

Teachers continue strike action after Scottish National Party government refuses concessions

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Tens of thousands of teachers in Scotland ended a two-day strike Wednesday to demand better pay.

Teachers have rejected several miniscule pay offers from the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) and the Scottish National Party (SNP) government. They are being offered a pay deal of just 5 percent, with the lowest paid offered 6.5 percent. The unions are calling for a still-below inflation deal of 10 percent. Official CPI inflation rate was 10.7 percent in the 12 months to November.

The strikes involve members of four unions—the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS), NASUWT, Scottish Secondary Teachers' Association (SSTA) and the Association of Headteachers and Deputies (AHDS). The EIS represents eight out of 10 teachers in Scotland.

EIS members struck on January 10 and 11 and were joined by SSTA members on the second day. NASUWT member struck in primary schools on January 10 and secondary schools on January 11. The strikes led to the closure of around 2,000 primary schools on Tuesday in a repeat of the first wave of action last November. More than 300 secondary schools were closed on Wednesday.

The strikes went ahead despite last minute talks by the education unions to avert them. The EIS convened a meeting with the Scottish Negotiating Committee for Teachers (SNCT), consisting of representatives of the unions, government and councils, saying they hoped it would advance discussions towards a new offer. Des Morris, EIS Salaries Convener, said, “Trade unions remain committed to reaching a fair, negotiated pay settlement for Scotland's teaching professionals.”

Scottish National Party (SNP) Education Secretary

Shirley-Anne Somerville said talks between the devolved government and unions on Friday were “constructive and helpful” and “I took the opportunity to make clear how much I value our teaching workforce and recognise the vital importance of reaching a fair and affordable settlement on pay.” These warm words were only the preamble to declaring the main concerns of the government of keeping pay down. “Any deal must be fair and affordable for all concerned, given the unprecedented pressures facing Scotland's budget,” said Somerville.

Further talks on Monday failed to reach agreement.

There was never any chance of the government making concessions, with Education Minister Jamie Hepburn insisting that the derisory 5 percent offer was “fair”. For the SNP-Scottish Greens government any pay settlement must fall into line with its overall austerity agenda which saw it impose £560 million cuts to public services in September, followed by the £615 million spending cuts Scotland's Finance Secretary John Swinney made in his November emergency budget.

As the strike began EIS General Secretary Andrea Bradley was forced to acknowledge that no single concession was on offer after almost a year of negotiations. “While there has been some slight progress in discussions over the past week, we are still awaiting an improved offer from the Scottish Government and COSLA – more than 9 months after teachers should have received a pay rise.”

She pleaded, “The union side remains willing to talk, at any time, with a view to reaching a resolution to this dispute. While it is now too late to halt this week's strike action in schools, we hope that fresh talks may

take place later this week to advance discussions towards an improved offer.”

Pay discussions first began last February. In June the EIS rejected a 2.2 percent pay offer, with the SNCT submitting a 10 percent pay claim on behalf of the profession. A revised 3.5 percent pay offer was seen as an insult by teachers. The government then offered a 5 percent pay rise, which was overwhelmingly rejected by union members, with 94 percent opting to refuse the deal.

Days before the November strike employer COSLA made a fresh proposal of 6.85 percent for some teachers. However, this would only affect teachers new to the profession on a sliding scale with experienced teachers still receiving 5 percent.

The November strike day was the first national action on pay by the EIS for almost 40 years. The last strike was part of a long-running programme of industrial action in the 1980s. The teachers’ unions challenged the government on low pay and the struggle lasted two years before a settlement was reached with the then Conservative government in Westminster.

National strikes took place alongside a rolling programme of action targeted at secondary schools in the constituencies of government ministers. EIS members at some schools regularly went on strike on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. During the 1984-86 industrial action almost 15 million pupil days were lost across Scotland. The campaign ended in 1987 with a Teachers’ Pay and Conditions Act.

Nothing of the sort is being considered now.

The unions next steps are to start 16 days of rolling strikes. But these will be split across every council in the country, with only two local authorities (of a total of 32) striking on each of the days—greatly reducing the impact.

In an indication of the pressure from below Bradley said that EIS members had been “forced to escalate” measures. “With the cost-of-living crisis continuing to worsen, and with inflation now at over 10 percent and still rising, it is simply unjust that teachers as essential public sector workers would be expected to bear the brunt of this.”

It is the unions who have overseen workers bearing the brunt. Having received no real-terms pay increase for years, some educators, struggling to meet the cost of food, fuel, energy and housing, have even turned to

using food banks.

The division of teachers in Scotland, deliberately reinforcing national divisions, echoes the unions’ division of workers throughout Britain. The strike in Scotland is being organised separately from that of teachers throughout the rest of the UK.

Ballots for industrial action by teaching unions in England and Wales, over the same issues driving the strikes in Scotland, end this week. There has been a self-financing pay deal offer of just 5 percent for most state school teachers in England and Wales this academic year, and many teachers in Northern Ireland have been offered an even lower 3.2 percent over the past two years.

Educators should draw the lessons of the union's role in allowing teachers’ pay to stagnate over decades. There can be no confidence in the unions ability to achieve what workers are fighting for, only an inevitable attempt at a sell-out.

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 throughout Britain, acting independently of the union bureaucracy which sabotages every fightback. Those who want to take up this struggle should contact and join the struggle.



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