

UK teacher unions to hold consultative strike ballots over pay and conditions

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13 February 2024

The National Education Union (NEU) and the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) have announced plans for a consultative ballot on strike action over pay and funding.

The NEU will launch an indicative strike ballot on March 2, asking teachers in England and Wales if they would back further strikes over pay and school funding. The NASUWT joined them in becoming the second education union to announce plans to run a consultative ballot of members “in the coming weeks”.

While a clear pay offer has yet to be announced by the Conservative government, the NEU believes that it “looks set to back a paltry 1 to 2 percent pay rise” for teachers this year which would most likely be funded by existing schools budgets. The official government measure of inflation, CPI, is at 4 percent currently, with the majority of classroom teachers' salaries in England worth more than a quarter (25.5 percent) less in real terms than 2010. The more accurate RPI measure is at 5.3 percent.

In announcing the consultative ballot NEU General Secretary Daniel Kebede, wrote on X, “12 months ago today, members took their 1st of 8 days of action. I was one of those hundreds of thousands. Today we are preparing again for an indicative ballot on FUNDING and PAY. As the government lines up another unfunded, below inflation pay award. Our children deserve better.”

Kebede does not mention the outcome of that dispute, which was a rotten sell-out deal. The walkouts were the first national strikes of schoolteachers in over 12 years and formed part of a militant offensive across the public sector, including health workers, and workers in the private sector against the crippling impact of the cost-of-living crisis and two decades of austerity and pay regression.

Teachers went on strike demanding a fully funded, above inflation wage rise of 12 percent. Instead, the education unions accepted a deal of 6.5 percent of which

3 percent would have to be funded from schools' decimated budgets. The deal was put at the point where for the first time ever all major education unions had passed ballot thresholds for action which could have shut all schools nationally. The unions claimed that the broad issues around recruitment, retention and workload would be fought through the creation of a corporatist body, “the workload reduction taskforce”, which all the education unions sit on.

Ending the national strikes in August 2023, the unions claimed they would “continue the fight and hold the government to task” over pay and funding in the 2024 pay negotiations. They would ensure that the workload taskforce would not be a toothless body and claimed it could be influenced to resolve chronic workload, funding and a recruitment crisis.

The sell-out of the 2023 teachers' strikes has only accelerated an existential crisis across the education sector.

The government reneged on its funding promises to end the school strikes, claiming to have made an “error” in its calculations that will mean schools must cover a £370 million shortfall from their already dwindling budgets.

Schools reopened in September amid a Raac (Reinforced Autoclave Aerated Concrete) scandal that has resulted in mass disruption to children's education as over 100 schools were forced to close fully or partially due to fear of their imminent collapse, with over 500 others at risk and 8,000 needing urgent risk assessments. The government has refused to provide the over £4 billion in immediate funding to rebuild unsafe schools.

Workload for teachers has increased according to a report published by NASUWT, which surveyed 7,000 of its members in England's state schools. Nearly three-quarters (72 percent) responded that workload had increased since the start of the academic year, while 65 percent said they had raised concerns about their

workload with their school.

Some 60.4 percent of respondents report that on average their working hours each week during term time were between 50 hours and 69 hours. 20.9 percent reported weekly average hours of 60-69 hours. 71 percent said they did not get a guaranteed and uninterrupted lunch break. And 46 percent said they had to supervise pupils or undertake other work during their lunch break.

The cost-of-living crisis continues to impact teachers, with figures produced by Teacher Tapp—a survey app—revealing that there has been a “substantial jump” in teachers working second jobs. The survey found a 42 percent jump in the proportion of educators doing other work outside their day job. Between 2019 and 2022, the proportion doing this remained at about 12 percent. But this year that increased to 17 percent. A separate Teacher Tapp survey last year showed an increase in school staff using food banks.

The budgetary crisis is creating a powder keg. Schools across England have warned they will soon be unsafe because they are having to cut teachers and support staff to save money, with record numbers now in deficit.

With escalating behavioural problems, soaring numbers of children with special educational needs, and increased pupil numbers, schools say staff are already stretched to the limit. Heads across the country claim they now have no choice but to plan redundancies or not replace leaving staff to balance their books.

One in eight local authority-maintained schools were in deficit in 2022-23, the highest number since schools took control of their own bank balances in 1999, according to data released by the Department for Education (DfE) at the end of January. This was a big jump from one in 13 schools the year before. There has been a steady upward trajectory of schools being pushed into the red since the Conservatives came to power in 2010. In 2011, just one state school in 20 was in deficit.

The NEU predicts that deficit figures for this year will be “much worse” when they are released by the Department for Education next January and shedding more staff will be “the only way out” for many schools—leading to larger class sizes and more stressed staff leaving the sector. Kebede noted that UK primary class sizes are already the highest in Europe; secondary class sizes are the highest since records began almost 50 years ago, and more than 1 million children are taught in classes of more than 30 pupils.

COVID continues to run rampant throughout schools with no mitigations or testing in place or mandatory

isolation for those infected. Schools are struggling with absenteeism due to COVID related illnesses and entrenched Long COVID on top of a recruitment crisis.

The education unions are the key mechanism through which the government is destroying state education. They have played the lead role in dissipating anger and opposition. To overturn this brutal onslaught a new perspective is needed. Educators should vote “yes” in the consultative ballot, while seeking to take the struggle out of the hands of the trade union bureaucracy by forming independent rank-and-file-committees.

Any industrial action will immediately come into conflict with Minimum Service Levels (MSL) anti-strike laws legislated last June—while teachers were striking—that the unions did nothing to oppose. The Strikes Act outlaws effective strike action across six key areas of the public and private sectors including education.

The DfE has proposed that the minimum level of service in education would keep 74 percent of pupils in school during industrial action.

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (UK) calls for:

- *The immediate abolition of education inspectorate Ofsted.

- *Abolition of all anti-strike legislation including MSL

- * Billions to make schools COVID safe and structurally sound.

- * Reduction in class sizes and the fully funded recruitment of tens of thousands of qualified teachers

Sign up to join the committee, read our newsletter and participate in its work.



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