

Teachers begin two-day national strike in England: “This infatuation with money is devastating for kids and teachers alike”

Our reporter
5 July 2023

Teachers in the National Education Union (NEU) held their sixth day of national strike action in England on Wednesday, opposing the Conservative government’s derisory pay offer of just 5 percent for 2022-23 and 3.5 percent for 2023-24.

Thousands of teachers attended pickets, rallies and marches. Several thousand teachers marched in London to Parliament Square where a rally was addressed by NEU leaders.

Since the education strikes began last year, part of a strike wave embracing workers in the NHS, railways, post and other key sectors, teachers have put up a determined fight.

Their strikes are set to escalate, with the first ever joint action by members of the four main education unions due from October. But the NEU leadership, in line with the response of the trade union bureaucracy across every other sector, is doubling down on its pleas to the government to enter talks and end the dispute based on a substandard pay deal and further erosion of conditions.

Despite a large mandate for action, the NEU has organised virtually nothing since February, with just three regional strikes held.

In the lead up to Wednesday’s strike, the NEU announced they would be called off if Education Secretary Gillian Keegan would agree to enter talks and publish the School Teachers Review Body’s (STRB) pay recommendation of 6.5 percent for next school year. This is the same body that recommended a 5 percent pay offer for 2022-23.

The STRB recommendation is well below current RPI inflation of 11.3 percent and even the government’s favoured inflation measure, CPI, currently at 8.7 percent.

Joint Secretary of the NEU Kevin Courtney spoke at the rally in Sheffield, stating that 44,000 teachers (9 percent of all teachers) have resigned this year before their retirement age, the highest on record. He called on teachers to “keep up the pressure and force Keegan to listen”.

Daniel Kebede, NEU general secretary-elect, spoke at the London rally, reiterating the key demand of the unions as the basis for ending action, “[Prime Minister Rishi] Sunak and the education secretary Gillian Keegan could have averted further strike action by publishing the report of the School Teachers’ Review Body, which is said to recommend a 6.5 percent pay increase for teachers.” Laying on the insincere demagoguery, Kebede declared, “If this Government doesn’t deliver there will be a general strike in education. Get ready now.”

The results of industrial action ballots of the four main education unions will be published within the next three weeks, with talk of a coordinated strike planned for October 2, coinciding with the Tory Party conference. But teachers should draw a warning from the role of the health unions in ending strikes based on recommending below inflation pay deals reached in closed door talks.

Left in the hands of the NEU the education strikes are threatened with a

similar sell-out based on acceptance of the STRB recommendation that leaves teachers’ demands over education funding, impossible workloads, class sizes and other issues unaddressed. Educators who want to mobilise a genuine fightback, in opposition to the teacher union bureaucracies, should contact the Educators Rank and File Committee.

Teachers spoke with reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site*.

London

Sai-Leya, a teacher from North London, told WSWs, “I believe that teachers deserve better! The current funding situation is unsustainable, teachers deserve fairer pay and it should be fully funded by the government. The strain shouldn’t be put on teachers or the students.

“Current working conditions in schools vary, but essentially the workload is too high. It’s not doable. The ‘work life balance’ is a fallacy based on the idea that if we just managed our time, we’d be able to do the work that’s required of us. But there isn’t enough time to do that, so something has to give, and it shouldn’t be our personal lives.

“We will continue to apply pressure to the government because they are refusing to negotiate and I think they’re just hoping we go away because the summer holidays are coming up, but when term starts again, we’ll be back.”

Emily, a primary school teacher in Camden for the past 7 years said, “I am striking today as the funding for schools is absolutely shocking especially for things like special educational needs. The wider needs of children, especially those with special educational needs, is rising astronomically. Any funding is being slashed.

“I work in probably one of the best funded schools in the country and still we are scraping to try and find enough to support the children and it’s just not good enough. I can’t do my job, I can’t teach children without the funding to do so, and I feel like I’m failing them, and I don’t want to do that anymore.

“Particularly in the last few years, funding has been going less and less far, and we’ve been able to get fewer teaching assistants. It’s been going downhill for longer.

“Hopefully over the summer there will be some sort of acceptable offer from the government. None of us wants to be striking, we want to be teaching the children. Barring that, hopefully all the other unions will get their mandate to strike and there will be more coordinated strike action which will hopefully bring an acceptable offer from the government.”

Sheffield

Sam, a primary school teacher who joined the Sheffield rally said, “I don’t think people realise how bad it is in schools right now, how underfunded they are. And it’s getting worse.

“The government should fund us properly. But they will say there is ‘not enough money’. Support staff will be the first to go. Historically, that’s what’s happened, although schools can’t run without teaching assistants and support staff. The government will say that teachers are the essential ones, and support staff are a luxury. But they’re not. They’re not at all.”

Tom, a teacher at Nether Edge Primary School, said of the STRB’s recommended pay rise of 6.5 percent being backed by the NEU, “It’s still not enough. Inflation is 8 point something percent. Last year, another 12 percent. A pay freeze for 13 years. So, pay has dropped, depending on how you measure it, by 11 to 23 percent in the last 13 years.

“If I were faced with voting for that tomorrow, I would personally not be voting for it. I think we should push even harder.”

Caitlin, a newly qualified teacher, said, “The government has not done nearly enough for education for decades. Serious action needs to be taken. And that’s why we’re all here today.

“I look at the effects that academisation has had, running education like businesses and neglecting students’ learning and students’ welfare. This infatuation with money is devastating for kids and teachers alike.

“You don’t go into a profession light heartedly. You go in wanting to make a difference or share the joy of your subject, which for me is exactly why I wanted to get into teaching from 14 years’ old.

“Education staff are clearly not being looked after, not just financially, but also socially. There isn’t enough recognition for what we do. It needs to change drastically and now.”

Bournemouth

Helen told WSWS reporters, “I’m a year 5 primary teacher in Dorset. I’ve taught for 23 years and I’m here because I’m one of those teachers that for the last 10 years have had below-inflation pay rises, so I’m now going to work for a pay cut. Schools aren’t being funded properly, so there isn’t enough money for resources, for staff, and we’re losing loads of teachers. If we don’t do something about it, children aren’t going to have teachers and aren’t going to receive the education they deserve.”

Lizzie recently joined the teaching profession as a career change, “I’ve been teaching for three years. I teach at a primary school in Blandford, and I teach upper Key Stage 2 children [years 5 and 6]. I’m here today because education is in crisis, and the Tory government is not listening to teachers, to educators, and our children ultimately are suffering for it.

“When you work in a school every day, you see it, and you see that fact that we are being asked not to put our lights on because we can’t afford to pay the bills. The children don’t have new pencils, we haven’t got glue sticks, we don’t have exercise books. Those are the things that people don’t see.

“Staff are leaving in droves, and they cannot be replaced because there is a recruitment crisis. People are not coming to education because it is not invested in, and teachers are not paid appropriately to the skill level that’s required.

“I think it’s very interesting what the government can and does not find money for. I’m here as somebody who is for fair pay, but more so, I’m here for investment in education so that all our children have the right start in life, with highly qualified, skilled and dedicated teachers.

“Schools have no money for essentials for our children. They cannot increase pay for teachers on their current budgets. It has to be a fully funded pay rise. The government needs to say that they value education, and there’s only one way to do that and it’s to invest in education.”

Leeds

Owen, a geography teacher from Notre Dame Sixth Form College in Leeds said, “I’m hoping that we get all the unions together which can cause more of an impact. What’s been done so far is great but working together will put more pressure on the government.

“Being on the picket today you can see a lot of support from the public, this is probably the most support we’ve had. The government are doing their best to ignore us and keep us at arms-length.

“It’s been very difficult since 2008. The government have deliberately pushed down the wages of the public sector over the last twelve years--nurses, junior doctors, teachers--they are the ones that have seen the greatest decline in their wages in real terms.”

Emma said, “I have been a teacher for 7 years. I enjoy the job but sadly I am now feeling less and less valued. I’m here with my colleagues; we are quite a small department, and we are being told that we have to teach outside of our specialist subject areas. It’s frustrating for us and it’s not really fair on the children either, being taught by teachers who are not specialists in the subjects they’re learning.”

Emma also spoke about the pandemic and its ongoing effects, “We started by having to stay open for vulnerable students and the children of key workers. I didn’t go into school very much at the start of the pandemic because I’ve got asthma. But there were a lot of staff having to go into school during the pandemic and it was a scary time.

“Since then, there are fewer people wanting to come into the profession. As a school we aren’t finding it easy to recruit new teachers or support role staff. Sometimes we have applicants changing their minds and not turning up for interview. Sometimes we have one or two turn up, but other times only one is interviewed for a role. It’s really sad.

“Now’s the time that children need the *best* level of education because they’ve had what, three years out of school. You can see that in the classroom as well – they find it hard to concentrate, they find it difficult to follow instructions, no independence, lack of resilience. It’s probably the most challenging time to be a teacher. On top of that, all the cuts and lack of funding, yep, it’s a lot to cope with.”



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