

More than 100,000 workers prepare to strike in New Zealand

Tom Peters
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More than 100,000 public sector workers—including teachers, nurses, doctors and other healthcare workers—are preparing to strike on October 23, in what is expected to be New Zealand’s largest industrial action in more than 40 years.

The simultaneous strikes, involving about 3.5 percent of the total working population and one in five public sector workers, reflect deep anger over the National Party-led coalition government’s relentless attacks on public services, jobs, wages and working conditions. As is happening internationally, workers in New Zealand are being driven to the left and into significant struggles.

The country’s ruling elite is responding to a historic economic downturn by seeking to intensify the exploitation of the working class, while funnelling billions of dollars to the armed forces to prepare them to join US-led wars, especially against China.

The immediate issue in the so-called “mega strike”—which follows previous strikes by nurses, doctors and teachers—is the government’s determination to cut wages and set a benchmark for similar attacks on other workers.

Those striking next Thursday include more than 36,000 public hospital nurses and healthcare assistants, 4,000 senior doctors and dentists, 11,500 allied health professionals, 1,700 health policy, advisory and IT support workers, and about 60,000 teachers and other school staff. Separately, 2,000 firefighters held a nationwide strike for one hour on October 17.

In each dispute, workers have been offered wage deals below the 2.7 percent rate of inflation and even further below the actual increase in the cost of living (food prices are up 4.1 percent annually). They are also protesting against dangerous levels of understaffing in hospitals, schools and fire stations, the result of

austerity measures imposed by both the current government and the 2017–2023 Labour Party-led government.

Prime Minister Christopher Luxon asserted during a media conference on October 13 that “Kiwis are getting a bit sick of the unions going on strike action,” which would “cause pain and suffering for parents and kids and patients.” He declared that “we don’t have a bottomless pit of money... we’ve got very straitened economic times.”

Education Minister Erica Stanford told Radio NZ the next day that “parents should be furious” about teachers striking while students are preparing for exams.

On October 16, Health Minister Simeon Brown told the annual conference of the Association of Salaried Medical Specialists (ASMS), the senior doctors’ union, that the doctors’ strike “crossed an ethical line.” He stated, “Patients should never be collateral damage in disputes between management and unions.”

These provocative attempts to blame healthcare workers and teachers for the crisis they face are based on lies. Tens of thousands of patients are spending months waiting for crucial treatment and surgeries, not because of strikes, but because successive governments have run down the public health system.

A report by the New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO), based on Health NZ data, found that from 2022–2024 there was an average shortage of 587 nurses for every shift last year across 59 public hospitals. In the Wellington region, 51 percent of shifts were understaffed, placing staff and patients alike at significant risk.

In public schools, the Ministry of Education itself estimated in February that there is a nationwide shortage of 750 primary teachers and 500 secondary

teachers.

Luxon's claim that there is "no money" is a transparent fraud. His government has delivered billions of dollars in tax cuts for businesses and property investors.

An extra \$12 billion has been allocated to the armed forces over four years. By contrast, the 2025 budget included an additional \$2.5 billion for education over four years, with operations grants for schools increasing by just 1.5 percent annually and healthcare funding up just 4.77 percent.

Workers must be warned that neither the opposition Labour Party nor the union bureaucracy has any differences with the agenda of militarism and austerity.

The unions involved in the October 23 strike—the NZNO, ASMS, the Public Service Association, the Post-Primary Teachers' Association and the primary teachers union, NZEI—are only demanding pay rises equal to or slightly above inflation, which would still effectively be a pay cut. The only question for the well-paid officials who run these organisations is how to wear down workers' resistance to a sellout agreement.

Labour and the PSA—the country's biggest union, which covers allied health workers—openly support the government's increase to military spending, which is at the expense of essential public services. PSA leader Fleur Fitzsimons has attacked the government for not doing enough to "build a modern, combat-ready defence force" to confront China.

The middle class, pseudo-left International Socialist Organisation (ISO) published an article on October 1 by former NZNO president Grant Brookes, which covered up this reality and sought to stoke illusions in the unions and Labour. Brookes declared that a mass public sector strike led by the unions had the potential to "not only break [the government's] grip on power, but also to force changes far beyond what the Labour opposition would like to offer and press to wider liberation for Māori, for Palestine, for women, and for others."

The ISO has close links with the union bureaucracy and consistently seeks to cover up its betrayals. When nurses struck against the last Labour government in July 2018, Brookes helped to persuade them to lower their expectations and accept a deal which effectively froze wages and did nothing to resolve the staffing crisis. He told workers there was "some truth" to the

government's claim that it could not immediately fix the underfunding of the health system.

Without mentioning the PSA's embrace of militarism, Brookes hails the unions' verbal endorsement of recent pro-Palestine protests. In fact, the bureaucracy has refused to mobilise workers in strikes and other actions to shut down supplies for Israel and stop New Zealand's support for the Gaza genocide.

In a statement on September 24, the Socialist Equality Group (SEG) warned that "as long as workers remain trapped in the strait-jacket of the pro-capitalist union bureaucracy, they will be divided, isolated and sold out."

It called on "healthcare workers and school staff to take control of their struggles by building rank-and-file workplace committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves."

Such committees "must fight to overcome the divisions imposed by the unions and to coordinate the struggles of healthcare and school staff with workers in transportation, meat processing, forestry, manufacturing and across the public sector." They must also unite workers in New Zealand with those in Australia and internationally, who are facing the same attacks.

Above all, the SEG called on workers to reject the lies peddled by the capitalist parties, including Labour and its allies, that there is no money for social programs and jobs, and to take up the fight for socialism. They must demand the expropriation of the super-rich, the defence of immigrant workers' rights, and an end to all military spending and imperialist alliances.



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