

New Zealand firefighters continue strikes

Tom Peters

15 February 2026

Two thousand firefighters across New Zealand held a one-hour strike on February 13 as their long-running dispute continues with the government agency Fire and Emergency NZ (FENZ), which is trying to cut their pay.

A strike scheduled for February 16 was cancelled due to severe weather and flooding in parts of the country. Notices have been given for strikes on February 20, 23 and 27, and March 2.

The NZ Professional Firefighters Union (NZPFU) has now held about a dozen one-hour strikes since October. FENZ is offering an increase of just 6.2 percent over three years—a major pay cut with annual inflation at 3.1 percent. According to economics firm Infometrics, the cost of essential items has risen 3.8 percent in the past year.

Because firefighters last had a pay increase in 2023, FENZ's offer actually equates to around 1 percent a year over five years.

Successive National- and Labour Party-led governments have starved the fire service of funding for decades, leading to rundown and faulty equipment, chronic staffing shortages and low pay. The latest cuts are part of the National Party-led coalition's drastic austerity measures to pay for tax cuts and to double the size of the military in preparation for war.

There is widespread opposition to this agenda. On October 23, 2025, more than 100,000 workers—teachers, doctors, nurses and other healthcare workers—took part in New Zealand's biggest strike since 1979. The union bureaucracy is desperately seeking to prevent a repeat of the “mega strike,” keeping workers divided and isolated from each other in order to demoralise them.

The PPTA, the high school teachers' union, pushed through a sellout last December, including below-inflation pay rises of 2.5 and 2.1 percent over the next two years. Primary schoolteachers rejected a similar

pay-cutting agreement, and the healthcare workers' struggles remain unresolved.

During the January 9 strike, Workplace Relations and Safety Minister Brooke van Velden and Health Minister Simeon Brown seized on a fire at a shop in Auckland to slander firefighters as “reckless” and “gambling with people's lives.” On February 12, FENZ's deputy national commander Megan Stiffler repeated that striking “needlessly puts the community at risk.”

This vicious propaganda has two aims: first, to deflect blame from the government for endangering public safety by severely underfunding the fire service; second, to create conditions for banning strikes.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with firefighters picketing in Porirua, north of Wellington, on February 13.

Ben, who has worked 12 years as a professional firefighter, said that “to make ends meet” some firefighters were working as many as 86 hours over a nine-day period.

He said the strikes were primarily “about our working conditions and trying to really ensure this service is world-class for every New Zealander.” In Porirua, he said, fire appliances “have been plagued with faults.” Due to issues with intercoolers, fire trucks were prone to overheating, which can cause delays.

Commenting on the staffing shortage, Ben said his station was “struggling to fill holes today, tonight and into the weekend. We just can't continually keep flogging the existing workforce.” He noted that the “first recruit course for this year's cycle has been cancelled because Fire and Emergency New Zealand has deemed that there are enough career firefighters.”

Meanwhile major regional centres such as Blenheim, Ashburton and Queenstown do not have crews of professional firefighters and rely on volunteers.

Ben said it was a “kick in the guts” to see

government ministers “hopping on social media and slating career firefighters. It’s our legal right to protest, we don’t have many levers available to us to ensure we’re getting fair and equitable treatment from our employer.”

Conditions had not improved following strikes under the previous Labour government. Ben described promises made in 2023 as “just shallow words.”

One major, long-standing demand is for more support for firefighters who develop occupational cancer. Ben said “the hoops you have to jump through to get ACC [the state-owned Accident Compensation Corporation] to accept that claim is just not fair.”

JC, who has worked for FENZ for 10 years, said during that time “it’s got worse, the whole place seems like it’s a debacle.” The strike, he said, was because FENZ had failed to invest in new firefighting equipment.

He also mentioned firefighters “having to rely on overtime just to get ahead. People who have got new children, they’re starting to struggle now because they can’t do that overtime. It’s not very fair. We should be able to go to a job and have a good base pay.”

JC said it was “appalling” for politicians to attack firefighters for striking, adding that comments by Michael Laws, a host of the far-right Platform podcast, were “absolutely disgusting.” Laws declared on January 22 that professional firefighters had “decided to abandon the human race” and were “bastards.”

“He’s got no idea,” JC said. “I risked my life once to try and save a person I could not save. I got burns from it and they are going to remain for the rest of my life. I tried my absolute best to try and get to that person. To make comments like he was making really just throws a big knife in your back.”

He pointed out that firefighters are “one of the most trusted professions in New Zealand” and “the public absolutely love us. Every time I go somewhere they say: ‘I support what you guys do.’” The media, however, largely blacked out the latest strike.

There is widespread support in the working class for the stand taken by firefighters, but the union bureaucracy is preventing this support from being mobilised.

The NZPFU has no strategy other than more hour-long strikes, aimed at placating the firefighters’ anger and wearing down their resistance to an eventual deal

that fails to keep up with inflation or fix the broader crisis in the fire service. Significantly, NZPFU issued a statement in December congratulating the PPTA on its below-inflation pay deal, indicating that it would accept a similar offer.

Firefighters should reject any attempt to impose a sellout and instead fight to broaden the struggle against austerity by appealing to other sections of the working class. To do this, workers need new organisations that they control. Rank-and-file committees, independent of the union bureaucracy, must be built to link up the struggles of firefighters, teachers, healthcare workers and other public and private sector workers, all of whom face ruthless attacks on their living standards and working conditions.

Workers should base themselves on a socialist political program. The money wasted on war and hoarded by the super-rich should be used for essential services that workers rely on, including a fully resourced and expanded fire service with modern, reliable equipment and well-paid staff.



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