

# New Zealand Professional Firefighters Union calls off strike

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On November 6 the New Zealand Professional Firefighters Union (NZPFU) announced via a Facebook post that it had cancelled a strike planned for the following day, after “meaningful” discussions with the employer, Fire and Emergency NZ (FENZ).

Relations between FENZ and the firefighters have become acrimonious over 16 months of contract bargaining, with firefighters saying lives are being put at risk with thin staffing levels and unsafe equipment and trucks. Firefighters have rejected a pay offer of 5.1 percent over three years, i.e. less than 2 percent per year, well below the 3 percent inflation rate and soaring living costs.

About 2,000 firefighters held a one-hour nationwide strike on October 17, just days before 110,000 public sector workers, including 60,000 teachers, more than 30,000 nurses, 5,000 doctors, and about 20,000 other health workers, joined a “mega strike” on October 23. Many firefighters also turned out in support of the mass strike.

With about 3.5 percent of the working population protesting pay cuts and attacks on public services by the far-right National Party-led government, the strike was the country’s largest since 1979.

On October 20 the NZPFU announced members had voted for nationwide one-hour strikes on four days: November 4, 7, 11 and 14. The first two stoppages were called off after the union and FENZ met for talks last week. The remaining two proposed strikes remain in place for now but could well be called off.

The NZPFU National Committee declared it had now “reworked” some of its claims “in an innovative way in a bid to find a framework which could lead to a settlement.” FENZ accepted the proposal as “worthy of exploring,” the union said, and talks will resume next week.

The union also claimed FENZ has “moved closer” to accepting some of the NZPFU’s claims that they had previously rejected.

Firefighters should be prepared for a sell-out from the secretive closed-door negotiations. Throughout the months of talks, the union has remained publicly vague about its actual claims and objectives. The NZPFU statement proclaimed that, after months of bargaining, it was “refreshing to be able to have intelligent and thoughtful discussions” with the employer last week.

FENZ meanwhile has launched a restructuring drive to cut \$50 million annually by slashing jobs and “stopping or slowing” non-core activities. The government has warned of a reduction in insurance levies that fund the agency in 2026 and told FENZ to save \$60 million from the \$800 million budget by 2029. According to the union, a commitment made in 2022 to hire 230 extra firefighters is now at risk.

The wider issues facing firefighters run deep. Firefighters last held a series of strikes in August and September 2022, against the then Labour-led government, over pay and conditions. FENZ had offered most firefighters a 4 percent per year pay rise, well below inflation that was more than 7 percent, while failing to address staffing and health and safety concerns.

Firefighters who spoke to the WSWS at the time raised serious concerns, including excessive overtime demands, trucks repeatedly breaking down, insufficient manning and lack of support for workers getting occupational diseases, including cancer and mental health problems. Demands on firefighters had grown, requiring them to respond to emergencies ranging from vehicle incidents to major flooding disasters.

Three years on, most of these issues remain unresolved. Deputy Prime Minister David Seymour

recently denied claims of routine breakdowns, telling parliament that in recent months there had only been one breakdown causing a two-minute delay to a fire callout.

Firefighter Steve Devine accused Seymour of covering up the poor state of the fire truck fleet, pointing to multiple cases where “firefighters and the public had been put at risk by faulty fire trucks.” He told Radio NZ (RNZ) one truck had broken down on the way to a fire in Whangarei where fire fighters almost died. Devine said older trucks were simply upgraded or refurbished and he hadn’t seen a brand new truck delivered in 14 years.

According to the union, Auckland, the country’s largest city, currently has no operating high-reach aerial trucks capable of saving people trapped higher than three stories. Firefighters would be forced to go inside a blazing building, rather than using the safer option of outside or high above the blaze. The next closest aerial truck was in Hamilton, an hour and a half away.

Last month, it was also reported that Auckland’s central fire station was at a “standstill” with staff and vehicles temporarily unable to enter the building after asbestos had been found there. The Lower Hutt fire station has not reopened after being closed down four years ago due to black mold.

The attempt by NZPFU to shut down its already extremely limited one-hour strikes to seek a deal with FENZ is part of a deliberate move by the entire trade union bureaucracy to hose down the explosive movement of the working class expressed in the October 23 “mega-strike.”

That unified stoppage, the first in 40 years, was part of an upsurge of workers internationally, testifying to a growing militancy and social anger against sweeping pay cuts and intolerable working conditions. New Zealand workers are being driven into struggle against brutal cuts to public services, which are being imposed in order to double military spending and divert money to the super-rich. The government is determined to drive down wages 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 a 4.6 percent increase in food prices.

The union bureaucracies, having called the “mega-

strike” for fear that opposition would escape their control, are now seeking to demobilise workers. They have called no further joint action, signalling their willingness to return to backroom bargaining with the government.

The New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO), Post Primary Teachers Association (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 for tens of thousands of workers.

Nurses, midwives, and healthcare assistants in public hospitals have voted to take further action this month over unsafe staffing. But the NZNO has not called any more strikes, restricting the upcoming action to a ban on extra hours and roster changes across a limited series of dates.

On November 5, more than 20,000 secondary school teachers went on strike, but this was limited by the PPTA to just two hours from 1.15 p.m. to 3.15 p.m. during senior exams, which are not supervised by teachers. PPTA president Chris Abercrombie told RNZ: “We just really hope the government comes to the party with an offer, so we don’t have to engage in any more industrial action.”

The Socialist Equality Group (NZ) is holding a public **webinar tomorrow, November 9, at 4:00 p.m.** which will discuss the political lessons of the “mega strike” and the way forward in the fight against austerity, pay cuts and imperialist war. Speakers will explain why workers should adopt a socialist perspective and build rank-and-file committees opposed to the pro-capitalist union bureaucracy and the whole political establishment, including Labour and its allies. We urge readers to register here to attend this important discussion.



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