

# UK education unions begin ballots for strike action

## Teachers must take the fight out of the hands of the union bureaucracies!

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Strike ballots by four of the leading education unions in England began on May 15. They take place as part of an ongoing fight by the teaching profession for a 12 percent wage rise and against unbearable workloads which have led to a retention and recruitment crisis.

If the ballots are successful and meet the threshold of the anti-strike laws of a 50 percent turnout and over 50 percent in favour of action, they will provide a mandate for the largest action by teachers in history. Two of the four unions involved would be striking for the first time in their entire existence.

For the strikes to be successful, however, education workers must set out on a new road and take control of their dispute. So far, the education union leaderships—which have overseen well over a decade of austerity, budget cuts and privatisation—have been able to drag the struggle into the dead end of “negotiations” with the government.

The unions involved are the National Education Union (NEU), the largest with 510,000 members; National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers, (NASUWT), the second largest with over 300,000 members; the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) with 35,000 members; and the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) with 23,000 members.

Initial strike ballots in January were held as opposition grew among educators to the Conservative government’s pay deal for 2022-23 and 2023-24. Teachers were awarded a paltry 5 percent increase for 2022-23, resulting in a real terms wage cut of more than 5 percent for the last year alone. A further 3.5

percent was offered for this current year. Teachers have had a wage freeze imposed since 2010, resulting in a decline in real wages of over 23 percent.

Only the NEU met the threshold for industrial action, in a massive de facto vote of no confidence in the union bureaucracy.

Following four days of NEU strikes, Minister for Education Gillian Keegan entered negotiations with the four unions. She made a provocative offer of an additional £1,000 non-consolidated wage rise for this year and an average of 4.5 percent for next year—of which the government would only fund 0.5 percent—forcing schools to use their collapsing budgets to pay the remainder.

Teachers across the unions rejected the offer in indicative ballots recording rejections of between 87 and 98 percent. The NEU announced two more strike dates on April 27 and May 2 in response but pledged to call them off if Keegan agreed to hold further discussions.

Concerned and panicked by their members’ overwhelming rejection of the rotten deal, the four unions issued an unprecedented joint statement April 28 threatening to “coordinate” strike action. This was forced on the union leaders confronted with the collapse of their entire strategy of “talks”, which they had proclaimed the only way forward, and a membership determined to wage a fight.

Keegan responded to the rejection of her offer by withdrawing it completely and has since refused to enter any negotiations or discussions, informing the unions that they were being “irresponsible” and that

their demands were “unaffordable”. Claiming she had wiped her hands of the matter, Keegan said she would leave teachers’ pay to the School Teachers’ Review Body (STRB), which is recommending nothing extra for this year and just 3.5 percent for the next. Inflation is at 13.5 percent with the cost of living soaring.

Defeating this attack cannot be left in the hands of the education union bureaucracies, which have suppressed opposition to the assault on pay and conditions and to intolerable workloads while pursuing talks with the government aimed at defusing the strike on its terms. The union bureaucracy is now directing teachers into a futile campaign of pleading with the Tories to offer a slightly repackaged pay deal, in the hope the long-drawn-out process will lead to fatigue and opposition petering out.

The NAHT’s comment on the joint statement made this clear: “We are calling on the government to return to the negotiating table to resolve this dispute before any industrial action becomes necessary.” The NEU press statement added, “It is never too late for the education secretary to come to the negotiating table and make an improved offer.”

Strike ballots begin between May 15 (NEU and NAHT), and June 3 (NASUWT). The ASCL are yet to confirm when their ballot will be issued. Their deadlines will be spread across several weeks meaning that any industrial action will not take place until after the summer holidays in the new term in September. The union leaders hope that by then—in four months’ time—educators’ resolve will have been worn down and the wave of strikes in the rail, university, health and postal sectors will have been finished off by other bureaucrats pushing surrender deals.

Teachers should be clear that the unions can call off all action overnight without any of their members’ demands being implemented. In Scotland and Wales, teachers have already seen the education unions impose way-below-inflation offers. In Wales, the NEU approved a below-inflation 11.4 percent wage deal with the Labour-run administration for teachers *spread over two years*, while the NASUWT agreed a pay deal over a 28-month period equating to a real terms cut of up to 10 percent. NASUWT General Secretary Patrick Roach stated that he would be prepared to accept a wage deal of just 5 percent for next year, citing what had been offered to (and rejected by) nurses in England.

The agenda of the unions is based on the premise—shared with the Tories, Labour and the employers—that workers must make sacrifices to pay for an escalating economic crisis and the billions of pounds being allocated to fund the war in Ukraine. The bureaucracy which runs these organisation is a privileged social layer whose interests lie in the defence of the capitalist system. They serve as an industrial police force over their members.

To seize control of the dispute, teachers should begin discussions to establish democratically elected rank-and-file committees in every workplace. The committees’ first task would be to unify the struggle of educators—teachers, support staff and all school workers—across the divisions upheld by the unions and formulate a series of “red line” demands for a fully funded, high-quality education system. They can facilitate the coordination of workers in all sectors in a counteroffensive against the Tory-Labour policies of war, wage cuts and worsening social services and living conditions.

Moreover, 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 and the struggles by teachers and educators in the US, Portugal and New Zealand fighting in defence of wages and conditions.

We urge teachers to join the Educators Rank-And-File Committee and begin to build an alternative leadership in the fight to protect and defend state education. Participate in our meetings and discussions by signing up and registering your details.



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