

Scottish teachers balloted for strike action in pay dispute

Darren Paxton
23 January 2019

Teachers in Scotland are demanding a 10 percent pay increase, having rejected on several occasions the Scottish government's offer of a paltry 3 percent. Teachers argue this does not cover the huge income losses they have experienced over the last decade, during which pay dropped by nearly a quarter.

Teachers have been demanding industrial action for almost a year and, after months of prevaricating, the EIS (Educational Institute of Scotland) finally conceded a ballot on the issue.

In March 2018, after teachers rejected the 3 percent offer, Scottish First Minister and Scottish National Party (SNP) leader Nicola Sturgeon stated that even 5 percent was "unaffordable," making clear the Scottish government's attitude towards 10 percent.

Seeking to divert and disperse workers' anger, the EIS launched a token petition campaign to "pressure" Scottish MPs into supporting the demand for a 10 percent increase. This petition received 25,000 signatures.

Last June, EIS President Alison Thornton made clear the goal of the EIS was not to mobilise teachers but rather to suppress moves towards a strike, stating, "The EIS remains committed to seeking a negotiated solution in order to remove any prospect of a formal dispute..."

In a further attempt to drag matters out, the EIS opened yet another ballot in October on the already rejected 3 percent offer. The ballot lasted almost a month and the offer was yet again thrown out.

On October 27, 30,000 teachers, students and family members took to the streets of Glasgow to demonstrate their willingness to fight back against decades of attacks on their pay, terms and conditions.

The size of the demonstration, expressing the frustration felt by workers over the long period of inaction, took the EIS by surprise.

The EIS invited representatives of the SNP, Labour, Liberal Democrats and Green Party to speak at the rally,

revealing their utter complicity with those who have either carried out or covered up for the assault on teachers over the past decade. One after another, speakers stepped up to the podium to urge a demobilisation and acceptance of a future sell-out offer.

The unions are working to isolate this movement from lecturers and local authority workers. An equal pay demonstration in Glasgow took place just days before the teachers march. This demonstration drew in 6,000 local authority care workers and won spontaneous support from every waste collection worker in Glasgow.

One month later, local authority workers across Scotland rejected a 3 percent pay rise from COSLA (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities). Seventy-nine percent of the members of the public sector trade union Unison rejected the COSLA offer while 67 percent voted for industrial action. GMB and Unite union members also rejected the offer. Scottish local authorities employ around 244,000 workers overall.

GMB, Unison and Unite are fully aware of the toll taken on council workers due to cuts, increasing workloads and low pay. In July last year, the unions filed a Freedom of Information request which revealed that, in 2017, 918 workers from Glasgow City Council took time off work suffering from stress.

A further 685 Glasgow City Council workers were unable to attend work, between January and July of 2018, due to stress, anxiety, depression and nervous debility. Between 2012 and July 2018, as many as 5,030 Glasgow City Council workers were off due to stress.

These figures forced Glasgow City Council to put an "early intervention" policy in place that will supply counselling for workers suffering from stress. This, however, does nothing to address the roots of the problem.

Unmanageable working conditions for teachers were also exposed by an anonymous letter sent to Scottish

National Party Deputy First Minister of Scotland and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills John Swinney.

The teacher insists “the SNP and Scottish government are not tackling the underlying issues in education but are rather just putting a plaster on a gaping wound.”

The letter highlights increasing numbers of physical and verbal assaults from challenging children and identifies the attacks on education funding to be the root of the issue. “There are an increasing number of challenging children within our schools, and yet our resources are being continuously depleted. We have fewer classroom support worker hours. ... Children’s needs are simply not being met.”

The letter explains teachers often find themselves targeted for blame when pupils do not receive adequate care or attention, when in reality there is very little they can do with the resources on offer.

The teacher reported having to evacuate a classroom of pupils whilst one challenging pupil proceeded to “trash” the class, explaining that it is incredibly difficult to be attentive to every pupil adequately with a lack of staff when some individual pupils need extra support. Teachers are “worn down from day to day stress ...”

In the final paragraphs of the letter, the teacher expresses frustration and opposition toward the SNP administration’s inaction: “I sincerely hope you take the content of this letter seriously, because I know I am starting to feel quite disillusioned with the SNP government’s lack of concern for our failing education system at present.”

All this expresses that there is the basis for a broad movement uniting education and local authority workers against austerity. But the unions refuse to link up these struggles, instead working to splinter and isolate disputes from each other.

The EIS held a strike of Scottish lecturers on January 16 for a 2.5 percent pay increase in line with inflation. The EIS-FELA ballot saw a 90 percent vote in favour of industrial action. This strike was held in complete isolation from the 10 percent pay campaign, with some of the striking lecturers entirely unaware of the teachers’ pay dispute.

In Edinburgh, Queen Margaret University workers voted 64 to 36 percent in support of a strike in opposition to plans from management to sack around 10 percent of the workforce. Opposed to taking up this struggle and linking it to the struggles of teachers and local authority workers, the University and College Union are advising that management make cuts elsewhere.

The National Education Union (NEU) refuses to call a single strike in the UK despite years of cuts to the public education budget amounting to billions of pounds. The union is actively resisting their members’ demands a fight be organised against the cuts. This week the NEU announced the results of a consultation of 257,849 school teachers and 4,550 sixth form college staff members. It received 82,487 responses overall with 99 percent of teachers replying “Yes” to the question, “Do you believe the Government funding cuts are having a negative impact in your school?” Eighty-two percent of teachers and 84 percent of college staff responded they were prepared to strike to secure more funding for their institutions and for an increase in pay. In response the union has announced nothing in the form of any action.

The role of the EIS, NEU and other education unions expresses their transformation into labour management outfits, who serve as an industrial police force seeking to suppress the class struggle while maintaining the most harmonious relations with government and employers.

To advance their struggle teachers must shake off the straitjacket imposed on them by the unions.

In a recent statement “ A fighting strategy for California teachers ,” the WSWs Teachers Newsletter explained, “A real fight can be carried out only if teachers take the initiative into their own hands. In every school and community ... teachers should hold meetings to discuss and debate a real strategy to win. Rank-and-file strike committees should be elected to formulate real demands, including a 30 percent wage increase, a 25-student cap on class sizes, a vast expansion of funding and the immediate reconversion of charter schools into public schools.”

The same struggle is posed before teachers across Britain.

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