UK education unions delay industrial action for months amid growing rank-and-file anger

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The UK's two largest education unions, the National Education Union (NEU) and National Union of Schoolmasters-Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT), are doing everything to prevent strike action as the government escalates its attacks on the sector.

On June 22, NEU leaders Kevin Courtney and Mary Bousted announced they had sent a letter to Education Secretary Nadhim Zahawi. The letter noted that the Conservative government was planning a teachers' pay increase of just 3 percent, which "would mean a huge pay cut on the basis of the latest inflation figures," hitting 11.7 percent RPI that day.

The letter calls on Zahawi to "commit to an inflation-plus increase for all teachers. It is not good enough to only propose higher increases for beginner teachers (which are themselves likely to be lower than inflation)." It continues, "We have to tell you that failing sufficient action by you, in the Autumn Term, we will consult our members on their willingness to take industrial action," adding, "we will be strongly encouraging them to vote yes."

Even if the NEU sanctions a consultative vote, a tried and tested mechanism used to delay and head off industrial action, it still intends to do nothing. It would take weeks more to organise a genuine ballot for strike action, plus another two weeks' notice period, pushing any strike near to Christmas, effectively ruling out any fightback this year.

Even this is not assured. The letter equivocates, "An indicative ballot would commence in the autumn term, *possibly leading to a formal ballot on strike action* [emphasis added]."

The statement by NASUWT that it will ballot its members for industrial action if staff are not given a 12 percent pay rise should be treated with the same distrust as the NEU's claims. NASUWT said that if the government did not back its demands, it would hold a ballot for action in November—five months from now.

The education unions are responsible for teachers' pay and conditions falling so disastrously over the past decade, suppressing calls for industrial action.

The consequences were highlighted in a March report by the Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS), which found that "teacher salary levels fell by 4–5 per cent for new and less experienced teachers between 2007 and 2021, whilst salaries fell by 8 per cent in real terms for more experienced teachers over the same period."

It assessed that "proposed increases of 3% in 2022 and 2% in 2023 for more experienced teachers would imply further real-terms salary cuts of 5% between 2021 and 2023."

The IFS concluded that in real terms there has been a cut to experienced teachers' pay of "14% between 2010 and 2023." It noted, "In today's prices, this is the equivalent of a [£7,000!] pay cut from £46,000 to £39,000 for experienced classroom teachers at the top of the pay scale (nearly one-third of all teachers)."

Zahawi showed the mood in the ruling class for a war on workers with his reply to the NEU and NASWUT's cowardly entreaties. Cynically feigning concern for "Young people" who "have suffered more disruption than any generation that's gone before them," he declared industrial action "unforgivable and unfair."

The same "disruption" pretext was used by the ruling class throughout the pandemic to force children and educators into unsafe schools and parents back to work. It was never about any concern for children's education and wellbeing but ensuring that millions of parents remained in factories and offices, continuing to churn out profits for the corporations and banks.

This is the ruling elite's brutal response to teachers

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who acted independently of the education unions, refusing go into unsafe schools and interrupting the government's breakneck reopening strategy. Doing so doubtless saved many lives, while educators delivered—as far as criminally limited resources allowed—an online education for children.

With the pandemic declared over, there is to be no let-up of demands on educators. Conditions in schools are intolerable. Before the pandemic teachers were already drowning under excessive workload, and the last two years have intensified the strain. Schools were forced to stay open as staff became ill, with those left taking on double the work. All of this without any extra funding to cover the costs. During the last term, schools have struggled to find enough supply staff to cover COVID-related illness just to keep running.

Secondary school job adverts have increased by 14 percent compared with levels seen before the pandemic and many schools cannot fill positions. The situation is so bad that some are being forced reduce their curriculum offer. Data from a Teacher Tapp survey of 6,598 respondents found that almost one in five teachers are now more likely to leave the profession or reduce their hours.

A Facebook group with close to 80,000 members, "Life after teaching—Exit the classroom and thrive", reveals the desperation of educators. Nearly 2,000 joined just in the past week to seek advice about leaving the profession or about workplace bullying and toxic work environments.

These conditions are to be enforced ruthlessly.

Aware of rising anger among educators and demands for action, the government has drawn up plans to create an army of supply teachers in a mass scabbing operation. Whitehall sources said the legislation, which is being rushed through to be in place by the autumn, "would allow supply teachers to keep schools open while union members are striking". The legislation states that "strikes in public services such as education can often mean parents have to stay at home with their children rather than go to work".

Were the NEU serious about opposing the government's onslaught in education, they would have long ago mobilised the largest membership of any teaching union in Europe, over 460,000 members. But it has done nothing, refusing even to support educators who took independent action by refusing to go into COVID unsafe schools or to support some of its members victimised for their brave stance. The same goes for the other education unions.

The NEU's letter to Zahawi is the latest in a long and sorry list. Throughout the pandemic the education unions wrote a series of letters to the government asking for talks and compromise in order to avoid "education disruption" caused by the virus. The result was thousands of teachers contracting COVID, leading to over 500 officially announced deaths in the sector. Many thousands of the cases of Long COVID can be traced to schools, including among the more than 3 million pupils infected with the disease. Teaching and education staff now have the joint highest incidence of Long COVID alongside social care.

No faith can be put in the unions to stop the Tory government's plans and fight for a pay rise to make up educators' losses. As quickly as the NEU letter had gone out, Bousted appeared on ITV's politics show *Peston* to play down the threat of industrial action. She pleaded for "direct negotiations with the government", insisting "we don't want these strikes" while warning that anger among teachers is the "greatest it's ever been".

As is the case in every sector, the education unions are working to block the sentiment among workers for action, helping to head off a unified movement of the working class against the Johnson government. This sentiment requires conscious organising if the unions' attempts at sabotage are to be defeated, and a fresh round of sellouts averted. The means for doing so are rank-and-file committees of workers which can lead the fight for an inflation-busting pay deal, safe working conditions and a joint struggle to bring down Zahawi, Johnson and the rest.

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