

UK teachers vote overwhelmingly for strike in “preliminary” ballot

National Education Union sanctions formal strike ballot

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An unprecedented 98 percent of teachers in the National Education Union (NEU) voted yes to a fully funded, above-inflation pay rise. A huge majority (86 percent) indicated they would be prepared to strike.

Teachers have been offered a pay deal of just 5 percent, which will not be funded nationally and must come from schools' existing inadequate budgets.

261,522 NEU members were consulted in the ballot with turnout at 62 percent.

National Education Union support staff members, who were balloted separately, rejected the offer by 92 percent. Over three quarters (78 percent) of voted in favour of strike action.

The 5 percent offer is an enormous real terms pay cut. RPI inflation is currently at 12.3 percent. Interest rates are forecast to increase in the coming months, vastly increasing mortgages and rents, putting more pressure on workers. 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.

The NEU's “preliminary ballot” was held in September, with the union asking members if they were prepared to strike for “a fully funded above inflation pay rise.” Educators across the sector throughout the UK have voted overwhelmingly in a series of indicative ballots for strike action signalling their intention to fight. Last week teaching unions in Northern Ireland voted to take action short of a strike, after rejecting an “inadequate” two-year pay offer. Members of Scotland's largest teaching union, the EIS, are also being balloted for strike action.

Many teachers struggle to make ends meet. In their

notes for union delegates to help mobilise support for the ballot the NEU states, “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.”

The union has repeatedly claimed in those years that there was no stomach in its membership for strike action, but this result has proved the opposite. The ballot vote was the largest turnout in decades.

The largest education union in Europe, with over 450,000 members across England, Wales and Northern Ireland, the NEU bureaucracy have sat on their hands for months despite this sentiment. The union has delayed launching an official strike ballot since June, when the government announced an initial derisory pay offer of 3 percent. This has meant that teachers, a powerful battalion of the working class, have been unable to strike alongside hundreds of thousands of postal workers, rail and other transport workers and BT workers who have been taking industrial action for months.

Instead of mobilising for strike action to defeat an intransigent government and win teachers' demands, the union bureaucracy pleads for negotiations to end the struggle before it has even begun.

A letter sent to Education Secretary Kit Malthouse October 5 stated, “We urge you again to act urgently to avoid the possibility of a dispute that nobody wants but which is increasingly likely should the Government not act on the pay and living standards of our members. We and our team remain ready to negotiate with you and your officials at any reasonable time to resolve this dispute.”

Last week Joint NEU general secretaries Mary

Bouston and Kevin Courtney insisted, “Our members don’t want to strike—they want to be in the classroom, doing what they do best, educating the nation’s children”, adding, “It is regrettable that we have reached this point”.

On Monday, having received no concessions from the government, the NEU sent an e-mail to members stating that they would hold a formal strike ballot and “papers will start landing on members’ doormats from Monday, 31 October.” No close date for the ballot was announced.

The e-mail stated, “Members in National Education Union (NEU) and sister unions NASUWT and NAHT are also being balloted on a very similar timescale.” The aim of the NEU and the other unions in finally resorting to a formal strike ballot is not to mobilise a joint offensive of teachers in industrial action. Instead, “This will put huge pressure on the Government to fund schools so that support staff, teachers and leaders receive fully funded, above-inflation pay rises”, said the e-mail.

It should be noted regarding the NEU’s boast that the three unions are operating on a similar timescale that NASUWT’s ballot papers will be issued from October 27 but the vote will not conclude until months later—on January 9. Therefore, the 300,000 educators in that union will have to wait until 2023 for any strike action, if any is ever called.

Patrick Roach, NASUWT’s general secretary, pleaded with ministers of a government rotting on its feet that they “will be entirely responsible” for industrial action unless they deliver a better deal. He added, “The government has failed to recognise the damaging impact of years of real terms pay cuts on the morale of teachers, which is fuelling the teacher recruitment and retention crisis”.

This only plays into the hands of the crisis-ridden government. Far from recognising the damage of decades of teacher pay cuts—which they imposed—the Tories are planning to ban strikes in “essential services” including education to help enforce them.

In the face of intolerable working conditions, exacerbated by COVID-19—which the union bureaucracy allowed to run rampant through schools—the sector is haemorrhaging teachers. A government survey of the teaching workforce in England showed that 4,000 more teachers quit the

profession last year than in the previous year, with just 11 percent retiring out of the 36,000 who left the state sector. The report found that vacancies were at the highest level since records began in 2010.

The situation in secondary schools (11-16) is even worse. Heads are struggling to find replacement staff this year, with figures showing a 14 percent increase in job advertisements compared with the period before the pandemic. The government have also missed teacher recruitment targets for seven consecutive years.

Educators must draw the lessons of past disputes. The last national strike over teachers’ pay was in 2008 when the Labour government was in power. This was the most widespread strike action since Labour came to power in 1997, with college lecturers and civil servants joining in a “day of discontent” over public sector pay.

At the time the NEU (then the National Union of Teachers, which later combined with the Association of Teachers and Lecturers) was protesting a 2.45 percent pay deal saying it would leave teachers worse off because of the rising cost of living. After the initial one day strike, the NUT called off further strikes. It claimed a majority 51.72 percent vote for “discontinuous strike action” was too narrow to provide a real mandate.

To reverse years of falling wages, slashed school budgets, impossible working conditions and staff shortages, education workers must take matters into their own hands. A network of rank-and-file committees must be established capable of acting independently of the union bureaucracy which sabotages every fightback. Those who want to take up this struggle should contact and join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee.



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