Northern Ireland education union leaders sanction ineffective “work to rule”, reject strike action

Tania Kent
2 October 2026

Teachers in Northern Ireland began industrial action short of strike action (ASOS) as part of a dispute over unsustainable workloads on September 28. All five teaching unions—who form the Northern Ireland Teachers’ Council (NITC)—are involved following ballots which returned resounding support for industrial action including strikes.

But the union bureaucracy has opposed strikes, which could paralyse the Northern Ireland education system, in favour of an ineffective “work to rule”.

This comes after months of negotiations with the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) Education Minister Paul Givan over the “Independent Review of Teacher Workload”. The review concluded that workload levels were unsustainable and causing serious harm to teachers, the profession and the quality of education provided to young people across Northern Ireland.

The education unions have been involved in negotiations since November 25 last year, when the review produced some 27 recommendations to be implemented. The unions challenged 11, of which eight have been agreed with a further three recommendations unresolved.

The statistics in the Independent Review paint a stark picture of the teacher workload crisis in Northern Ireland.

· 85.8 percent of teachers and school leaders state that they do not have a manageable workload.

· 77 percent of educators report that they are unable to achieve a healthy work-life balance.

· 1 in 5 teachers report that they do not receive an official Directed Time Budget (DTB) from their school, leaving their working hours effectively unplanned and unregulated.

· 46 percent of teachers—nearly half the workforce—say they are likely to leave the teaching profession as a direct result of these work pressures

· 32 percent of educators rate their mental health over the prior year as “poor” or “very poor”.

· Trade unions estimate that there is some £55 million given up in free labour, with teachers reporting working an average of 5+ hours of unpaid overtime every single week—which scales up considerably for newly qualified teachers and secondary school.

The “industrial action” consists of teachers not doing several activities across their working week, which they are not contracted to do in the first place. These include: “to no longer provide labour on an unpaid, goodwill, basis”.

They are to “attend one formal school meeting or parental engagement event of no more than one-hour duration per term” outside of normal school hours, meaning that most meetings with parents will have to be during the school day.

They are to refuse to undertake cover for absent colleagues beyond what is in their contract. They are also not to supervise or administer public exams. Extra-curricular activities, like after-school clubs and sports, can still go ahead if they are “voluntary”.

Every constituent member of the NITC asked their members the same two statutory questions during the summer 2026 ballot cycle: whether they were prepared to take strike action, and whether they were prepared to take action short of strike action.

Each union secured a strong mandate for both options: NASUWT (National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers), the largest union, had over 92 percent of participating members voting in favour of striking and over 98 percent voting for ASOS .

INTO (Irish National Teachers’ Organisation) returned a 91 percent vote in favour of striking and 99 percent in favour of ASOS. UTU (Ulster Teachers’ Union) saw 71 percent voting for strike action and 95 percent voting for ASOS. NAHT (National Association of Head Teachers NI) recorded 81 percent in favour of a strike and 96 percent in favour of ASOS. The National Education Union have not produced results but confirmed that their ballot in June returned overwhelming support to strike.

Education unions have organised “workload surveys” and

© World Socialist Web Site

“reviews” consistently for over 30 years, with the first beginning in 1994. These have told teachers what they effectively already know; that they are overworked, underpaid and burnt out! They have been utilised to supress growing militant opposition towards appeals and pressure on governments to “lighten the load” with little effect. In fact, during this period, the education system has descended into crisis.

The real issue, which teachers were prepared to strike over but blocked from doing so in Northern Ireland, is revealed in the major funding crisis in which schools have collapsed into unprecedented deficits.

The total cumulative deficit carried over by schools in Northern Ireland at the end of the 2025/26 financial year surged to £173.1 million, a staggering £70.5 million increase in a single year from the £102.6 million recorded in 2024/25. Approximately 70 percent of schools are in deficit.

The Department of Education’s budget allocation stands at roughly £3.36 billion, leaving a structural shortfall of over £250 million for the current year. Department officials warned that the multi-year budget trajectory falls £700 million to £800 million short of what is required to safely run the system, prompting warnings that it could “ruin education” without major structural overhauls.

In January 2026, the Northern Ireland Teachers’ Council formally accepted a 4 percent consolidated pay increase, backdated to September 2025. This followed prior settlements (a 5.5 percent raise for 2024 and an adjusted 4.1 percent plus £1,000 lump sum for 2023). The Northern Ireland Fiscal Council noted that public sector pay pressures are the main reason for Stormont’s budget overspends. This must be taken as a threat, as resolving a workload crisis is not compatible with budget cuts and will lead to further erosions of teachers living standards.

Northern Ireland teachers should study the impact of the agreements reached with education unions by consecutive Conservative and Labour governments in England. It was the Tory government in 2016 who first accepted the recommendations of the Teacher Workload Review. It resolved nothing and the education unions formed a “taskforce” whose workload recommendations were then implemented in January of 2024. Whilst in England the recommendations have been included into a statutory framework, nothing has fundamentally changed for teachers. The education unions in Northern Ireland are taking action to demand a similar statutory law.

The English workload agreement and the subsequent interventions by the Workload Reduction Taskforce have made limited difference on paper, but a deep divide remains between official government metrics and the daily reality reported by classroom teachers. Official figures show that the average working week for full-time teachers has fallen to 46.9 hours, down from more than 50 hours in earlier surveys, while school leaders now average 55.5 hours. Both are among the lowest averages recorded in the series.

Despite the statistical dip in hours, major independent sector reports—such as the TES Teacher Wellbeing Report—warn that workloads remain unsustainably high. The proportion of teachers describing their overall workload as “unmanageable” has surged to 71 percent (a significant jump from 61 percent in 2024). While clerical paperwork has lessened, teachers reported a sharp rise in communication demands with parents/carers via online school apps, alongside escalating time spent managing worsening post-pandemic student behaviours and huge increase in special Educational Needs (SEN) pupils.

Even with the reductions, English teachers still average a working week far higher than the statutory UK 48-hour maximum for other sectors, keeping the recruitment and retention crisis high.

Teachers must reject the feigned concern over workload promoted by the union leadership. It is they who have overseen the decimation of state education and working conditions along with it.

Strike ballots must be honoured and used as a springboard for a unified campaign across the public sector against austerity, budget cuts and privatisation and the efforts to subordinate all social rights and spending to increased military budgets to fund war. But in order to defeat the attacks on pay and conditions, teachers must break from the straitjacket of the trade union bureaucracy and organise independently through forming rank and file committees.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site