

Pseudo-left ISO promotes Labour and union bureaucracy amid New Zealand's “mega strike”

Tom Peters
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New Zealand's October 23 “mega strike” involving more than 100,000 public sector workers—the country's biggest day of industrial action since 1979 and part of an upsurge of the working class in the US, Europe and throughout the world—has provoked considerable nervousness in the political establishment, the corporate media and the union bureaucracy.

The unions were forced to call the one-day combined strike involving teachers, nurses, doctors and other healthcare workers, due to mass anger over the National Party-led coalition government's moves to cut real wages across the public sector, while continuing to starve public hospitals and schools of staffing and other resources.

The development of a mass movement against austerity is seen as a threat not only by the National government, but by the opposition Labour Party and its allies. The horrific conditions workers face are the product of decades of attacks imposed by successive Labour and National Party-led governments. Both parties are responsible for soaring social inequality, homelessness and poverty, and the diversion of billions of dollars to the military to join US-led imperialist wars.

The ruling elite is relying on the union apparatus to bring the situation under control, to demobilise and divide workers, prevent any further mass strikes, and overcome resistance to wage-cutting agreements. Union leaders have already re-entered talks with the government and indicated that they would agree to pay deals matching the 3 percent inflation rate, which will not cover the real cost-of-living increases.

In this context the pseudo-left International Socialist Organisation (ISO), which has close ties with the unions, is seeking to cover up the role of these organisations and to present them as the champions of the working class.

The basic position of the ISO was spelled out in an October 1 article by Grant Brookes, a former president of the New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO).

Brookes quotes the revolutionary leader Rosa Luxemburg's statement in her 1906 pamphlet *The Mass Strike*, that the class struggle “aims at one and the same time at the limitation of capitalist exploitation within bourgeois society, and at the abolition of exploitation together with bourgeois society itself.”

However, Brookes then asserts that such a perspective is not on the agenda, writing: “Although moves to abolish capitalist exploitation in Aotearoa [NZ] are unlikely in the near future, we are witnessing a major escalation of working class struggle.”

Instead of mobilising the working class in a conscious struggle against capitalism, 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 M?ori, for Palestine, for women, and for others,” he continued.

The ISO's aim, in other words, is the replacement of one capitalist government with another, which it claims will be under pressure to make progressive changes, the nature of which is not spelled out.

This is a complete fraud. The ISO has spent decades campaigning on behalf of Labour and its allies—the Greens, Te P?ti M?ori and the now-defunct M?ori nationalist Mana Party—and whitewashing the record of these capitalist parties.

The organisation glorified the 2017–2023 Labour government led by prime minister Jacinda Ardern, falsely describing it as “reformist,” i.e. progressive. In fact, Labour oversaw the running down of New Zealand's schools and hospitals, including stagnant wages and chronic understaffing, and a public health crisis triggered by its decision to abandon all COVID-19 mitigations. Homelessness, child poverty and the number of people relying on foodbanks to survive all increased during the last years of the Ardern government.

Nationwide strikes by nurses, doctors and teachers took place during the Ardern government, but the unions played a key role in ensuring that these disputes were kept divided, and in imposing sellout agreements.

The union bureaucracy is again seeking to lower workers' expectations. Fleur Fitzsimons, national secretary of the Public Service Association—which covers 17,000 health sector workers involved in the October 23 strike—told Newstalk ZB on October 26 that workers were “simply asking for pay to remain at its current level; they're not asking for big pay increases, they're

simply asking to have inflation reflected in their pay.” Similar statements have been made by representatives of the teachers, nurses and doctors’ unions.

Far from criticising the record of these unions or what they are putting forward in their current negotiations with the state, the ISO’s articles often read like union press statements. An October 16 article echoed the main complaint by union officials that the National-led government was not engaging in “good faith bargaining, where each side is committed to finding common ground,” i.e. reaching a compromise at the expense of workers’ interests.

The ISO meanwhile continues to falsely portray the unions as opponents of war. In an October 20 “Open letter to the working people of Aotearoa,” the ISO’s Romany Tasker-Poland criticised the government for starving public services while cutting taxes for the rich and spending billions to double military spending—including subsidising the company Rocket Lab, which produces military technology being used by both the US and Israel.

Responding to Defence Minister Judith Collins’ claim that the “mega strike” was “politically motivated” by the issue of Palestine, the ISO cited a statement by a group of members of the Post-Primary Teachers’ Association (PPTA) criticising government decisions to “divert funds away from children’s education towards military participation.”

The union leadership, however, suppressed the issue, telling teachers not to bring any “political” signage to strike rallies and to keep their messages focused on issues related directly to schools.

Not one of the union officials who spoke at the Auckland demonstration mentioned the billions being poured into the military because they, like the Labour Party, fully agree with it. The PSA’s Fitzsimons is on the record calling for the government to spend more to prepare the armed forces for war against China.

According to the ISO, “unions are united in backing the history-making protests” against the Gaza genocide. The truth is that while the unions have passed limited resolutions calling for a ceasefire, these are no less hypocritical than similar statements made by governments around the world.

For the past two years, none of the NZ unions have called any industrial action against the genocide. Internationally, the unions have enabled the continued production and supply of weapons for the mass murder of Palestinians.

The ISO covers up this fact because it, like pseudo-left groups in the United States, Australia and Europe, has embraced imperialism. It openly backs the escalating US-NATO war against Russia, which is being used to rapidly militarize Europe and which threatens millions of people with nuclear war. The Ardern Labour government, with the support of the Greens and the entire parliament, deployed New Zealand troops to Britain to train Ukrainian conscripts for the war, in which hundreds of thousands have been killed.

As the class struggle escalates in New Zealand and internationally, workers must reject the politics of pseudo-left organisations, which represent the interests of affluent middle-class layers who do not oppose capitalism but merely seek better conditions for themselves within the present system.

Workers and young people should also reject the fraud peddled by the ISO and similar groups that Labour and other parties of big business will ameliorate conditions for workers. The capitalist system is beyond reform and is plunging the world into catastrophe. The imperialist powers including NZ’s ruling class intend to solve the worsening economic crisis by intensifying the exploitation of workers and through a new US-led world war against Russia and China.

The way forward for workers in New Zealand was outlined by the Socialist Equality Group (SEG) in its statement distributed to workers during the “mega strike.”

In opposition to the pseudo-lefts, the SEG warned workers that public sector workers will be isolated and sold out unless they take their struggles out of the hands of the union bureaucracy. We called on workers to build rank-and-file committees, which they themselves control, independent of the corporatist union bureaucracy.

These committees must organise the broadest possible struggle, uniting workers in every industry against the assault on wages, jobs and public services. The SEG proposed demands including an immediate 30 percent wage rise for all workers, funded by expropriating the super-rich and ending all military spending.

The International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, an initiative of the Trotskyist movement, will provide the mechanism for linking New Zealand workers with those in Australia and other countries. This will overcome the national barriers enforced by the union bureaucracy and build a powerful international movement against the capitalist oligarchy.

The SEG called on workers to break from all the capitalist parties and to build the SEG into the New Zealand section of the International Committee of the Fourth International—the world party of socialist revolution, which fights for the abolition of the profit system and the reorganisation of the world to put an end to social inequality and war.

We call on workers to register to attend the SEG’s webinar at **4:00 p.m. on Sunday November 9** to discuss the way forward in the struggle against pay cuts, austerity and war.



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