

UK regional teachers strikes to begin as National Education Union prepares a sell-out

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26 February 2023

Over 300,000 teachers will take part in strike action, over three days beginning February 28, to demand a fully funded 12 percent wage rise. Members of the National Education Union (NEU) will be striking across four regions, in the Northern, North West, Yorkshire and the Humber regions.

On March 1, teachers throughout the East Midlands, West Midlands, Eastern regions will strike followed by strikes on March 2 in London, South East, South West and Wales. The strikes follow the first national strike of teachers on February 1, alongside other unions—which included the University and College Union (UCU), Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS), Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union and ASLEF train drivers union—where up to 500,000 workers took part in the largest co-ordinated strike action since 2011.

Since then, every union, including the NEU has been desperate to dissipate the anger and opposition amongst public sector workers to the devastating impact of austerity and rising inflation producing a collapse in living standards and a funding crisis to essential public services. Strikes have been repeatedly cancelled, “paused” and postponed by the Royal College of Nursing union, RMT, ASLEF, UCU, Communication Workers Union and others based on rotten deals.

The University and College Union (UCU) called off seven days of strikes set to be held over two weeks, which would have coincided with the school strikes. UCU leader Jo Grady did so without receiving any concrete offer addressing members grievances over pay, conditions and pensions. The RCN called off the national nurses strike in England to begin “intensive talks,” aimed at a rotten sell-out, which would have also coincides with the school strikes on March 1.

The regional strikes this week by the NEU are aimed at minimising the impact of the teachers action and will

be used as bargaining chip by the union bureaucracy. The union has shown their willingness to call off all action in return for discussions on the basis of a pitiful offer, as in the first regional strike action due to take place in Wales on February 14. The NEU called off the strike 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. There was no funding in place, even for this pathetic offer.

The offer was overwhelmingly rejected by NEU members. While the NEU acknowledged 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,” it paused industrial action until March 2 to “consult” members on their views. No consultation was offered on the decision to halt the strike.

The unions claim to be acting “in good faith” in calling off strikes, while the governments they are negotiating with tell them repeatedly “there is no money” for funding vital services as they implement draconian anti-strike legislation.

The legislation will be on the statute books by the summer. It grants ministers powers to impose minimum service levels (MSLs) during strikes in key sectors of the economy. They will apply to “blue light” emergency services such as ambulance and fire/rescue initially and then to all strikes in the transport, health and education sector. There is no strike action by any union or the Trades Union Congress to block the implementation of MSL’s.

Instead, the NEU thanked Jeremy Miles, the Minister of Education in the Labour Party-run devolved Welsh government, for agreeing to “negotiate with us, in stark contrast to the Westminster Government”.

The Westminster government responded by offering

such talks. Secretary of State Gillian Keegan also made an offer to meet the NEU, with no improved pay offer to which the NEU responded, “Hopefully, this new commitment to talks to ‘end the dispute’ signals a change in the willingness of the DfE [Department for Education] to countenance change. We are willing to talk at any time: but there is nothing substantial in the Secretary of State's letter that suggests to us we should call off strikes for next week...”

“However, our national executive meets on Saturday, they could change that decision. There is time for the DfE to make clear that they will talk about pay rises for this school year and would fund those potential pay rises. There is time for them to tell us they are willing to move beyond a 3% pay rise for next September and to fund such pay rises.”

It is clear from the NEU's response that a sell-out of the dispute without a single demand of the members for a fully funded wage offer in line with inflation being met is being prepared.

Teachers have suffered an over 20 percent decline in wages since 2010, without challenge by the education unions. The intolerable increase in workloads is driving teachers out of the profession. DfE statistics show that nearly a third of teachers who qualified in the last decade have since left the profession. Out of just under 270,000 teachers who qualified in England between 2011 and 2020, more than 81,000 have since left the profession, or 30 percent of staff.

The state school sector requires tens of billions of pounds in extra funding to bring it up to a level anywhere fit for the 21st century. The Institute for Fiscal Studies noted at the start of last year that current government spending for education was set to be 3 percent lower in real-terms by 2024. This amounts to a £2 billion shortfall, enough money to pay for around 38,000 teachers. None of these issues will be resolved through negotiations.

The unions are seeking deals with a government that has declared all-out war on the working class to make them pay for the pandemic bailout, escalating war against Russia in Ukraine and the economic crisis produced by rising oil, gas and food prices. The government declares daily that a cost of living pay rises are “impossible”, “out of the question”, but can find billions to fund war, provide tanks and military equipment to send to Ukraine, which is used to

slaughter workers in the defence of the geostrategic interests of UK imperialism.

The fight against these attacks 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 counteroffensive against the Tory-Labour policies of war, wage cuts and worsening social services and living conditions. These must link with workers internationally who are engaged in the same bitter battles, such as the massive strike movement in France against pension cuts, as well as teachers and educators in the US and Portugal who are fighting in defence of wages and 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.

To block the imposition of yet another defeat on the working class, join our committee and begin to build an alternative leadership to lead the fight to protect and defend state education and working conditions.



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