

20,000 New Zealand high school teachers strike

Tom Peters
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Almost 20,000 high school teachers took part in a nationwide one-day strike on August 20 to protest a wage-cutting proposal from the government. Pickets and protest rallies were organised in Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch, and many other cities and towns across the country.

Members of the Post-Primary Teachers' Association (PPTA) had voted to strike after the right-wing National Party-led government offered a pay rise of just 1 percent per year for three years.

This is well below the rate of inflation, which was 2.7 percent in the 12 months to July. In the same period, rents increased 3.2 percent, food prices went up 5 percent and electricity 8.4 percent—all of which is fuelling a cost-of-living crisis.

Teachers are also angry about the severe under-resourcing and understaffing of schools.

The government responded to the strike with a campaign of misinformation. A statement on August 13 by Education Minister Erica Stanford and Public Service Minister Judith Collins falsely claimed that a senior teacher was currently paid \$147,000. Collins was later forced to apologise, saying she got “mixed up.”

The statement declared that the 1 percent offer “reflects the current fiscal constraints and the substantial increases teachers have received over the past three years—an average increase of 14.5 per cent.”

In fact, 14.5 percent over three years was an effective pay cut. According to Statistics NZ's household living-costs price index, the average household's costs increased 8.2 percent during 2022, 7 percent in 2023 and 3 percent in 2024—i.e. more than 18 percent over three years.

The claim that there is “no money” to increase pay for teachers and nurses—who recently went on strike after rejecting a similar offer—is another lie.

The government announced this week that it is spending \$2.7 billion to acquire five new Navy helicopters and two military airplanes. With the support of the opposition Labour Party and the public sector union, the military budget is being doubled from 1 to 2 percent of GDP over the next several years in preparation for joining US-led imperialist wars.

At a protest outside parliament in Wellington, teachers told the WSWs the 1 percent offer was the lowest they had ever seen.

“It's the kind of amount you present if you expect a strike,” said **Sam**, a maths teacher originally from Ireland. He said the fact that the government had “misrepresented the amount that teachers make” demonstrated “malicious intent.”

He explained that a major issue facing schools was the staff shortage and “the difficulty in getting relievers and teaching aides and one-on-one time for neurodiverse kids.”

Too many children faced barriers to their education and the government was “telling them: ‘Tough, we haven't got the resources.’ The lack of specialist teaching is not acceptable, because we have much more of a diverse spectrum of learners right now across the world, and if we aren't supporting them, these kids will be disenfranchised,” Sam said.

“I think education needs to be accessible to everybody,” he said, but the government was “tacitly accepting that some kids are more valuable to teach than others.”

Sam said primary school teachers should be on strike as well, because “the only way this works is if we have as many people as possible.” Members of the primary teachers' union NZEI also recently received a 1 percent per year pay offer.

Jess, a science teacher in Porirua, said she was paid

around \$70,000 a year—nowhere near the figure mentioned by the government.

She told the WSWWS that one of the hardest parts of her job was that many high school students “can’t read or write, and I am not resourced to do anything about that. It’s really hard when you see their frustration.” This was connected with poverty as well as problems throughout the education system, she said.

Jess felt most “insulted” by the government’s refusal to address conditions in schools. “Those are the things that are going to keep teachers in the job, so we don’t burn out. It’s all of the support they are continuously taking away from us and our students.”

She said the government’s changes to the qualifications system and wanting to make exams digital would require a large amount of time and effort by the principal’s nominees, who were not adequately paid. In addition, teachers needed to be given more time to complete management units required to take on leadership positions.

Jess said primary teachers, nurses, and school support workers should also be on strike.

Faced with growing anger among hundreds of thousands of workers, the government aims to further restrict the right to strike. On August 19, Collins told parliament that the government was considering how to “improve the bargaining system, because the right to strike is important, but so is the right for students to learn and for patients to access the healthcare they need.”

For decades, the state and big business have relied on the trade union bureaucracy to ensure that strikes, if they cannot be shut down, remain limited to one-day or half-day actions, and that different sections of the working class are kept isolated from each other. The aim is to drag out disputes and wear down workers’ resistance to a below-inflation deal—as happened repeatedly during the last Labour government.

Another sellout is being prepared. The PPTA initially called for a pay increase of 4 percent per year for 3 years, plus an extra 4 percent to make up for the government’s cancellation of separate pay equity negotiations. But in various statements to the media since the strike these claims have not been mentioned.

The PPTA is resuming negotiations with the government next week. The union has scheduled further, limited industrial action for

September—different year levels to be rostered home on different days—but president Chris Abercrombie told Newstalk ZB: “we’re really hopeful that we won’t need to do that.”

To prevent a sellout and carry out a real struggle, the Socialist Equality Group calls on teachers and other school staff to take matters into their own hands by organising rank-and-file committees, independent of the union apparatus. Such committees must link up with primary and early childhood teachers, healthcare workers and others, to build a mass movement capable of defeating the government’s agenda of austerity and militarism.

This struggle must be guided by socialist principles. The claim that there is “no money” for education is a lie. Billions of dollars being hoarded by the rich and squandered on war should be redirected to public schools and used to reduce class sizes, ensure support for students with diverse needs, and provide decent-paying jobs for all staff.



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