

Strike by teachers over pay at 32 sixth form colleges in England continues into New Year

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Sixth form college teachers at 32 colleges are set to hold three more days of strike action from January 7-9 in the ongoing fight for a pay increase. In early November, 32 of the 40 non-academised sixth form colleges voted in favour of strike action with a 97 percent mandate.

Sixth form colleges that have transformed into academies (state-funded but privately run) have been granted funding for a paltry 5.5 percent teacher pay rise in 2024/5 through the post-16 schools budget grant. But the remaining non-academised sixth form colleges have been given nothing at all.

Lecturers represented by the National Education Union (NEU) first came out on strike on December 3 and 4 and again when the union added the first of an additional four days of strike action on December 13. Hundreds joined the picket lines in Liverpool, Birmingham, Hull, Manchester, London, Bristol and other major towns and cities. The staff collectively teach around 80,000 students.

The strike by these hugely underpaid and overworked FE workers marks the first major industrial action by education workers since Labour's summer general election victory.

On November 28, the NEU organised a rally outside the Department for Education's Sanctuary Building in London, with hundreds gathering to demonstrate. Teachers chanted, "What do we want? Fair pay. When do we want it? Now!" and vociferously booed mentions of Labour Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson and Skills Minister Jacqui Smith. NEU members also protested outside Chancellor Rachel Reeves's Leeds constituency office.

At the demonstration, teachers told *FE Week* journalists how they had assumed the DfE originally made an error in excluding them from the pay award.

Some noted that it could be a tactic to force the remaining sixth form colleges to transform into academies.

"That's something even the Tories didn't try to do," Ian Morton, accounting teacher at WQE and Regent College in Leicester said, "We just expected better of a Labour government. No Labour government worthy of the name performs actions like this... It must be by design and it's just really sickening."

According to the NEU, teachers in academised sixth form colleges have been incorrectly designated as being subject to the School Teachers Pay and Review Body and thereby delineated from their non-academised colleagues. Sixth form college teachers have their own long-standing bargaining arrangements for pay with college employers represented by the Sixth Form Colleges Association (SFCA)—which the government decision to differentiate between academy and non-academy colleges has undermined.

The SFCA is seeking a judicial review of the government's September 2024 pay review decision. In a statement, the nominally independent SFCA asserted, "The government could avoid the disruption to young people's education that will be caused by this strike action by revisiting its decision to fund a pay award for staff in schools but not colleges".

NEU general secretary Daniel Kebede told BBC Radio 4 that teachers are "going into Christmas not having had any pay award and we are trying to rectify that situation". Kebede said it would cost "an additional £15m in funding, small beer in funding terms, to rectify". He added that the additional strike action called should have been a "wake up call" to DfE ministers and that the NEU "will not back down on this issue".

Regardless of Kebede's claims, "backing down" is

what the NEU leadership specialises in, as has been confirmed repeatedly over decades. In a recent article detailing the government's plans for thousands of civil service job losses, the WSWs called on workers to "view with contempt the hand wringing" by public sector trade union leaders over government "cuts and paltry pay deals".

The article explains, "Labour's announcement for huge cuts in every department completely blows apart the deception practised by the union leaders, who claimed that if their members voted Starmer into office then years of cuts could be reversed by a government that would be 'on their side'."

Sixth form college teacher pay has been cut in real terms by 29.5 percent since 2010, and college budgets shrunk simultaneously by 20 percent. Salaries of state school teachers have fallen by 20 percent over a similar period and university lecturers, the University and College Union (UCU) announced in 2021, have also lost fully one fifth of their salaries since 2009. This steep downward trajectory has only worsened since 2021. A pitiful 5.5 percent pay deal against such losses doesn't cut it, not by a long chalk.

The paucity of FE teachers' pay, in both sixth form colleges and FE colleges is primarily the responsibility of the NEU and UCU. For decades the education unions have refused to organise a co-ordinated fight to stem the steep decline in their members' wages and terms and conditions of work. This was confirmed in spades when NEU and UCU members, along with millions of other workers, fought for pay rises to end years of pay cuts during the 2022-23 strike wave, but were sold out by the unions' leaderships.

In the current dispute, no attempt is being made by the UCU and NEU bureaucracies to unify any struggles across FE. But unity by workers in pursuit of their interests is what is required if they are to prevent their incomes sinking further. Under the Starmer-led Labour government, the employers are escalating attacks against education workers, in conjunction with the trade union bureaucracy

In November the *Times Higher Education* warned that 10,000 university jobs are threatened, with over 140 universities making redundancies in 2025. Dr. Liesbeth Corens, a senior lecturer in early modern history, has tallied records showing at least 77 universities have announced cuts. Corens describes

what jobs and courses across the sector face as "all-round slaughter".

The Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA) have offered between 2.7 and 5.2 percent to HE lecturers—next to nothing when compared to real-terms wage loss in recent years.

The potential to unify the struggles of all education workers—who face the same issues of poor pay, unpaid work and casualisation—has never been greater. But for this to be realised requires that they begin to organise their own rank-and-file committees to oppose the wage "restraint" and funding cuts jointly imposed by the government and overseen by the trade unions.



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