

Meeting discusses the way forward for workers after New Zealand's "mega-strike"

Our reporter
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The Socialist Equality Group (SEG) in New Zealand and the Socialist Equality Party in Australia held a webinar last Sunday to discuss the way forward in the fight against austerity and war following the October 23 mass strike in New Zealand.

The online meeting was attended by about 50 people, including workers, young people and supporters of the Trotskyist movement in both countries.

The simultaneous strikes by more than 100,000 public sector workers, including teachers, doctors, nurses and other healthcare workers, was NZ's largest industrial action in nearly half a century, involving 3.5 percent of the workforce. It demonstrated the mass opposition to the right-wing National Party-led coalition government's efforts to slash wages and cut vital public services.

Introducing the event, Max Boddy, assistant national secretary of the SEP (Australia), emphasised that "the same conditions driving New Zealand workers into struggle are present in every country." On October 18, "seven million people took part in the No Kings protests [in the United States], the largest demonstrations in that country's history, opposing the Trump administration's efforts to concentrate power in the presidency and establish a form of authoritarian rule."

Tom Peters, a leading member of the SEG, delivered the main report to the meeting. He explained that "the astronomical wealth built up by a handful of billionaires and the unprecedented levels of social inequality" in the US was incompatible with democracy.

At the same time, to defend its dominant global position, US imperialism was seeking to violently redivide the world, including through the US-Israeli genocide in Gaza and "the far-advanced plans for war against China." The ruling classes in New Zealand and Australia, close allies of the US, were complicit in these crimes and were carrying out the same attacks on living conditions and public services.

In New Zealand, "teachers, nurses, doctors and other healthcare professionals as well as firefighters, have all been offered a pay rise of about 2 percent or even less per

year—which amounts to a substantial pay cut. Inflation is at 3 percent but the real cost of living is far higher: food prices have increased by 4.1 percent, power prices by more than 11 percent and visiting a doctor has gone up by more than 10 percent."

Peters warned that the union bureaucracy and pseudo-left groups like the International Socialist Organisation (ISO) opposed any movement against the capitalist system and were seeking to channel workers behind the Labour Party and its allies in next year's election.

"Austerity did not simply begin with the current coalition government," he said. The policies of the 2017–2023 Labour government had led to increased homelessness, child poverty and inequality. "The situation in schools and hospitals is the result of decades of attacks, including under the government of [former Labour prime ministers] Jacinda Ardern and Chris Hipkins." He reviewed the record of severe underfunding of education and health under Labour and the role of the unions in isolating and betraying strikes by nurses and teachers.

Peters noted that the Labour Party and the unions agreed with the National government on doubling military spending and strengthening the alliance with US imperialism. He quoted Public Service Association leader Fleur Fitzsimons, who criticised the government for not doing enough to "build a modern, combat-ready defence force" to confront China.

The unions, he said, could no longer be called workers' organisations. "Everywhere in the world they act as the enforcers of big business demands for cutbacks and the demands of the state for a militarised economy.

"The claims by pseudo-left organisations, including the ISO, that the unions are taking a stand in support of Palestine, are utterly false. Internationally, including in Australia and New Zealand, the unions have refused to organise strike action to stop the production and shipment of weapons and other supplies to Israel."

Peters argued that workers must build rank-and-file committees, independent and opposed to the union

bureaucracy and the political establishment. He quoted a 2022 resolution of the SEP (Australia) which described such committees as “democratic organisations of, by and for the working class, based upon a perspective of unyielding social struggle. They are the antithesis of the corrupt, bureaucratic apparatuses of suppression and betrayal that describe themselves as trade unions.”

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, an initiative of the International Committee of the Fourth International, would provide the mechanism for linking workers in New Zealand with those in other countries, to fight against big business and imperialist war.

The SEG, Peters said, proposed “demands including an immediate 30 percent wage increase for all workers, and tens of billions of dollars to expand the public health and education system. This must be paid for by expropriating the billionaires who dominate society and placing all major industries under the ownership and control of the working class. We also called for an end to all military spending, the alliance with the United States and all support for Israel.”

The final speaker, Oscar Grenfell, a writer for the WSWs and a member of the SEP’s National Committee in Australia, said the “mega strike” was “an indicator of what’s coming everywhere, including in Australia.”

He explained that a unified movement of workers in Australia and New Zealand “would increase their strength by orders of magnitude. It would be an enormous blow to the forces of the political establishment on both sides of the Tasman, which promote nationalism to divide the working class, to cover over the real causes of the social crisis, and to present what are inherently international problems as local ones.”

Grenfell exposed the New Zealand union leaders’ “depiction of Australia as a land of milk and honey” as “outright misinformation.” He debunked the false claims made by officials from the Post-Primary Teachers’ Association (PPTA) and the New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) about the supposedly high wages and good conditions in Australia.

The NZ unions’ glorification of Australia was “a peculiar, almost inverted form of nationalism. It presents the situation in New Zealand as an aberration. That goes hand in hand with the claim that this is just an issue of the National-led government, and that New Zealand Labour would be an alternative.”

Grenfell highlighted the responsibility of the Labor government in Australia for a drop in real incomes by at least 4.8 percent on average since the pandemic, “one of the sharpest reversals of an OECD country.” He described the political programs of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, “a so-called Labor left,” and New Zealand’s right-wing PM

Christopher Luxon as “nearly identical.”

The reports were followed by questions and discussion on issues including the source of the enormous wealth of oligarchs like Elon Musk, and the development of socialist consciousness in the working class.

One audience member commented that “there is a deep sense of hopelessness in my community of young people in New Zealand.” She asked: “How do I best mobilise those around me to join the fight, when they are all exhausted and defeated by the day to day struggle of the current conditions?”

SEG member and WSWs writer John Braddock explained that such moods were the “product of a long period of betrayals and shattered hopes,” going back to the right-wing restructuring carried out by the 1980s Labour government of David Lange.

“What [workers] are seeing is that the Labour Party and the trade unions have nothing to offer and, in fact, are acting as policemen for declining conditions and wages,” he said. The decisive issue for socialists was to solve the crisis of political leadership and perspective in the working class.

Grenfell said that the artificial suppression of the class struggle and the “capitalist triumphalism” that followed the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 had affected the political atmosphere, but the present crisis of capitalism was leading to a new radicalisation. A survey in May found that “62 percent of Americans aged 18 to 29 say they hold a favourable view of socialism, 34 percent say the same of communism. This is the land of official anti-communism, which has been almost a state religion for the entire post-World War II period.”

Peters pointed to the prominent role of young people in the mass protests against the genocide in Gaza. He quoted David North’s appeal to young people in the *Logic of Zionism: From Nationalist Myth to the Gaza Genocide*: “Transform your anger and outrage into effective political action, into the determination to master Marxist theory, to learn the lessons of history, to acquaint yourself with the great revolutionary struggles of the last century.”

Peters concluded by calling on those present to make the decision to join the SEG and the SEP, to begin their education as socialists, and to fight to build the Trotskyist movement.



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