

UK: Teachers should reject 5.5 percent wage offer and fight for billions needed for schools

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Teachers in England should reject the National Education Union's (NEU) executive's recommendation to accept the government's 5.5 percent pay offer.

The pay rise does nothing to address the historic loss of wages over two decades, or the chronic underfunding of the education system the Labour government has offered no new money for.

A snap ballot on the offer will commence September 21 and end on September 30.

Daniel Kebede, NEU general secretary, said, "We believe this is a significant first—but not last—step towards a long-term correction in teacher pay, secured as a direct consequence of members' strike action in 2023 and their positive indicative ballot this March."

The NEU in fact imposed a sell-out deal on its members over pay following eight days of strike action in 2023. The union accepted a 6.5 percent wage rise, of which 3.5 percent was not fully funded, against the demands of teachers for a fully funded 12 percent wage claim.

The NEU suspended its successful ballot for strike action on pay and working conditions, calling on members to wait for the School Teachers Review Body's (STRB) at its annual conference in April in anticipation of the election of a Labour government it was intent on collaborating with.

In a July 30 speech, Labour's Chancellor Rachel Reeves said the government accepted "in full" the recommendations of the STRB which called for meagre "increases to teachers' pay of 5.5 percent at all grades. In addition, a 5.5 percent increase to all allowance ranges".

Overworked teachers will have to do even more in return and face any increase being clawed back in productivity increases agreed between the education unions and Labour. Reeves announced she was launching a "spending review" and "today starting the firing gun on a new approach to public service reform to drive greater productivity in the public sector." Labour "will establish a new office of value for money, with an immediate focus on identifying areas where we can reduce or stop spending or improve its value."

To this Kebede responded with platitudes such as "more

needs to be done to remedy teacher pay, workload and the recruitment and retention crisis" and claimed ministers should "be under no illusion that a single pay deal is an end to the matter".

The pay rise is for teachers in state-maintained schools, with academies not obliged to implement it. With 42.7 percent of primary schools now academies or free schools, (44.2 percent of the primary school population), and 81.9 percent of secondary schools now academies or free schools, (81.7 percent of secondary school pupils), most headteachers, under financial stress and budgetary demands can choose to ignore the claim and set their own pay deals.

The STRB estimated its recommendations would cost £1.65 billion over a whole school year. Schools will receive "almost £1.2 billion in additional funding to cover their costs" in the 2024-25 financial year, the Department for Education (DfE) has stipulated. Schools will be therefore expected to use £600 million of "headroom" in their budgets identified by the Conservative government earlier this year. That funding was earmarked for the previous year's wage claim, as well as the paltry amount allocated to repair dangerously crumbling buildings under the RAAC concrete crisis.

As noted by the *Times Educational Supplement*, in "real terms, the September pay rate for newly qualified teachers is actually below the 2020 level, when new teachers started on the equivalent of £31,705 today (then the salary was £25,714).

"Looking further back, the 2024-25 rate is below, when inflation is taken into account, salaries between 2003 and 2010, when for eight years the entry salary was above £32,000 in today's money, reaching a high of £33,003 (in 2024 terms) in 2007.

"This means that a new teacher's purchasing power was higher in 2003 than it is today."

In "real-terms new teacher salaries were already falling before the 2008 financial crash, and the decline in pay accelerated once the coalition government took office in 2010. New teacher pay was frozen in 2011 and 2012 under

austerity measures.”

The TES cited Christine Farquharson, associate director at the Institute for Fiscal Studies, referring to the average pay of all teachers, who said, “Average teacher pay is no higher in real terms today than it was in 2001-02. By contrast, the average worker in the economy has seen a real-terms pay rise of 18 percent over this period.”

The NEU’s statement recommending the pay deal ignores the actual “first step” the newly elected Starmer Labour government took in office—upholding the two-child welfare benefit cap (preventing parents from claiming universal credit or child tax credit for a third child and subsequent children) and suspending seven MPs for opposing it.

The NEU knows full well the tragic consequences for educational outcomes that entrenched poverty has on children’s lives and its impact on the ability of teachers to support these children.

A report on Generation Z children (born the mid-to-late 1990s) born into the poorest fifth of families in the UK are 12 times more likely to experience a raft of poor health and educational outcomes by the age of 17 compared to more affluent peers, according to University College London researchers.

Children who were most disadvantaged aged 0-5 were four and a half times more likely to do worse at school at the age of 17 compared to those in the highest income group. They were three and a half times more likely to start smoking.

Those born in the lowest income quintile group were more likely to have a harmful cluster of vulnerabilities at age 17 and were 12 times more likely to experience all--or all but one--of the five adverse health and social outcomes examined by researchers, compared to those born in the highest income quintile.

The Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) reported that removing the cap on benefits, which costs affected households up to £3,455 a year, would make a “significant difference” to one million children in poverty, and would lift 300,000 children out of poverty altogether.

Children born in poverty, will die in poverty and Labour, beholden to big business, will continue to entrench this class reality.

Reeves said it would cost £3 billion to axe the cap, when Labour has confirmed it will hand over £3 billion every year indefinitely for the war in Ukraine and will renew the Trident nuclear weapons programme at an estimated cost of £200 billion. All part of Starmer’s “cast iron commitment” to spending 2.5 percent of GDP on defence, an extra £75 billion by 2030.

Prior to the general election the NEU’s manifesto cited the disastrous state of education and included a lengthy wish list, but the most it can bring itself to call for is an increase

in school funding of slightly above one percent of GDP on education, to what it was under the last year of the last Labour government. “In 2010 the UK spent above five percent of GDP on education, which is the average for OECD countries. Today it has fallen to just 3.9 percent. We are calling for the next Government to invest £12.2bn next year to start reversing the impact of Government cuts.”

No such demands are raised by the union now that the election is over. There is no call to resume industrial action to fight for the billions necessary to provide a decent quality of education or a pay deal in line with the cost of living.

The Educators Rank-and-File Committee insisted before the general election: “Teachers must prepare to take on Labour as it prepares to take office. This requires a break from the trade union bureaucracy whose function, in order to secure their privileged existence, is to block the development of a struggle in defence of educators’ independent interests.

“With dozens of local authorities facing bankruptcy, a collapse in teacher recruitment, an unprecedented level of teacher resignations, a crisis in SEND (special educational needs and disabilities), collapsing school buildings, and a witch hunt against teachers opposing the Gaza genocide, proposing a right-wing Labour government as a means of overcoming the crisis in education is to treat teachers with contempt.”

We call on teachers to vote no in the pay ballot and take forward the fight to build independent rank-and-file committees to prosecute the struggle for decent wages, safe buildings, mass recruitment of teachers, reduction in class sizes and high-quality training for new recruits.



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