Scottish teachers offered 28 months of pay cuts—Vote NO!

Steve James
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In a stark betrayal, thousands of Scottish teachers, after months of well-supported strikes, are being advised by the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS) to accept 28 months of real terms pay cuts. The EIS Salaries Committee has suspended all strike action and is currently balloting teachers on an offer far removed from their original claim.

Representing 80 percent of Scottish teachers, the EIS is set on suppressing their struggle as soon as possible. Only last week, a further series of strike days saw well-attended pickets at primary and secondary schools across Scotland.

Presented as a "revised best and final offer" by the employers' side of the Scottish Negotiating Committee for Teachers (SNCT), the proposed deal runs from April 2022 to August 2024. In three parts, the deal offers most teachers 7 percent from April 2022, 5 percent from April 2023, and 2 percent for April to August 2024.

The shift to August instead of April as the deadline for pay negotiations is something the EIS has long sought. Presented as bringing teachers' pay negotiations in line with the school year, the move splits teachers' pay anniversaries from other sections of public sector workers.

Echoing the SNCT and the Scottish government, EIS General Secretary Andrea Bradley presented the package as "the best that can be achieved in the current political and financial climate without a much more prolonged campaign of industrial action" and one which "will result in teachers seeing a 12.3 percent increase on their current rate of pay by April of this year and by 14 percent by January 2024."

Bradley made no comparison with inflation, and neither did an EIS FAQ page—for good reason. Annual RPI inflation to January this year was 13.4 percent, more than 6 percent higher than the 2022-2023 pay rise. The Confederation of British Industry expects annual inflation for 2023 of 6.7 percent, using the lower CPI measure, and 2.9 percent for 2024, giving another year-and-a-half of de facto cuts. This would compound the deep erosion of teachers' pay since 2010.

Bradley also did not reference the EIS's initial claim, made in February 2022, for a one-year 10 percent deal, which at the time was a few points above the rate of inflation.

NASUWT, despite declaring itself "underwhelmed by the detail of much of" the agreement, is also balloting its members this week, as is the Scottish Secondary Teachers' Association (SSTA). Balking at the EIS's open endorsement of such a betrayal, neither have made a formal recommendation. But their refusal to pledge any further action in the event of a rejection, bar NASUWT's pathetic hint of continuing action "short of a strike", is intended to pressure acceptance.

How the EIS has turned an opening demand for a real terms increase into 28 months of pay cuts is an object lesson in the anti-working-class role played by the trade union bureaucracy. Its actions are part of a succession of below-inflation pay offers forced on workers after they have been ground down by months of deliberately circumscribed strike action on little or no strike pay.

Teachers in Scotland have been routinely divided by union and region and limited to at most a few days' strike action at a time. The EIS's rolling strikes earlier this year were split up so that only two local authorities saw strikes on any given day. Barely any action was coordinated with National Education Union members in England and Wales, who have themselves been divided into a series of intermittent, regional actions.

The same strategy has been employed against the rank-and-file by the rail unions, keeping stoppages

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sporadic and largely separate while walling off their members in Scotland and Wales from the national dispute, encouraging acceptance of sellout deals with ScotRail and Transport for Wales. Two unions, the TSSA and Unite, have closed down all action nationally. The pay agreements reached are all in the region of 5-9 percent. On Tuesday, the Rail, Maritime and Transport Union cancelled planned strike action by Network Rail workers to ballot on a two-year pay deal thought to be worth 5 percent this year and 4 percent the next.

A similar fate is being prepared for Royal Mail workers, after 18 days of strike action, by the Communication Workers Union, who sold out an historic strike of BT workers last year for roughly 4 percent.

Two weeks ago, the University and College Union cancelled seven planned strikes this term, claiming a "breakthrough" in talks which confirmed a pay deal of 5-8 percent.

The unions are also dividing workers in the National Health Service, using proposals from the Scottish National Party (SNP) and Welsh Labour administrations to pave the way for a UK-wide sellout. The Royal College of Nursing (RCN) is recommending its members in Scotland accept a 6.5-7.1 percent deal, with balloting due to close March 20. Unite and Unison have already brought their Scottish disputes to a close after producing "yes" votes for an average 7.5 percent deal.

A 5.5-6.5 percent consolidated pay rise, plus a lump sum, is being pushed through in Wales after a Unison yes vote. The RCN, GMB and Royal College of Midwives have called no action despite the overwhelming "no" votes of their members.

Though no offer has been made, the RCN has called off all strikes in England to engage in talks with the government. The GMB, Unison and Unite have followed suit. RCN General Secretary Pat Cullen has already made clear she will ask members to accept a below-inflation deal.

What was a mass offensive of millions of workers against a hated government and national administrations pursuing a common renewed austerity agenda is being turned into a series of routs, costing the working class billions in pay.

In Scotland, the union bureaucracy is acting to protect a weak government mired in crisis after the shock resignation of SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon, amid the collapse of the party's independence strategy. A succession of savage local government budget cuts is due imminently to address a budget shortfall of £700 million, with Glasgow City Council alone facing £120 million cuts. Edinburgh is £70 million short.

Glasgow intends to increase council tax and parking charges, introduce waste collection permits, cut opening hours at popular venues and introduce charges at others, while slashing or entirely dropping support for vital and popular charities on which thousands depend.

Workers have responded angrily to the latest sellout organised by the EIS.

Mrs W tweeted, "You've literally just accepted a worse offer than was on the table a week ago – you've now roped us into a poor 2 percent offer and a move to August negotiations. Disgrace."

Mr Smith told the union, "You were pathetic last year. Pathetic again this year. Teachers deserve better."

John Fitzpatrick argued, "I've said it before and I'll say it again - inflation is too volatile to get involved with multi year deals - or do the EIS have a crystal ball? Anything accepted should take us back to the table after 12 months."

This militant sentiment requires a political perspective, organisation and leadership. Workers cannot maintain, let alone improve, their living standards without combating the sabotage of the trade union bureaucracy. Doing so will require new rank-and-file organisations, committees democratically elected in every workplace, to lead a struggle to secure workers' interests against the cost-cutting agenda of the governments in Holyrood, Cardiff and Westminster and the employers, starting by mounting a determined campaign for a "no" vote against the EIS's rotten deal.

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