

New Zealand: Workers need a socialist perspective to fight pay cuts, austerity and war

Socialist Equality Group (New Zealand)
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Thursday's historic strike by 110,000 public sector workers across New Zealand reveals the mass opposition that exists in the working class to the National Party-led coalition government's relentless assault on public services and its promotion of militarism and imperialist war.

The simultaneous strikes by nurses, doctors, and other public healthcare workers and teachers will be the country's largest day of industrial action since 1979. Some 3.5 percent of the country's working population, and more than one in five public sector workers, is taking part.

They are supported by the overwhelming majority of the population: A poll by Talbot Mills Research found that 65 percent of people support the strike and only 25 percent oppose it. This reflects deep hostility and anger over the evisceration of public healthcare, education and other vital services by successive governments led by both Labour and the National Party.

The immediate issue in the strike is the attempt by the National-led government to significantly lower wages for educators and healthcare workers. Those taking part have rejected wage offers of just 2 percent a year or less—a major cut under conditions where annual inflation is 3 percent, the cost of food has risen 4.6 percent and electricity more than 11 percent.

Workers are also striking to protest drastically understaffed public hospitals and under-resourced schools—conditions that are putting the health of thousands of people at risk and undermining the right of children to a high-quality education.

The burning question facing workers is: what is the way forward in the struggle against the government? While Thursday's strike will be a powerful demonstration of the potential power that workers have, a single day's strike will do nothing to stop the worsening onslaught on basic social rights.

The government has made clear that it is determined to press forward with the agenda demanded by big business and the banks to make workers pay for the recession through sweeping public sector cuts and wage reductions. The aim is to boost corporate profits and to divert public funds to the military to equip and prepare it to join US-led imperialist wars.

This is the program of governments in every country, provoking a global upsurge of protests and strikes. A few days ago 7 million people rallied across the United States against the Trump regime's plot to impose a fascist dictatorship that will reduce workers to poverty, crush political opposition and wage wars against China and Russia and to redivide the entire world.

The New Zealand government—with the full support of the Labour Party—is strengthening its alliance with US imperialism and lashing out at mass opposition to war and to the US-Israeli genocide in Gaza.

Workers want to fight this agenda. The main obstacle they confront is the union bureaucracies, which are seeking to limit the strike as much as possible, to demoralise and divide workers and create the conditions for imposing a sellout.

The leadership of all the unions—the Post-Primary Teachers' Association (PPTA), the primary teachers' union NZEI, the New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO), the Association of Salaried Medical Specialists (ASMS) and the Public Service Association (PSA)—have told the government that they are prepared to accept a wage offer that matches the official inflation rate. This means an effective pay freeze, which will not address the soaring living costs that workers face or the staffing crisis in schools and hospitals.

No further joint strikes have been scheduled. The perspective of the unions is to use Thursday's action to let off steam, then immediately return to bargaining with the state behind closed doors, sector by sector, and prevent any ongoing industrial campaign against the government.

Workers must draw fundamental political lessons from decades of bitter experiences with the unions, which long ago ceased to be workers' organisations and transformed into agents of big business and the state.

The Socialist Equality Group calls for the building of new organisations: rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves and independent from and opposed to the union bureaucracy and the capitalist parties, including Labour, the Greens and Te Pāti Māori.

These committees should discuss and formulate demands which address the urgent needs of workers—not what the government and the unions claim is “affordable” or “realistic.”

The SEG proposes that workers demand **an immediate wage increase of at least 30 percent** to make up for years of cuts.

Rank-and-file committees must also fight to overcome the divisions imposed by the unions and to expand the struggles of healthcare and school staff by linking up with workers in transportation, meat processing, forestry, manufacturing and across the public sector facing similar attacks on their basic rights.

Workers must direct their struggle not only against the National-led government but also the opposition Labour Party and its allies—the Greens, Te Pāti Māori and their pseudo-left supporters—which bear direct responsibility for the crises in public health and education.

Labour has made mealy-mouthed statements in support of the public sector strike, with party leader Chris Hipkins criticising the government's below-inflation offers. But teachers, nurses and doctors all took repeated strike action during the 2017–2023 Labour Party-led government, in opposition to its austerity policies. Again and again, Labour worked with the NZNO, PPTA, NZEI and other unions to ram through rotten agreements which kept wages stagnant and failed to meet demands for safe levels of staffing.

The government led by Jacinda Ardern—which also included the Greens and, in its first term, the right-wing NZ First—told workers there was “no money” to address the crisis in schools and hospitals, even as it exploited the COVID-19 pandemic to distribute tens of billions of dollars in tax concessions and bailouts to corporations, and committed billions to the military.

The Ardern government presided over increased homelessness and child poverty, and a public health crisis, including thousands of deaths caused by its criminal decision in 2022—backed and enforced by the unions—to remove all public health measures stopping the spread of COVID-19.

In opposition to Labour and the unions, the SEG calls on workers to link their fight against austerity with the struggle against imperialist war.

Defence Minister Judith Collins, in a hysterical and provocative outburst on October 19, denounced Thursday's strike for supposedly being fixated on the issue of Palestine. In reality, the unions in New Zealand and internationally have refused to call any strike action against the genocide in Gaza; for two years they have enabled the uninterrupted shipment of weapons and other supplies to Israel's war machine.

The PSA, the country's largest union, has joined the Labour Party in supporting the government's decision to double military spending. The union's Fleur Fitzsimons has attacked the government from the right for not doing enough to “build a modern, combat-ready defence force” to confront China.

Various middle-class, pseudo-left groups, particularly the International Socialist Organisation (ISO), are seeking to cover up the unions' record of betrayals and embrace of militarism. In an October 1 article, the ISO promoted illusions that strikes led by the unions can “break [the government's] grip on power ... [and] force changes far beyond what the Labour opposition would like to offer.”

The ISO, which campaigns in elections for Labour, the Greens and Te Pati Maori and has intimate connections with the union bureaucracy, is perpetrating a deliberate fraud. Such groups are hostile to the mobilisation of the working class in a revolutionary struggle for socialism. Their aim is to ensure a more comfortable existence for the privileged middle class layer they represent.

Against all these supporters of capitalism, the Socialist Equality Group calls on workers, organised in rank-and-file committees, to fight for an explicitly socialist and internationalist program, including the following demands:

Billions for public services, funded by expropriating the super-rich

Workers must reject the lie that there is no money for social programs and jobs. The tens of billions of dollars controlled by the corporate and financial elite must be expropriated to fund the vast expansion of schools, hospitals, housing and other vital infrastructure, and eliminate poverty and inequality.

No money for war! End the genocide in Gaza!

The money being squandered on military spending must be

redirected to meet the urgent needs of working people. Workers must mobilise to stop the US-Israeli genocide in Gaza, including through strikes at ports and other actions to shut down supplies and funding for Israel. Workers must demand an end to the alliance with US imperialism and the withdrawal of NZ troops from the Middle East, where they are assisting in the bombing of Yemen, and from Britain, where they are training Ukrainian conscripts for the US-NATO war against Russia.

Workers must oppose the anti-China war propaganda from the media and the capitalist parties, and take action to halt the mad preparations to join what would inevitably become a nuclear war against China.

For internationalism and the defence of immigrants

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, an initiative of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement, provides the means for workers in New Zealand to unite their struggles with those in Australia, the US and other countries. This is the only way to fight the ruling oligarchy and its criminal plans for war and dictatorship.

Workers must oppose all attempts to divide workers based on nationality and race. Rank-and-file committees must defend immigrant workers, who are being viciously scapegoated for social inequality and unemployment by the government and opposition parties and the unions. Immigrants and refugees must be allowed to live, study and work in New Zealand with full citizenship rights.

For world socialism: Build the Socialist Equality Group

Governments throughout the world are engaged in a social counter-revolution: They are plunging the world into barbarism and war, and destroying all the gains workers have made over more than a century of struggle.

The parties, unions and pseudo-left groups who claim that the capitalist system can be reformed in the interests of workers are lying. It must be abolished and society reorganised along socialist lines. The wealth and resources created by the working class must be taken out of the billionaires' hands and placed in public ownership, under workers' democratic control, so they can be used to meet human needs.

The immediate task facing workers is to build the necessary revolutionary leadership to fight for the unification of the international working class based on a socialist program.



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