

Vote no to union sellout of New Zealand teachers! Mobilise the working class against the Ardern Labour government!

By the Socialist Equality Group (New Zealand)
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The Socialist Equality Group (SEG) calls on teachers to decisively reject the proposed settlement announced last Friday by the New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI), Post-Primary Teachers' Association (PPTA) and Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's Labour Party–NZ First–Greens coalition government. Voting on the deal will take place over the next 10 days.

The union-backed agreement is a sellout which will do nothing to reverse the effects of a decade-long funding freeze. It will only deepen the NZ schools' crisis and represents a betrayal of the 52,000 primary and secondary teachers and primary principals who joined the May 29 strike, one of the largest in New Zealand's history.

The revised deal is almost identical to previous offers that teachers rejected and that led to the strike. It does not begin to address teachers' demands for a substantial pay increase, major reductions to workloads, more staff and more support for students with learning difficulties.

The unions' endorsement of this rotten deal underscores the urgent need for a political rebellion against these organisations. The union bureaucracy does not represent working people but is part of a self-satisfied upper middle class layer that supports the Ardern government. The unions are playing the critical role in enforcing low wages and ever-worsening conditions by suppressing the growing anti-austerity movement of the working class.

The SEG calls for teachers to adopt a socialist program and form independent rank-and-file committees in every school, independent of the trade unions and the political establishment. These committees, democratically controlled by teachers themselves, must fight to broaden their struggle to include health workers, transport workers, meat processing workers and others in a political and industrial campaign against the government's austerity agenda.

Teachers must oppose all the efforts by the unions, the government and the media to isolate them from other workers and convince them that there is no alternative to

accepting a sellout. Even before the deal was announced, let alone voted on, the PPTA cancelled industrial action scheduled for coming weeks. The unions are now seeking to push through the agreement with as little discussion as possible.

The demand must be raised for mass meetings of primary and secondary teachers in every major town and city, so they can fully discuss and debate the proposed settlement before voting, with equal speaking time for opponents of the union-backed deal.

Preparations should be made for an indefinite strike by all teachers until their original claims are met, with strike pay provided from the unions' coffers. The PPTA and NZEI together collect more than \$27 million a year in dues, but paid out nothing during the recent strikes.

The government's revised offer is worth \$1.47 billion over four years, i.e. an additional \$271 million. This increase, however, is partly due to the offer being extended to 2,000 teachers at area schools (that have primary and secondary students).

The figure is still less than half the value of what teachers initially demanded, which totalled \$3.9 billion, including a 15 percent pay increase for secondary teachers and 16 percent for primary teachers. The government and unions are offering just three percent per year for three years, plus a \$1,500 lump sum (before tax).

The NZEI and most media outlets have misleadingly implied that the deal means an 18.5 percent pay increase for most teachers. This figure is arrived at by factoring in progression up the salary scale over three years and a small extra increase for primary teachers, to restore pay parity with secondary teachers.

The pay rise will be consumed by increased living costs. It will not even begin to restore what teachers have lost from 10 years of stagnant wages. According to Newshub, between 2009 and 2017 average wages for senior primary teachers increased 7.1 percent and for beginner teachers 5.65 percent.

Over the past decade official inflation was 17 percent and housing costs soared more than 80 percent.

Teachers also have impossibly heavy workloads, caused by a critical shortage of teachers and teacher aides. Every day teachers confront the effects of the social crisis on the working class as a whole. One in four children live in poverty and many come to school hungry and with serious learning difficulties. Many families cannot afford essential items such as books, school uniforms and computers. None of this is addressed by the union-government deal.

Education Minister Chris Hipkins boasted last Friday that the teachers' pay offer was "equivalent" to the three percent nurses and healthcare assistants received almost a year ago. "We went into this with a clear expectation that the nurses' agreement set a benchmark, and we've stuck to that," he said.

The Employers and Manufacturers Association and other corporate representatives had warned that any significant pay increase for teachers and health workers would encourage more strikes by low-paid workers throughout the country.

Following a nationwide strike by 30,000 hospital workers, the government relied on the New Zealand Nurses' Organisation (NZNO) to push through a sellout deal. It wore down health workers' opposition by presenting them with the same offer again and again, cancelling industrial action, and echoing the government's lie that there was "no more money" for decent pay and well-staffed hospitals.

Now the teacher unions are using the same anti-democratic methods against their members.

The strikes by nurses, health workers and teachers demonstrate that there is no lack of determination to fight. The past 18 months have also seen strikes by thousands of doctors, public servants, disability carers, midwives, transport workers and others, that have shaken the ruling class. In every dispute, however, workers' have been bound hand and foot by the trade unions.

This situation is mirrored internationally in the strangulation and betrayal of one strike after another, including mass teacher strikes in Poland, across the US, in India and several Latin American countries.

Teachers cannot accept yet another sellout deal that will intensify the crisis facing them and their students. The fight for high-quality, free education and other social rights brings workers into direct struggle against the pro-capitalist trade unions, the Labour Party and the government. While Ardern is glorified around the world as "kind" and "caring," her coalition government with the right-wing nationalist NZ First and the Greens has continued to starve public services, while keeping taxes low for the rich and diverting billions of dollars to expand the military in preparation for war.

Workers must base their fight on a socialist strategy. This means rejecting the endless lie that there is "no more money." There is plenty of money in the hands of the rich, for whom New Zealand governments—Labour and National Party-led governments alike—rule. The billions they waste to corporate tax cuts and military spending should be redistributed to meet human needs, not private profit.

Building rank-and-file committees in every workplace is the only way to break the isolation imposed by the unions and unite the entire working class against the government and the crisis-ridden capitalist system it defends, which cannot provide a future to workers anywhere.

In opposition to the nationalism promoted by the trade unions, the SEG calls on workers in New Zealand to forge links with their counterparts in Australia and internationally who face the same assault on working conditions and wages.

We urge all those who agree with this perspective to contact the Socialist Equality Group, and join us in the fight to build a section of the world Trotskyist movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International, in New Zealand.

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