

New Zealand primary school teachers reject pay-cutting deal

Tom Peters

19 December 2025

More than 35,000 primary teachers in public schools across New Zealand have voted against the Ministry of Education's latest pay-cutting offer. The breakdown of votes has not been released but the union NZEI Te Riu Roa described it as a "resounding" No vote.

This is an important stand against the right-wing National Party-led government, which is imposing brutal austerity measures and pay cuts across the public sector. Teachers, nurses, doctors and other public health workers held a mass strike, involving more than 100,000 workers, on October 23—the biggest strike since 1979—to oppose this agenda.

The vote cuts across efforts by the union bureaucracy to divide and demobilise workers following the "mega strike," and to persuade them that there is no alternative to accepting real wage cuts. Teachers must now take the next step: build rank-and-file committees, controlled by teachers and school staff, to break the stranglehold of the union leadership and fight to unite the working class in a powerful movement against austerity and militarism.

Primary teachers rejected the same agreement that was pushed through by the Post-Primary Teachers' Association (PPTA) earlier this month for roughly 20,000 high school teachers. The offer included a 2.5 percent pay rise followed by 2.1 percent a year later—below the 3 percent rate of inflation and the 4.4 percent annual increase in food prices.

Similar offers put to primary principals, teacher aides and other school support staff were rejected earlier this month.

Prime Minister Christopher Luxon's government—like the previous Labour Party-led administration—has done nothing to address unbearable workload pressures and chronic staffing shortages across the school system. It is carrying out major

attacks on public education, including the push to create several privately-run, for profit charter schools, which will further erode wages and conditions. The government has also slashed the quality and size of school lunches for hundreds of thousands of children in poorer, working class areas.

Operations grants to public schools were increased by just 1.5 percent in the 2025 budget. Finance Minister Nicola Willis announced on December 17 that deeper austerity would be required due to the worsening economic outlook and to pay for doubling the country's military spending. She told Newstalk ZB that one option is to end the current policy of one year of free tertiary education for students.

After primary teachers voted down the sellout offer, the NZEI's Liam Rutherford stated: "Teachers feel that the rejected offer is barely different from the unacceptable offer they also turned down in September."

This begs the question: why did the union present its members with essentially the same offer they had already rejected? The bureaucracy did not take a public position for or against the deal, but clearly hoped that the PPTA's sellout would put pressure on primary teachers to accept the same wage cuts.

Rutherford told Radio NZ that the vote showed teachers did not want to "see their wages going backwards." The NZEI however, like other public sector unions, has not publicly campaigned for any specific pay increase. The union leaders' statements and actions make clear that they will assist the government in imposing an effective wage freeze, as they have done again and again in recent years.

During the Labour-led government of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, teachers held a nationwide strike in 2019, following which the unions pushed through a

deal which was barely above inflation.

In 2023 teachers again took strike action against Labour's running down of public services in order to pay for its handouts to the corporate elite during the first years of the COVID-19 pandemic. Three offers presented to primary teachers were rejected before the NZEI was able to wear down its members' resistance to a below-inflation deal, which did nothing to address the staffing crisis facing schools. The PPTA and the New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) enforced similar pay-cutting deals.

Negotiations are continuing between the government and the NZNO, the Association of Salaried Medical Specialists and the Public Service Association (PSA)—which together cover tens of thousands of healthcare workers—as well as the NZ Professional Firefighters' Union. All these unions have indicated that they would support wage offers matching the level of inflation—i.e. a pay freeze.

PSA leader Fleur Fitzsimons told Radio NZ on December 17 that she was “hoping” to resolve the health sector disputes before Christmas. This means more sellouts will likely be announced soon. On October 26, Fitzsimons told Newstalk ZB that workers were “not asking for big pay increases, they're simply asking to have inflation reflected in their pay.”

That is the demand, not of workers, but of the union bureaucracy—an affluent, upper middle class layer that is hostile to the class struggle, and whose role is to enforce job and wage cuts demanded by governments and big business.

Fitzsimons, who leads NZ's largest union, openly supports the record level of military spending, which is aimed at integrating New Zealand into Washington's preparations for a US-led war against China. No union leader has opposed this insane march to world war, which is being paid for by gutting vital services including health and education.

To fight back, workers have to rebel against the pro-capitalist unions. They must also recognise that they face a political struggle against all the established parties, including Labour and the Greens, which are seeking to channel rising anger over the soaring cost of living into their election campaigns next year. This is a dead-end: Labour and its allies fundamentally agree with the government's program of war spending and austerity.

The Socialist Equality Group (SEG) calls on workers to urgently build new organisations: rank-and-file committees, in every school, hospital and other workplaces, independent of the capitalist parties and unions. These committees must resist the unions' efforts to split and shut down workers' struggles. They must prepare new strikes and other industrial actions involving the largest possible number of workers across the public sector and private industries—all of whom have experienced real wage cuts in the past year.

This fight must link up with workers in Australia and internationally, who are also entering into struggles.

In its statement distributed during the October 23 strike, the SEG proposed that workers demand an immediate 30 percent wage increase to make up for decades of stagnant wages. We called on workers to adopt a socialist perspective and base their demands not on what capitalist politicians and union officials claim is realistic or affordable, but on what workers and their families need.

The funding required for high-quality public education, including well-staffed and properly resourced schools, and a high standard of living for all workers, must be obtained by expropriating the billionaires and major corporations and ending all spending on the military. This means putting an end to the profit system, which is the source of inequality and war, and placing society's resources in the hands of the working class.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact