

New Zealand firefighters continue nationwide strikes

Tom Peters

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Almost 2,000 professional firefighters throughout New Zealand held a one-hour strike on December 19 against plans to drive down their wages, as well as the understaffing of the fire service and the failure of successive governments to invest in new fire trucks and equipment.

Members of the New Zealand Professional Firefighters Union (NZPFU) have held several hour-long strikes since October after they rejected a pay offer of 5.1 percent spread over three years. The state agency Fire and Emergency New Zealand (FENZ) has reportedly increased the offer to 6.2 percent. This is still well below the rate of inflation, which was 3 percent in the past year alone. The actual cost of living has gone up even more: food prices have increased by nearly 5 percent.

Firefighters also joined demonstrations on October 23 during the “mega strike” by more than 100,000 public sector workers including nurses, doctors and teachers—the country’s biggest strike in more than 40 years. The National Party-led government is seeking to impose real wage cuts on all these workers as part of its right-wing austerity agenda, aimed at making the working class pay for the crisis of capitalism while funnelling record sums of money to the military to prepare for war.

The ruling class is relying on the union bureaucracy to prevent any further joint strikes, divide and demobilise workers, and impose sellout agreements. This month, the Post-Primary Teachers’ Association (PPTA) imposed a pay-cutting deal on secondary teachers. In an important stand, primary school teachers rejected a similar sellout agreement.

In the latest strike, firefighters and supporters held dozens of demonstrations in every major city and town across the country. The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke

with some at a roadside picket in central Wellington.

Neal, who has worked as a firefighter for 25 years, said the below-inflation pay offer as well as safety were major issues in the strike. They were working with ageing and unsuitable equipment.

“We haven’t had a new fire truck in Wellington for over eight years,” he said. “At the start of my career, every two-and-a-half years we would get a new fire appliance, so eight years is a long time not to have a new fire truck. We have a lot of breakdowns.”

He explained that the strike was about “the same issues” that triggered multiple strikes in 2022 during the Labour Party government of Jacinda Ardern. “Nothing’s been sorted out since then,” Neal said. “They gave us promises on paper that they were going to change things, and they haven’t.”

New aerial appliances—trucks with ladders for responding to fires in high-rise buildings—promised in 2019 have still not been delivered.

Neal said FENZ had also done nothing to address the issue of work-related health issues, particularly cancer. Firefighters have the highest rate of work-related cancer of any occupation, yet still face challenges receiving compensation from the government insurer, the Accident Compensation Corporation (ACC).

He also criticised a restructure proposal announced by FENZ in November, which could lead to 140 job losses among “non-firefighter” staff, including some in training and recruitment roles.

Matt, who has seven years’ experience as a firefighter, said staffing shortages had worsened in recent years and understaffed crews were now “a weekly occurrence.” This could lead to safety issues and “delayed response” to callouts.

He pointed out that it had been two years since firefighters last got a pay rise, so the initial pay offer of

“5 percent over three years” was actually 1 percent a year when spread over five years—a significant pay cut compared to inflation. Matt said he was “not that optimistic” that the strike would shift FENZ’s position.

A senior firefighter, **Nick**, spoke about the long-term deterioration in the service over the last three decades.

“In the early 1990s there was one professional firefighter for about every 1,600 people in New Zealand, now there’s one for every 2,800,” Nick explained. During the 1990s the National Party government cut the number of firefighters from 2,000 “to about 1,500.” In the 2000s, Labour government increased the numbers but only to about 1,800. Since then, there have only been very small increases.

“So we have never recovered our numbers from the 90s and yet the population has increased by about 40 percent,” he said.

Meanwhile, firefighters’ responsibilities have increased, including medical and mental health-related callouts. “During COVID we were going to self-harm incidents once a week,” Nick said. “So we have a huge weight of PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder]” among firefighters, he said, leading some to leave the job.

Nick also warned about the large number of buildings in Wellington that are “intrinsically dangerous,” including former office-buildings converted into housing such as Loafers Lodge, which was gutted by a deliberately-lit fire in May 2023 that killed five people.

“There’s buildings in Wellington with the same cladding that they had on Grenfell Tower,” he added. The high-rise residential tower in London caught fire on June 14, 2017, which spread rapidly due to highly flammable cladding and killed 70 people. “If there’s a building like that and we get sent there, they send one extra truck and they warn us on the radio.”

The NZPFU has scheduled more one-hour strikes on December 26 and January 2. There is no guarantee that these will proceed; the union called off one such strike scheduled for November 7 after what it said were “meaningful” discussions with FENZ.

While workers are determined to fight, the union bureaucracy has indicated that it would be willing to settle for a pay freeze or less. The NZPFU issued a statement on December 4 congratulating the PPTA on the high school teachers’ two-year pay deal, which delivered pay rises of just 2.5 percent in the first year

and 2.1 percent in year two—a real wage cut.

To prevent more sellouts, firefighters and other workers must build rank-and-file committees, independent of the union leadership and all the capitalist parties, including Labour and its allies. These committees should build a powerful movement against austerity and militarism, uniting workers across all public sector agencies and private industries, in New Zealand, Australia and internationally.

This struggle needs to be guided by a socialist perspective. Workers should reject the government’s claim, echoed by the unions, that they have to sacrifice for the sake of the economy—which really means to protect corporate profits. The money hoarded by the super-rich, the banks and major corporations, as well as the billions wasted on the military, must be redirected into vital public services and used to end poverty and inequality.



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