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Teacher strikes: Everything you need to know about the ongoing pay talks

Gabrielle McCulloch · 05:00, May 21 2023

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Post Primary Teachers' Association's (PPTA) Te Wehengarua acting president, Chris Abercrombie explains why teachers are striking.

Schools will face further disruption across Aotearoa this week, with teachers voting on whether to strike for the fifth time in as many months.

Primary school teachers have already rejected the Government's **most recent pay offer** and may take to the streets in protest yet again.

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If another strike goes ahead, it will mean added uncertainty for pupils already hit hard by the ongoing impacts of Covid-19 and severe weather events.

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Teachers may take to the streets in protest yet again.

However, parents spoken to by the *Sunday Star-Times* were philosophical about the disruption, and acknowledged how tough classrooms had been.

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“It is frustrating to have the kids’ learning disrupted, but the teachers are also affected by the cost of living crisis and deserve to be fairly recognised and appreciated for everything they do,” said one mother.

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Ministry of Education employment group manager Mark Williamson said the Government was working to find a solution.

“Our offers balance significant improvements in remuneration and a comprehensive range of other conditions to improve opportunities for teachers and principals to deliver great teaching and support for students,” Williamson said.

“Our offers also respond directly to the workload concerns that teachers have raised in bargaining discussions,” he said, adding that average rates of pay had increased by 4.3% over the last 12 months as measured by the Labour Cost Index.

Union leaders, however, said the Government’s offers were “not good enough”.

Chris Abercrombie, acting president of the Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA), said the latest pay offer for secondary school teachers was missing some “really significant things”.

The offer included 11-14% increases for all teachers and put those at the top of the pay scale on \$100,000 by December 2024. The bottom of the scale would rise to \$58,505.

It also had improvements to conditions, including time for pastoral care and recognition for cultural leadership.

But Abercrombie said the offer had a 17-month period where teachers wouldn’t see any pay rise, which didn’t cut it.

“There’s a significant cost of living crisis and teachers haven’t had a pay rise in two years. It’s not good enough,” he said.

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Chris Abercrombie is acting president of the Post Primary Teachers Association.

A **recent teaching survey** found 24% of advertised teacher positions had no suitable applicants, and 28% had only one.

Around one third of advertised jobs could not be filled.

“There’s a supply issue in teaching, and we know pay and conditions need to be attractive for people to come into the profession,” Abercrombie said.

The PPTA is negotiating a pay agreement for secondary school teachers while the New Zealand Education Institute (NZEI) is bargaining for primary teachers, area school teachers and primary school principals. 

Mark Potter, NZEI president, said teachers’ pay has been slipping behind other similar professions for “quite a long time now”.

“They need to have good, competitive remuneration to stop people from choosing to go elsewhere or from choosing not to train.”

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ROSA WOODS/STUFF

NZEI president Mark Potter.

Primary principals had also seen the short end of the stick, he said.

“We know that we’re losing principals at a great rate. We do know some principals can earn more by not being a principal and taking on a teaching responsibility role.

“That shouldn’t be happening. It’s such a significant role in any school no matter the size. They should never be earning less than people with less responsibility,” Potter said.

The frustration has resulted in a year of strikes and industrial action.

On March 16, around 50,000 teachers and principals from across the country took to the streets to demand better pay and working conditions.

Facing a booing crowd outside the Beehive, education minister **Jan Tinetti** said she knew the last few years had been tough for teachers.

“I know that we have to do better, and I commit to you that we will do better,” she said.

But when little headway was made, secondary school teachers organised **another strike** for March 29.

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BRADEN FASTIER/STUFF

If primary teachers decided to take to the streets it will be the fifth teacher strike this year.

By April 17, Tinetti announced the Government would **decrease teacher-student ratios** for years 4 to 8 by one student.

Lower class sizes were a major issue for primary school teachers, and although many teachers celebrated it as a win some said it was **too little too late**.

A few days later, the **Employment Relations Authority** announced it would try and break the impasse between secondary school teachers and the Government through facilitated bargaining.

They weren't the only ones hitting a wall. By April 24, primary school principals – who were also stalling in their pay negotiations – began a **2-month ban on work** outside school hours.

Term 2 started with a little progress. The Government made an offer to primary school teachers which **the union called “reasonable”**, but the teachers later rejected.

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Thomas Newton, chairperson of the PPTA Canterbury, speaks to Stuff about why teachers are taking industrial action, ahead of a strike held at the end of March.

On May 4, secondary school teachers began holding rolling year-level strikes, where different year groups were rostered home, and warned more were on their way.

Both unions – NZEI and the PPTA – joined forces for a second time to hold rolling strikes in the area schools and secondary schools.

Between May 9 and May 11, protests were held across the motu, despite a last-minute offer to [secondary school teachers](#) from the Government.

For area school teachers, secondary school teachers and primary school teachers, their grievances have not been resolved. None of these groups have reached an agreement and further strikes are still on the table.

Williamson, the Ministry of Education manager, said strikes were an “unnecessary disruption” to students and their families.

“We continue to work with the unions to reach a settlement so teachers can return to delivering teaching and learning to all students across the motu,” he said.

The ministry has made two formal and two informal offers to secondary school teachers.

It has also made three formal offers to primary school teachers.