

8,000 university and polytech workers strike in New Zealand

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22 October 2026

More than 8,000 workers at universities and polytechs across New Zealand held a half-day strike on Wednesday against low wages, understaffing and insecure contracts.

It was the first time workers in universities and polytechs have gone on strike at the same time, after being offered pay rises well below the 4.1 percent official rate of inflation. Workers are also protesting the fact that more than half of all university jobs are now on fixed-term or casual employment agreements, according to the Tertiary Education Union (TEU).

Victoria University of Wellington staff are also demanding that their pension scheme Unisaver divest from companies, such as Palantir and Elbit Systems, linked with Israel's genocide and ethnic cleansing of Palestinians.

Wednesday's industrial action is part of a growing wave of struggles. It followed a nationwide strike by 10,000 public sector workers last month. Thousands of firefighters are also continuing to hold one-hour strikes twice a week in opposition to real wage cuts and underfunding.

Internationally, workers are entering into major struggles against soaring living costs, austerity and imperialist war. Mass protests have erupted across France, Spain and Italy, where workers are demanding general strikes.

With an election looming on November 7, both the National Party, which leads the right-wing coalition government, and the main opposition Labour Party, have pledged to cut overall spending, while pouring billions of dollars into the military to prepare for war.

Labour's tertiary education spokesperson Shanan Halbert, who attended a strike rally at Auckland University, told Te Ao Māori News that the current government "has left our tertiary sector high and dry

financially." He stated that "Labour increased the funding every year we were in government [from 2017 to 2023] so providers didn't need to hike up fees substantially and that would be our goal in government this time too."

In fact, Labour has said that if elected it will not reverse the current government's decision to scrap a policy that gave students one year of free study—in effect, a hike in fees.

The last Labour government imposed austerity measures that starved tertiary education, leading to hundreds of job cuts and a wage freeze across the country's universities. The TEU enforced these attacks: its national secretary Sandra Grey told Newshub on October 4, 2022, 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."

Grey is now the Council of Trade Unions president and is leading the unions' campaign to elect Labour and the Greens again.

To minimise the impact of the October 21 strike, the TEU called workers out for just 3 hours and 45 minutes. It also scheduled the strike during the end-of-year exam period, instead of during the teaching period. This served to separate staff from the students, few of whom were present during the rallies.

At Victoria University of Wellington's strike rally in the Hub, union officials gave speeches that didn't mention the election, the cuts by successive governments or any of the political parties. They criticised university management for refusing to increase its pay offer or to address precarious work conditions and divestment demands.

The organisers refused to let the Socialist Equality Group's (SEG) election candidate for Hutt South, Tom Petterson, give a speech to the rally, saying that no politicians were allowed to do so.

The SEG is calling on workers in every industry to break from the union apparatus, whose role is to enforce austerity and impose sellouts on behalf of the state and big business. Its election statement urges workers to build rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled and independent of the union bureaucracy, Labour and all capitalist parties.

Members of the SEG and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality at VUW distributed copies of the election statement and spoke with some of the workers on strike.

A research assistant working in the field of AI, who asked not to be named, said the main issues in the strike were low wages for temporary staff which are being outstripped by inflation. He said, "You should be able to get a living wage. Setting the floor a little higher would be helpful."

Commenting on the fact that both Labour and National are promising further spending cuts, he said: "When the economy is struggling, education is something you should be spending money on, also research. These things pay off, long term. When times are tough, you should invest in the future."

Joel, a biology professor who has worked at VUW for 22 years, said his main concerns in the strike were the low pay rise "especially for people who make a lot less money than I do." Staff had been offered "2.5 percent this year and 2.5 percent next year, which is less than inflation," he said.

He was also concerned about changing pay structures which meant that some new hires are given a better deal than "people who have worked here for a long time on a fixed term contract."

In the last two decades Joel said he had seen "the corporatisation of the university: more management, more business-oriented, less intellectual pursuits. The problem is there are so many people on fixed-term contracts. The university uses them and doesn't hire them." In this way, the university was able to easily dismiss people without having to pay redundancy or go through any process.

Joel strongly criticised the university management for continuing its Unisaver investments in companies

implicated in war crimes against Palestinians, noting that other universities had divested but VUW had not.

He expected things would be "pretty much the same" under a Labour government. "You've got to raise revenue. If you're not willing to raise revenue, i.e. tax people, especially people who can afford it, how are you going to have more money for the things you need?"

To discuss the way forward in the fight against austerity and war, and the need for a new party based on the program of international socialism, the Socialist Equality Group urges all workers to register to attend our public election meeting at 1:30 p.m. on Sunday November 1, in the Dowse Art Museum, 45 Laings Road, Lower Hutt.

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