

UK National Education Union closes down strike ballot, allowing Labour government to impose below inflation deal

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The National Education Union (NEU) has announced a “pause” to the national strike ballot of teachers, due to begin on October 3, claiming that a “significant victory” had been secured on a pay deal.

The union’s executive said in a September 24 statement that the 3.5 percent, below inflation pay rise will now be “fully” funded by Andy Burnham’s Labour government and that schools will no longer need to find the additional 1.1 percent, over £500 million from existing budgets.

The decision to ballot for strike action followed an indicative ballot in April. Then more than nine in 10 (90.5 percent) NEU members said they would be prepared to take strike action to demand a fully funded pay rise and to oppose a budgetary crisis engulfing thousands of schools either in deficit or predicted to be this year.

The government announced on September 16 that they would fund the pay rise to avert strike action. The NEU’s executive then held closed door meetings and announced a “pause” in the ballot on September 24, without giving teachers any opportunity to discuss the deal, view its contents or vote on it. The deal comes with a 3 percent indicative pay rise for 2027-28 which will not be fully funded.

The £500 million used to fund the pay rise does not come from new funding but has been allocated from an underspend from Local Government Pension Scheme (LGPS) where employers have had their pension contributions reduced from around 25 percent to around 16 percent. This produced £3.5 billion in additional money which will return to the government. The NEU have lauded the announcement as a victory, but school leaders have attacked it as misleading.

The *Times Educational Supplement* (TES) found headteachers said the government is treating them “like idiots”. The government has told schools they can retain

some of the savings from the LGPS rather than reduce their funding, therefore the money is just compensation for the change.

In contrast NEU General Secretary Daniel Kebede said the government had shown it was “willing to put its money where its mouth is”, while he admitted that school funding remains below 2010 levels. In its own research, the NEU has concluded that 3.5 percent is a real-terms pay cut with Retail Prices Index inflation running at around 4.5 percent and Consumer Price Index at 3.8 percent. Teachers have already lost over 20 percent of their wages in real terms since 2010 (using the more accurate RPI).

In the NEU’s press release Kebede admitted that “Seventy-four per cent of schools have less money in real terms than they did in 2010. Teachers have suffered real terms pay cuts of around a fifth in that same period, contributing to the recruitment and retention crisis. Buildings continue to crumble. Workload remains high.”

The latest report from the Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS) “The outlook on school funding in England”, warns that despite the projected increase schools confront a major funding deficit, “from £67 billion in 2025–26 to £68 billion in 2028–29 equating 0.7 percent per year increase....”

“Regularly allocating funding outside of the spending review process is not ideal. Repeated changes make it harder for schools to plan their budgets effectively, while allowing the government to postpone the difficult trade-offs involved in setting public spending levels.”

Much of the small overall growth in funding is allocated to funding special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). The IFS noted, “Rising demand for special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) support will continue to absorb a substantial share of the increase in

funding. The government has already allocated about £3.5 billion from the core schools budget to boost funding on SEND provision in 2028–29. Stripping out planned funding for SEND, mainstream school funding per pupil will rise by 3% in real terms over this period.”

Other concerns about buildings, staffing and retention are still being ignored by government.

The details the challenges schools face in the next period. Funding per pupil is set to rise by 3 percent but this comes with a caveat that schools must survive on what is available until “reforms” to SEND funding due in 2029!

Schools are also having to deal with falling numbers of pupils: The IFS warns that “Policymakers will need to make a choice between maintaining existing funding levels (allowing funding per pupil to rise and class sizes to fall) or using falling pupil numbers to deliver cost savings through reductions in the workforce and number of schools.”

The pupil population is expected to fall by around 436,000 between 2022/23 and 2028/29, with an additional 382,000 between 2028/29 and 2032/33. The National Audit Office (NAO) estimates that a projected national drop of 56,300 primary pupils will automatically strip £288 million out of primary school budgets. Major multi-academy trusts (MAT’s) and local authority schools have been actively restructuring, putting hundreds of teaching and support staff roles at risk of redundancy.

In “pausing” the ballot for strike action, the NEU have used a well-worn path. In 2023, when the Conservative government’s 6.5 percent “deal” still required schools to find 3.5 percent from their own budgets—while the remaining 3 percent came from cuts to the DfE’s own budget—the union accepted the deal. In 2024, after a 90 percent vote for strike in an indicative ballot—with Keir Starmer’s Labour government then in power—the leadership ran a “snap poll” recommending acceptance of 5.5 percent. This while acknowledging that pay was still below 2010 levels in real terms.

In 2025, the union shelved its calls for a national ballot after accepting a partially-funded 4 percent pay award as a “positive step.” Every pay award for teachers for well over a decade has been a partially funded award, which the unions have accepted and enforced. Indicative ballots are only ever used to let off steam, provide a cover for the union to claim it is putting up a fight, when they never intended to culminate in strike action.

The trade union bureaucracy promotes the dangerous illusion that the replacement of Starmer with Burnham

represented a step change to the left and provides “hope”, that the Labour Party will listen, and that Burnham is “on our side”. This is the same fraud they promoted when Starmer was placed in office. Burnham has reneged on every policy since his election, including re-nationalisation of Thames Water and last week announced a plan to remove the triple lock safety net on the state pension.

He has fully committed to increase military spending and is escalating the war drive in Ukraine, with Britain already committed to £25 billion in total support to Ukraine. Just £2.5 billion to £2.8 billion annually would be enough to give teachers a pay rise of 10 percent.

The NEU responded to the Labour Party conference stating: “The prime minister and education secretary demonstrated they understand the challenges the sector faces. Now they need to work with educators to turn their vision of hope into concrete reality.” This is a lie; there was not a single additional penny announced at the conference for education or single progressive reform to deal with the catastrophe the sector confronts.

Teachers cannot rely on the NEU bureaucracy to defend anything. They must take control of their struggle through the building of rank-and-file committees, independent of the union apparatus in every school and linked across the sector. Such committees must unite teachers with other public-sector workers—nurses, resident doctors, transport workers—who face the same assault on living standards and prepare coordinated action.



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