

UK: National Education Union leadership drives dispute into “negotiations” dead end

Rank and file rebellion must be organised.

Tania Kent
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Teachers in the National Education Union (NEU) are striking on April 27 and May 2. These are the final two days of industrial action by the union covered by the current ballot of teachers, demanding a 12 percent wage rise for this year and improved conditions on workload, recruitment and retention.

The two strike days were announced following the rejection of the Conservative government’s pay offer by over 98 percent of NEU members. The derisory and provocative offer was for a £1,000 unconsolidated wage rise for this year and an average of 4.5 percent for next year, of which 4 percent would have to be funded from existing school budgets. Members of the other major teaching unions, including the NASUWT, ASCL, and NAHT also rejected the offer with votes of over 80 percent.

The NEU called for the pausing of strikes following their two-day national strike on March 15-16, promoting “negotiations” with the government “in good faith” and “with confidence”, supported by all the teaching unions. The negotiations produced nothing, acting as a mechanism to suppress the growing anger of teachers to the decimation of the education system.

Despite the overwhelming rejection of the governments’ offer by four teaching unions, the NEU strike will be isolated yet again. Five teaching unions in Northern Ireland struck on Wednesday April 26, the day before the NEU strike, for one day over identical issues following 12 months of negotiations with nothing offered.

The NEU has agreed to arrangements with schools giving “special dispensation” for members teaching students in Year 11 and 13 who will be preparing for their GSCE and A level exams to work through the

strikes, as an adaptation to a hostile mass media.

The NASUWT and NAHT ballots held in January failed to meet the government’s anti-strike legislation threshold. Both unions claimed that they would organise fresh ballots but have stalled them, leaving only the NEU teachers out on strike since February. The same rhetoric has been regurgitated in response the rejection of the pay offer by the NASUWT, ASCL and NAHT, but no ballots have been issued. The NEU will issue a fresh ballot from May 15 with the possibility of just two days of strike action in June and July, should the threshold be met.

Entering talks, NASUWT claimed that there was “nothing that should now stand in the way of detailed negotiations and getting a deal onto the table.” Acting as the government’s stooge, NASUWT 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.”

NASUWT General Secretary Patrick Roach said his union was now “putting the secretary of state for education on notice.” He claimed that summer term strikes “could be on the cards” and that the union would “look to co-ordinate wherever we can.”

The ballot is yet to be announced and Roach has attacked another section of strikers, nurses who rejected a sell-out one-off payment this year of between £1,655 and £3,789 and a 5 percent pay increase in 2023-24 in defiance of the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) leadership.

Roach stated that had the same well-below-inflation deal been offered to NASUWT members, he would recommend acceptance. “We go into negotiations surely in good faith and with some integrity. We sit

around the table, throw stuff out. We're not going to get everything we're going to be looking for and we understand that. But frankly, if you've got something which looks good enough and smells good enough, why would I not put that to my members with a positive spin?"

A petition has been organised to remove RCN General Secretary/Chief Executive Pat Cullen and the entire negotiating team for moving the deal embraced by Roach. Not only does the struggle to remove the entrenched bureaucracy in the RCN deserve the support of every worker, but the same fight must also be taken up in every union.

The ASCL bureaucracy announced that they will launch a ballot for strike action, for the first time in their history "shortly." If successful, however, they will only consider strikes in the autumn term in four to five months' time! The NAHT announced that they will launch their ballot on April 27, the day of the NEU strike, with no timeframe for strike action if it were successful.

Although there is no agreement on ballots and unified strike action across the education sector, all the unions are agreed that the threat of strike action will be suspended at the drop of a hat if Education Secretary Gillian Keegan agrees to further negotiations.

Keegan is maintaining her insistence that there is nothing to negotiate, that there is now no offer on the table and that teacher pay will be reviewed by the School Teachers' Review Body (STRB). The notionally independent pay review body always imposes the government of the day's proposals on pay. It has suggested a 3.5 percent pay offer for teachers for 2023-24. Keegan told the BBC's *Today* programme, "The independent pay review body is the right place to do it, and we actually said that's what would happen if they rejected this offer."

Left in the hands of the trade union apparatus, the fight by teachers for decent pay will end the same way as all the major strikes that have erupted over the past eight months, including health, postal and rail workers—with the bureaucracy imposing rotten deals and a betrayal.

Calling a few limited strikes interspersed by endless ballots has been an intentional gift to the government, delivered by the union leaders.

Teachers determined to fight for a living wage, to

oppose the unbearable working conditions and for increased education funding must strike out on a new road. The mobilisation of the rank-and-file independently of the union bureaucracy is the precondition for any genuine fight against the government and the employers.

Each of these struggles are being treated by the union functionaries as isolated issues, aimed only at forcing "talks." While the results of the ballots reveal the depths of anger and opposition that exists to the devastating impact of over a decade of austerity, after months of determined struggle teachers have won nothing.

Teachers are angry. The NASUWT has lost tens of thousands of members since January after shamelessly entering secret negotiations with the government only two days before the national strikes on March 15 and 16 were to take place. This mass exodus has partially benefitted the NEU, which has recruited teachers who want to strike. But this does not offer teachers a way forward.

Education workers must now seize control of the disputes from the entire union bureaucracy, by 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 counter-offensive against the Tory-Labour policies of wage cuts, worsening living conditions and the decimation of social services to pay for handouts to the corporations, militarism and war.

These committees must link with workers internationally 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 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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