

UK teachers union refuses to back one-day strike

Margot Miller
21 February 2014

The National Union of Teachers (NUT) has announced that its members in England and Wales will stage a one-day strike on March 26 against changes in pensions, pay and conditions. On Friday, the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) stated that it will not join the strike.

The changes the NUT is supposedly striking against have already been implemented, testifying to the bankruptcy and complicity of the teaching unions. Teachers now have to pay more for a pension that they cannot access until they are 68. Moreover, pay rises will as of this year be directly linked to the annual test/exam results of pupils.

The unions capitulated to the attacks on pensions, calling token one-day strikes to diffuse the anger of teachers. Last year, the NUT and NASUWT confined their action to just three regional strikes and rallies, with most teachers turned away from the rallies, as the venues booked were too small. A scheduled one-day strike in November was then called off.

Teachers also face pay cuts because the unions have collaborated with the introduction of performance pay. The NUT sent a model pay policy accepting performance pay into schools, assuring teachers they would still get their increments. Annual pay rises, however, are dependent on almost-impossible-to-achieve targets.

In calling for a day's strike, the main aim of the NUT is not to fight for the interests of their members but to secure a place at the negotiating table and offer their services to the government.

This action follows the direction of the trade union apparatus as a whole. The trade union representing workers at the newly privatised Royal Mail, the Communication Workers Union, has just signed a deal

trading measures to prevent local and national strikes in return for greater union involvement in the running of the business. On the eve of the privatisation of Royal Mail, while opposing privatisation in words, they called off all strike action.

Similarly, the unions representing London Underground workers, the Rail Maritime and Transport Union and Transport Salaried Staffs Association, spent months pleading with London mayor Boris Johnson in relation to the proposed closure of all ticket offices and 950 job losses. Last week, after calling just one 48-hour strike, the unions called off a further strike for further negotiations, without the company backing down on any of its proposals.

Since meeting with government officials last October, NUT general secretary Christine Blowers bemoaned the fact that Conservative Party education secretary Michael Gove had, since then, "put obstacle after obstacle in the way of talks. We on the other hand have made every effort. We cancelled the strike planned for November and postponed action in February."

Grovelling even further, she continued, "We have indicated we will meet with Michael Gove anywhere, anytime to seek to resolve the disputes in the interests of the education service."

In a last desperate plea and calling the proposed strike a "last resort," she reminded Gove of the upcoming European elections. "His policies are losing the coalition party votes," she said.

Chris Keates, general secretary of the NASUWT, echoed Blower's disappointment. "Having agreed in October 2013 to a programme of talks with the NASUWT and NUT, the secretary of state did not take the opportunity to progress this, despite planned strike action for November 2013 being called off to allow progress to be made," she said. "The Secretary of State

[for Education] needs to take the window of opportunity the NASUWT has offered to him to build trust and confidence with the teaching profession and to demonstrate that he is willing to discuss their deep concerns.”

Gove finally threw the unions a bone by agreeing to talks on February 25 as well as accepting the recommendations of the School Teachers Review Body (STRB)—for now. This enabled the leaders of both unions to claim some sort of victory.

The NASUWT asserted that the “belated commitment by the Secretary of State to hold meetings with the NASUWT to discuss its trade dispute issues” on February 25 was a “key development.”

According to Keates, “The acceptance by the Secretary of State of the Review Body’s recommendations, which protect important contractual entitlements including provisions on working time, holidays” is a “victory”. Blower also called this a victory and “testament to the campaigning of NUT members.”

The STRB recommendations, however, incorporate performance pay. And only the previous week, Gove had announced school days up to 10 hours as well as a new series of tests and community service punishments for pupils who misbehave.

According to the pseudo-left Socialist Workers Party (SWP), who have several members on the national executive of the NUT, the proposed strike about pay, pensions and conditions is “also about Michael Gove’s dogmatic attack on education.” This ignores the fact that the Conservative-led coalition is continuing initiatives introduced by the previous 1997-2010 Labour government. The role of the SWP is to cover for the unions’ prostration before the government and hold out the illusion that they can be forced to fight, in order to try and block an independent movement by the working class.

In the *Socialist Worker* of February 4, Nick Grant, one of the SWP’s NUT bureaucrats, served up an apologia for the unions’ running down of any united offensive by teachers. Justifying the demobilisation of teachers, he wrote, “This national strike was publicly threatened last November, but was postponed on the apparent promise of talks with the Secretary of State. They haven’t happened. It was then planned for next Wednesday, but colleagues in the NASUWT wanted

more time to plan. Their leaders meet on Friday of next week to decide whether or not to join this 26 March strike.”

Sanctioning beforehand the strikebreaking of the NASUWT, he added, “The NUT has no option but to fight on alone if others prevaricate.”

The Socialist Party (SP) repeats the fiction that the unions can be pressured into becoming an effective means of struggle. The SP’s Martin Powell-Davies, a member of the NUT national executive, also gave a clean bill of health to the NUT and NASUWT in comments in the *Socialist*. “NUT members will be relieved that their union is taking national action to defend teachers and education,” he wrote. The NUT, at his suggestion, was “exploring support for a national demonstration for education and, above all, agreement on a date for national strike action to take place before Easter, whether or not other unions agree to coordinate with us.”

In other words, more of the same policies are promised by organisations that have enabled the government to impose its attacks on teachers and education thus far. Facilitated by the unions’ betrayal, Gove is meanwhile pressing ahead with the privatisation of education and further erosion of pay and conditions.

He has apparently lined up Theodore Agnew for the job as chair of the education inspectorate Ofsted. Agnew is a Tory donor, insurance and private equity magnate, and trustee of the right-wing think tank Policy Exchange. Last year, according to the *Eastern Daily Press*, Agnew, who runs his own Academy chain, the Norfolk-based Inspiration Trust, became a “pioneer of outsourcing to India,” where it is possible to hire maths graduates for as little as £70 a month.



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact