

Protest strikes won't win a real pay rise

THE NATIONAL Education Union is taking two days of strike action on 27 April and 2 May followed a ballot to reject the Government's derisory offer of 4.3% and a one off payment of £1,000. A majority of 98% sends a clear message that teachers and support staff are not prepared to see their pay cut as the cost of living crisis deepens.

The strikes had been preceded by a massive show of strength by the union on 15 March as tens of thousands marched in London in an impressive Save Our Schools carnival alongside other workers who took strike action that day. The widespread thirst for action has actually seen the NEU increase its membership by over 50,000. Workplace organisation has strengthened as a new layer of union representatives has emerged.

The union is very clear that this is not just about pay but also about saving our education system from Tory attacks and underfunding. Previous pay cuts have had a devastating impact on the ability to recruit and retain teachers. The shortage of teaching assistants and support staff is also a perennial problem. Add into the mix the escalating workload and excessive accountability that teachers face and it makes for a grossly underfunded education system in severe crisis.

Education Secretary Gillian Keegan has now withdrawn her latest offer which had been roundly rejected anyway. Union general secretaries Mary Bousted and Kevin Courtney, who have been cam-

paigning for a 12% pay rise, have stressed that teachers' pay has 'lost 23% in real terms since 2010 and support staff 27% over the same period'. They continue to call for more negotiations with the government whilst pursuing limited strike action over a protracted period of time.

The union strategy so far has seen a one day strike, some regional ones, and a couple of two day strikes since February. The union now intends to use the period of examinations from 15 May to begin a re-ballot of teacher members in England running until the end of July and timetable in a 3 day strike in late June/early July to be confirmed by the National Executive on 18 May. Of course, this is on condition that the union has not agreed to a new deal.

NEU joint general secretary Mary Bousted said on Thursday that the union had asked "for an above-inflation pay rise, but we'd be prepared to negotiate a decent pay rise," adding that the union would consider a multi-year deal.

This shows the union's strategy is aimed at securing a similar deal to the one accepted by NEU members in Wales

in March. That deal consisted of 1.5 percent consolidated, and 1.5 percent non-consolidated, followed by 5 percent from September 2023. The deal ties teachers into two-years of real-terms pay cuts, and included nothing for support staff, in the one region where they crossed the ballot threshold for strike action.

Escalation

Rank and file members must question why this strategy from the leadership has not forced the government's hand at all. The stakes are very high in this dispute and a militant mood amongst the membership must not be dissipated by occasional strikes followed by lengthy negotiations and then re-ballots, if not ballots on under inflation deals.

Strikes have to escalate quickly and for over a significant period of time otherwise we fall into the government's waiting game. Strikes must be organised with a view to winning the battle for inflation-proof pay not as a means of merely protesting. Rank and file activists need to tap into the rise in union consciousness and workplace organisation by building a rank and file movement that can coordinate action. Such a movement could also be the springboard to assuming control of the strikes and negotiations and to fight any backtracking from the union leaders.

Prices, bills and rents—up. Wages—down. It's a rip-off!

THE LATEST inflation figure of 10.1% surprised many economists. It won't have surprised many workers—except that it wasn't higher.

The *Mirror* reported on the day of the announcement, 'Struggling households are now faced with shocking food prices, with cheese 49% more expensive than a year ago, eggs up 28%, sugar 33% and a white sliced loaf 20%.'

'Last month,' The *Mirror* concludes, we 'paid 19% more on a weekly shop, the highest [rise] since 1977'.

The other main driver of inflation is energy. According to government statistics (ONS) electricity rose by 66.7% last year and gas by an astronomical 129.4%.

Because working class families spend a far higher percentage of their income on fuel and food, for us inflation is much higher than 10%. But this is deliberately obscured by the fog of official statistics.

Yet Jeremy Hunt has the nerve to say that rising wages were a 'significant' factor driving inflation. He claims the average wage rise of 6.9% is 'inflationary'.

How can it be when pay is lagging multiple percentage points behind the headline inflation figure? And that's before you even start to look at the real rise in the cost of living for working class families.

It shows the nurses and teachers were absolutely right to reject this Chancellor's insult of an offer—less than 10% over two years! After a decade of real falling wages, nothing less than a real cost of living pay rise is 'affordable'. Add to this the shortfall of over 40,000 nurses in the NHS and anyone can see that nurses' (and junior doctors') pay is a major factor in the deliberate running down of the NHS.

The bosses' plan

Forcing down real wages is what lies behind the Tories' push to get over-50s back into work and the recently announced benefits sanctions to force the unemployed and single mums back into the labour market. Not because there's any

decent jobs out there, but to increase competition for work so that trade unionists will be afraid to put in for increases that make up for inflation.

The capitalists' other tool to combat inflation is for the Bank of England to keep raising interest rates. This makes borrowing more expensive. But millions of us are trapped in debts we cannot easily get out of—on credit cards, mortgages, etc. Even renters will face increases as landlords put up their rents to pay off their mortgages.

Although the rate of price increases will likely slow, if energy prices come down, they will remain historically high, if the Bank of England increases interest rates to 5% and keeps them there for a long time.

It is at this point that economists predict indebted companies will start to fail, as the banks refuse to roll over their debts. That means closures and job cuts—unless there's a fightback.

Strikes

This makes the strikes all the more important to win. Two or even three year deals that tie in our best organised and most combative unions to falling real wages would be a disaster.

It is up to rank and file workers, like those behind the successful NHS Workers Say NO campaign, to organise resistance to the union leaders' sell-out deals. Those currently balloting to strike must vote for action, so we can build the momentum up again.

But this time—in the second wave of strikes—we must force the union leaders to escalate the action, up to all-out indefinite strikes if necessary. We should demand they coordinate their strikes, their demos and their slogans. We must aim to bust the Tories' economic policy to pieces.

We demand:

- Real pay rises for all.
- Instead of two-year deals, our pay should rise monthly to keep up with prices.
- No job cuts or closures—occupy to stop the bosses removing their assets.

workers power

What we stand for

Behind the Tories and their billionaire backers lies the capitalist system. It is a system that puts millions on the dole, seeks to drive down wages and destroys the environment. It is a system that diverts attention from its crimes by bloody wars, and by dividing up the workers amongst themselves by promoting racism and sexism.

We want a socialist revolution to replace this system with one where production is guided by the needs of the many, not the profits of the few. That means taking the wealth of society, the banks and the major firms, into the hands of the working class and drawing up a democratic plan of production under workers' control.

To get this we have to break the resistance of the capitalist state: the police, courts, army and judiciary and replace it with a new kind of state based on democratically elected and accountable workers' councils.

The working class has the power to do this. It is rediscovering its potential to defeat the bosses through strike action. We think that power should be used to smash capitalism and build a new kind of society without poverty, oppression and war.

We fight for a working class unity and a revolutionary party based on a programme of action:

- A living wage, pension and social security for all, indexed to inflation.
- Controls on prices, rents and bills.
- Workers' control over all strikes and negotiations. For a rank and file movement to dissolve the bureaucracy and create fighting, democratic unions.
- Women's liberation: social provision of childcare and domestic labour. Full reproductive rights on demand.
- No platform for fascists. Workers' unity against racist police and bosses.
- Open borders: equal rights for all migrants and refugees from day one.
- No to war: Britain out of Nato. For national liberation against imperialism.
- A workers' government based on and accountable to councils of workers' delegates.
- Expropriate the fortunes of the rich to fund public services and a just transition.
- Nationalisation under workers' control of the major banks, transport, utilities, public services, manufacturing.
- A revolutionary party, united with socialists across the world in a new world party of socialist revolution—a Fifth International.

If you want to fight for socialism, international solidarity and revolution, join Workers Power today.

