

School strikes erupt throughout the UK

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Strikes have erupted in the education sector across the UK alongside other disputes in the public sector, transport, health and energy. These strikes express an initial yet significant growth in the class struggle.

Employers have used the pandemic as a pretext for ramped-up exploitation of their workers. The crocodile tears over “disadvantaged children” and “lost learning” have been used as an ideological weapon to force children back into school so that their parents can return to work and produce profits.

For educators, the “return to school” has been a return to cuts, job losses and the victimisation and harassment of those who oppose Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s government agenda. The education unions have played a key role throughout the pandemic in suppressing opposition to unsafe workplaces, opposing the campaigns led by educators for the closure of schools. They supported the “big bang” reopening of schools in March, despite the high levels of infection and lack of safety protection for staff and children.

The unions in every sector continue to play a criminal role in policing opposition to the cuts to jobs and services, being escalated as the economic impact of the pandemic and massive corporate bailouts is placed on the shoulders of the working class. They have suppressed industrial action throughout the last year in the name of “national unity”, allowing big business and the Conservative government to launch an assault on jobs, wages and conditions.

Lecturers at 26 further education colleges across Scotland began a two-day strike last Wednesday, following a one-day strike the previous week. Called by the Educational Institute of Scotland Further Education Lecturers’ Association (EIS-FELA), its members are protesting plans by Colleges Scotland to replace lecturer posts with lower-paid instructor posts. Further strikes are planned.

A one-day strike involving all six further education

colleges in Northern Ireland took place March 24, called by the University and College Union (UCU) in a pay and workload dispute.

Many more actions are being kept isolated to individual schools to prevent a unified campaign across the education sector. Since February, there have been the following strikes in colleges and secondary, primary and special schools:

* Workers at Shrewsbury Colleges Group held three days of strike action from February 25 and a further nine days are planned throughout March and April in defence of victimised National Education Union (NEU) rep John Boken. He was targeted after raising complaints about racism in the college.

* NEU members in Greenwich, south east London, are voting on whether to strike to defend victimised union rep Kirstie Paton, a member of the NEU’s executive committee. Paton, a teacher of 20 years at the John Roan School, Maze Hill, Blackheath, used a trade union branded social media account to highlight fears that some lateral flow tests (LFT) may not be reliable. The action will be taken across the borough. United Learning, the Academy chain which now runs John Roan, are taking action against Paton on grounds of gross misconduct.

* Strike action continued last week in Hackney, at an independent school for children with special educational needs, amid allegations of bullying and intimidation by senior managers at Leeways school, run by the Kedleston Group. The strikers have restated demands first made in December for the 2.75 percent pay rise received by many teachers in 2020, as well as complaining of the “lack of decent sick pay”. There are allegations of poor educational resources, a lack of outside recreation space, and temperatures inside the building being so cold that “staff and students frequently wear coats”. Two staff members have been dismissed since the beginning of the dispute, including

a union rep. School leaders are reported to have threatened to dismiss staff en masse if the strike is not called off.

* Staff at Moulsecoomb Primary School in Brighton, members of the NEU, GMB and UNISON, took strike action following an announcement by the Department for Education that three new academy sponsors are being considered. The staff and local community are opposed to the academisation of the school.

* Teaching staff at the University of Central Lancashire have voted to strike in a dispute over job losses. The university said about six posts at the Faculty of Culture and Creative Industries were at risk. More than 250 workers have already taken voluntary redundancy. A national consultative ballot over pay involving all UCU further education members will take place from April 19.

* UCU members working for Novus, an education provider in England's prisons, are balloting for strikes over coronavirus safety concerns.

* Teachers are on strike at Gateshead school in Newcastle over claims of threats and intimidation by management. Some members of staff at the Eslington and Furrowfield Schools Federation, a group of special schools in Gateshead, are taking industrial action over "management practices". Fifteen days of action have begun.

* Staff at Langley School in Sutton Coldfield are set to take the first of several days of strike action from Wednesday, February 24, according to the NEU. The issues are particularly related to heating, ventilation and cleanliness at the school.

* Over 140 teachers and support workers at Beal High School in Redbridge took the first of six days of strike action on March 25 over a refusal by the school to renegotiate a sickness pay policy. The staff are members of the National Education Union. A local NEU blog states, "Beal has a two-tier workforce: since 2016, new members of staff have had their sick-pay entitlement slashed and are on significantly worse working conditions. As a result, recruitment and retention will be impacted negatively in the long-term."

* Cleaners at the prestigious South London Roman Catholic Girls' School La Retraite took two days strike action at the end of March with a pledge for a further 40 days over "unlawful wage deductions", "poverty pay" and "institutional racism". The strike has now

ended with the school agreeing to back-pay sick pay in line with teachers and to a 24 percent wage increase. The dispute erupted after the cleaners' hours were cut in the run up to Christmas and their wages withheld after a month-long walkout in February over COVID-19 health and safety concerns.

* Members of the Argyll College EIS-FELA branch are being balloted for strike action over the decision to make lecturers compulsorily redundant during the pandemic. An indicative ballot earlier this month put support for strike action at 76 percent on an 82 percent turnout. This statutory strike ballot opened mid-March and closes on April 15. It comes one day after lecturers at Argyll College took strike action over the ongoing national dispute to replace lecturers with instructor assessors.

Every struggle educators mount puts them at loggerheads with corporatist trade unions, that work to suppress the class struggle and, when they cannot avoid a strike, to isolate and defeat it. The expansion and unification of the struggles of the working class requires the formation of a network of rank-and-file workplace committees, independent of the pro-capitalist trade unions. Such committees are the form through which workers can advance their own demands, including emergency measures to stop the coronavirus pandemic, and an end to the unsafe reopening of schools and workplaces, with full compensation for workers and small businesses.

To take forward this struggle, register today for the launch meeting of a network of rank-and-file action committees for safe workplaces, held this Saturday at 2pm (GMT).



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