

“Reclaim EIS” offers no alternative to union sell-out of Scottish teachers

Stephen Alexander
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A section of the Education Institute of Scotland bureaucracy has launched a campaign to “Reclaim EIS.”

The group was launched in response to an agreement reached between the Education Institute of Scotland (EIS), the largest teaching union, and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA), containing £45 million in wage and benefit cuts for primary and secondary school teachers.

The deal negotiated by the EIS concedes a two-year pay freeze, as well as cuts to maternity pay and statutory holidays. One in 20 teachers stand to lose between £4,377 and £10,806 of their yearly salary through the axing of conserved salaries protecting senior pay levels. Supply teachers will lose over 40 percent of their weekly earnings, as they are to be paid at a lower grade and for a maximum 25-hour week.

“Reclaim EIS” criticises the undemocratic nature of the union leadership and the campaign of intimidation it employed, threatening mass unemployment and ever-deeper inroads into pay and conditions, to force the deal through in a second ballot.

The campaign’s Facebook page has received over 11,000 unique visits, with 1,100 people registering their support. This is an expression of the widespread hostility amongst teachers to the treachery of the trade union bureaucracy. Nonetheless, the campaign provides no alternative for teachers, differing only on how the multimillion-pound concessions should be imposed.

A March 27 post on the campaign’s web site rejected criticism from EIS General Secretary Ronnie Smith that it offers “no way forward other than industrial action.” It responded defensively, stating openly its own programme cuts: “We do and it is based on the following: any changes should be fairly distributed across the profession. No single element of the

profession should be singled out. We also have ideas about pay freezes, giving conserved salary teachers additional responsibilities commensurate with their salaries.”

The campaign, initially named “Reject EIS”, appears to have been started by one teacher and called for teachers to “jump ship” to the supposedly more representative Scottish Secondary Teachers Association (SSTA). The SSTA, along with the National Association of Schoolmasters/Union of Women Teachers and the Voice trade union, have in reality taken up only a nominal oppositional stance to the EIS and COSLA. Both agree with the two-year pay freeze and have only pledged to organise protest action over some secondary aspects of the pay deal.

The campaign has now been brought under control by left-talking mid-to-high level bureaucrats who hold membership in, or orbit around, various middle class ex-left tendencies such as the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), the Socialist Party (SP) and the Scottish Socialist Party. These groups are wholly loyal to the trade union bureaucracy and urge members to “stay in the EIS and reclaim it.”

Neither perspective presents teachers with any means of defence against a continuous onslaught on their wages and conditions. Even deeper education cuts will be announced in September on conclusion of the Scottish-government commissioned McCormac review.

The review is considering advice from a number of sources. COSLA’s input calls for an end to the 35-hour limit on the working week, the introduction of performance-related pay and the replacement of permanent contracts for promoted staff with short fixed-term contracts. Glasgow City Council advises that newly qualified teachers may be put on half pay of £10,700 for a two-year probationary period. The

current period lasts one year, with a salary of £21,400 rising to £25,700 upon completion.

The principal concern of the functionaries behind Reclaim EIS is not the interests of workers, but the protection of the privileged social position of the union bureaucracy by preventing the haemorrhaging of members and their dues, all the while maintaining the union's cordial relationship with the government and its grip on the workforce.

To head off the emergence of any effective movement amongst teachers, they attribute the anti-worker policies of the union to a small "undemocratic" section of the bureaucracy, principally the salaries committee. They aim to channel opposition to EIS policies behind a campaign for minimal reforms within the union and the "democratic and constitutional removal" of a few bureaucrats.

Reclaim EIS is at pains to dress up the trade union apparatus as a progressive force through which workers can realise an "alternative to the cuts."

A letter addressed to all Scottish schools, posted on the campaign web site on June 2 and signed by Reclaim EIS members who hold positions on the regional and national executives, states: "The TUC (Trades Union Congress) protest in London on 26 March of almost one million people in London proved there is a mood of resistance and the planned strikes by civil servants and teachers (in England and Wales) on 30 June will see hundreds of thousands on strike against austerity and to defend our pensions. A determined stand by the EIS could have led to a united fight back ... and won further concessions."

This is political deception. The trade union bureaucracy is hostile to any genuine struggle in defence of jobs, wages and livings standards. Internationally, the trade unions are dedicated to the suppression of class struggle, functioning as an essential tool for the corporate and financial elite who are seeking to resolve the global financial crisis through imposing mass austerity.

The TUC's March 26 demonstration was a token protest designed to let off some of the enormous pent-up social antagonism against the £81 billion programme of public spending cuts being carried out by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government with the full cooperation of the devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern

Ireland. It remains the sole action organised by the TUC since the coalition came to power over a year ago.

The one-day protest strike planned for June 30 has been cast in the same mould. Only a few unions have agreed to participate, mainly those with executives controlled by the pseudo-left parties, while proceedings are to be concentrated on protesting the assault on the Teachers' Pension Scheme. The University and College Union (UCU), in which groups such as the SWP also hold sway, are delaying strike action over an identical attack on the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) pension, until the start of the new academic year in autumn.

The goal of Reclaim EIS was summed up by EIS rep, Jim Halfpenny, in an article published May 19 on the web site of the Socialist Party's Scotland branch: "The conditions exist for forming a substantial broad left within the union and the rank-and-file movement, Reclaim EIS, has made a significant start."

Such "broad left" formations operate in a number of unions including the UCU, the PCS and Unite. They function as little more than a vehicle for career advancement amongst a layer of trade union functionaries. Their speciality is the use of empty militant-sounding rhetoric to provide the trade union bureaucracy with left cover as it systematically betrays the interests of working people.

A successful offensive against the onslaught on the social position of teachers and the working class as a whole cannot be achieved through switching unions or lobbying the bureaucracy to change course. Workers must make a fundamental break with the pro-capitalist perspective shared by all trade unions, and their apologists. Independent rank-and-file committees must be built on the basis of a genuine socialist programme.



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