

UK teaching unions call off strike action

Tania Kent
5 November 2013

The National Union of Teachers (NUT) and the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) announced last week a suspension of further strike action pending negotiations with the education secretary, Michael Gove.

A joint national strike by the two unions was to be held in November. It followed three regional strikes held on June 27 and October 1 and 17. Teachers are seeking to oppose changes to pensions, attacks on terms of national pay, the introduction of performance pay, privatisation, attacks on the curriculum, and a further offensive by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition aimed at the abolition of preparation time, the extension of teaching hours and the use of unqualified teachers in the classroom.

Very little information has been provided by the unions in their press statements announcing the suspension of the strike. It is not clear when Gove wrote to the unions offering talks or whether any demands have been placed on Gove for the basis of these negotiations.

On October 25, the unions' joint statement said, "The NUT and NASUWT have welcomed confirmation that the Secretary of State is willing to discuss a basis for genuine talks on the unions' trade disputes on teachers' pay, pensions, workload and conditions of service and jobs.

"In response to the indication from the Secretary of State that he is willing to engage in talks, the NASUWT and NUT have agreed to: suspend the planned national day of strike action which was scheduled to take place in the Autumn 2013 term."

The unions then claim that they will hold a national strike no later than February 13 if there isn't an "acceptable resolution" to the dispute.

A report in the *Socialist Worker*, journal of the pseudo-left Socialist Workers Party (SWP), on October 29, claims that Gove had already written to the unions

on September 17, before the last two regional strikes had taken place, and that in this letter, Gove, while agreeing to talks, stated that he will not withdraw the central thrust of the government's attack on teachers' pay and conditions.

The SWP has several members on the national executive of the NUT. It states, "Union leaders say they have postponed planned strikes because Gove is willing to hold meaningful talks. There is no evidence for this.

"Gove sent a letter to union leaders claiming he was 'happy to meet' to discuss their concerns. This is dated 17 September 2013. It isn't clear what has changed since then.

"In any case, Gove's letter makes clear, 'The government's policy direction on pay and pensions is fixed.

"I am fully committed to the changes to both pay and pensions,'" Gove stated.

During the regional strike, despite demands from teachers at public rallies to name a date for national strike action, NUT president Christine Blower refused to answer. This is because everything that has taken place over the last three years was to prevent such action from developing. This is the second time that the union has called off national action. In 2011, national strike action was suspended at the 11th hour and limited to London only.

The Socialist Equality Party, in opposition to the pseudo-lefts who promoted the regional strikes as "proof" that the unions could be forced to act in the interests of their members, warned that the aim of the strikes was to diffuse opposition to the unions' betrayals. We said, "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.

"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."

The pseudo-lefts bear the main responsibility for this latest betrayal. The SWP had described the regional and one-day strike actions as a "serious plan of action," claiming that they represent "a fight to defend the sort of education that is not based on testing, targets and Ofsted [the government's schools inspection body]." They provided a rotten cover for the role being played by the unions.

The SWP's executive members advanced a resolution at the national executive meeting of the NUT held last week, calling for strike action on November 27 to be followed by two further national strikes if Gove didn't back down. This was defeated. Their attempts to promote the fiction that the unions can be forced to fight and that the government can be defeated without a political mobilisation of the working class to bring it down have been exposed as bankrupt.

Teachers are the most unionised sector of workers in the UK. Some 67 percent of teachers are in the unions, and in the state sector this is as high as 90 percent. Despite this, not a single one of the raft of attacks on education has been defeated. The problem hasn't been the refusal of teachers to fight. It rests with their domination by an organisation dedicated to a defence of the employers and the state--of capitalism itself--in order to secure the privileges of the bureaucracy, rather than the defence of its members.

The pseudo-left groups are bitterly opposed to mobilising workers in a genuine fight independently of and against the union apparatus because their own privileged positions within the higher echelons of the union bureaucracy would be endangered.

Teachers must begin to draw lessons. The unions are not the vehicle for the defence of their conditions, but the mechanism through which the government is imposing its agenda.

Teachers and education staff must set up rank-and-file committees—not to pressurise the unions, but independently of the 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.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact