

National Education Union conference reveals growing opposition to Labour's attack on education

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28 April 2025

The National Education Union (NEU) held its annual conference April 14-19, the first since the election of the Starmer Labour government.

The NEU is the largest education union in Europe, with nearly half a million members. Its conference was held just days after an indicative ballot that saw educators vote overwhelmingly to strike against an unfunded pay offer of 2.8 percent that would be gouged from existing school budgets.

Teachers across England rejected the government's offer by 93.7 percent, with 83.4 percent of those balloted saying they would be willing to strike to secure "a fully funded, significantly higher pay award that takes steps to address the crisis in recruitment and retention". Turnout was 47.2 percent.

The vote reflects teachers' continuing opposition to funding cuts and the relentless erosion of working conditions.

The NEU executive met April 23, announcing plans for a formal strike ballot, pending the School Teachers' Review Body (STRB)'s announcement of its pay recommendation to the government.

On Monday, the government confirmed it has received the STRB's pay recommendation of "close to 4 percent", with a spokesperson for Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer's office confirming there will be "no additional funding for pay if recommended awards exceed what departments can afford".

This unfunded raise will plunge schools into further crisis, with *Schools Week* reporting, "Official government research estimates schools can only afford a rise of 1.3 per cent next year."

The NEU has stated the award must not be funded through further "efficiency" cuts. But Labour has doubled down, urging "our colleagues in the trade union

movement" to "recognise the reality of the financial position."

The debate at NEU's conference, attended by 1,600 delegates, revealed teachers are on a collision course with the Labour government, with the union confronting growing unrest amongst members. Illusions promoted by the education unions that Labour would end more than a decade of austerity under the Tories have rapidly dispersed. The NEU's own survey results, published ahead of the conference, show the education system catapulting into an existential crisis.

Daniel Kebede, general secretary of the NEU, who blocked a ballot for strike action at last year's NEU's conference by claiming that a Labour government would open "a journey of renewal" and "a new era of possibility and progress", was forced to change his tune. Without apology or explanation, he told this year's conference: "Time and again, we are told there is no money. No money to properly fund our schools, or to cover fair pay. No money to repair crumbling classrooms or to scrap the two-child benefit cap." He continued, "Conference, after 14 years of Conservative austerity, we expect better from a Labour government."

Education Secretary Brigitte Phillipson, after denouncing teachers' threat to strike as "indefensible" stated, "The toughest financial inheritance in a generation has meant that we've already had to take some incredibly difficult decisions, and I'm afraid that more are still coming."

Kebede's opening speech to conference revealed a significant growth of opposition to the Labour government. He stated, "Across the country, in primary schools and secondary schools, in cities, towns and rural areas our members have taken a stand, demanding better pay, manageable workloads, and improved conditions for

teachers and support staff alike.”

The NEU reported that in 2024, there were 219 formal ballots approved by the NEU for action, and 593 days of action were taken by members, many of these since Labour was elected, and strike activity was more than double that of the previous year.

Strikes took place against academisation and its implications for wages and conditions, and over the impact of budget cuts, workloads, and bullying and victimisation.

These include:

- A bitter dispute in non-academised sixth form colleges across England in December-January this year, with eight days of industrial action by 2,000 NEU members who were offered a lower pay rise than teachers in academised sixth forms.

- A wave of current strikes in London, with schools from Haringey, Waltham Forest, Lambeth, Redbridge, Ealing and Hackney, all over working conditions, staff and budget cuts. Strikes have also taken place over efforts to increase the working day with no extra pay across several academies.

- Dozens of strikes this year in the independent schools’ sector against attacks on the Teachers’ Pension Scheme (TSP). The Coventry School Foundation is the longest running TPS dispute in the independent sector, with 19 days of action so far.

- In multi-academy trusts, employer-wide disputes this past year by teaching and support staff over workload, cuts to funding, loss of jobs and restructuring of working conditions.

Disputes are emerging across nurseries, schools, colleges, and universities.

But they have all been treated as separate disputes and deliberately isolated. In 2023, when the unions confronted mass support for national strike action to fight the Tory government’s austerity agenda, they refused to organise a general strike to bring down the Tories.

Instead, eight days of strike action by teachers was ended right at the point when several other education unions had passed ballots to strike, including headteachers for the first time in their history. A below inflation wage rise of 5.5 percent, which was only partly funded by the government, was imposed on members.

After a ballot for strike action in April 2024, the NEU refused to honour it, subordinating the oppositional sentiment of teachers to the election of a Labour government. Today, they are shackling teachers’ fight to the STRB, an advisory body set up by the Tory

government in 1991, and which reports directly to the Prime Minister and Education Secretary. The NEU claims the STRB and the government can be pressured to provide a better deal for teachers.

As Kebede stated: “The strategy of this union is to work with this government when we can and press them where we have to. I believe Bridget Phillipson understands many of the problems in the education system and cares about working class kids.”

Kebede’s promotion of Phillipson as sympathetic ear is farcical. Just weeks earlier, Chancellor Rachel Reeves announced plans to slash £15 billion from public spending in the Labour government’s Spring Statement, which has already thrown tens of thousands of children deeper into poverty.

A record 4.5 million children were living in poverty in 2024. Labour’s policies will throw 250,000 more people into poverty at a stroke, including tens of thousands of children.

Phillipson has mooted plans to cut school spending by £500 million, including by ending universal free meals for infants, as part of her negotiations with the Treasury. According to the *Times*, Phillipson also offered to axe funding for free period products in schools, as well as dance, music and PE programs.

Kebede is acutely aware that Labour’s assault on social rights to divert billions of pounds into military spending is becoming a key issue of debate, fuelling anger amongst teachers and students. He warned: “This government has pledged billions of pounds for military expansion at the expense of the most vulnerable in society... If there is money for bombs, for bullets, for hypersonic missiles then there should be money for carers, for those unable to work and for free school meals.”

The NEU’s moral appeals to a Labour government imposing austerity, war and the destruction of democratic rights, is aimed at blocking a genuine fightback. A new leadership must be built amongst teachers, youth and parents. Independent rank-and-file committees must be established to mobilise against the efforts to subordinate all social rights to the war agenda of the ruling class. Join the Educators Rank-and-File Committee to build this leadership.



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