

# New Zealand government exploits Auckland fire to slander striking firefighters

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New Zealand's National Party-led government has seized on a fire that broke out in Auckland during a brief firefighters' strike on January 9 to escalate a vicious propaganda campaign against the firefighters.

The pile-on by government ministers and state agency Fire and Emergency New Zealand (FENZ) represents an attempt to criminalise industrial action and intimidate workers throughout the public sector who are fighting against austerity.

The large fire broke out at midday in a shop in the suburb of Pakuranga as 2,000 firefighters nationwide were starting the scheduled one-hour strike. Flames and black smoke could be seen billowing across Auckland's eastern suburbs. One person suffered serious injuries and was hospitalised.

The cause of the blaze at the Pita House is not yet known. The shop was owned by two brothers who arrived from Syria more than 20 years ago. Family member Ahmed Reynolds-Hatem told the *New Zealand Herald* the business was his father's and uncle's life's work and the fire was "devastating."

The fire was attended and brought under control by volunteer firefighters from nearby suburbs, but as the fire was still raging FENZ seized the opportunity to direct blame at the strikers. On its Facebook page, FENZ said it was alerted to the fire at 12.07pm, but it took 30 minutes for volunteer crews to arrive when it would usually take seven minutes from the manned station at Mount Wellington. A crew from the station arrived at the scene within four minutes of the strike's end.

FENZ asserted the situation was "exactly" why it had been calling on the union to call off the strikes while bargaining with the Employment Relations Authority (ERA) was under way. "By going on strike and rejecting calls to set up a process to respond to more serious incidents, the NZPFU are gambling with the public's safety," the statement declared. FENZ deputy commander

Megan Stiffler demanded the union call off strikes planned for 16 and 23 January.

The NZ Professional Firefighters' Union (NZPFU) retorted it was "disgusting" that FENZ was "throwing stones at a moment when, obviously, the building is still on fire." NZPFU vice-president Martin Campbell said it was "incredibly disappointing" that FENZ was blaming firefighters "for their [FENZ] failures to actually present a fair and reasonable offer for over almost two years now."

Within hours two government ministers launched co-ordinated attacks on the firefighters. An "angry" local National Party MP and Health Minister Simeon Brown postured on X that the union needed to "put a stop to these reckless strikes which endanger lives, homes and businesses."

The far-right ACT Party's Workplace Relations and Safety Minister, Brooke van Velden, pointedly thanked "the volunteer firefighters who stepped up," and like Brown insisted: "Enough is enough. The NZPFU needs to stop gambling with people's lives and safety and stop these strikes."

The accusations deliberately obscure the fact that responsibility for public safety during industrial action rests with FENZ which, as the employer, is required to maintain adequate contingency arrangements. FENZ failed to do this.

The slander that firefighters—not the government—are responsible for "gambling with people's lives" was subject to furious blowback on social media. Brie posted on Facebook: "Firefighters have been injured putting their bodies on the line, and you've [Brown] responded by smearing their colleagues and exploiting an emergency to push a political attack. This is cruel, dishonest and morally repugnant."

Emily accused Brown of "going after firefighters who risk their lives every single day for us. They are striking for us."

Catherine posted on X: “Enough is enough Brooke!!! Fund our Firefighters so they don’t have to strike. Stop messing with workplace safety. How many deaths at work are acceptable to you Brooke?.....29?.....You know, like Pike River [the coal mine where 29 workers were killed in an explosion in 2010]?”

Another respondent noted that van Velden declared in April 2024 she was “not convinced” FENZ needed a further boost to the insurance levy that funds the agency’s operations, after its expenses had increased by \$200 million since 2018.

The attacks are part of a sweeping assault on all public sector workers by the far-right National-ACT-NZ First coalition government. On October 23 more than 100,000 teachers, nurses, doctors and healthcare workers mounted the country’s largest strike since 1979 against the government’s austerity agenda and real wage cuts. Off-duty firefighters also joined demonstrations during the so-called “mega-strike.”

The NZPFU noted this week that firefighters had been working for 561 days under an expired agreement and without a pay increase since July 2023. FENZ’s pay offer of 5.1 percent over three years—less than 2 percent per year—was rejected by a 99 percent vote at ballot meetings in July 2025. FENZ later increased the offer to 6.2 percent over three years, still a savage wage cut with inflation at 3 percent and real living costs much higher.

Nor did FENZ’s offer include anything to increase staffing to ensure minimum manning levels or address unfair workloads. Multiple unresolved issues include the dire state of the fire appliance fleet as well as significant health, safety and wellbeing problems. FENZ recently announced a restructure that would slash 160 jobs.

These conditions are the product of decades of under-funding and attacks on the fire service by successive governments, including Labour Party-led governments.

Neal, a Wellington firefighter with 25 years’ experience, told the WSWS that the current disputes were about “the same issues” that triggered strikes in 2022 under the Labour government of Jacinda Ardern. “Nothing’s been sorted out since then,” he said. “They gave us promises on paper that they were going to change things, and they haven’t.”

Firefighters have overwhelming public support. But the NZPFU carries prime responsibility, along with the leaderships of other unions, for dragging out the dispute while systematically working to isolate firefighters’ struggles. The tactic of confining industrial action to a series of token one-hour strikes, initiated during the 2022

dispute, with the unions refusing to mobilise support from other sections of workers, is paving the way for defeat.

Following the mega-strike, the unions have moved to contain the movement and divert it into futile negotiations and token actions. Last November, a group of state sector unions including the NZPFU wrote a grovelling letter to Prime Minister Christopher Luxon begging him to “step in and meet” to find “possible ways forward and settlement options.” Luxon, who has condemned the strikes as politically motivated, felt no need to respond.

The NZPFU leadership has meanwhile signalled its willingness to accept a sellout agreement. On December 4, it congratulated the Post Primary Teachers Association on its sellout deal for high school teachers, which delivered pay rises of just 2.5 percent in the first year and 2.1 percent in the second—a real wage cut. This sent an unmistakable message about the NZPFU leadership’s own intentions.

Firefighters must be warned: the NZPFU bureaucracy is leading its members into a dead-end. The only way forward is through an escalation of industrial action and, crucially, the unification of all sections of workers in a common struggle against the government’s attempted intimidation and austerity agenda. Firefighters and all public sector workers must break free from the stranglehold of the union bureaucracy and build rank-and-file committees, controlled by workers themselves and independent of the official unions and all capitalist parties.

Such committees must be based on a fighting program that rejects the claim—made by the government and echoed by the unions—that there is no money for decent wages, adequate staffing, and safe working conditions. This requires the fight, throughout New Zealand and the Asia-Pacific region, for a workers’ government and a socialist reorganisation of society.



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