

Teachers across the UK vote for industrial action

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Teachers have voted overwhelmingly for strike action over pay and pensions at conferences of the National Education Union (NEU) and the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) held last weekend.

Members of the Education Institute of Scotland (EIS), the largest Scottish education union, have meanwhile rejected a derisory 3 percent pay rise offer and given the union a mandate to ballot for industrial action.

Representing the vast majority of teachers in the UK, the votes are a response to the catastrophic conditions prevailing in primary and secondary schools across the country.

The action must be seen as part of a struggle of educators across four continents that are in conflict with governments attempting to impose massive cuts to their livelihoods and increase workloads. This week strikes by teachers erupted in the US states of Oklahoma and Kentucky, following those last month in West Virginia and Arizona.

In the UK, most teachers' pay has fallen by up to 20 percent in real terms since 2010, thanks to a 1 percent maximum pay rise cap fixed by the government for the last seven years—the cap was scrapped this year in Scotland.

This has exacerbated the attack on pensions made in 2015, when teachers were switched from a final salary to a less generous career average scheme. Their retirement age was also raised to 68.

Cuts to pay and pensions have been imposed in the context of a staggering increase in workloads. According to a survey carried out by the *Guardian* in 2016, roughly three in five teachers were working more than 55 hours a week, with nearly a third working more than 60 hours a week. Much of this is unpaid overtime.

Opposing this, delegates at the NEU supported a call for the removal of a clause in the Schools Teachers Pay and Conditions Document that demands teachers must work “such reasonable hours as needed” in discharging their duties.

The sector is suffering a severe staffing shortage. A report by the Public Accounts Committee in January found the number of qualified teachers exiting the profession for

reasons other than retirement increased from 6 percent of the workforce in 2011 to 8 percent in 2016. The number of secondary school teachers has fallen by nearly 11,000 since 2010.

This has seen class sizes increase across the country, adding yet more work for those who remain in the profession.

This is part of a broader crisis in primary and secondary schooling, itself the product of government education cuts, of the social breakdown produced by austerity measures generally and of the introduction of private interests into the schools sector.

According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), schools will have suffered a 4.6 percent real terms cut in budgets between 2015 and 2020.

Teachers are paying out of their own pockets to fill the gaps, with 94 percent of respondents to a *Times Educational Supplement* survey saying they are having to buy stationery items, books, art materials and storage equipment.

The current level of funding is leaving many schools unable to provide the most basic levels of educational provision, as they are also dealing with the consequences of other cuts to social care and benefits. Figures from the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) found that 60 percent of teachers felt child poverty in schools had gotten worse since 2015 and 55 percent thought free school meal provision did not come close to meeting the needs of poorer pupils. Half those surveyed said their school offered anti-poverty services like food and clothes banks or emergency loans.

While schools scrape for funds to provide food and toiletries, the government has provided a total of £241 million for 42 state-funded, but privately run free schools in areas with no need for additional places. Vast sums of public money are also being given hand over fist to the trustees, head teachers and chief executives of academy schools and trusts. There are 121 trusts where at least one individual is being paid more than £150,000 a year. One in five of these are paid more than £200,000. A total of £21 million is spent on these salaries, with the highest paid individual, Dan

Moynihan of Harris Foundation, earning just over £500,000.

Academies were first set up under the 1997 Blair Labour government as a halfway house to privatized education and have since been massively expanded under the Conservative Party. They now make up 60 percent of secondary schools and 20 percent of primaries in England.

Numerous studies have shown no tangible benefit brought to a school by switching to academy status. The real winners are the well-paid academy bosses and the business interests they bring with them. Wakefield City Academies Trust, for example, which is in charge of 21 primary and secondary schools, paid private companies associated with its chief executive Mike Ramsay (and his daughter) some £440,000. Bright Tribe Multi-Academy Trust was reported by the *Observer* to have paid nearly £3 million to businesses in which the Trust's founder, venture capitalist Mike Dwan, had interests.

Far from flourishing with private sector involvement, eight out of ten academies are in financial deficit, based on findings from the Kreston UK accountancy network. Multiple schools and trusts are reliant on continued government bailout programmes.

The intolerable situation facing teachers is the responsibility of the teaching unions who have refused to fight the attacks on jobs, wages and conditions. Teachers have repeatedly shown their willingness to fight the attacks by government and management, only to see any struggles isolated along local and regional lines and led into a dead end by their unions. What few strikes have been organised have been of a token character and designed only to placate growing anger.

With 400,000 members in the NEU, 280,000 in the NASUWT and 54,000 in the EIS, a joint offensive by teachers, in unity with lecturers and Further Education staff, as well as health and local government workers—who are also in dispute—would represent a powerful challenge to the government's austerity and privatisation agenda. Lecturers and academic staff in universities and colleges workers are currently also fighting for decent pensions and pay against funding cuts and the marketization of education.

The sentiment for such unity was shown by an amendment passed at the NEU conference calling on the teaching unions to submit a joint pay claim for all school workers. Based on an initial pay increase of 5 percent, this was so as to “begin restoring the cuts in living standards all school staff have suffered.”

The teaching unions are opposed to any such struggle. All that the NEU is proposing is a joint committee of the union to meet in May to consider the ballot for strike action called by delegates in its National Union of Teachers (NUT) section. Delegates to the other Association of Teachers and

Lecturers section are meeting at their annual conference this week.

The NEU is only committed to holding an indicative ballot of members this summer. If successful, this would be followed by a formal ballot of members for strike action to possibly take place in the autumn.

In order to take their struggle forward teachers must break the stranglehold of the unions. It was only when lecturers threw out an attempt by the Universities and Colleges Union (UCU) to sell out their strike last month that it was able to continue. Now, the UCU has agreed another sell-out agreement with Universities UK and is attempting to end the dispute on management's terms.

The UCU has opposed joint action between lecturers and FE staff, with the last strike of FE workers involving staff at just seven colleges out of nearly 300.

Teachers and students across the education sector must organise themselves into rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade unions. Such a struggle must be waged as part of a socialist programme calling for fully funded highly quality and well-resourced public education as a social right.

The Socialist Equality Party and its Education FightBack initiative are holding an online and call-in forum on April 10 to discuss these vital issues. We urge teachers, lecturers, academic and FE staff and students to attend.

Education FightBack forum, Tuesday, April 10, 7:30 p.m.

To participate in the meeting, visit <http://bit.ly/efb100418> when the meeting begins, or call +44 330 221 0088 and enter access code 274-739-237.



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