”

Some 1,100 specialist learning staff directly employed by the MoE have already twice rejected zero percent pay offers. The workers, including speech and language therapists, early intervention teachers, occupational therapists and psychologists, walked off the job for two hours on July 22 and are currently working only contracted hours and not taking on new cases.

The pay cuts are part of a wholesale assault on public services and workers. The teachers’ offers are similar to one rejected by 36,000 nurses. The New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) last week announced a two-day strike from September 2, following 24-hour strikes last December and in July.

The government’s austerity regime involves brutal cuts to healthcare, education and welfare, a pay freeze across the core public sector, and over 10,000 layoffs with more to come. Its aim is to increase the exploitation of the working class, divert more public money to the super-rich through a shift to privatisation, and to fund a vast increase in military spending to prepare for war.

The teachers’ pay equity claims were among 33 pending cases for workers in predominantly female professions, including nursing. In May, Workplace Relations Minister Brooke Van Velden, from the far-right ACT Party, cancelled all existing claims while raising the bar for future claims to be successful.

The Equal Pay Amendment Act was pushed through under parliament’s anti-democratic “urgency” provisions, prompting widespread protests. Treasury estimates that the government will save \$NZ12.8

billion by stopping the claims from proceeding.

The contract disputes are only one aspect of the deepening assault on public education by the National Party-NZ First-ACT coalition. Led by the “libertarian” ACT Party, a privatisation program has been launched with the establishment of US-style publicly funded, privately run Charter Schools.

The school lunch program was handed over to the multinational Compass Group, along with the NZ businesses Gilmours and Libelle, which is now in liquidation, saving \$NZ130 million a year while drastically reducing the nutritional quality of school lunches.

Minister for the Public Service Judith Collins denounced the impending strike as a “political stunt,” claiming there had been “no genuine engagement” by the PPTA in bargaining. Public Service Commissioner Brian Roche falsely declared the government’s offer was “fair” and followed “significant” pay advances over the last three years. In fact teachers’ pay settlements have lagged behind inflation under successive Labour and National Party governments.

Conditions are over-ripe for a unified industrial and political campaign by public sector workers, backed by the wider working class, to defeat the government’s austerity agenda. Along with workers in the health sector, including junior and senior doctors and laboratory technicians, thousands of workers in the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment and the child welfare agency Oranga Tamariki have taken industrial action against the wage freeze.

The main obstacle to workers taking the offensive against the government’s assault is the trade union bureaucracy. Composed of well-paid officials loyal to capitalism, the union apparatus is enforcing the government’s agenda of austerity and militarism.

The modus operandi of the union leadership is to keep each sector of the workforce isolated, calling only short-term, intermittent industrial action to let off steam, while dragging out pay negotiations in order to demoralise workers and persuade them that they have no alternative to accepting the erosion of their pay and conditions.

The NZEI and PPTA held their first ever combined strike in 2019 in response to wage-cutting offers from the then Labour Party-led government. The unions ultimately imposed deals that amounted to a wage

freeze and did not address the staffing crisis in schools. In 2023, again under Labour, the unions imposed sell-out deals of about 3 percent, a pay freeze relative to the cost of living.

There is widespread anger across the entire healthcare workforce. On May 1, more than 5,000 doctors held a nationwide one-day strike after rejecting a pay offer of 1.5 percent spread across two years. Yet the NZNO, following its limited strike in December, went back into negotiations with HealthNZ, which have now dragged on behind closed doors for eight months.

The NZNO was finally forced to hold its second strike on July 30 to defuse the anger among its members. The union’s main demand is for a paltry 5 percent over two years, and an extra \$2,000 rate increase for senior roles. This is little better than Health NZ’s offer and for most nurses it would still be a pay cut relative to inflation.

Teachers and healthcare workers want to fight, but to do so they need new organisations: rank-and-file committees that are controlled by workers themselves and are independent of the union bureaucracies. These committees will provide the means to link up with other workers in New Zealand and internationally who are entering into struggles.

Public sector workers should base their struggle on a socialist perspective. This means rejecting the lie that properly resourced schools and hospitals, with well-paid staff providing care to all who need it, is “unaffordable.” The necessary resources can be found by expropriating the wealth of the super-rich and by ending the diversion of billions of dollars to the military.



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