

New Zealand university and polytechnic staff vote to strike

John Braddock
14 October 2026

About 9,500 New Zealand university and polytechnic staff, including lecturers, tutors, professors and librarians voted in ballots last month to strike during October.

Tertiary Education Union (TEU) national secretary Amy Ross said university staff were being offered pay rises well below inflation, which is currently 4.1 percent. Radio NZ reported in August that the TEU was “seeking a six percent pay rise for its members at six universities,” but an October 2 press release announcing the strike vote did not mention this figure. Workers also want more secure employment, with fully half of all tertiary staff not permanent.

It is the first time both university and polytechnic staff have voted together to strike, but the TEU has not announced any strike dates. Its statement said actions “may include half day or full day strikes, withholding of students grades or new enrolments.”

Polytechnic employers are resisting attempts to retain a single collective employment agreement covering the country’s trades training sector. The TEU has asked the state’s Employment Relations Authority (ERA) to provide facilitated bargaining for a multi-employer collective agreement (MECA) for 11 institutions.

The union has been trying to engage in collective bargaining with polytechnics since February, with most employers dragging out the process, refusing to be a part of a MECA and refusing to discuss pay.

Staff from the universities of Otago, Canterbury, Victoria University of Wellington (VUW), Massey, Waikato and Auckland are all involved in the proposed strike action. So too are polytechnic staff from the NZ Institute of Skills and Technology (NZIST), MIT/Unitech, Wintec, Toi Ohomai, Eastern Institute of Technology, UCOL, Open Polytechnic, Nelson Marlborough Institute of Technology, Ara, Otago

Polytechnic and Southern Institute of Technology.

The vote is an expression of rising anger over worsening austerity hitting all layers of the working class. It follows a half-day strike by 10,000 public servants on September 9 against the National Party-led government’s moves to drive down wages and cut jobs. About 8,700 jobs across government departments, 14 percent of the core public sector workforce, are to be axed.

The public service strike was the biggest since last October’s “mega strike” by some 100,000 teachers and healthcare workers.

The ruling elite is starving essential public services, including health and education, to funnel more money to the rich and to boost the military budget in preparation for war. With an election due on November 7, opinion polls have the National Party and main opposition Labour Party both registering below 30 percent support, the first time since the 1930s that the two main bourgeois parties have been so unpopular.

The broad assault on living standards has been facilitated directly by the trade unions. Following the mega-strike the unions isolated each section of workers involved, shut down intermittent strike activity, and imposed below-inflation pay deals of around 2.5 percent for teachers, allied health workers, doctors and nurses.

The TEU did not mobilise members to join with other educators in last October’s historic strike. Its current negotiations over wages and conditions are already preparing a sell-out, as evidenced by its move to divert the polytechnic dispute into the hands of the ERA.

The union bureaucracy is appealing to the political establishment to increase funding. Ross stated that while “it’s up to the tertiary employers to better their offers and to move along in bargaining,” the union was

calling for “a comprehensive long term investment plan for the Tertiary sector.” The union notes that NZ ranks below the average of similar countries on investment in tertiary education and wants all the parties “to show meaningful leadership and commit to improved funding for the whole sector.”

This begging exercise, aimed at the very forces responsible for decades of underfunding in health and education, is a sham. It is designed to divert anger and militancy into the dead-end of parliament. The trade unions are campaigning for Labour and its allies in the election, with former TEU leader Sandra Grey playing the major role as president of the NZ Council of Trade Unions.

The TEU has a long history suppressing strike action and enforcing pay cuts and widespread sackings, including under the 2017–2023 Labour Party-led government.

In October 2022, 7,000 university staff held a half day strike, the first nationwide stoppage in 20 years. Grey, then the TEU’s national secretary, told Newshub that over the previous two years the union had accepted “the lowest pay increases of any workers in New Zealand, because we actually said to our employers: we understand COVID’s hard on the universities and on the polytechnics, and we did our bit.”

A study commissioned by the TEU found that from 2007 to 2021 salaries fell by 10 percent at the University of Otago, 12.2 percent at Canterbury and 17 percent at Auckland University. During this time, there were no nationwide strikes and the union’s typical response was to accept job and wage cuts as necessary. During the 2022 pay struggle the union initially called for an 8 percent pay increase, then reduced it in November to 7.2 percent to match inflation and eventually imposed below-inflation deals for most staff.

By 2023 hundreds of tertiary positions were axed in addition to 1,000 jobs shed during the height of the COVID pandemic. The cuts included 229 jobs at VUW, over 200 at Otago, and 170 at Auckland University of Technology (AUT). The national trades training institution Te Pūkenga announced 400 sackings.

The TEU organised no unified nationwide campaign on the campuses and among the wider working class to defend jobs and public education. Instead, the union confined members to making futile appeals to the then

Labour government, calling for “four-way discussions among student associations, the Tertiary Education Union, Vice Chancellors and the government to establish a sustainable funding model for universities.” The position of the union was simply that it be “consulted” over how cuts were to be made.

The pseudo-left International Socialist Organisation (ISO) played a significant role in propping up the union bureaucracy and promoting illusions in Labour. Speaking on the *New Zealand Herald’s* Front Page podcast on June 28, 2023, ISO member Dougal McNeill, the TEU branch president at VUW, hailed a paltry temporary funding boost by the Labour government as “a first step” which provided the opportunity for “a wider conversation about funding.”

The Socialist Equality Group (SEG) in New Zealand warns that the current struggles will, if left in the hands of the TEU, result in a sellout. The union apparatus long ago ceased representing the interests of workers, even in the struggle to defend basic conditions. It is a privileged bureaucracy whose priority is the defence of capitalism. Its role, with the assistance of middle class, pseudo-left groups, is to enforce redundancies, wage cuts and pro-corporate restructuring.

The unions, instruments of big business and the state, are not reformable. The SEG calls on education sector workers to build rank-and-file committees that they control democratically, independent of the unions. These committees must break the isolation imposed by Labour and the bureaucracy and fight to unite all public and private sector workers against historic attacks on their jobs, wages and living standards.

Authorised by Tom Petterson,
sep.wellington@gmail.com



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact