

Rolling strikes continue in New Zealand

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Despite intense efforts by New Zealand's trade union bureaucracy to demobilise and break up the strike movement that erupted in a nationwide "mega-strike" on October 23, thousands of workers are continuing industrial action against the far-right government's austerity agenda.

The mass strike, the country's largest since 1979, saw more than 100,000 public sector workers—teachers, nurses, doctors and healthcare workers—mount a militant and unified one-day stoppage. The strike was a demonstration of the potential power of the working class, and an expression of enormous opposition to the attacks on wages and conditions by the National Party-led coalition government.

The unions were forced to call the strike due to mass anger over moves, begun under the 2017-2023 Labour government, to further cut wages across the public sector, while starving hospitals and schools of staffing and resources. It was part of an upsurge of workers internationally—including millions-strong protests against US President Trump's fascist dictatorship, strike waves in France, Italy and elsewhere and global mobilisations against the Gaza genocide.

The NZ union bureaucrats promptly moved to contain the developing movement and divert it into safe parliamentary channels. They did not schedule any further joint strikes and, while keeping each section of workers isolated, returned to negotiations seeking deals that would freeze wages and intensify the crisis of living costs.

The strategy has met with fierce resistance among workers. Last Friday nearly 17,000 health workers covered by the Public Service Association (PSA) struck over pay and unsafe staffing levels. On the same day 2,000 firefighters walked out in the latest of a series of one-hour stoppages in a contract dispute that flared up in August. The unions limited both strikes to a paltry one hour while deliberately isolating them from each other.

On November 18, about 37,500 nurses and healthcare workers in public hospitals began two weeks of partial action, refusing to accept redeployment or changes to

their rosters or additional hours or shifts. Following the mega-strike, the NZ Nurses Organisation (NZNO) has kept a tight lid on any further walkouts by its members.

According to the PSA, 11,500 allied health workers, including physiotherapists, social workers, technicians and Māori health specialists voted to strike last Friday after mediated talks failed. They were joined by more than 3,500 mental health nurses, public health nurses plus 1,700 policy, advisory and other staff who are also in dispute with Health NZ.

In Auckland, hundreds of striking workers picketed outside the central hospital. Social worker Margaret Colbrough told Radio NZ: "The offers that are on the table at the moment are quite insulting and given the pressures and the lack of resources that we're working under, there's very good reason to come out and strike today."

Health worker Natasha told the WSWs that "all of us" in her section were "not happy with the way the PSA is handling things." The union was "bowing down and selling out to [Finance Minister] Willis" who was only offering a "pacifier," Natasha said. An NZNO member added she was "all for striking" for better conditions but agreed the unions had scaled back action since October.

PSA national secretary Fleur Fitzsimons said Health NZ's pay offers of 1.5 and 2 percent were effectively pay cuts since they were below inflation. "Meanwhile, there are simply not enough health workers to provide the level of care New Zealanders need," she declared.

The unions, however, have indicated that they would settle for pay rises of around 3 percent, matching the official inflation rate but well below the actual cost of living. Stats NZ data released last month shows sharp annual increases for food including fruit (11 percent), beef (17.4 percent), lamb (32.2 percent), bread (11.4 percent), cheese (14.8 percent) and eggs (6.2 percent). Electricity is up 11.8 over the year.

Fitzsimons claimed on Newstalk ZB on October 26 that health 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." Posting on X from the Auckland protest, Council of Trade Unions official Craig Renney, a Labour Party candidate for the 2026 election, declared: "The government should come to the bargaining table, listen and settle this dispute."

NZ Professional Firefighters Union (NZPFU) national secretary Wattie Watson said Friday's strike was a bid to get Fire and Emergency NZ (FENZ) and the government to "act to address the dire state of the fire service." The walkout was the second one-hour stoppage since the union cancelled a strike on November 7 after "meaningful" discussions with FENZ.

Watson declared the union had been "innovative in developing options for settlement and repeatedly urged FENZ to return to the table willing to actually negotiate." NZPFU members rejected a 5.1 percent pay increase over three years, i.e. less than 2 percent per year. Watson also complained that FENZ had announced a restructure that will slash 160 jobs "without consulting with the NZPFU or the PSA."

Last week a group of unions wrote a grovelling letter to Prime Minister Christopher Luxon begging him to "step in and meet" to find "possible ways forward and settlement options." The group, including the Association of Salaried Medical Specialists, NZNO, NZPFU, Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA), NZEI Te Riu Roa and the PSA claimed it would enable impasses to be "moved on" and bargaining "concluded satisfactorily for all parties." Luxon has previously condemned the strikes as 'politically motivated' and felt no need to meet.

After a week of facilitated bargaining, PPTA last week presented a pay offer to over 20,000 secondary school teachers, who have been involved in long-running industrial action. It is a precedent-setting, below-inflation sellout, similar to offers teachers have previously rejected —2.5 percent from next January and another 2.1 percent from January 2027. Many are saying on social media they will vote "no."

Meanwhile, in the private sector, 200 low paid workers at paint manufacturing company Resene struck for two days last week following a strike on October 17, after rejecting a pay offer of just 84 cents an hour. And 1,500 Air New Zealand cabin crew have voted for a one day strike this month. E t? union spokesman Michael Wood appealed to Air NZ management to return to negotiations, saying that the union would "work hard ... to prevent any strike action."

Opposition Labour Party leader Chris Hipkins briefly

joined strikers on Friday, telling media; "I want to see their collective agreement settled before [the 2026 election]. It would just be absolutely wrong for the government to allow this dispute to continue into the new year."

As a cabinet minister and then prime minister in the 2017-2023 Labour government, Hipkins played a key role enforcing the ruling elite's attacks on public sector workers. He enforced an effective pay freeze, triggering nationwide strikes by primary and secondary teachers in 2019 that were sold out by the union bureaucracy, which pushed through pay deals of about 3 percent per year.

With an election looming next year, Hipkins has taken to posturing as a "democratic socialist," following the new mayor of New York, Zohran Mamdani. His intervention around the strikes is a sign of the fear in ruling circles that working class anger over inequality, pay cuts and war could well erupt outside the control of the unions and entire capitalist political establishment.

To expand their struggles and prevent sellouts, healthcare workers, educators and others must rebel against the union leadership, which is colluding with the government and the Labour Party to isolate workers and impose wage cuts. The Socialist Equality Group urges readers to watch our recent webinar on the way forward following the October 23 strike, and to contact us to discuss how to build rank-and-file committees, controlled by workers themselves and independent of the union bureaucracy.



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