

Teachers across England overwhelmingly reject derisory pay offer

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Indicative ballots conducted by three of the four main education unions in England have returned a resounding rejection of the government's pay offer following six days of "intensive talks" beginning March 17.

The offer was well below the demands of teachers for a fully funded 12 percent wage rise. It consisted of a paltry £1,000 non-consolidated payment for 2022-23 and an average of 4.5 percent for 2023-24 with only 0.5 percent funded by the government. The ballots concluded April 5, with NASUWT still to announce its results.

Both the education unions and the government knew full well that educators would reject it and have used the "talks" to diffuse anger and opposition through political theatre and posturing, with the unions now calling for "fresh talks".

The results of the indicative ballots were:

The National Education Union (NEU), the largest, announced April 3 through a live meeting from their annual conference in Harrogate that 66 percent of members turned out and 98 percent rejected the offer.

The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) announced April 4 that 87 percent of members rejected and 13 percent were in favour, with a 56 percent turnout in its consultative ballot.

The National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) announced April 5 that 90 percent of members rejected the offer in a 64 percent turnout. Head teachers know that if the current offer goes through, they will struggle to pay staff from existing, overstrained school budgets as the deal is not fully funded. Analysis by the NEU shows that between two in five schools and three in five schools would have to make cuts next year to afford it.

The NEU have announced just two strike dates in

response, on April 27 and May 2, with a further three strike dates in June and July. A new ballot for extending the strike action for the next school year will be sent out in June/July. The NEU rejected a motion from its conference floor which would have seen the strike dates coinciding with A-level and GCSE exams. "The press will have a field day if we go out on strike during exam weeks," Wendy Harding, a member of the NEU's executive, told the conference.

The NEU and other education unions claim to be opposed to the results-based culture of Britain's education system and call for the overhaul of SATS, A-levels and GCSE's, as ineffective measure for assessing children's progress and placing unnecessary stress on teachers and pupils. To claim that teachers can win the right-wing press to their side, which for over a decade has done nothing but attempt to marginalise and demonise them and their concerns over a crumbling education service, is farcical.

Conservative Minister for Education Gillian Keegan denounced the threat of new strikes as "unforgiveable" and possible strikes by other education unions as "disrupting yet again, children's education". The NEU have made clear that the threat of action will be withdrawn at any time if the minister agrees to further talks. In response Keegan withdrew the paltry offer, said there is nothing on the table at all, and that pay would now be decided by the independent pay review body which would recommend pay rises for next year, at 3.5 percent currently. There would be no further "talks" until next year!

The calling of a few limited strikes interspersed by endless ballots has been a gift to the government from the union leaders. Teachers determined to fight for a living wage, to oppose the unbearable working conditions and for increased funding must strike out on

a new road.

The government's offer was nothing but a provocation. Keegan has repeatedly claimed "there is no more money" and offering a pay deal which will not be funded, throwing tens of thousands of schools further into deficit and possible bankruptcy—resulting in job losses and cuts in provision that would never be supported by teachers.

This agenda demands that workers make sacrifices in response to an escalating economic crisis, fuelled by the impact of the pandemic and billions being made available to fund the war in Ukraine.

The unions direct teachers into a futile campaign in the hope the long drawn out process will lead to fatigue and opposition teetering out. The union bureaucracy is a privileged social layer whose interests lie in the defence of the capitalist system. They offer their services as a mechanism through which the government on behalf of big business can more easily go about imposing the crisis onto the backs of the working class.

The education unions, along with unions in the Royal Mail, rail, public sector, universities and the National Health Service have systematically isolated these struggles for over eight months now and blocked support for a general strike. They have imposed rotten deals and working conditions on their members.

The NEU were the only teaching union that organised strike action as the NASUWT and NAHT did not pass the government's ballot threshold set by anti-strike laws. The NAHT have responded to the indicative ballot with claims that they are now "forced to hold a ballot for industrial action." ASCL General Secretary Geoff Barton responded by stating that industrial action "is certainly an option that will be discussed, but we would emphasise that no decision on this front has been taken in either direction. It would clearly be much better for all concerned if the government responds with an improved pay offer and puts an end to the industrial dispute."

The NASUWT shamelessly entered secret negotiations with the government only two days before the national strikes on March 15 and 16 were to take place, claiming that there was "nothing that should now stand in the way of detailed negotiations and getting a deal onto the table."

They pleaded, "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."

In Northern Ireland, after 12 months of "negotiations" over pay, working conditions and funding, the education unions have set April 26 for a national strike, the day *before* the NEU strikes will be held. The NAHT will participate in the strike for the first time in its 125-year history. The four other teaching unions in Northern Ireland have held a single half-day strike on February 21, following 12 months of "failed negotiations" which produced nothing in securing the demands of teachers. The unions involved are NAHT, NASUWT, NEU, Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) and the Ulster Teachers' Union (UTU).

Each of these struggles are being treated as isolated events, aimed only at forcing "talks". While the results of the ballots reveal the anger and opposition that exists to the devastating impact of over a decade of austerity, 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 the disputes, 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.



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