

UK teaching unions announce limited strike action

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The two leading teaching unions have announced a series of regional strikes beginning in October leading to a one-day national strike in England in November.

The announcement by the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) and the National Union of Teachers (NUT) came as teachers returned to the new school year confronted with a raft of new attacks on working conditions and the state education system.

The strike has ostensibly been called over attacks that have in fact already been imposed in collaboration with the teaching unions over the past two years. These attacks include the rise in pension contributions, raising the retirement age to 68, the abolition of the national pay structure and handing over of powers to head teachers to implement pay decisions, “performance” management, the imposition of a new target driven, rote learning curriculum and forcing schools to become self-governing academies as a step towards privatisation.

Having enabled the implementation of all these attacks, what is to be made of the unions’ show of opposition?

There has been a flurry of activity, albeit limited, in the last few months. Leading up to the regional strike of teacher’s held in the North West of England on June 27, over a dozen rallies and mass meetings have taken place with the general secretaries of both unions wheeled out to pledge defiance.

One-day strike action has been announced for October 1 across the Eastern, East Midlands, Yorkshire and Humberside regions to coincide with the Conservative Party’s national conference. A further strike is planned in the North East, London, South East and South West regions on October 17 and a national strike for November 18.

These strikes do not signify any newfound militancy on the part of the heads of the teaching unions. Instead, the union bureaucracy is aware that it is policing an increasingly restless and angry profession. The long history of betrayals and collaboration by the unions in the government’s assault on education have had an impact. The union leadership is afraid that if it does not make a token showing of resistance, opposition will develop outside of its control.

Despite repeated ballots for strike action to defend teachers’ conditions, the teaching unions have worked to demobilise opposition by organising harmless and divisive campaigns such as a “work to rule.” The NUT cancelled planned national strike action last year at the eleventh hour and limited action to a token walkout in London.

This has led to several strikes breaking out over the last year in individual schools across the country over forced academy status, changes to term time and teaching hours as well as bullying tactics by management.

The union leaderships are exploiting the anger and preparedness of the teachers to fight to manoeuvre to entrench their positions and convince the government that their services are needed. Having proven that they can be willing allies in imposing the government’s agenda, they have been sent reeling by the refusal of the Education Secretary Michael Gove to negotiate with them.

NUT and NASUWT statements express their dismay at being left out in the cold. In the period leading up to the June 27 strike, the unions’ tried to avert the dispute by pleading with Gove to talk to them. Their demand was not that the government withdraw its reactionary education policies. Instead they proposed “three reasonable demands” so as to “avoid strike action.”

They requested only that Gove hold a “series of meetings” with them and suspend “the implementation of the changes proposed to the School Teachers’ Pay and Conditions Document, pending the outcome of these discussions.” Gove refused.

Similarly, the latest joint press release of the NUT/NASWUT states that following Gove’s continued refusal to “engage” with the unions, “plans are in place for the next stage of industrial action.”

Chris Keates, NASWUT general secretary, told a Nottingham rally last weekend, “We have a secretary of state who’s not listening. He’s not consulting properly and is just driving through his own personal agenda.”

Christine Blower, head of the NUT, told a London rally the same day, “It is a great shame that the Education Secretary has let things get to this stage. With pay pensions and working conditions being systematically attacked and an education secretary who refuses to listen or negotiate, teachers now, however have no other choice.”

Plans for strike action are on hold in Wales. This is not because the proposed attacks have been withdrawn, but because the unions have succeeded in gaining the ear of the powers that be. The same press release explained that, “In contrast to the Secretary of State, the Welsh Government has been prepared to engage in constructive talks to seek to avoid the escalation of the rolling programme of strike action in Wales.”

The unions are being fully backed by their apologists in the pseudo-left organisations. These groups are far more frightened of mobilising workers in a genuine fight and thereby threatening their own privileged positions within the higher echelons of the union bureaucracy than they are of the deep attacks on teachers and education being waged by the political establishment.

The Socialist Workers Party (SWP) has described the regional and one-day strike action as a “serious plan of action.” claiming that it represents “a fight to defend the sort of education that is not based on testing, targets and Ofsted.” This is a rotten cover for the role being played by the unions.

All indications are that there will be a large turnout for the strike actions. Already hundreds of schools affected by industrial action planned for October 1 have sent letters home to parents stating that schools will be

closed on this day as the overwhelming majority of teachers will be taking action. Many teachers will want to use the occasion to express their deep hostility and anger to the draconian assault on their conditions and their concern for the fate of the future education of children by this government.

Anger, however, is not sufficient. Lessons must be drawn and a new perspective advanced. Left under the control of the trade unions, any fight back will be strangled as has been proven repeatedly. The unions’ only interest is to defend their own privileged positions and they are the vehicle through which austerity, wage cuts and the redistribution of wealth from the poor to the rich has taken place.

Teachers and education staff must categorically reject the attempts to overturn their pay and conditions and mobilise a genuine opposition by setting up rank-and-file committees, independent of these bankrupt unions. They must join with support staff, parents and local communities to resist all cuts to pay and conditions and unite with other workers fighting to defend jobs and services, against the government’s brutal austerity measures on the basis of a socialist programme.



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