

Organise to prevent sell-out of UK teachers' strike by education unions' bureaucracy

Educators Rank-and-file Committee
13 March 2023

Teachers across England, who are members of the National Education Union (NEU) will strike on March 15 and 16 in their ongoing campaign for a full funded 12 percent wage rise.

The strikes are the remaining two days of strike action which began on February 1, the largest in over 12 years, when 500,000 public sector workers walked out to over the devastating impact of the cost-of living crisis. Teachers will be joined by striking doctors, lecturers, civil servants and transport workers.

A rally and demonstration will be held at Trafalgar Square under the banner "Save Our Schools Carnival". The NEU advertises the event as "a fun, family-friendly affair. It will combine the best of our movement; striking, marching, rallying, speeches and a political stunt." The stunts include: "chance your arm at our education coconut shy and to try and knock down the issues in education; poor funding, low pay, excessive workload. Or try the 'wheel of their fortune': guess how many times more personal wealth an individual cabinet minister has compared to the average education professional's salary." The rally will end with a "school disco".

No amount of desperately unfunny theatrics and stunts can conceal the rotten role being played by the NEU, along with every trade union in systematically sabotaging the fight by workers in defence of their interests. For the privileged layers which dominate the union bureaucracy, to present the calamity that confronts the education sector, cuts in wages of over 20 percent, an historic crisis in recruitment and retention, unbearable workloads, collapsing buildings, schools facing bankruptcy, cuts in support programmes, as a "fun day out" exposes the social chasm that separates them from their members.

Nor should educators allow the efforts of the NEU to

"dumb down" to divert attention from the fact that a further 150,000 teachers in Scotland and Wales who would have been involved in the strikes, had the NEU and Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS) not overturned their strike mandates to impose wage deals well below inflation and not fully funded. The shutting down of disputes in Scotland and Wales is a warning to teachers in England that behind the fanfare and jamboree is a hammer coming down to crush their opposition.

On March 10, the NEU cancelled strikes due on March 15 and 16 in Wales to put a pay offer by the Welsh government. This is the second time that strike action was blocked to put a pay offer. On February 14, industrial action was called off by the NEU to consider a 1.5 percent wage offer which was rejected by members. The "revised offer" is 1.5 percent for 2022/2023 consolidated, 1.5 percent unconsolidated and a 5 percent pay award for 2023/24. The union claims that these will be fully funded. The offer is way below the current RPI inflation rate of 13.4 percent and locks teachers into a filthy deal until 2024. NEU support staff, the only support staff who passed the legal threshold to strike in the UK, were offered nothing!

The NEU then placed a "no detriment principle so that should there be a higher pay settlement in England, Wales would match that pay award." It called on the Westminster government to match the deal and then it would call off strike action. Its aim is not to fight to defend teachers and education but to preserve its role as enforcers of the government's austerity agenda.

Mary Bousted, the Joint General Secretary of the NEU said, "If it is true that the Education Secretary has the blessing of Government to negotiate on pay for this year and next, then there is nothing preventing talks

other than her own intransigence. We have demonstrated in Wales that we are more than willing to enter serious negotiations and suspend strike action while we consult our members on an offer.”

Conservative government Education Secretary Gillian Keegan, has insisted that the NEU follow the path of the health workers’ unions who ended their strikes with the offer of nothing but “talks”. “This is the same offer that was accepted by unions representing nurses, ambulance workers and physiotherapists who all agreed to call off their strikes and are now representing their members in talks with the government”, said Keegan.

In Scotland, the largest teacher’s union, the EIS, after months of well-supported strikes, are urging acceptance of 28 months of real terms pay cuts. The EIS Salaries Committee has suspended all strike action and presented the “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.

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 is intended to pressure acceptance.

The education 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.

It is clear 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 by the NEU. Teachers in Scotland and Wales should

vote “No” to the rotten deals being offered and begin to strike out on a new path, independent of the official trade unions.

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, 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 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 fighting in defence of wages and conditions.

To prevent another defeat for the working class means joining the Educators Rank-And-File Committee to begin to build an alternative leadership to lead the fight to protect and defend state education and working conditions.



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