

Striking teachers detail crisis facing UK education

Our reporters
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300,000 teachers took strike action on Wednesday in England and Wales, according to the National Education Union (NEU). They are demanding a pay rise of 12 percent, fully funded by the government and not drawn on existing school budgets.

The first national strike action of teachers in six years took place alongside strikes by 10,000 civil servants, 70,000 lecturers and thousands of train drivers.

The NEU's ballot which closed on January 16 was 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 were involved in strike action.

The rival NASUWT education union ballot, announced on January 12, failed to meet the threshold, with only a 42 percent turnout. Some 38,000 teachers, according to the NEU, switched from the NASUWT or joined for the first time to participate in the strike. Action will run until March 16 as three national strike days and four regional strike days.

According to government statistics some 51.7 percent of state-funded schools were partially closed or closed due to teacher strikes. In Wales teachers were out on strike with support staff, who unlike in England did meet the ballot threshold. Nearly all schools in Wales were affected. Strikers picketed at school gates and joined rallies in large numbers in both countries.

In the lead up to the strikes, the NEU joint general secretaries, Kevin Courtney and Mary Bousted, were in closed discussions with Gillian Keegan, Minister for Education, Monday seeking to end the strike based on rotten below-inflation pay awards that do nothing to protect jobs and conditions. This is the second time since the ballot was announced that such meetings have taken place.

The deadline for the government's pay award recommendation for next year, due Friday, was missed for the first time in years. The NEU hailed this as a sign that the NEU's negotiations are working, and the government is too frightened to make any announcement. Keegan said the deadline was missed as a negotiating tool.

The union bureaucrats are desperately seeking to sabotage the strike and impose a deal that focuses on a pay deal for next year, set at 3 percent by the pay review body.

Keegan denounced the strikes and attacked teachers for putting "children's education and recovery after the pandemic at risk". She outlined plans being considered for teachers pay being determined by which subjects they teach, based on market forces and not the educational needs of children.

Members of the Educators Rank-and-File Committee and the Socialist Equality Party visited picket lines and held intensive discussions with teachers.

Strikers spoke of the horrendous working conditions they face, the crisis in school budgets, the challenges of recruitment and supported the demand for unified action against the Conservative government's austerity measures.

Lee Perkins, a Leicester primary school teacher, joined pickets at Fullhurst Community College. "Our real income has gone down year on year for about the last 12 years. Another reason to strike is the recruitment and retention issue in education, where we're struggling to recruit teachers and those who train tend to leave. A third leave within the first five years, which is shocking. It's just a waste of all that money and time that's gone into training people, but they take a look at the workload, at the pay rates and they don't like what they see. Also, the pay offer that we have been given is not funded, so it's having to come out of school budgets. What we want is a fully funded pay settlement which doesn't deplete resources that should be going to educating children.

"At our school most teachers are striking today, I don't teach here at Fullhurst, but I know they've got a lot of NEU members who are striking. The NEU are the only ones who passed the threshold, sadly, but there is a lot of frustration among colleagues in other unions who want to take action. NEU membership has gone up by several thousands since we announced that we were taking action, because people are frustrated and they want to make a statement".

Charlie Bourne, a teacher at Folville junior school, said, "I've been a teacher for 11 years, and I love it, it's my vocation, I'm really concerned that we're on a downward spiral with lack of funding and the impact on the kids I'm seeing day to day is considerable. It's really worrying me.

"My mental health has been affected heavily in the past year. No matter how hard I work, there's still more that needs to be done, just to get these kids the sort of basic standards that they deserve. Because there's been so much wider impact on them and their development with COVID and other societal things, now more than ever education needs to be a place where they're safe and thriving.

"I think we need collective action to deal with some of the issues that are going on in our society. There's a concern at all of the attempts at legislation coming in to lessen the impact of strikes and make it more difficult. For some people they could be dismissed."

Mandy Ascombe, a teacher at Fullhurst Community College, said, "I think that teacher's pay and conditions need to be improved, but also I think everyone should be on the streets. The government is showing such contempt for the people of this country that I'm astonished we're not out—not just with flags, but with pitchforks and torches! It feels like they could do anything they want, brush it under the carpet and we have no comeback. And democracy doesn't seem to work anymore, because they're doing these things and getting in again and again.

"I don't think there is a credible opposition at the moment. [Labour Party leader Sir Keir] Starmer seems incredibly flaccid and a little bit pointless.

"With COVID, the whole response [by the Tory government] was just full of holes, and yet there was no credible questioning by the opposition of what should be done instead. It felt like no one was in charge, and the cost was really high.

“We’ve got no way of knowing until the future unrolls in term of the longevity of it. And there could still be hidden effects that are yet to come to light. There’s a lot of really frightening research coming out. It is incredibly worrying.

“Personally I would be up for a general strike with everybody out for a period of time until things change. Obviously they’re working to winnow down our ability to do that, so that’s problematic in and of itself. But I feel that we can’t get any lower as a country. The people cannot be treated with more contempt than they’re being treated by the government. Everyone needs to act, and it’s good that things are starting to gain momentum, but it feels very late and still not as powerful as it should be.”

Katharine Sellers, a secondary teacher of history for 17 years at Tapton School, said, “Education Secretary Gillian Keegan’s claims that teachers are in the top 10 percent of earners in some parts of the country. But this covers over the fact that there were real term cuts in teachers’ pay by 23 percent compared to pay in 2007. This has caused a teacher recruitment and retention crisis in our schools.

“The ‘increased pay offer’ of 5 percent is not funded by the government and has to come out of the schools’ budget to cover wages and cuts the money to spend on resources. Schools already cannot get enough teachers. One in eight children are set work assessed in maths by someone who is not qualified to teach the subject. You know there is a crisis when ‘good’ schools in the Peak District cannot recruit new maths teachers. There aren’t even enough supply teachers to teach maths, with schools requesting PE staff to cover maths. Children are routinely being taught by non-specialists and unqualified teachers in core subjects. This affects their future prospects and the situation cannot go on.

John, a Design & Technology teacher at Tapton Secondary School, said, “We’re seeing far fewer new teachers applying for roles and entering training since I started in 2011 as a result of chronic underfunding. There are massive teacher shortages, with thousands of unfilled posts nationally, even in subjects that the government says are really important such as maths. There aren’t enough teachers to deliver quality education.

“Low pay, poor conditions, and stress are driving people away. Schools in deprived areas are not given sufficient funding to compete with those in affluent areas and help kids to progress, and so are rated lower by [official inspectorate] Ofsted.

“This is driving frustration amongst educators. Are we supposed to expect getting paid less money, year on year, forever? Yes, we get long holidays, but it’s no use if we’re destitute.

“In the past, pay increases have been paid for through cuts elsewhere in the education system. This is the same across the public sector, such as in the NHS [National Health Service]. We don’t want to take money away from kids’ schooling or support staff. We need teaching assistants more than ever because they’re increasing class sizes. It’s very difficult having 30 kids in a classroom.

“We’re the seventh richest country in the world. The money is there. The Tory government has had an austerity agenda since they came into power. Even Thatcher didn’t cut spending as badly as they do now. It’s obvious what they’re trying to do, especially with the NHS, they’re trying to cut the funding until it collapses to justify privatisation. They’ll do the same with schools, as we’re an easier target with less public support than nurses.

“Academisation is back-door privatization. This was brought in by New Labour. It carried on Thatcher’s role in the 1980s. They also want to break up workers in order to make strike breaking easier and reduce our ability to negotiate over pay, as we’re one of the last major unionised professions in the public sector.

“I think the current planned strike actions are too limited to make any difference to the government’s agenda. I’m quite militant. I think we should’ve been striking every year for the past 12 years that our pay

didn’t go up with inflation. Why should teachers ever get a pay cut? Do they think that teachers in 2010 were better than teachers now? Compared to teachers internationally, we’re now relatively poorly paid. People are leaving the profession. I’ve thought about emigrating to teach abroad for better pay.

“It’s difficult to organise coordinated strikes because secondary picketing is not allowed under anti-union laws. But I’d be all up for a general strike. We don’t have any constitutional means of getting rid of the Tories until they call a general election. They won’t do this because they’re behind in the polls.

“I think the Conservatives assumed that the public would get sick of strikes and start to blame the workers, but people have seen what the country is like under this government. They’ve seen their pay falling behind inflation. They don’t want to increase public sector pay because they don’t want to tax rich people, basically.

“The new anti-strike laws are a massive kick-away of our freedoms and will effectively make strikes illegal.”

Isabelle, Freddie, Jolie, and Robin are students who joined the picket line at Tapton Secondary School to show support for their teachers.

Robin said, “Teachers are important to us, they do so much for us every single day. Even with a pay rise in line with inflation they still don’t get enough.”

Isabelle said, “We are at an age where we were born into severe austerity measures, so we have always been used to changes of classes, lack of teachers. I was thinking today, teachers that I started with in secondary are no longer here or leaving. This shows lack of teacher retention, and we are a very good school, so it shows how bad it could be in other places.”

Freddie said, “My mum’s a teacher, so I have always known the value that teachers provide and as students we have a responsibility to give back when they have done so much for us.”

Jolie said, “I think in terms of teachers’ wages and conditions, how can this generation have a future when we don’t value them when they are shaping our futures?”

Adam, a teacher at Park Academy, said, “I’m on the picket line this morning because I care and care about the students that we teach. We’re out on strike because there’s an absolute crisis in education funding, in teacher recruitment, teacher retention and in the money that’s going towards the schools.

There is a well below inflation pay rise taking food out of children’s mouths, be it equipment, books, just everything in schools. We are here because you’ve got the next generation of people and you’re taking it away from them. This is my sixth year in teaching and second one at this school.”



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