

New Zealand government denounces looming strike by 110,000 workers for being pro-Palestine

Tom Peters
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On October 19, New Zealand's Minister for Public Service Judith Collins, who is also the defence minister, issued an "Open letter to the people of New Zealand" denouncing the strike actions scheduled for Thursday involving roughly 110,000 workers and demanding that they be called off.

The strikes being held simultaneously by teachers and public healthcare workers will be the country's largest industrial action in four decades. They are part of an international radicalisation of working people, driven by the deepening crisis of capitalism. In the US, Europe and elsewhere millions of workers are seeking to fight back against austerity measures, attacks on democratic rights, imperialist wars and the Gaza genocide.

The right-wing National Party-led coalition government has clearly been shaken by the mass opposition to its drive to slash wages and funnel billions of dollars into the military and tax cuts for the rich.

Collins' open letter is a desperate and lying outburst that smears teachers, nurses and doctors as greedy and selfish. She blamed striking workers for jeopardising children's education and patients' health; in reality, the crisis in schools and hospitals is the result of years of austerity measures under National and Labour Party governments.

The letter falsely asserted that the government had "met unions' demands for pay increases in line with inflation." The offers put to teachers, firefighters, doctors, nurses and other healthcare workers have actually been around 2 percent per year or less. The annual inflation rate is 3 percent, food prices are up 4.1 percent and electricity prices a staggering 11.3 percent.

Prime Minister Christopher Luxon has trumpeted a

deal reached with the Primary Principals Collective Bargaining Union, which has accepted a below-inflation 2.5 percent pay rise this year, followed by a 2.1 percent rise next year, as a model for the striking workers.

In an attempt to divide workers by stoking nationalism and xenophobia, Collins declared that the strikes were "politically motivated" by the issue of Palestine. Conditions facing teachers in Palestine were mentioned by the Post-Primary Teachers' Association (PPTA) in a meeting with Education Minister Erica Stanford earlier this month.

"Palestine. Not terms and conditions. Not student achievement. Not the new curriculum. Palestine. That's not what students or parents should expect," Collins stated. On Monday, Luxon told the media that a union wanting to talk about Palestine was "completely insane."

In response, Council of Trade Unions president-elect Sandra Grey told TVNZ, "Workers aren't striking over international politics, they're striking because their wages aren't keeping up." The PPTA has urged teachers to avoid writing "political" statements on their placards and to focus on messages directly related to schools.

In fact, while there is mass opposition to the US-Israeli genocide in Gaza, for the past two years the union bureaucracy has not called a single industrial action to stop this historic crime—in which the NZ government is complicit as an ally of US imperialism. Internationally and in NZ the unions have issued empty statements of "concern" about the mass murder of Palestinians, while continuing to oversee the uninterrupted production and shipment of weapons and

other supplies for Israel's war machine.

Only the Socialist Equality Group (SEG) has called on workers taking part in the October 23 strike to link the fight against wage cuts and austerity with the international struggle against imperialist war, militarism and genocide.

These issues are profoundly interconnected. Collins' open letter states that "money is tight" and "the country is simply not earning enough to meet all these calls" to properly fund vital public services. As minister of defence, however, Collins has announced nearly \$13 billion in military spending over four years, part of a plan to double spending on the armed forces and integrate New Zealand into US war operations, especially against China. This is being paid for at the expense of healthcare, education and other services.

Far from opposing the military spend-up, the opposition Labour Party and the Public Service Association (PSA)—the country's biggest union, which covers about 17,000 health sector workers involved in Thursday's strike—have endorsed it.

The union apparatus is staffed by affluent officials who are loyal defenders of capitalism. While workers want to fight, union leaders have sought to limit industrial action as much as possible. Two of the unions involved in the October 23 strike, the NZ Nurses Organisation and the Association of Salaried Medical Specialists, have not even called a full-day strike; their members will only stop work for 4 hours.

Workers must be warned that the union bureaucracy is looking for an excuse to call off the strike and future planned industrial action. Its aim is to persuade workers to lower their expectations and accept a sellout agreement which fails to address the real cost of living.

Asked by Radio NZ (RNZ) yesterday whether anything could be done to stop the strike from proceeding, CTU president Richard Wagstaff said: "Of course, absolutely." He said the unions would agree to return to bargaining "on the basis that we're not expected to go backwards."

PPTA president Chris Abercrombie told RNZ that workers "should at least get inflation, I don't think that's an unfair position." That means an annual pay rise of just 3 percent, which would still be an effective pay cut amid soaring living costs.

Labour Party leader Chris Hipkins, meanwhile, yesterday criticised Collins' "rhetoric" and said the

government was waging a "war on public servants." The 2017–2023 Labour government starved schools and hospitals of resources amid a growing crisis of understaffing. It faced repeated strikes by nurses, doctors, teachers and others, and relied on the union bureaucracy to isolate workers and impose sellout deals that failed to improve conditions and kept wages stagnant.

Working people must oppose any attempt to curtail Thursday's strike. Instead, they should fight to expand it to include workers in every industry, all of whom face attacks on their living standards.

The objective conditions exist for a general strike and a sustained industrial and political campaign to stop the ruling elite's onslaught against public services, jobs and wages, and its militarist agenda.

Such a campaign requires new organisations. The SEG calls for rank-and-file committees to be established in every workplace, controlled by workers themselves and opposed to the union bureaucracy and all capitalist parties, including Labour and its allies.

These committees must organise workers across New Zealand and forge links with workers internationally, including in Australia and the United States—where millions have protested against the Trump administration's drive to establish a dictatorship.

Workers must be guided by a socialist and internationalist perspective, which includes demands for the expropriation of big business and the banks, and an end to all military spending. The wealth created by the working class must be used to meet urgent social needs, rebuild crumbling infrastructure, and eliminate poverty and inequality.



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