

Union pushes through pay cut for New Zealand primary teachers

Tom Peters
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On April 2, just before the Easter holidays, the media reported that primary teachers in New Zealand public schools had voted to accept a two-year deal that will significantly reduce their real wages.

The agreement, covering over 30,000 teachers, consists of a 2.5 percent pay rise and a further 2.1 percent in January next year—well below the increase in the cost of living. Annual inflation last year was 3.1 percent and is expected to rise significantly this year; food prices increased 4.5 percent in the 12 months to February, and now fuel prices are soaring due to the US-Israeli war against Iran.

This is virtually identical to an offer the teachers rejected last December, in what the union NZEI Te Riu Roa called a “resounding” No vote. The union has not revealed how many people voted in favour of the repackaged offer.

This is the latest sellout imposed on workers who took part in last October’s one-day “mega strike,” involving more than 100,000 educators and healthcare workers across several unions. The strike—the largest in New Zealand since 1979, encompassing nearly 4 percent of the country’s workers—reflected widespread opposition to the National Party-led government’s austerity measures, which are starving hospitals and schools of funding.

The union bureaucracy, however, called the strike with great reluctance and refused to organise any further joint actions—let alone broaden the strike movement to encompass other sections of the workforce who face similar attacks. Instead, the unions moved to break up and isolate each section of workers in order to convince a majority that it was impossible to fight, and that they had no alternative to accepting the government’s attacks on their wages and conditions.

Late last year, the Post-Primary Teachers’

Association pushed through the same below-inflation deal as NZEI for its 20,000 members. In February, the Public Service Association announced that its 12,300 allied health worker members had voted to accept a similar agreement cutting real wages.

The government has refused to give back pay to any of these workers, whose previous collective agreements expired in mid-2025. Sir Brian Roche, the Public Service Commissioner, said primary teachers had missed out on \$550 by failing to vote for the deal when it was first presented in December.

In an attempt to divide teachers, the Ministry of Education last month offered the same below-inflation increase to the one-third of primary teachers who are not union members, before NZEI members had voted on the offer.

NZEI, for its part, defended the rotten deal by pointing to minor gains: opportunities for relief teachers to do professional development training; and a \$750 increase in the allowance given to teachers who have additional leadership roles (known as management units).

According to Radio NZ, the union’s Barb Curran expressed frustration with the below-inflation pay rise and then stated: “But our members have made the decision, so we’ll move on.” This is a cynical attempt by the bureaucracy to offload responsibility for the defeat onto teachers.

The actions of the union leadership paved the way for this outcome. After primary teachers had overwhelmingly rejected the offer in December, NZEI refused to organise any new industrial campaign to mobilise teachers. Instead, in early March, it applied to the state’s Employment Relations Authority (ERA) for “urgent facilitation” with the ministry to resolve the dispute.

NZEI's Liam Rutherford told Newstalk ZB on March 4 that the aim of appealing to the ERA was to secure a pay offer "that keeps up with the cost of living," adding that teachers had made clear that 2.5 and 2.1 percent was not enough. Predictably, the facilitation produced an almost identical offer, which was passed on to teachers to vote on again. Seeing no alternative, a majority apparently approved the offer.

This latest sellout comes on top of effective wage cuts imposed by NZEI and PPTA in 2023, following a mass strike against the then-Labour Party-led government. At that time, the NZEI joined the government in fraudulently presenting the deal, which failed to keep up with the cost of living, as a victory for teachers.

Labour and its allies the Greens, Te P?ti M?ori, and middle class, pseudo-left groups like the International Socialist Organisation and Socialist Aotearoa, which act as cheerleaders for the union bureaucracy, have remained completely silent on the pay cuts pushed through by the NZEI, PPTA and PSA.

Teachers and other workers are prepared to fight, but are trapped within organisations—led by well-paid upper middle class bureaucrats—which serve as adjuncts of the state and are opposed to any real fight against capitalism.

The other unions that took part in the October "mega strike"—the New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) and the Association of Salaried Medical Specialists (the senior doctors' union)—are still in negotiations with the government. The Professional Firefighters Union is continuing to hold hour-long national strikes about once a week.

As long as these disputes remain isolated and under the control of the union bureaucracy, however, workers are destined for defeat. The pay cuts imposed on teachers and PSA health staff will be used by the government and the unions as a means to put more pressure on nurses, doctors and firefighters to accept the same deal or worse.

The ruling class is determined that workers must pay for the economic crisis, which is escalating due to the widening war in the Middle East. The government will ramp up its austerity program while funnelling billions more dollars to the military—with the support of the Labour Party and the PSA—to prepare it to join US-led wars.

To fight this agenda, workers need new organisations that they control. The Socialist Equality Group calls on workers to rebel against the union bureaucracy by building rank-and-file committees in every school, hospital and other workplaces. These committees must be independent of the unions, Labour and all the capitalist parties. They must link up workers across the country, in the public sector and private industries, against the assault on jobs, wages and public services.

Through the International Workers' Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, an initiative of the Trotskyist movement, workers in New Zealand should link their struggles to those of workers in Australia, and other countries who face the same attacks.

The assault on living standards and public services, including education, is inseparable from the militarisation of society and the developing world war: these are all the products of capitalism, which is plunging the world into barbarism. What is urgently needed, above all, is the building of a new political party, based on a program to unify the working class and lead it in the international struggle for the socialist reorganisation of society.



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