

National Education Union suspends Welsh school workers' strike after paltry 6.5 percent pay offer

Ioan Petrescu**14 February 2023**

Strikes planned for Tuesday by members of the National Education Union (NEU) in Wales did not go ahead. Action was called off by the union after the devolved government in Wales made a revised pay offer of 6.5 percent—up from 5 percent—plus a 1.5 percent lump sum payment.

Teachers and support staff in England and Wales voted just last month by a margin of more than 90 percent to strike to overcome more than a decade of falling real terms wages, amid a biting cost-of-living crisis. The NEU was forced by its members' anger to officially set a pay demand of 12 percent—still below RPI inflation at 13.4 percent—to be fully funded by the government and not payable from existing, overstrained school budgets.

Despite acknowledging that the new offer in Wales “remains significantly below our members’ demands and does not begin to address the real terms cuts visited upon teachers since 2010,” the union paused industrial action until March 2 to “consult” members on their (already known) views. No consultation was offered on the decision to halt the strike.

In addition to falling well behind inflation, the offer fails to address school workers’ many other grievances.

Firstly, whether the new money is to be funded by the government or will come out of existing school budgets is left unspecified. Schools in Britain are already in a desperate financial situation. Making them pay for a wage rise out of their own budgets is robbing Peter to pay Paul and would result in staff, classes and vital services being cut,

Secondly, the deal applies only to educational staff, with members of the NEU working in support roles (teaching assistants, janitors, librarians etc.), being left

by the wayside.

Nor does the deal address the issue of workload. At the same time as wages have gone down during the past decades, teacher workloads have gone up, with many now having to work up to 12 hours a day. This causes workers to burn out and leave the profession, deepening the crisis in the education sector.

As soon as the Welsh offer was made and the planned strike cancelled, workers made their hostility to the union’s maneuvers known on social media. One NEU member said on Twitter: “What about the support staff in Wales? ... The right wing attitude within this union is toxic.” Another added, “many of us in the NEU in Wales are unhappy at yesterday’s decision. Not a good enough offer.”

The NEU’s aim was never to lead a serious struggle for better pay and conditions for workers in the education sector, but to suppress the development of such a struggle. In originally announcing the strike, NEU joint general secretary Kevin Courtney made clear that his intention was to use the mandate as a “bargaining chip” in ongoing negotiations with the government—negotiations between an unaccountable union bureaucracy and a government viciously hostile to the working class which have delivered year after year of worsening conditions and pay cuts.

Despite the NEU being handed the largest strike mandate since at least 2016, only seven strike days were announced, to give space for these rotten deals to be struck.

Now, within a month, action by tens of thousands of school workers has been suspended. And the union has wasted no time in using the miserable offer from the Welsh government as a model, appealing to the

government in England to make a similar offer that the NEU can force on its members.

“The willingness of the Welsh Government to engage in talks with us about the current pay dispute is in stark contrast to the position taken by Westminster and the Secretary of State for Education Gillian Keegan”, Courtney glowed.

This follows the well-worn playbook of the union bureaucracy. In recent months, the Rail, Maritime and Transport union and the health unions have reached below-inflation deals with the Welsh and Scottish devolved governments and are using them as levers to shut down their respective national strikes.

The NEU’s claim that it will continue to fight for a better, fully consolidated pay offer for both teachers and support staff cannot be taken at face value. Why spend even a day considering the offer in Wales in that case? In a revealing comment, Courtney admitted that the sellouts already achieved or worked towards in other sectors are precisely what the NEU has in mind. “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 unions are seeking deals with a government that has declared all-out war on the working class. To make the working class pay for the pandemic bailout, escalating war against Russia in Ukraine and the economic crisis produced by rising oil, gas and food prices, it has launched a programme of state repression, spearheaded by the Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Bill. The Tories’ austerity agenda is backed to the hilt by the “opposition” Labour Party.

The fight against these attacks to defend workers’ living standards cannot be left in the hands of the NEU and the wider union bureaucracy. Education workers must seize control of their struggle, democratically electing rank-and-file committees in every workplace. The committees’ first task must be to unify and expand the strikes in all sectors being divided and contained by the trade unions, preparing a working-class counteroffensive against the Tory-Labour policies of war, wage cuts and worsening social services and living conditions.

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee was established in 2020 amid the mass infection with COVID-19 of school workers and children encouraged

by the government and allowed to take place by the education unions. Its purpose is to help workers break out of the stranglehold of the union bureaucracies and fight for policies which meet their needs and are not subordinated to the profit 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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