

Day two of national teachers' strike in England: "We're stretched to the limit already"

Our reporters
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Teachers in the National Education Union (NEU) held their seventh day of national strike action in England on Friday, opposing the Conservative government's pay offer of just 5 percent for 2022-23 and a revised offer of 4.3 percent for 2023-24.

This is the second day of strike action by teachers this week. The main national rally was held in Manchester to promote a protest by unions outside the Tory Party conference being held in the same city in October. This could coincide with strikes across the education sector, pending the outcome of strike ballots starting with teacher union NASUWT on Monday.

Joint General Secretary of the NEU Kevin Courtney addressed the Manchester rally. Behind his bombast and threats of "co-ordinated" action, the teachers' six-months-long strike is in danger of betrayal.

Courtney admitted that the NEU's perspective of forcing Education Minister Gillian Keegan to enter talks had been ignored for months. He asked, "Does it feel like they're (the government) digging in, not giving in?"

His solution was to exert more pressure, which would "frighten the government" to implement the School Teachers' Review Body (STRB) leaked recommendations for a 6.5 percent pay raise.

This year's pay claim was originally for 12 percent. But the NEU has dropped this in favour of promoting the STRB's purported call for 6.5 percent raise next year so that strikes can be ended.

Speaking this morning on BBC Breakfast, Minister of State for Education Robert Halfon said the government had "a very difficult choice" in deciding how much to pay teachers and had to "be fair to the taxpayer".

The government had no such qualms in spending £45.9 billion on the military in 2021-2022, plus an additional £16.5 billion over the next five years as part of NATO's military build-up against Russia and China.

While schools are being starved of resources, the wealth of the UK's billionaires has risen by over 1,000 percent since 1990. In the first two years of the pandemic, billionaires in the UK increased their wealth by almost £150 billion. The world's billionaires added \$852 billion to their fortunes in first half of 2023.

Sir Keir Starmer has made clear that a Labour government will uphold NATO spending targets and protect the wealth of the financial oligarchy. He has declared repeatedly that "there is no magic money tree". This has not stopped the NEU and the entire trade union bureaucracy from throwing their support behind the Labour leader, as they work to suppress the current wave of strikes.

Manchester

Deputy head teacher **Raymond** from a primary school in Cumbria spoke with WSWs reporters at the Manchester rally, "I'm here because of the lack of funding in education and the big problems we've had with recruitment and retention---that more than pay.

"We've struggled in our school, with 250 kids, to recruit teachers. It's the children who are suffering. We've also found that we've got so many newly qualified teachers, early career teachers [ECTs], we have five at our school and there are two senior teachers who have to look after them!

"Also, we've got one more year with teaching assistants [TAs], and we know looking at our future budget some will be made redundant. We've got eight TAs in our school, and we're going to have to get down to six, possibly five for the next financial year.

"The needs of our children are increasing, but we cannot access external support. Self-harming children can't get referred, it's almost like there's nothing out there. It's down to schools, and we're already stretched to the limit.

"Five years ago, if we had children with learning difficulties we could get a specialist in. Now it's all private. We've been quoted over a thousand pounds just to have someone come in and sit with children for half a day and assess them for dyslexia. Even children really struggling with their mental health, we're totally reliant on Barnados [charity] who have an 18-month waiting list in our area. We have an 11-year-old who's self-harming—that's not going to help a child!

"It concerns me that so many teachers are leaving because the pressure's getting so high."

Referring to Ofsted, the school inspectorate whose judgement of "inadequate" drove head teacher Ruth Perry to take her own life this year, John said, "We need a locally based system that's much more supportive. Our school came out good, but a single word judgement didn't do our school justice. It's incredibly stressful going through Ofsted. They're in school for a day or two days, they don't know the school, they're making a sweeping judgement on a small evidence base. I know a head teacher in our area who walked out because of Ofsted, his whole career ahead of him. We're losing good people, good heads, good deputy heads, good teachers. That's why I'm here."

Lisa is primary school teacher in Walkden and has been a teacher for 12 years. She said, "I'm here at the rally to make sure that our voices are heard because nothing's being done to help.

"Teachers are leaving the profession in droves because they can't cope with the expectations put on them. It's a very tough, hard career to be in. We want to be in the profession, it's rewarding, but it's being made increasingly difficult year on year, with all the pressures, especially Ofsted. Ofsted are hurting education by putting teachers and heads under such immense pressure.

"Where is the money going? because it's not going to help the working

class. Families are on the breadline, and it's wrong, and if we don't do something like striking then things aren't going to get better."

Lora, a team leader in the Westley Art, Design and Technology school in Standish attended with her partner Keith, a librarian at the same school. She said, "The initial pay offer from the government was appalling, not just in the meagre amount they offered but that it meant the remaining 4 percent would come from the school budget.

"My partner Keith was drafted in to teach to cover the shortfall in staff, despite the fact he has no teacher training. I've worked previously in really deprived areas where teachers were spending hundreds of pounds of their own money to buy equipment and resources. But this is not sustainable, and that goodwill is going to run out, just as it is in the NHS and other organisations."

Sara, a part-time teacher and union lay officer from Cheshire said the struggles of teachers and other workers had to be linked-up, "This morning we were on the RMT [Rail, Maritime and Transport union] picket line supporting the train cleaners who are on strike. This is about us uniting together.

"We've reached that stage and I've been teaching a long time. Schools are struggling everywhere, even in supposedly middle-class areas such as Cheshire. This isn't just about pay, it's about the general crisis in education, workloads, the impact of Ofsted, and the impact on staff wellbeing and mental health."

Sheffield

Paul, a secondary school English teacher for 17 years said, "We're struggling to recruit, and these are things not just specific to this school. We're also seeing less support for SEN [Special Education Needs] and we're working more hours with fewer resources, so it's across the board really.

"This is a training school as well, so even recruiting for new teachers has gone down. People are leaving the profession when they've got more years they could potentially do. On the ground, we're seeing less Teaching Assistant support, turnover of TAs, and non-replacement of TAs in the classroom. We seem to be working with more and more needs, with smaller and smaller resources.

"This strike doesn't exist in a vacuum. The cost-of-living crisis means we are dealing with a lot of kids coming into school hungry or with other kinds of social issues. Their needs have gone up, as well as ours."

During the pandemic, "We were teaching almost from the start, and being innovative and creative in finding ways to teach, and not just teach but safeguard children, and putting our lives and health at risk. We work in buildings that are unfit for those conditions, with windows open in the middle of winter. And this nonsense notion of the two-metre rule, when classrooms aren't designed to give you that space."

Calling for an expansion of strikes in the new school year, Paul said, "Ideally, we want the other unions to come out as well. That would be the thing that would take us to the next level.

"It's not just us, we've seen it across other sectors where we seem to be paying for the financial incompetence of the government. We've seen those things writ large this week with the energy companies, and whether supermarkets have been artificially manipulating cost-of-living increases for profiteering. It feels like public sector people pay for that, both as consumers and the ones who are told 'There's no money for you'."

Camille, a secondary school teacher said, "A teacher's pay can be okay if you look at it in restrictive ways, and if you don't know what teachers do every day. We have colleagues on a full-time contract who work 10-12 hours a day and who are expected to always go above and beyond,

retraining to do more. So, if you look at the pay, it is not enough for the hours and conditions that are expected.

"In schools you have people who are very dedicated, and the government knows that. They are going to go the extra mile, running after-school stuff, clubs, trips. Lots of people do all kinds of work on weekends with no extra pay. I have never met a teacher who is lazy."

Teachers are expected to perform a variety of roles in place of specialist school staff, including career guidance and mental health services, "which is great, but its extra stuff you worry about, and you are not teaching. Our school is well-funded, and we have counsellors who come in sometimes to provide these extra things, but it's an exception. Pastoral supervisors end up working 15 hours a day. They have done this job for twenty years and they are almost crying because there is so much to deal with.

"All public services are under attack. You see the problem with water companies being bailed out. They get a lot of money, while not providing the public service. My hope is that things are becoming so blatant towards privatisation that people will realise it might not be a good thing. It was sold as a cheaper alternative and efficient, but these companies cost millions more than nationalised services."

Cambridge

Gracinda, a secondary school maths teacher said, "People think it's about pay, but it is more about workload. Pay rises in the past decade have all come out of the budget of the school. The result has been increased workload. This has led to cuts to staffing, increase in class sizes and cuts to resources. Teachers can't give the education that we want kids to have.

"I'm really hoping that the re-ballot is successful, and we have more people coming together that feel the same way. I believe there should be a general strike. We have supported the nurses when they were on strike. The same thing is happening in the NHS with increased workload. There isn't enough staff on the wards, so care isn't safe."

Saima, a primary school Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) explained, "It's become harder and harder to support children with special needs. The places at special schools have completely shrunk. Because of this there is more pressure on mainstream schools as teachers are now having to plan for kids with needs that they are not trained to deal with.

"The waiting list for support is months and even then the support parents get is minimal, and the rest has to come out of the school budget. In the private sector there are wage increases and bonuses. Apparently, that doesn't affect the economy. But if public sector workers ask for anything then it's the end of the world. It's going to cause inflation. Why is it like this? The last deal [3.5 percent] was coming out of the school budget. We don't want that!

"It's such a double system. [Prime Minister] Rishi Sunak and his friends can do what they want, but when the public sector asks for something it's ignored. When the strike ballots come back ideally everyone should make a stand: the headteachers, TA's, all other unions. It needs to be a joint action."



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