Scottish teachers ballot for strike action

Steve James
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The majority of Scotland's 60,000 teachers are to be balloted regarding strike action. This follows the Council of Scottish Local Authorities (CoSLA) and the Labour government's refusal to offer more than a 3 percent annual pay increase. Members of four of the five teaching unions, by far the largest of which is the Educational Institute for Scotland (EIS), will consider a series of one-day strikes and other actions. A large majority in favour is expected.

Teachers have already rejected, by a 98 percent majority, an attempt by the government to introduce new working conditions, increased duties, re-grading—including the introduction of "super teachers"—and up to 50 hours more time spent in schools per year in return for a 4.7 percent pay increase. Following the huge rejection of the proposals, the teaching unions submitted a pay claim of 8 percent, which was rejected by CoSLA.

Over the last years teachers have seen a steady erosion of conditions, increased class sizes and working conditions associated with the introduction of a fixed curriculum and new examinations. David Eaglesham, leader of the Scottish Secondary Teachers Association, said the 8 percent claim “was supposed to start addressing the relative decline of teachers' salaries in recent years. At a minimum, teachers would accept nothing less favourable than other colleagues have received this year."

But such statements by union leaders were immediately contradicted by their actions. On October 16, EIS president John Patton announced that the union would settle for a 4 percent increase. This is in line with previous intimations that they considered a 3.5 percent increase a basis for negotiations. Union officials have also made clear that they are not opposed to a radical restructuring of teachers' pay and conditions, only to how it is implemented.

Following the vote against restructuring, EIS General Secretary Ronnie Smith emphasised his support for government policy: "An imposed settlement on schools, whether through a new pay and conditions body or some other route, will simply not work. It will fail to deliver the benefits of curricular change and development in schools to which the government is so strongly committed. For change to work, the government must involve teachers and their representatives right from the start of any process of change. The negotiating mechanisms are in place to be used and the government should be ready to use them."

At this point, the government is attempting to bypass the normal negotiation machinery—the Scottish Joint Negotiating Committee (SJNC)—which includes all the teaching unions. It has established a “review body” from which the teaching unions are excluded. The union leadership is attempting to use the 98 percent rejection vote, and the threat of a strike, as a means of re-establishing its previous working relationship with government.

Should the elaborate game of bluff and counter-bluff between the local authorities, government and union officials collapse, then the date chosen for the first one-day strike is November 30. Explaining the significance of this date, Ronnie Smith said, "By taking action on St. Andrew's day, teachers will be confirming the Scottish identity of Scottish education. We shall be calling on the Scottish Parliament and Executive to identify Scottish solutions to the issues facing Scottish schools and teachers."

This nationalist slant obscures the fact that teachers in England and Wales face the same erosion of pay and conditions, increased class sizes and introduction of private capital into schools by the same government. The much-vaunted “unique character” of Scottish education, which historically had a certain validity, is now little more than a device to divide teachers and promote regional divisions.

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