

New strike dates announced as UK education unions promote below-inflation deals

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Teacher members of the National Education Union (NEU) will strike for two days in England on July 5 and July 7.

The NEU members have already taken part in five national and three regional strikes since February of this year, demanding a 12 percent wage rise and a resolution to the retention, recruitment and budgetary crisis which is paralysing schools and the profession.

This is the first strike since May 2 which affected more schools than ever—with fewer than half (45.3 percent) able to fully open. Since then, the unions have been silent, waiting to be let into talks with the ruling Conservatives. The latest strikes are unlikely to have as significant an impact. They will be held in the last two weeks of the school year, with students taking GCSE and A-level exams already having left school and many teachers organising end-of-year events such as school trips, sports days and transition sessions.

The decision was made by the NEU following their executive meeting on June 17. The union had insisted for the past six months that strikes would act as a lever to pressure the government and the Education Minister Gillian Keegan to “get round the table and negotiate a better deal for teachers.” There is, however, precisely nothing “on the table” after months of action. An initial offer of a £1,000 one-off non-consolidated payment for 2022-23 and an average 4.5 percent pay rise—with only 0.5 percent to be funded by the government—was overwhelmingly rejected by all four main teaching unions. NEU members voted it down by 98 percent.

Keegan responded to the rejection by withdrawing the offer and insisting that pay for 2023-24 will be decided by the STRB (School Teachers Review Body). Since then, she has snubbed the unions and refused to meet with them.

The NEU are re-balloting members to extend their strike mandate, as required by law, for a further six months as

the current mandate ends July 17. The NAHT and NASUWT are also balloting their members and ASCL will announce their ballot shortly. This could be the first time that the head teachers’ union (NAHT) and the ASCL take strike action in their entire history. The unions have issued joint statements threatening “co-ordinated strike action” in the new school year starting September. These would be the first ever co-ordinated strikes in the history of the teaching unions.

The unprecedented character of the actions proposed is in response to the unprecedented crisis that is wracking the sector and fuelling an outpouring of anger and opposition to the decimation of school-aged education. This comes alongside the impact of collapsing living conditions leading to tremendous stress for children and families; the ongoing impact of the negligent handling of the pandemic on children’s learning; and the reality of war in Europe which is resulting in billions being funnelled away from social spending to military spending.

Education is in its deepest crisis in decades. The government’s recruitment strategies have failed year in year out, with the next school year the worst for recruitment ever—with less than 50 percent of the government’s target being met. New figures released this week show the highest number of teachers leaving the profession before retirement ever recorded.

Class sizes have ballooned with primary schools reporting sizes of 35, and some heads in secondary schools predicting they will rise to 60. Head teachers are reportedly considering shortening the school day to cut teaching time, with one academy leader warning that another year of underfunding would force many schools into a four-day week. Teacher workload has risen dramatically with the Department for Education’s (DfE) own survey revealing that primary school teachers are averaging 59.3 hours a week and 55.7 for secondary

teachers.

School buildings are unsafe with hundreds across the country at risk of collapse. Teachers have had a wage freeze for over a decade.

These are the intolerable conditions driving the militant sentiment among school workers. For the union bureaucracy, their concern is to ensure they remain in control of a powder-keg on the verge of exploding. Their policy is to direct anger into dead ends such as “good faith” negotiations. They are alarmed by the refusal of the government to meet with them, which is cutting across the bureaucracy’s main aim of convincing the Tories that they cannot suppress the movement among educators without using the union apparatus as their middlemen.

The announcement of the NEU strikes and ballots among the other unions do not mark a change of approach—only an attempt to placate members while the leaderships continue pursuing a rotten deal with the government. In announcing the latest strikes, NEU joint general secretaries Mary Bousted and Kevin Courtney stressed, “It is within Gillian Keegan’s grasp for this action to be halted. Time and again the National Education Union, alongside its sister unions, have called for the Education Secretary to get around the negotiation table to settle this dispute for a fully-funded teacher pay increase.”

Tellingly, the education unions’ main activity in recent weeks was to jump on a report by the *Sunday Times*, which published the leaked latest recommendations of the STRB, proposing a 6.5 percent wage rise for teachers for the 2023-24 pay round. Unions have insisted the report be published in full and its recommendations “considered”.

A joint letter, signed by NAHT’s Paul Whiteman, NASUWT’s Patrick Roach, ASCL’s Geoff Barton and Bousted/Courtney, states: “Following this weekend’s leak [May 21] of the STRB’s recommended award of 6.5%, we write to you to urgently request that you re-start negotiations with us.

“It is only right that we, and the profession, receive confirmation on the accuracy, or otherwise, of the STRB recommendation on next year’s pay award. We ask you to publish the STRB report and then to confirm whether the recommendation made by the independent pay review body will be accepted by your government and, further, that it will be fully funded for every school and implemented from September.”

The promotion of the STRB is politically criminal. Its recommendation of the 5 percent pay award for this year precipitated strikes in the first place. It is the STRB that

has recommended pay freezes for teachers for over a decade. After denouncing it as a government mouthpiece for years, the unions’ key demand now is for the publication of its recommendations which fall way below the current inflation rate of 11.3 percent. There is no longer any reference to the 12 percent wage increase demanded by teachers for this year, with the unions indicating they will accept the STRB’s 6.5 percent award.

Peter Shreeve, Assistant District Secretary of the NEU, told news site OnTheWight, “This possible offer (6.5% by STRB) will not make up for the poor pay awards the STRB has made almost every year since 2010... However, it might go some way to addressing the present crisis. This offer is significantly above the previous Government offer of 4.3 per cent, which was roundly rejected by NEU members. The STRB report needs publishing immediately.”

NASUWT General Secretary Roach stated, “She [Keegan] must invite the teacher and leader unions into the DfE and be absolutely clear about whether and when she intends, or not, to implement the STRB’s recommendations in full, or, as we would argue, to go beyond them.”

Paul Whiteman, general secretary of the NAHT, said a 6.5% increase “would be progress.”

The Educators Rank-and-File Committee has warned repeatedly that, “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.” This is precisely what the education unions are preparing.

Teachers determined to fight for a living wage, to oppose unbearable working conditions and to win increased education funding must strike out on a new road. The mobilisation of the rank-and-file independently of the union bureaucracy through their own democratically elected committees is the precondition for any genuine fight against the government and the employers.



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