

More than 100,000 join New Zealand's biggest strike in more than 40 years

Tom Peters
23 October 2025

As many as 110,000 public sector workers joined New Zealand's so-called "mega strike" yesterday, including about 60,000 teachers, more than 30,000 nurses, 5,000 doctors and about 20,000 other healthcare workers. In addition, about 2,000 firefighters held a one-hour nationwide strike on October 17.

With about 3.5 percent of the working population taking part, Thursday's strike was the country's largest since 1979.

The historic strike is part of an international upsurge of working class struggles. A few days earlier, 7 million people joined the No Kings rallies across the United States—the largest demonstrations in the country's history—against the Trump administration's drive to establish a fascist dictatorship.

In France, hundreds of thousands have protested against sweeping social cuts, and in Italy millions have joined strikes in opposition to the US-Israeli genocide in Gaza and the Meloni government's fascistic policies.

In New Zealand workers are likewise being driven into struggle against the right-wing National Party-led government's brutal cuts to public services, which are being imposed in order to double military spending and to divert more money to the super-rich.

The government is determined to drive down wages across the public sector, amid soaring living costs. Healthcare workers, teachers and firefighters have all rejected proposed pay offers ranging from 1 percent to just over 2 percent per year—well below the 3 percent annual inflation rate and the 4.6 percent increase in food prices.

In the biggest city, Auckland, about 20,000 people rallied in Aotea Square and marched down Queen Street, many of them carrying handmade placards. WSWs reporters spoke with several participants including teachers, social workers and other healthcare workers, who highlighted the extreme dysfunction in understaffed public hospitals and schools, exacerbated by increased homelessness, poverty and soaring costs for food and other essentials. They denounced the government for being focused solely on further enriching those at the top of society.

Ten thousand people also protested in the nearby city of Hamilton and thousands more joined events in Whangarei, Tauranga, Napier, Rotorua, Gisborne, New Plymouth, Palmerston North, and Whanganui, as well as the smaller towns of Kaitia, Taupo, Te Kuiti, Thames, Tokoroa, Turangi, Whakatane and Wairoa.

Striking workers were joined by many supporters, including school and university students, retired workers and others. A poll found that 65 percent of the country supported the strike and only 25 percent were against it. Workers in every industry are facing attacks on their wages and conditions, as well as being directly impacted by the crisis in public health and education.

The union bureaucracy called the combined strike actions with great reluctance, in an attempt to let off steam and maintain control over workers. To limit the strike's impact, the Association of Salaried Medical Specialists (ASMS) and the New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) only allowed doctors and nurses to stop work for 4 hours.

Planned rallies outside parliament in Wellington and across the entire South Island were cancelled due to severe storms. The unions, however, refused to reschedule or to organise alternative indoor events.

The government lashed out viciously at striking workers, with Public Service Minister Judith Collins saying their action was "cruel to those people who were due to have surgery or vital consultations" and "disruptive for senior school students about to face exams."

In fact, it is the drastic underfunding of vital public services by successive Labour and National Party governments that has led to unsafe, overflowing emergency wards and tens of thousands of people unable to access timely medical treatment. Across the country's public schools, a shortage of roughly 1,250 teachers has led to overcrowded classrooms, placing intolerable burdens on staff and students alike.

Collins previously attacked the Post-Primary Teachers' Association (PPTA) for mentioning concerns about the situation in Palestine during a meeting with Education

Minister Erica Stanford. Prime Minister Christopher Luxon said it was “insane” for Palestine to be raised as an issue in the teachers’ dispute.

The *New Zealand Herald* endorsed these statements in its editorial on the strike, which falsely declared that nurses and teachers are “well-paid” and stated that it was “hard to see the relevance” of Palestine.

In reality, despite mass opposition in New Zealand to the US-Israeli genocide in Gaza, the unions have not called a single industrial action to oppose the government’s support for US imperialism and for the Zionist regime in Israel.

Union officials who addressed the Auckland strike rally did not mention the genocide. Nor did they denounce the hypocrisy of Collins and Luxon claiming the government cannot afford to fund public services, while it funnels \$13 billion into the military over four years in preparation to join a US-led war against China. This is because the unions, like the opposition Labour Party, support the militarist build-up.

The union leaders’ speeches were notable for their lack of any concrete demands. A vaguely-worded “resolution” endorsed by the different unions was read out, calling on the government to fund public services “at a level necessary to meet the needs of our communities” and to settle collective agreements “on just and reasonable terms, including improved conditions.”

This does not commit the unions to anything. What level of funding is needed and what is meant by “just and reasonable terms”?

The resolution called for “ongoing solidarity between public sector workers and other workers to achieve these goals” including more “industrial activities.” Council of Trade Unions president Richard Wagstaff told the crowd: “This strike today is about putting a stake in the ground and saying ‘no more.’”

Yet no further joint strikes have been scheduled. Instead, the unions will go back into behind-the-scenes negotiations with the government, aimed at coming up with a sellout deal.

The NZNO, PPTA and other unions have indicated that they would support a pay rise of just 3 percent, matching the inflation rate, which would in reality be a pay cut relative to the actual cost of living. The only question for the well-heeled officials who run these pro-capitalist organisations is how to persuade their members to accept such a deal as the only one they can “reasonably” expect.

A speaker from the primary teachers’ union NZEI told the Auckland rally: “This government better listen to us because there’s also an election next year.”

The claim that workers can resolve their pressing issues by voting for a Labour Party-led government is a lie. Jacinda Ardern’s 2017-2023 Labour government imposed brutal

austerity in the public sector, which starved health and education services. Its 2023 budget, for instance, increased health spending by about 5.4 percent, well below inflation (then 7.7 percent) and not enough to meet the demands of the growing and aging population.

When teachers, doctors and nurses tried to fight back through strike action in 2018, 2019 and 2021, the unions systematically isolated their struggles and pushed through sellout deals that kept wages effectively frozen and led to worsening conditions in schools and hospitals.

The Socialist Equality Group (SEG) intervened in the Auckland rally, speaking with many of those present and distributing hundreds of copies of its statement calling for workers to adopt a socialist perspective to fight pay cuts, austerity and war.

It explained the need for a political struggle against the entire political establishment, including Labour and its allies—the Greens and Te P?ti M?ori, and the pseudo-left organisations—all of which represent big business and the affluent middle class, and have no real differences with the National-led government’s agenda.

The statement called on workers to build new organisations—rank-and-file committees that workers themselves control, independent of all the capitalist parties and the union apparatus, whose role is to enforce the dictates of the corporations and the government. Such committees must build a powerful mass movement by linking up workers in every industry, as well as coordinating with workers internationally, including in Australia.

Contrary to the divisive misinformation spouted by NZ union officials, teachers, nurses and other workers in Australia are not highly-paid and are confronting all the same attacks as their counterparts in New Zealand.

The pro-corporate onslaught in every country can only be stopped by an international movement of the working class, based on socialist demands, including the expropriation of big business and the rich, the defence of immigrant workers, and an end to all funding for war.

The SEG urges workers and young people to attend a public webinar at 4:00pm on November 9, to discuss these urgent issues and the way forward in the fight against pay cuts, austerity and war. Register here to attend.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact