

Teachers in England strike as National Education Union bureaucracy says pay, terms and conditions “all up for negotiation”

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Our reporters
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Tens of thousands of teachers struck in England on Wednesday in the latest action to demand better pay and conditions. The strikes involve members of the National Education Union (NEU) working in thousands of schools and sixth form colleges. Another one-day action is taking place on May 2.

The action is the first of a possible four walkouts taking place in the summer term, as the NEU leadership keeps industrial action to a minimum while it tries to reach a sell-out agreement with the Conservative government.

Educators have rejected a derisory £1,000 lump sum payment for this year and an average of 4.5 percent pay rise for next year, of which 4 percent would have to be funded from existing school budgets. Inflation is above 10 percent CPI and 13.5 percent RPI.

The offer comes after years of pay cuts not fought by the education unions—to the extent that average annual teacher pay fell £3,000 in real terms from 2012 to March 2022. In the months since, inflation has soared to its present double-digit level.

Thanks to the demobilisation of their members carried out by other education unions, NASUWT, the ASCL and NAHT, suppressing the school workers’ determination fight back, the NEU members are striking alone, as they have been since February.

As the strike began, NEU joint leaders Kevin Courtney and Mary Boustead again pleaded for talks with the government. Writing in the *Mirror*, Courtney said of below inflation deals the education unions have

reached with the devolved Labour Party and Scottish National Party governments, “Wales and Scotland have both reached settlements on teacher pay. It is about time that the Westminster Government gets serious and gets back round the table to resolve this dispute.”

Boustead said that not only were the unions prepared to ditch any previous demands made for an above inflation deal, but that everything could be put on the chopping block to be negotiated away if only the government would talk.

Speaking on the BBC’s *Today* programme Thursday, she said, “We’ve asked for an above inflation pay rise, but we’d be prepared to negotiate a decent pay raise for teachers.

“We would accept that there needs to be a longer term correction in teachers pay. If you [Tory government] can’t make it all up this year, then let’s look at a multi-year deal. Let’s look at teacher workload, let’s look at the rules inspection. You know what, let’s look at the terms and conditions.

“It’s all up for negotiation. All we have to do is get in the room and negotiate and that’s what the government is not doing.”

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke with strikers on picket lines.

Richard is a teacher from a primary school and joined the picket at King Edward VII school (KES) in Sheffield. Staff are involved in a bitter dispute with the Conservative government and Local Authority who are forcing the school into joining an academy against their

will following a flawed Ofsted inspectorate report which judged the school as “inadequate”.

Richard said, “I am concerned about parents having choice taken away from them. The option is to go to schools who are academies, with uniforms and strict rules, unlike KES where the teachers and leaders here are concerned about the development of the child’s individual needs. They teach children to think for themselves and explore creative and artistic sides to their personality far more. The emphasis is on child, rather than recreating a child in some blueprint alternative version.

“It feels like the Ofsted grading was a political choice, a big drive by the government to be able to produce compliancy from children and reproduce their desire to take away choice and reduce their educational options and as a teacher I object to that.

“There is a financial element to the move I suspect as well. At my school, there were several occasions where we had unsuccessful Ofsteds and nothing happened for a while. Why is it that this school failed one Ofsted inspection and was immediately threatened with academisation?

“I thought what a wonderful piece of real estate there is outside this school. It could be a fantastic financial opportunity for an academy to access an amazing historic building and consider the financial benefits of accessing such real estate. There are two buildings here, Lower School is about 1-2 miles away and I can foresee them squeezing pupils there and keeping the land here for themselves for investment.

“I am also striking in opposition to teachers’ working conditions and workload, which are my main concerns, and for younger staff pay is a big issue.

“I feel positive about the strikes. I think they had an impact in terms of, once we started striking, we were given an offer, although it was appalling. I am proud and pleased we rejected it out of hand. I was disgusted to hear that the Bank of England was quoted asking us to get used to idea of being made poorer and to accept this as fact, at a time when CEOs are being given soaring bonuses and pay rises.

“We are striking for the right reasons, there is a politically driven intent to limit our sense of right to have a decent lifestyle. We have had a pay freeze since 2010, I have lost out on £8,000 a year. I think it is important that we strike.

“We need to continue to strike until we get what we want. This is about values and principles and it is the right thing to do. Being isolated as we are the only teachers on strike is not right but it doesn’t surprise me that a lot of the unions have been unsupportive.”

Saskia is a primary school teacher and creative curriculum lead at Ellesmere College, a special needs school in Leicester. She said, “I absolutely love working here. I’ve got no issue with the conditions of work. I’m on strike for the funding and where it comes from. It’s all out of school budgets at the moment, so as a middle leader, I hold a budget that creates the curriculum for our students to have, and if pay comes out of those budgets, that’s less money for our children, and we’re such a resource heavy setting, they need so much, it’s got a cost.

“Across all settings, your class is often funded by your teachers’ pay check. I know there’s a saying where, ‘teaching’s the only job where you pay to work’.”

Asked about the strike, Saskia said, “I feel that it’s actually brought us together a bit. I think that quite a lot of parents are supportive of what we’re doing, and I think they do see why we’re doing it.

“We’re really lucky in that most of our parents are really appreciative of the work that we do, because it can be very difficult at home for them, so when they see their children making progress here, it’s a really positive thing.”

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