

Vote “Yes” in UK National Education Union ballot over pay and demand immediate strike action

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The National Education Union’s (NEU) preliminary strike ballot began this weekend. Teachers in schools and sixth form colleges will have until October 14 to indicate whether they are prepared to take strike action to demand “a fully funded above inflation pay rise.”

NEU support staff began a separate ballot on September 7 to October 14.

The union has opposed launching an official strike ballot since June, when the government announced a derisory pay offer of 3 percent, later revised to 5 percent, which will not be funded nationally and must come from schools existing collapsing budgets.

It still only intends to use the ballot as a “bargaining tool” for the government to get around the table and “talk with the unions,” with the NEU declaring that “strike action will only be used as a last resort.”

Teachers must oppose all efforts to use their living standards and the unprecedented crisis in the education system as “bargaining tools.” A dialogue with a Conservative government that has overseen mass death and illness through the pandemic, is waging war against Russia, has carried through the greatest redistribution of wealth from the poor to the rich and has rammed through legislation to break public sector strikes, including education, is futile.

Teachers and support staff should vote “yes” in the ballot and demand the immediate organization of strike action across the education profession. Further education staff at several dozen colleges are already taking action from this week until October 20, and staff at 150 universities are being balloted. A unified offensive by educators must be linked to the strikes that have erupted in rail, docks, postal workers, at BT and by Amazon workers facing the same battle against a ruthless government agenda of mass impoverishment.

This requires the construction of rank-and-file committees in every school and workplace across Britain to seize control of the struggle from the union bureaucracy and break out of the corporatist framework used by the government and unions to paralyse and smother working-class opposition.

The education unions are not merely incapable of mounting such a struggle against declining wages, the cost-of-living crisis, slashing of school budgets and the mass exodus of teaching staff from the profession. They are the vehicle through which all these attacks are being imposed.

In their call for the indicative ballot, the NEU bureaucrats reveal more than they intended. They admit that for more than a decade since the financial crash of 2008, they have overseen a massive reduction in school funds and slashing of teacher incomes.

In their notes for union delegates to mobilise support for the ballot they state, “Pay for teachers had already fallen by around a fifth in real terms against inflation since 2010, even before the huge inflation increases in 2022.”

But the NEU didn’t lift a finger to oppose this. The statement admits that the union collaborated throughout the pandemic with the government: “In 2021, while you were dealing with the huge challenges of the pandemic, the Government chose to freeze teachers’ pay.”

They did not oppose this either, ordering NEU members to work in unsafe schools, repeatedly, while over 570 teaching staff and over 200 children [died] from COVID.

The government’s 5 percent wage offer, with inflation currently at 12.3 percent and rising, will mean a real-terms pay cut of over 7 percent. Even the proposed 8.9 percent for beginner teachers outside London is below inflation and falls well short of its 2019 promise to deliver a £30,000 starter salary within two years. School funding

has only increased 1.4 percent this year, under conditions where schools are unable to pay energy costs without slashing jobs, increasing class sizes and removing access to a broad curriculum.

In the face of intolerable working conditions, exacerbated by the pandemic, the recruitment and retention of teachers have hemorrhaged. One in three teachers expect to leave the profession within five years. Some 25 percent of last year's new recruits have left within just one year!

Support staff—amongst the lowest earners in the public sector—are hit worst by the soaring bills. The National Joint Council employers have offered a flat-rate £1,925 increase which averages out at 8 percent for school support staff.

Teaching staff wield massive collective strength, with the NEU and the second largest union, NASUWT, claiming a combined membership of 750,000. But everything is being done by the bureaucracy to head off joint action and limit whatever action they are forced to call.

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The NEU's indicative ballot only gives the government time to organize a mass strike breaking effort as strike action, if sanctioned by the bureaucracy, will not take place until January.

The Northern Ireland government's Education Minister, Michelle McIlveen responded to the threat of strike action by the Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO) by warning teachers that they will be in breach of their contracts. The union responded by organising a ballot to vote for industrial action *short of a strike* when a ballot goes ahead in September.

The NASUWT are already involved in industrial action short of strike in Northern Ireland but are yet to announce any campaign in England. At their annual conference held in July they stated that if the government did not back its demands for a 12 percent pay rise, a ballot would be held for action in November!

The cost-of-living surge is having a devastating impact on millions of children and their families. Children are coming to school hungry and cold and schools are using their limited and meagre budgets to try and feed children without additional funding. Already, 800,000 children living in poverty in England do not qualify for free school meals, according to the Child Poverty Action Group, and headteachers are bracing for rising numbers from homes that cannot afford to feed them properly. The charity

identifies that hunger will be “the single biggest challenge” that schools face.

“We are hearing about kids who are so hungry they are eating rubbers in school,” Naomi Duncan, chief executive of Chefs in Schools told the *Observer*. “Kids are coming in having not eaten anything since lunch the day before. The government has to do something.”

Paying huge energy bills and an unfunded teacher pay rise, while supporting desperate families, would push hundreds of schools into deficit. The six months energy cap freeze will do nothing to alleviate this. The extreme social stresses imposed on children and their families will mean many will not have the energy or physical strength to access learning and deprive them of their right to a decent education.

Whilst COVID has been declared “over” as the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee predicted, the reopening of schools on September 5, with no mitigations or protections, has fueled a sharp 12.8 percent rise in COVID cases, with hospitalisations up 17 percent. Yet none of the unions have raised a single demand related to protecting education workers and children from the virus.

The crisis in education can only be ended by mobilising educators independently in a political rebellion against the union bureaucracies and implementing wage increases indexed to cost of living, fully funded by the government. Billions must be poured into education and the necessary protective measures of mass testing, isolation of individuals with COVID and providing proper ventilation in schools. Those who want to take up the fight for this should contact and join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee.



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