New Zealand firefighters union cancels strikes

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The New Zealand Professional Firefighters Union (NZPFU) announced on November 17 that it had cancelled two 10-hour nationwide strikes planned for November 27 and December 2 and that no more strikes would be notified before February 1 next year. The union also agreed to remove all protest signs displayed on fire stations and trucks.

The announcement was made after the NZPFU National Committee met with the Fire and Emergency NZ (FENZ) Board and declared it had "successfully negotiated a new bargaining process that the NZPFU has been seeking."

FENZ withdrew its application for the state's Employment Relations Authority to intervene in the dispute. The union declared that the FENZ board had shown a "long-awaited indication of a genuine willingness to change."

This is not a victory for firefighters. The union cancelled strike action that had been overwhelmingly approved by its members, without FENZ agreeing to increase wages or improve working conditions. The "new bargaining process" will now proceed, facilitated by employment lawyer Graeme Colgan.

The NZPFU gave notice of the 10-hour strikes on November 4 after 25 meetings involving 70 percent of the union's 2,000 members: 88 percent voted in favour of the strikes. A below-inflation pay offer—two 2.2 pay increases over two years—first tabled by FENZ in December 2025 then presented again on October 1, 2026, had been rejected by 99 percent of firefighters.

The strike vote demonstrated the anger and militancy among firefighters, whose dispute has continued for more than a year. Low-level industrial action began in August 2025, and since October 2025 firefighters have held 72 one-hour nationwide strikes. These limited lunchtime stoppages were designed by the union bureaucracy to wear down firefighters' resistance to a real-wage cut.

The unions have isolated firefighters kept sections of the working class who face the same attacks. Following a major strike in October 2025 by 100,000 teachers, nurses, doctors and other healthcare workers, the unions refused to call any further joint strikes, divided up the workers and rammed through separate pay-cutting deals.

FENZ initially offered a pay increase of 5.1 percent over three years, later increased to 6.2 percent—still a major pay cut with inflation running at 4.1 percent last June. With no increase since July 2023, the offer equated to little more than 1 percent a year over five years. FENZ flatly refused any backpay on settlement.

Firefighters are also angry about understaffing and dangerous faulty equipment—the result of budget cuts under successive governments.

Announcing the 10-hour strikes on November 4, just three days before the New Zealand election, NZPFU National Secretary Wattie Watson declared that the power to force a settlement "will be in the hands of the incoming government or those negotiating a coalition. If they meet with the NZPFU and agree to who needs to be in the room with access to additional funding to settle the collective agreement, then the strikes will be called off."

The strikes were called off, however, well before the formation of a new government and with no announcement of additional funding. The election produced a deadlock: neither the incumbent National Party nor the opposition Labour Party had enough support to declare victory and the parties are awaiting the final vote count on November 27 before trying to form a coalition government.

Watson stated that the last contract signed in December 2022 would not have happened "without the support of the government, which forced FENZ to reach a settlement." That deal enforced by the then Labour Party-led government was actually an effective

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pay freeze. Firefighters held a series of strikes after FENZ offered a 4 percent increase. The final settlement was for around 20 percent, but this was spread across three years, from mid-2021 to mid-2024, during which time prices increased by roughly the same amount.

The National Party-led coalition government, which took office in 2023, escalated attacks on the fire service and its workforce. In December 2025 it refused to agree to insurance levy increases that fund FENZ, forcing the agency to cut spending by $50 million a year over three years. The government also ordered FENZ to cut $60 million from its budget by 2029.

FENZ responded with a restructuring plan to slash 140 roles to save $50 million a year. On the same day that the NZPFU withdrew its notice of strike action, FENZ announced the restructure will not proceed. The NZPFU and the Public Service Association applauded the decision, but FENZ chairman Raveen Jaduram stated that "there are many other ways in which we can achieve the same outcome." In other words, cost-cutting will proceed in another way.

In the lead-up to the election the government tried to distance itself from FENZ. A parliamentary committee report published in September criticised the agency for poor governance and spending decisions. It noted the large amount of aging equipment and that 30 trucks purchased in 2019 were still not in operational service seven years later. The report ruled out increased funding, however, calling for "better use of the existing budget before additional levies are considered."

Internal Affairs Minister Brooke van Velden announced on September 17 that she had no confidence in FENZ CEO Kerry Gregory, claiming that he had withheld information from her about a "seriously significant incident," without explaining what the incident was. Gregory resigned a month later.

The NZPFU has sought to bolster illusions that these changes signal a new dawn for FENZ. On November 17, Watson told Radio NZ that the withdrawal of the restructuring plan showed that the agency "want to refocus the organisation both in funding and intent back to what the purpose of the organisation is, which is to protect and preserve life and property." Such claims are completely unfounded.

Firefighters should be warned: by cancelling strikes the NZPFU is paving the way for another sellout agreement.

The firefighters actions over the past year have been part of a resurgence of strikes in New Zealand and internationally. On October 21, 8,000 tertiary education staff went on strike nationally while last month 10,000 workers at government departments struck.

In every case, however, the unions have limited action as much as possible, kept workers divided and promoted illusions in the Labour Party. Labour contested the election promising to reduce government spending while funnelling more money to the military—the same basic program as the National Party.

A strike by 660 laboratory workers employed by the company Awanui, scheduled to run across four days from November 19, was cancelled by the Apex union after just two days. The union told workers that the Employment Relations Authority will recommend a settlement this week—which will almost certainly be a below-inflation pay offer.

The only way for workers to fight back is to build new organisations that they control: rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions and all capitalist parties. These committees must link workers across industries and internationally in a struggle based on a socialist perspective. This must include a massive expansion of emergency services funded by ending military spending, and expropriating the banks and major industries, placing them under the democratic control of the working class. The Socialist Equality Group (NZ) fights for this program.



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