

UK: Teachers must reject derisory pay offer and fight unions' demobilisation through independent rank-and-file committees

Tania Kent
28 March 2023

Teachers across England must reject the Conservative government's derisory pay offer announced Monday night. A campaign of unified mass strikes must be organised to demand an above-inflation pay rise and the reversal of the chronic underfunding of the education sector.

The offer follows six days of behind-closed-doors "intensive talks" between the government and the education unions. Talks began on March 17, immediately following a two-day national strike of 300,000 teachers represented by the National Education Union (NEU), with the union calling off any further strikes for two weeks.

Of all the education unions, only the NEU passed the ballot threshold set by anti-strike laws to authorise industrial action.

The offer is a one-off £1,000 payment to all teachers and school leaders for 2022/23 and an average 4.5 percent consolidated pay award for 2023/24—of which the government will only fund 0.5 percent, forcing cash-strapped schools to fund the rest. No agreement was reached on teacher workload, staffing, recruitment and retention, performance pay and measures around the Ofsted school inspection regime.

Nothing else could have been expected, with the Tories repeatedly insisting that "there is no money" to fund education.

The pay deal was announced to over 20,000 NEU members on a Zoom meeting. The union leadership called on teachers to reject the offer, knowing they could never force such a rotten settlement on their members who have been solid in their determination to fight for better pay and conditions.

Members of the second largest education union

NASUWT, who were told in a recorded speech by General Secretary Patrick Roach to "consider the offer," responded angrily that there was nothing worth considering.

Teachers have until Sunday April 2 to accept or reject. If the offer is not accepted, the government will revert to the School Teachers' Review Body (STRB) process for the 2023/24 academic year, which is currently offering a 3.5 percent deal.

NEU Joint General Secretary Mary Bousted said the union's executive committee had "looked carefully at the offer" before deciding it was "really insulting".

No strikes will take place until nearly a month after the ballot closes if members reject the offer, and even then only two days of action at the end of term on April 27 and May 2. This would have hardly any impact, with the union stating, "The executive has agreed to seek local agreements with head teachers to ensure exam preparation is not interrupted for Years 11 and 13."

NASUWT revealed how little difference there was between what the government was prepared to give and the union bureaucracy prepared to accept.

Roach explained that the four unions—the NEU, NASUWT, the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) and the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL)—tabled a final proposal for a £1,000 one-off payment for 2022/23 and a 5.75 percent consolidated award for 2023/24, together with non-pay improvements. Had this proposal—*only 1.25 percent above* what has been offered and still not fully funded—been accepted by the Tories then the unions would have rushed to push it through.

The unions promoted the negotiations to break

teachers' strikes. Announcing the talks, the NEU said, "We promised you that we would engage in these talks, in good faith, and listen to what the Government has to offer." Striking teachers never demanded talks in "good faith" with a viciously hostile Tory government, but a fully funded 12 percent wage rise.

Only days before the two-day national strike, the NEU itself had rejected talks without the government first making a firm offer.

The NEU's real concern throughout the dispute has been to protect its close relationship with the government, as its statement suspending strikes made clear: "We have a place at the table because you have sent such a powerful message to Government of your determination to solve the crisis in education."

Two days before the March 15-16 strikes, NASUWT secretly attended negotiations with Education Minister Gillian Keegan to which the NEU was not invited because at that stage it had not agreed to call off the strikes. Roach, who had attacked the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS) for entering negotiations with the Scottish government with NASUWT absent, shamelessly did the same with the government in Westminster, dividing NASUWT and NEU members.

He was consciously acting to bring an end to educators' struggles for pay and funding, claiming that there was "nothing that should now stand in the way of detailed negotiations and getting a deal onto the table," and adding that "Avoiding further escalation of this dispute will not only require all sides to commit the time needed, but also to be willing to find solutions."

Teachers reacted furiously on social media, with NASUWT members repeatedly denouncing the general secretary as a "scab". One said: "You aren't in a dispute. You couldn't even organise a ballot." Another stated, "Why would you, a UNION General Secretary undermine striking teachers like this? SHAME ON YOU!"; and another, "Solidarity is the key and not allowing the government to get their divide and rule tactic to rule the roost. You lost 50000 members over your flawed ballot."

In Scotland, NASUWT sold a rotten deal to its Scottish members. Teachers will receive a well-below-inflation 7 percent pay deal backdated to last April, a further 5 percent from next month and a miniscule 2 percent from next January.

Such was NASUWT's betrayal that thousands of its

members walked away from the union. Many joined the NEU believing this the only way to take any action.

But the NEU is fundamentally no different to NASUWT or any other education union in suffocating the determination of teachers to fight.

In Wales, the NEU called off the first national strike on February 14 to ballot on a 6.5 percent offer. This was overwhelmingly rejected, but only days before the next round of national strikes the union bureaucracy promoted a new offer which was virtually no different, with an additional 1.5 percent lump sum payment for this financial year. Aware that the bureaucracy was prepared to sell out their struggle at the nearest opportunity and seeing no other way to fight back, the deal was accepted by teachers.

The NEU's teaching assistant members—the only assistants across the UK who were taking strike action—were offered absolutely nothing.

After months of determined struggle teachers have won nothing. The fight 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 across all sectors divided by the trade unions, preparing a counteroffensive against the Tory-Labour policies of war, wage cuts and worsening social services and living conditions.

These committees 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, we urge teachers to join the Educators Rank-And-File Committee to begin to build an alternative leadership in the fight to protect and defend state education.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact