

UK NEU and NASUWT conferences sabotage teachers' pay and working conditions struggle and promote Starmer-led Labour government

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The National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) with a membership of 300,000 held its annual conference March 29-31 and the National Education Union (NEU), the largest education union in Europe with a membership of over 465,000, met April 3-6.

With dozens of local authorities facing bankruptcy, a collapse in teacher recruitment, an unprecedented level of teacher resignations in response to intolerable working conditions, a crisis in SEND (special educational needs and disabilities), collapsing school buildings, an acceleration of academies and free schools programme and a witch hunt against teachers opposing the Gaza genocide, both unions offered the election of a Labour government as the means through which this existential crisis could be overcome.

The NEU held an indicative ballot of its members for strike action in January with the results published days before their conference. NEU General Secretary Daniel Kebede hailed the outcome of the ballot, with over 90 percent voting for strike action in a 50.3 percent turnout, stating: “The facts speak for themselves; over half of our members voted in the ballot and overwhelmingly supported a move to a formal ballot to secure a fully funded, above inflation pay rise which constitutes a meaningful step towards pay restoration.”

What did the NEU bureaucracy then do with this mandate? They decided to reject it completely.

Conference voted to wait for the STRB's (teachers' pay review body) recommendations due in July, then to see what the Conservative government's response is, then organise yet another indicative ballot or “snap poll” on the offer. In the autumn term (at the same time that a

general election is likely to be called)—and then only if the indicative poll supports industrial action—would the union prepare a formal strike ballot! And almost certainly even if there was a vote for strike action, it would be ignored citing giving an incoming Labour government its chance to rectify matters.

The sole aim of this prolonged month's long campaign is to wear down NEU members and force them to wait on a Labour government under Sir Keir Starmer to supposedly act in teachers interests.

Kebede made a direct appeal to Education Minister Gillian Keegan, who has overseen the decimation of education, attacked striking teachers repeatedly and threatened them with anti-strike legislation, to “prevent any collision course” with teachers by working with the unions. “Gillian Keegan, this is your chance. You can avoid further industrial action. The ball is in your court,” Kebede said in his conference speech. “I'm very open to start talks now to prevent us having to move to a formal ballot at a later date,” he told the media.

With Keegan having made clear that she will not institute a pay rise above 2 percent (with CPI inflation 3.4 percent and more accurate RPI measures at 4.5 percent) and in line with the unions' betrayal of last year's six month strike, Kebede said, “We are ready to work with a Labour government to embark on a journey of renewal. To rebuild and to reinvigorate, to instil hope in our young people, and to champion a new era of possibility and progress.”

At their conference NASUWT members voted by 78 percent not to support a formal strike ballot. They did not participate in last year's strike action and lost thousands of its members to the NEU after failing to reach a

mandate in an initial ballot. NASUWT's leadership then took part in secret negotiations with the government, acting to break the strike of NEU members.

Even though both teaching unions are not affiliated to the Labour Party and claim to be "independent", NASUWT also promoted the illusion that a Labour government would be the best option to oppose the catastrophe in education.

NASUWT General Secretary Patrick Roache said, "Political campaigning to secure a government prepared to fix the damage inflicted on the education service over the last 14 years must now be the priority", as "teachers need change from a new government that is committed to delivering a new deal for teachers and education".

NASUWT delegates passed a resolution asserting "that the outcome of the next UK general election must be a turning point for the future of our schools and colleges and for the future of the teaching profession".

Roache confirmed that the role of the unions is to promote the election of a Labour government which would act to suppress strikes and attempt to tame militant opposition. "A new deal will only be secured when there is a government in Westminster that is on the side of our teachers, education and public services, and that political campaigning must now take priority over industrial action," he told delegates.

Speaking to journalists, Roache said, "Let's not get obsessed about national ballots as if somehow that is action, a day or two strike action here or there, that doesn't change anything".

The tragic suicide of headteacher Ruth Perry in January 2023 after an Ofsted (government inspectorate) report downgraded her school in Reading, England has highlighted the pressures educators face. A "rise in suicide, suicide attempts and suicidal thoughts within the teaching profession" were cited in the conference. NASUWT revealed in a survey of 11,754 members that 86 percent of teachers who responded believed their job adversely affected their mental health in the last 12 months.

Nearly a quarter (23 percent) increased their alcohol intake in the past year because of work, while 12 percent reported using or increasing their reliance on antidepressants. Among those surveyed, 3 percent said they self-harmed in the last 12 months because of work.

While professing concerns, the affluent union bureaucracy are indifferent to the problems of teachers. They only hope that a Labour victory will allow a deeper incorporation of the unions into governing structures, as

advocated by Starmer, to defend and expand their bureaucratic privileges.

Despite the glowing picture presented of a Labour government in power, many teachers who have witnessed Labour in opposition since the beginning of the pandemic know different.

As the Tories were gripped by crisis, Labour forged a de facto coalition. As many teachers lost their lives and were forced to work in unsafe schools and children were sent into classrooms that were death traps, Labour were the most intransigent in demanding that schools stay open—"No ifs, no buts," in Starmer's words.

Labour supported the Tory multi-billion bailout of the banks and big business, while parliament, with Labour's backing, opposed the provision of free schools' meals to tens of thousands of children going hungry as their families had lost their jobs and incomes throughout the pandemic.

During last year's strike wave, Labour denounced strikers and attacked teachers for "harming" children's education and insisted they should be back in schools.

Labour has made no promises whatsoever to be on the "side of teachers and public services". Rather, Starmer has repeatedly made clear that in office there will be no "big state chequebook" opened, "no magic money tree" for public spending, an "efficiency" drive in the National Health Service and an escalation of the private sector involvement, no support for strikes and above all no toleration of opposition to war. Labour, boasts Starmer, will be a government of "fiscal responsibility", "the party of NATO" and of "strong borders".

Teachers must prepare to take on Labour should it come to office.

A Labour government means an escalation of the austerity agenda, cuts to social spending, increased poverty and escalation of war. Teachers and the entire working class must fight now to build the Socialist Equality Party to genuinely represent workers' class and social interests.



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