

# Firefighters hold more strikes across New Zealand

Tom Peters  
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About 2,000 workers employed by Fire and Emergency New Zealand (FENZ) held one-hour strikes on Wednesday and Friday this week and organised pickets in several major towns and cities.

Hour-long strikes have been held at regular intervals since October last year, after workers rejected a proposal by the government agency to significantly cut their wages. The strikes are also fueled by anger over understaffing and faulty equipment—the result of budget cuts under successive governments.

FENZ's current offer is a 6.2 percent pay rise by the end of 2027. Firefighters have received no pay rise since July 2023 and FENZ is refusing to offer any backpay once a settlement is reached.

This is well below the rate of inflation, which was 3.1 percent last year. The Reserve Bank is forecasting inflation to jump to 4.2 percent by June, and the cost of living could well go higher due to the illegal US-Israeli war of aggression against Iran.

The National Party-led government insists that workers must bear the burden of the worsening economic crisis. It is imposing austerity measures and pay cuts across the public sector.

FENZ's deputy national commander Megan Stiffler said in a statement on April 8 that the offer “compares favourably with other public sector settlements.” Following a “mega strike” by more than 100,000 public sector workers last October, the union bureaucracies have systematically demobilised and isolated workers, and imposed wage-cutting deals on thousands of teachers and healthcare staff.

Stiffler insisted that a better deal was “not financially realistic at a time where we are reducing staffing levels in other areas of the organisation” and given the need to spend on trucks and equipment. A restructure proposal released late last year by FENZ called for 140 job cuts.

In an inflammatory statement, Stiffler denounced the strikes as “reckless” and accused firefighters of putting “the community at risk.” In fact, it is decades of underinvestment in equipment and staffing that is endangering public safety.

Meanwhile, on April 1, Minister of Internal Affairs Brooke van Velden, from the far-right ACT Party, provocatively announced that the government had approved an astronomical 79 percent pay increase for members of the FENZ board.

During the April 8 strike the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with FENZ staff employed at the Wellington Communications Centre (COMCEN), who take emergency calls from the public and also speak with firefighters going to call-outs.

**Josh**, who works as a dispatcher, said “the board getting a pay increase is a big slap in the face for those who took this job to help the wider community.”

He explained that he was struggling “in terms of supporting my family and being able to perform to the best of my ability with the stresses of what the work brings. It is a mentally challenging role, it is a time consuming role, and you're listening to people's emotions to try and help them out. Ever since I started we've always been short-crewed, and that was five years ago.”

Josh and his fiancée recently bought a house in Featherston, about one hour's drive from Wellington, due to the unaffordable cost of housing in the city. The rising cost of petrol, on top of having to pay for parking, is putting pressure on many workers.

He emphasised that other workers were experiencing similar issues, saying: “We stand with the nurses, ambulance drivers, paramedics, teachers as well.”

**Ethan**, a trainee COMCEN worker who has been at FENZ for about eight months, explained that he

currently makes less than \$60,000 a year. “If it wasn’t for my partner I probably wouldn’t even be able to take this job. We’re just surviving until I’m not a trainee.”

He described stressful working conditions, saying: “We don’t have our own break room, somewhere to sit down and have a five-minute breather.”

**Becca**, who has six years’ experience, said the staffing shortage was “pretty horrendous. I’m one of the people who does the rostering, and I’d estimate we would be offering about 30 overtimes in a week period. The amount of overtime that people are doing to make up for the shortages is pretty dire.

“Our minimum staffing is a shift manager, two dispatchers and two call takers. We call it one in four. But a lot of shifts we aren’t meeting that. We have a fatigue policy so you can’t work more than 84 hours in a 9-day period. But there’ve been multiple incidences when we’ve had to exceed that in order to get shifts covered.”

Becca criticised the government for being “unable to prioritise emergency services over everything else that they’ve got to spend money on. That really lets you know where their priorities lie.”

In addition to short staffing and low pay, COMCEN workers face a high risk of developing post-traumatic stress disorder due to the emergencies they have to deal with—including car crashes and fires, which sometimes involve children.

Becca said there was a need for better mental health support. “If we suffer a psychological injury we can go to the ACC [the state-owned Accident Compensation Corporation] to go on acute stress leave. The problem is a lot of PTSD is developed accumulatively [through being exposed to multiple calls] whereas if we go to ACC they want us to pinpoint it to one particular call.”

The political establishment is clearly concerned that the determination shown by firefighters could become a rallying point for broader opposition to austerity. In an attempt to placate public anger, National Party MP Tim Costley has initiated a parliamentary inquiry into FENZ, focusing on “fleet issues, which we see highlighted by recent breakdowns and vehicles sitting unused.”

The NZPFU said the inquiry was “a fantastic start to getting the answers New Zealanders deserve,” even though it does not actually commit the government to any action.

Meanwhile, opposition Labour Party MPs have appeared at firefighters’ pickets during recent strikes. On April 1, Labour leader Chris Hipkins posted on Facebook: “Firefighters do incredible, life-saving work and it’s shameful how poorly they’ve been treated under this Government.”

Labour and the union leaders are seeking to steer workers behind the party’s campaign for the November election. Labour, however, shares responsibility for the dire conditions facing workers.

Firefighters held strikes in 2022 during the last Labour government, which eventually increased wages by up to 5 percent per year in 2022 and 2023 for most FENZ roles. This was still below the increase in household living costs.

To prevent another sellout, workers must rebel against the pro-capitalist union bureaucracy and unite against the ruling class’s austerity regime. This requires the building of rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, the Labour Party and all capitalist parties. Workers should fight for socialist demands, including an end to funding the military to prepare for war, and the redistribution of profits from the super-rich and big business to fund vital public services, including education, healthcare and the fire service.



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