

New Zealand union bureaucrats peddle the lie: Australia—a land of “milk and honey”

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The “mega strike” by more than 100,000 public sector workers in New Zealand last Thursday was the largest industrial action in that country in 40 years. The stoppage, directed against the National-led government’s attempt to inflict real pay cuts and entrench intolerable working conditions, testifies to a growing militancy and social anger.

The New Zealand strike was part of the growth of the class struggle globally. Whatever their particularities, all of these struggles are fuelled by the austerity agenda of governments that are imposing the burden of a capitalist crisis onto the backs of working people, as they defend the interests of billionaires and divert vast resources to the military in preparation for war.

As in all the struggles that are developing internationally, New Zealand workers are posed with the necessity of a fight against the National-led government, the opposition Labour Party, which is no less a representative of big business, and the entire political establishment. What is needed is a political movement of the working class, based on a new perspective that rejects the entire austerity framework and the capitalist profit system that underpins it.

The New Zealand public sector union bureaucracies, having only called the strike for fear that opposition would escape their control, are desperately trying to prevent such a political development. They have called no further action, have signalled their willingness to return to backroom bargaining with the government and have indicated they will accept paltry wage increases that do not keep up with the real growth in the cost-of-living.

One of the ways the union bureaucrats are seeking to confuse workers and to divert from the struggle against the government that is required, is by presenting Australia as a beacon of high pay for public sector workers, quality working conditions and vast opportunities. That feeds into a broader narrative, promoted by much of the New Zealand corporate media and elements of the political establishment.

The substantial outflow of New Zealanders testifies to the depth of the social crisis, in a country where around 1 in 5 people live in poverty and where wage levels have always been among the lowest of an advanced “western” capitalist country. In the year to August, a record 47,900 New Zealanders migrated abroad, more than half of them to Australia.

But the depiction of Australia as a land of “milk and honey” is an utter fraud. That was demonstrated at the strike rallies themselves, where union bureaucrats simply lied about the

situation across the Tasman Sea.

Speaking in Auckland, Paul Stevens, regional chair of the Post Primary Teachers’ Association, denounced the bogus claims of the National government’s public sector minister Judith Collins that New Zealand teachers are well paid. But in doing so, he made his own false claims about the pay of teachers in Australia.

Stevens noted that Collins had falsely said that New Zealand teachers were paid as much as \$147,000 a year and that they had effective wage parity with their Australian counterparts. He then declared: “At the risk of offering people further enticement to move to the sunburnt country [Australia], we may not earn anywhere near \$147,000 but they [Australian teachers] often do.”

That is simply untrue. One need only look at Australia’s two most populous states, where the majority of New Zealanders emigrate to.

In the state of Victoria, for instance, the starting salary for a new teacher is \$78,021. The maximum annual pay rate is \$126,992, but the average is little over \$90,000. And that pay level is stagnant.

In 2021, Victorian teachers were hit with a wage freeze, due to a refusal by the state Labor government to provide backpay based on the expiration of their agreement. In 2022, the Australian Education Union rammed through a sellout agreement, which locked in annual pay increases of 2 percent, substantially below inflation.

In New South Wales (NSW), the starting salary for a teacher is around \$90,000, with the most experienced cohort receiving a maximum of \$129,000 per annum and an average for high school teachers of just over \$100,000. In that state too, the teacher union has imposed agreements throughout the cost-of-living crisis that amounted to real wage cuts.

A 2023 study by the University of Sydney Business School found: “On top of a continuing decline in teachers’ salaries compared to the average of all professions, the ‘real earnings’ of NSW teachers fell by about 5.7 percent between 2020 and 2022 due to salary increases that were far below inflation increases.” The study’s authors noted that in real terms, teacher pay had not advanced over the course of the previous decade.

The real scale of the reversal can only be seen by comparing the stagnant or declining wages of teachers with the soaring cost of living. This month, median house prices in Sydney, the NSW capital, reached a record \$1.75 million.

Commenting on that figure, Kate Browne, head of research at a financial comparison site, Compare Club, told Domain: “For a

\$1.5 million property on a \$1.4 million loan, a single person now needs to earn \$285,000 and a couple, \$290,000.” That is, home ownership is far beyond the vast majority of teachers.

For the majority, a vast chunk of their income must be dedicated to huge rents, the median of which in Sydney is approaching a record \$800 a week. Already, in 2023, a study by the Australian Educational Researcher found that 90 percent of NSW teachers work in suburbs where they could not afford to rent or buy a house on their salary.

As in New Zealand, the attack on teachers’ pay is one component of an offensive on public education that has made conditions in the schools intolerable.

A 2023 survey of 4,000 teachers across the country by the mental health Black Dog Institute found that almost 47 percent were considering leaving the profession in the next 12 months. That compared with just 14 percent in 2021. 70 percent reported unmanageable workloads, more than half of the total indicated symptoms consistent with depression.

So much for the claims of the New Zealand teacher union bureaucrats. But the situation is no different in the Australian public healthcare sector, which the New Zealand unions also hold up as a model to be emulated.

Data presented by Victoria University showed that “average salary for an enrolled nurse in Australia is around \$70,000, and \$88,000 for a registered nurse.” The Anglicare charity this month released its annual rental affordability snapshot, based on listed properties. It found that just 1.5 percent of advertised rental properties were “affordable” on a nurse’s salary.

The public hospitals are in their worst crisis ever. Over recent years, surveys have consistently shown burnout rates for healthcare workers of 70 percent or more. Every week, there are reports of dysfunction in the hospitals, from bed shortages forcing ambulances to “ramp” outside with patients, to insufficient staffing ratios and health workers compelled to confront dangerous situations without assistance.

The plight of Australian educators and health workers is one component of a crisis afflicting the entire working class. OECD figures last year showed an average decline in Australian real wages of 4.8 percent compared with the period immediately preceding the pandemic, as against an average rise of 1.5 percent across other OECD countries. All metrics of social distress, from rental and mortgage stress, to homelessness and mental illness are worsening.

Given that reality, the obvious question is why the New Zealand unions are so blatantly falsifying the situation across the Tasman. The answer is that their phoney claims serve political ends.

The unions, in New Zealand, Australia and globally, are all based on nationalism, which serves to divide workers and to subordinate them to the national political establishment. Above all they seek to prevent a unified struggle of workers across industries, regions and countries against the capitalist system which is the root cause of deteriorating living conditions.

The claim that the situation is so much better for workers in Australia than New Zealand is itself a peculiar, almost inverted form of nationalism. It presents the situation in New Zealand as an aberration. The implication is that if placed under sufficient

pressure, the National-led government will improve pay and conditions. Or failing that, that the election of Labour, with which the unions are allied, will remedy the situation.

In fact, in Australia, it is a federal Labor government that is presiding over an onslaught on social spending, wage suppression and a vast military build-up, and the majority of the state administrations are also led by Labor.

The reality is that the conditions of workers across the Tasman and globally are marked by their commonality, not their difference. Everywhere, workers are facing an assault dictated by the major banks and corporations, which themselves operate at a global level.

Everywhere, it is the corporatised trade union bureaucracies that isolate, divide and sell out workers. Just as the New Zealand unions are seeking to wind down the dispute that led to the mega-strike and to strike a dirty deal with the government, so too in Australia have repeated struggles by health, education and other workers been isolated from one another before being betrayed by the unions.

The alternative is a fight to unite workers in Australia, New Zealand and globally, in a common struggle for decent wages, conditions and services. That requires a rebellion against the union leaderships and the formation of new organisations of struggle, rank-and-file committees, controlled by workers themselves not privileged and government-aligned bureaucrats.

Through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees [IWA-RFC] workers can unite their struggles across national borders, in line with the need for an international strategy of the working class, directed against the international strategy of the capitalist ruling elites. This struggle must be based on a socialist perspective, because a frontal assault on the oligarchy and the placing of the banks and the corporations under public ownership and democratic workers’ control is the only way to halt the offensive against workers’ wages and conditions, and to establish a society based on social equality.



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