

National Education Union members vote for strike action in England and Wales

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Members of the National Education Union (NEU), the largest UK teaching union with 450,000 members, voted to strike to demand a fully funded pay rise of 12 percent.

The vote announced Monday expresses a determination by educators to overturn the decades-long suppression of wages and decimation of the education sector. According to the NEU, it is the largest vote for strike action in any sector since 2016 when anti-union laws were imposed demanding all ballots meet a 50 percent-plus threshold. Some 23,400 schools will be involved in strike action with over 121,000 educators returning ballots.

Over 90 percent of teachers who voted supported strike action in England (turnout was 53.2 percent) and over 92 percent in Wales (turnout 58 percent). NEU support staff members in Wales also voted for strike action, but failed to meet the threshold in England.

The National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) also announced the result of their ballot Monday, a 42 percent turnout that did not meet the threshold. This was the first strike ballot of head teachers in their 125-year history. Of those who voted, 64 percent supported strike action, underlining the magnitude of the crisis among those tasked with managing schools and budgets.

The NEU result follows that of the NASUWT last Thursday which failed to meet the threshold with a 42 percent turnout. Both unions plan to make announcements on possible new strike ballots as anger by members erupted on social media over the inability of the union leaders to fight for strike mandates. There are reports on social media and union websites of many NASUWT members leaving to join the NEU so they can strike.

This expresses the powerful sentiment that exists for

a fightback, but teachers cannot have any confidence in the NEU to lead an offensive to overturn the dramatic decline in living standards and total catastrophe that confronts education. A new perspective is required, based on mobilising the independent mass strength of the working class, to organise a general strike and create the conditions to fight for policies that are rooted in the interests of society and not the super-rich is necessary.

The NEU's aim is to suppress the development of such a movement. The vote was announced on the same day of the second reading in parliament of the Conservative government's new anti-strike legislation that would force educators to ensure minimum service provision during any future action—rendering strikes ineffectual if not impossible. But in announcing the ballot results, the NEU made clear that the strike vote will be used simply as a “bargaining chip” in ongoing negotiations with the government. It repeatedly referred to strike action as “a last resort” and said the aim of the ballot was to “change the government's approach”.

Joint General Secretary of NEU Kevin Courtney explained that they will write to employers and to the Secretary of State outlining the seven days of action, which will begin on February 1 as a national strike in Wales and England. This is the day the Trades Union Congress has designated as marking a national protest against the anti-strike laws and means that the NEU joins the Public and Commercial Services Union; the ASLEF train drivers union; Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers union (train driver members); and the University and College Union so far announcing strikes on that day.

But from then on, planned action is wound down, with a national strike on February 14 in Wales only. There follows three regional strikes on February 28,

March 1 and 2, before two further national strikes take place only “if necessary” on March 15 and 16 in Wales and England.

“We don’t really want to take any of those days of strike. We hope the government will see the strength of your intent and come to the negotiating table in both countries,” Courtney pleaded. He complained that the NEU had given numerous opportunities to the government to bring an end to strike action even before the lengthy ballot process began in November and they didn’t budge. He referenced the meeting between the education and other public sector union leaders and respective government ministers on January 8, complaining of a lack of any concessions. The meetings took place immediately following the announced plans for the swift implementation of the new anti-strike laws.

There was not even a reference in the NEU’s online mass meeting announcing the result of the ballot to the anti-strike legislation.

Courtney said that the NEU will meet with the Minister for Education Gillian Keegan Wednesday. He explained that they had met with the Department of Education last Friday and were told, “There is no money on the table,” before insisting, “We will continue to seek to negotiate, anytime, anyplace, anywhere.”

Teachers have insisted that any wage rise must come from government funding and not existing budgets, as the 5 percent granted has already put schools in a desperate financial situation with threats of teachers and teaching assistants being sacked and vital services cut.

Although the NEU have claimed that the demand is for a nationally funded pay rise, there must be no confidence in this taking place. Courtney made a revealing comment in ending the online meeting on the type of deals that might be reached. “They [the government] are starting to think about a settlement in the NHS [National Health Service] and in the railways. Our action can hasten that and bring a settlement”.

The rail dispute is the longest strike action in Britain, with rail workers confronting well below inflation pay offers and a massive restructuring of their terms and conditions. The Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union has been engaged in closed door meetings this week with Rail Minister Huw Merriman and closed-door talks throughout the week with the representatives

of the train operating companies (TOCs) in the Rail Delivery Group (RDG). RMT leader Mick Lynch said of any offer they will receive, “It will be a very tight proposal. It will not be generous. It will be way below inflation, and it will have very onerous conditions on it.” However, he then issued a statement declaring that “We are working jointly [with the TOCs] towards a revised offer.”

The Royal College of Nursing (RCN) has downgraded its pay demand from 19 percent to 10 percent and entered negotiations with a government insisting there may be a little bit of money for a one-off payment, but this will have to come from existing NHS budgets and made dependent on increased productivity.

Workers must not allow themselves to be “bargaining chips” between a privileged bureaucracy, desperate to maintain their position on the negotiating table and the government of the super-rich.

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 education and health systems. This means establishing new rank-and-file organisations of struggle, in defiance of the union leaderships.

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 subordinated to the interests of the capitalist market. We call on all educators to contact the committee and join the fight to build rank-and-file committees in every school.



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