

NASUWT teachers union UK strike ballot fails to reach threshold: Who is responsible?

Tania Kent
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The NASUWT teachers ballot which closed January 11 failed to reach the legal threshold of a 50 percent turnout to take forward strike action against the Conservative government's derisory pay offer of a 5 percent wage rise for the current financial year.

Only 42 percent of members of the second largest teaching union of 300,000 voted—with over 90 percent of those who did supporting strike action.

Of the 42 percent who returned ballots in state-funded schools in England, 88.5 percent voted to strike, as did 83.2 percent of sixth form colleges. In Wales, 90.7 percent of state-funded schools voted for strike action and 100 percent of all sixth form colleges involved in a long-running battle over funding and restructuring.

The ballot of members in independent schools was conducted on a disaggregated basis, employer by employer. In independent schools, 172 in England and 12 in Wales were balloted and mandates for strike action were secured at 125 in England and 7 in Wales. The union has not disclosed the names of the schools affected or any information on whether they will honour the outcome.

The result was met with anger and disappointment by the over 100,000 teachers who supported strike action. Results of strike ballots for the National Education Union (NEU), the largest education union with 450,000 members, and the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT)—who have balloted for strike action for the first time in their history—will be announced at a mass online meeting on Monday evening. Whatever the outcome of those ballots, the NASUWT results will be used by the education unions to strangle the deep-rooted opposition of educators to the unprecedented catastrophe that confronts the sector.

The reactionary character of the anti-union laws, which stipulate that ballots must be postal and reach a turnout threshold of 50 percent—when no such thresholds exist for the election of governments—and reports of a high level of

disorganisation in delivering ballots, and missing ballots due to postal strikes, do not account for the outcome of the vote.

The result does not reflect “apathy” on the part of educators, who are suffering a massive funding, recruitment and retention crisis, gruelling working conditions, and a loss of 20 percent of their earnings in the past decade. It is entirely due to the lack of any confidence among workers in the NASUWT leadership to wage a struggle to overturn the decades-long dismantling of state education—in which the unions have been fully complicit.

The education strike ballots, suppressed since June—when the government announced its revised 5 percent pay offer—were only called as “bargaining tools” by the education unions to demand the government engage in “meaningful talks”, even though the government insisted that there was “no more money”.

Refusing any concessions, the government invited the leaders of public sector unions to talks on January 8 under conditions in which it had announced plans for the swift implementation of widely expanded anti-strike laws—enforcing minimum service levels across the rail, health, education, border security and other sectors. To have even attended these talks in the first place revealed the treacherous intentions of the union bureaucracies.

Commenting on the ballot result, NASUWT General Secretary Patrick Roach declared that the union's “campaign to fight for the real-terms pay awards that teachers and headteachers deserve continues”.

He said, “It is clear that our members are sending a strong message to the government on the need to address teachers' pay concerns.”

This is clearly absurd. The only “strong message” from the ballot is that the union bureaucracy has handed the government a significant victory, removing 300,000 workers from Britain's strike wave.

Roach then spoke of “continued dialogue” with the government to “secure better deal for teachers.”

What dialogue, what better deal? Twenty-four hours after the meeting between the unions and ministers, Business Secretary Grant Shapps introduced the first reading of the government’s new anti-strike bill to parliament. The first three sectors to have the dictatorial measure imposed are the ambulance, fire and rail services. It will then be imposed on workers throughout education, health, border security and nuclear decommissioning.

But amid the largest strike wave in generations, with hundreds of thousands of workers engaged in industrial action and hundreds of thousands more returning ballots soon, the Trades Union Congress will not organise coordinated action even for one day.

The reality is that the more widespread the strikes become, the more determined the unions are to close them down. Disputes which erupted last summer are being whittled down and isolated and in danger of defeat.

NASUWT teachers deciding on whether to vote in the ballot were well aware that, due to the UK unions’ no strike pay policy, workers taking industrial action in other sectors have lost hundreds and even thousands of pounds in wages for no gain. Where disputes have been settled, including the national BT strike, these have resulted in well-below-inflation deals—compounding workers’ loss of income.

An additional factor was the unions’ refusal to mount a campaign demanding pay rises be funded by additional government spending. The 5 percent pay award which went into staff’s wage packets in November comes from schools’ existing budgets at a time of unprecedented and devastating cuts.

A recent snapshot survey by the NAHT union of 11,000 head teachers and school leaders in England revealed half are considering teacher redundancies or cutting school hours to balance the school budget. Nine out of 10 schools expect to run out of money even before the next tranche of cuts arrive. Some 66 percent anticipate losing teaching assistants.

Many teachers were concerned also about the impact of strike action on the children they care for—where schools have become “safe havens” for children and a place where they might get their only hot meal for the day.

This crisis did not emerge overnight. It is the logic of the capitalist profit system, which produces misery for the mass of society at one end and luxury at the other for a handful of super-rich. Since the global financial crash of 2008, the austerity agenda has destroyed social services

and wages, against which the unions organised no opposition. For more than a decade they have overseen a massive reduction in school funds and slashing of teacher incomes.

The education union bureaucracy was prepared to sacrifice the lives of their members and children in their care throughout the pandemic and ignore the health risks posed by the spread of COVID-19. They repeatedly ordered members to work in unsafe schools. Over 570 teaching staff and over 200 children were killed by the disease.

The union bureaucracy is a privileged layer whose interests lie in the defence and protection of the capitalist system at the source of the crisis in education and society more broadly. While the government pours billions into the war machine and escalates its intervention in the war with Russia, vital social programmes are starved of funds. The unions accept this and support the war drive.

Educators need a new programme and perspective to launch a struggle against the government’s anti-strike laws, in defence of pay, jobs and conditions, and for a massive increase in funding for the health and education system. This means establishing new rank-and-file organisations of struggle in defiance of the union leaderships.

Teaching staff wield massive collective strength, with the NEU and 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.

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee was established in 2020 as the means to break out of the stranglehold of the trade unions bureaucracies, unify workers throughout the education sector, and implement policies in their interests and not subordinate to interests of the capitalist market. We call on you to contact the committee and join the fight to build rank-and-file committees in every school.



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