

UK teachers speak from picket lines during latest three days of strikes

Our reporters

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Roughly 200,000 teachers represented by the National Education Union (NEU) are taking strike action this week. The strikes were organised on a regional basis, with the north of England out Tuesday, the Midlands and eastern region Wednesday and London, the South and Wales Thursday.

World Socialist Web Site reporters attended pickets and spoke with the striking school workers.

Leicester

Shirish, from Folville Junior School, explained, “A lot of people will say it’s to do with pay, and that we’ve not had a pay rise for years, which is part of it. But for me it’s more to do with the state of education as it is and its decline over the past years. There’s been a lack of funding in real terms to enable teachers to do the things we’d hope to in order to benefit the children.

“If we keep on letting things decline it’s not going to get any better. We’re striking to make sure we can see an improvement in things that we believe in.

“We’ve got millions on the breadline, old age pensioners struggling to heat their houses, the cost of living is escalating day by day and it’s atrocious that the government isn’t taking any notice or acting to make things better.

“Being a teacher, we can see the number of people using food banks and things like that is increasing all the time. There are these sorts of systems to make things a little bit more bearable, but they’re not getting to the root of or solving the problem. The government is relying on charities to solve the problems they caused.”

Minaz, at Shaftsbury Junior School, said, “We’re striking because we want a fully funded education system.

“Unfortunately, the secretary of state for education wanted us to cancel the strike before she talked to us, when it should be the other way around: you talk to us and then we can take

that back to our members—it doesn’t work the other way around.

“This dispute goes way back to before COVID. Our union has been lobbying successive governments, who thought they could get away with underfunding our system. Well, they can’t, because last year only 59 percent of the target for new secondary school teachers was reached. We’ve got a real problem. So, if we want a world class education system, we need to act.”

Minaz was joined by teaching assistant **Emily** and higher-level teaching assistant **Jackie**. Their union did not cross the ballot threshold for strike action, but they refused to cross the picket line. “I love my job but it’s not affordable,” Emily said. Jackie said they had received “good parent support.”

Ben, who works at Ellsmere College special needs school, explained, “Resources are always being cut, we’re constantly running short of money, of textbooks. Education has been consistently underfunded.

“Staff morale is on the floor. People are constantly seeing prices go up and their pay packets not matching those prices.”

Tomasz, a secondary school teacher, said, “It’s disgusting how the government thinks it’s acceptable to fob us off with a pay rise which comes out of school budgets rather than increasing the budgets. That makes our job harder, when those budgets get cut. It’s becoming nigh on impossible to do our jobs. I want to say: no, enough is enough, you need to pay up, you need to not steal from the school budget, and you need to find the money somewhere.”

Asked about the strike being split across different regions, Tomasz said, “We need to unite. If we’re not all out showing solidarity, it loses momentum. We need to force disruption: that’s the whole point of a strike.”

Sheffield

Jane, a teacher at Tapton Secondary School, said the strike “is about our pay, because it’s been eroded for so long now that people are not entering the profession or staying in it. We’re losing huge experience at the older end and then young people are just not choosing to join us. So it needs to be funded, but it also needs to be funded not out of school budgets—it needs to be funded by the government on top of the school budgets.

“It’s a political choice not to pay people. If we can pay the shareholders of energy companies then we can redistribute some of that wealth. It’s a fallacy to say there isn’t enough money. We need to decide ‘do we want to invest in public services?’ because we should. And I’m not just talking about education, I’m talking about the NHS and the ambulance drivers—we’re all in the same boat, and we should all work together. There is that money. They need to decide to spend it and invest in the country’s future.”

Leeds

Carlo, a teacher at Swarthmoore Education Centre, explained, “We’re striking in solidarity because our pay isn’t directly controlled by the government; it’s controlled by a board of trustees of a charity.

“We’ve been getting below inflation pay rises for years and years and we’re all feeling the crunch. We have worse pay than teachers in mainstream schooling. But we’re out here to support everyone else as well.”

Cambridge

“We are getting paid at such a low rate that I am struggling to pay any of my own bills and even to live, secondary school geography teacher **Andrew** told us. His colleague, computing teacher **James**, added, “I am an experienced teacher. I am pretty much at the end of progression of pay and I will be in fuel poverty next month.”

James called out the government’s hypocrisy in advancing the Minimum Service Levels Bill forcing workers to come into work even after a legal strike ballot. “I think a class should have qualified teacher in front of it all the time. That’s the minimum service we want. But talk to any parent and they will tell you that their kids have been taught by supply teachers for months—it’s not right. Initial teacher training is going down, it’s the lowest level for a decade,

and you are losing teachers like me because it’s just not economical to stay.”

Andrew said, “I am not happy about the government saying that ‘if you call off the strikes, we will open up talks’ as there shouldn’t be any conditions and we have a right to strike. He continued, “I think there should be a general strike. I am not a fan of the regional strikes as a national strike is more effective. Everyone should go out on strike and support it.”

Rachel, a primary teacher in her first full year of teaching, explained, “The funding of schools is wholly unsustainable, and the children are not getting enough. The working conditions very visibly impact on the children every day. If a child needs additional support in the classroom the school has to decide which child gets the Education, Health and Care Plan for the year to fund the support, as well as distribution of teaching assistants. Only certain children will get that support which leaves the classroom teacher to support all the other children.”

On the regional strike action organised by the NEU she said, “A national strike is more effective. Our voice is one. There is money, it’s a choice where that money goes to. The government have made a choice not to give it to children or their teachers.”

Katy, a primary school teacher, told our reporters, “The working pressures have increased every single year that I have been teaching—23 years. I regularly work 55-60 hours a week. The younger teachers coming into the profession are burning out.

“The government have decided not to fund education fairly in the same way they are choosing not to fund local authorities fairly. The decisions that the local authorities are having to make because of funding is having a knock-on effect on schools and Special Educational Needs and Disability services and it’s just horrific. At the bottom of it you have got children who are suffering.

“I would support a general strike because if people work together you send a stronger signal to the powers that be. We teach our children to collaborate, to work together because as a team you achieve more and the same goes for adults!”



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