

Unions spearhead assault on Scottish teachers

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Members of the Education Institute for Scotland (EIS), which represents around 80 percent of Scottish teachers, have rejected a recent pay settlement with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA).

Last month, the EIS held a “consultative ballot”—effectively a survey which commits the union to nothing—in which 59 percent of respondents registered their opposition.

The deal includes a pay increase of 1 percent for 2013-2014 and another 1 percent in 2014-2015. With inflation officially running at over 3 percent, this amounts to a considerable pay cut.

In return for this miserly wage increase, which comes on the back of a two-year pay freeze, the COSLA is demanding fundamental changes in working rules substantially increasing the workload of Scottish teachers.

If successfully imposed, the deal will overturn the 2001 McCrone Agreement, which ostensibly instituted a 35-hour working week, including 12 hours for preparation and marking, alongside safeguards against non-teaching responsibilities such as photocopying, reception duties, repairs and maintenance. It also included a substantial pay rise of 23 percent in exchange for teachers taking on greater responsibility and reviewed training and development.

Many of these provisions were never implemented, while others have already been reversed.

According to a report published by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), teacher pay in Scotland has declined annually in real terms since 2005.

A survey carried out by the EIS in March revealed that Scottish teachers work an average of nine hours unpaid overtime every week. An earlier study conducted by the University of Glasgow found that, on average, teachers were working 45 hours a week, with senior teachers working as long as 55 hours.

Teacher workloads have been further compounded by the introduction of the new Curriculum for Excellence (CfE), for which the first examinations are scheduled to take place this academic year. The CfE is intended to tailor Scottish primary and secondary education more closely to the demands of the markets, Scottish businesses in particular, and requires teachers to take on a range of responsibilities outside of their subject area.

All contractual limits on the tasks performed by Scottish teachers are now to be removed and the “35-hour week” is to be replaced by a 35-hour average.

Teachers are concerned that they will be left to pick up the slack for cuts to non-teaching positions, such as classroom assistants and administrative staff, as well as supply teachers. There is currently a critical shortage of supply teachers after non-permanent teachers’ salaries were cut by 40 percent in a 2011 deal between the COSLA and trade unions.

The contractual changes and pay offer were finalised collaboratively through the Scottish Negotiating Committee for Teachers (SNCT), comprising representatives from the Scottish government, the COSLA and a number of education unions—the EIS, the Scottish Secondary Teacher’s Association (SSTA), Voice, and the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT).

The SNCT largely adopted the advice of the McCormac Review, set up in 2011 by the ruling devolved Scottish National Party (SNP) government under the rubric of “advancing professionalism” and improving “educational outcomes for our children and young people”.

As is now clear, the undertaking was in fact dedicated to overhauling what little obstacles remain from the McCrone Agreement to the SNP’s goal of escalating the exploitation of teaching staff.

The SNP has already axed thousands of teachers since it took power in 2007, reducing the number of full-time equivalent posts from around 55,000 to just over 51,000 today.

The unions have done everything within their power to sabotage widespread opposition.

The SSTA immediately adopted the pay offer, which it characterised as “measured and reasonable”, and Voice recently denounced teacher strikes as “futile” and “counter-productive”. The NASUWT has left its members to resist individually through a work-to-rule.

The EIS has no intention of organising any defence of teachers. It has a track record of holding non-binding “consultative” ballots as means of suppressing opposition until it has conceded to all employer demands behind its members’ backs. The union has organised at least four such ballots since 2011. All have registered overwhelming support for strike action, and each time union officials have ignored the wishes of its members.

In 2011, the EIS worked hand in glove with the COSLA and the Scottish government to impose £45 million in wage and benefit cuts. Alongside the pay freeze and the slashing of supply teacher salaries, this included a reduction in maternity pay and massive cuts to the conserved salaries of experienced teachers.

Despite being advised by EIS officials to accept the deal, 98 percent of teachers voiced their opposition in a “consultative” ballot. It was only accepted by a slim majority after a sustained campaign by the union to intimidate and demoralise its members, threatening teachers that mass unemployment was the only alternative.

Earlier this year, the EIS was instrumental in assisting the SNP to implement the British Conservative-Liberal Democrat government’s pension cuts in Scotland. It disregarded yet another ballot in March, which yielded over 90 percent support for industrial action, and chose to channel opposition behind appeals to the SNP government to live up to its bogus rhetoric opposing Westminster’s austerity policies.

Scottish education differs somewhat from the English system. It is one of the major areas of policy, alongside the judiciary, police, health and local government, administered directly by the devolved Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh with funding from an annual discretionary public spending grant from the UK

Treasury. As with all austerity measures passed on by Westminster, the SNP made a few token noises of opposition, claiming it would reverse the pension reforms if Scotland gains independence in the September 2014 referendum, before implementing them in full.

Teachers across the UK now face higher pension contributions, rising to almost 9 percent of pay, while their retirement age has been linked to the state pension age, which is scheduled to increase to 68 by 2028. Those joining pension schemes prior to April 2007 signed up to a retirement age of 60.

Teachers in Scotland and the rest of the UK are on the receiving end of an almost identical offensive on pay and working rules, as well as a fundamental assault on the standards of education.

South of the border, teaching unions have played an equally treacherous role. The National Union of Teachers (NUT) and the NASUWT have organised three token one-day regional strikes this year, aimed at exhausting the resilience of teachers and heading off any resistance to the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government. A national strike, scheduled to take place this month, was called off despite Education Minister Michael Gove having reiterated his government’s intention to move forward with swinging education cuts.

Not once have the trade unions sought to unify teachers in England and Scotland, let alone appeal to workers in other sectors, including the universities and colleges, the Royal Mail, fire and probationary services, and the Grangemouth oil refinery, who all recently voted by large majorities for strike action.



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