

Marked Absent!

A rank-and-file strike bulletin

02/05/2023

Our strike beyond 2nd May

Our strike has been inspirational so far, but we need to make it even stronger, and build our power as rank and file workers. The government has been forced into conceding an improved offer, however this was wholly inadequate and rejected. Strike action has taken us this far, and is our greatest weapon to winning this dispute.

Building our numbers

Whilst our strike numbers so far have been good, and picket lines are often well attended, our struggle has still been limited in the scope of our action by the number of school workers who have successfully balloted for action. However, a number of opportunities present themselves to change this, and get the vast majority of school workers out on strike, placing the maximum amount of leverage on the government.

NEU support staff members in England have been waiting patiently for national leadership to announce a re-ballot for them to join the 'pay up' campaign, after narrowly missing the legal threshold to take strike action during our original ballot. However, as a re-ballot of teaching staff to renew our strike mandate has been announced, no such plans have been publicly put in place yet for support staff. Support staff play a vital role in our schools, and without them on strike it is much easier for the government to keep our schools open on strike days. Whilst some support staff in England have already taken the brave choice to refuse to cross picket lines on strike days, it is obvious that many more will join this action if they received a legal mandate through a re-ballot.

We must keep putting pressure on our national leadership to announce a re-ballot of support staff, and if they do not, put serious effort into building the confidence of our support staff colleagues to refuse to cross the picket line. Many school workers have already been doing this through signing an open letter (see the reverse side of this bulletin for more details), and bringing signs to picket lines saying "re-ballot support staff". We know that public sector unions like Unison and GMB have been purposefully obstructive of NEU balloting support staff members, as they want to maintain a hegemony over school support staff membership. But if GMB and Unison refuse to represent their members, refuse to ballot them, refuse to give them the tools to fight in any meaningful way, then an industrial union such as NEU cannot be apologetic about openly giving these workers a ballot and an opportunity to fight for themselves and their interests as school workers.

Another opportunity arises to grow our strike too, with three other education unions, NASUWT, NAHT and ASCL, balloting their members to join our strike action, the latter of which is balloting its members for strike action for the first time in their history. This offers the opportunity to expand our strike to every aspect of our schools, bring hundreds of thousands of more workers onto the picket lines, and more straightfor-



wardly shut down our schools fully on strike days. Forming cross-union strike committees within schools and regions would also give us a massive opportunity to grow the organisational strength of our sector's rank-and-file, and ensure that school workers themselves have the final say over how this dispute continues or ends.

However, we can't leave responsibility for making these ballots a success just to those school workers who are members of those unions. If we are to build our industrial strength, and build cross-union solidarity between school workers, we must also throw our weight behind their ballots, and help them beat the government's anti-trade union laws. That means talking to known NASUWT members in our schools, and making sure they've voted in the ballot. This could also mean writing a collective letter as school workers to send to our school leaders, putting pressure on them to vote yes in the NAHT and ASCL ballots.

Escalating our action

Building up our numbers alone is not all we can do though to help us win this struggle. Strikes are not simply another form of protest - they are actions that utilise our specific leverage as workers, i.e. that we are the ones whose work allows the school the function, to get the bosses to meet our demands. We therefore must be pushing for tangible forms of escalation to increase this leverage.

One way we can do this is on our picket lines. As NEU rep Vik explains in a recent Notes from Below article, picket lines should also be actually picketing - we're not there as individuals protesting but as a collective persuading other workers to support shutting down the workplace. Reps building strike action should expect every member to strike and physically join picket lines regardless how they've voted. The more workers on the picket line, the more we can convince scabbing workers to join the strike, and therefore the more effectively we can shut down the school.

Whilst as school workers it is difficult for us to talk to students about the strike, in South London reports have come in of local strike solidarity groups leafleting and talking to students in support of the strike, and trying to organise skillshares between school students already organising to support the strikes and those who want to mobilise in their own school. We should be talking to any local strike support groups in our local areas to try and see if they can replicate this sort of activity, and support a budding student movement in our schools.

We must also resist efforts to demobilise ourselves for the sake of good PR. Recently, NEU national leadership have been doing the rounds on TV, stating that they have encouraged striking year 11 and 13 teachers to ensure schools stay open for these students to have revision and exam preparation lessons, in an effort to keep out of the headlines the idea that striking teachers do not care about their students. The problem with this is our struggle will not be won depending on how sympathetic this or that journalist's article is to our cause - it will be won through the strength of our own disruptive strike action as school workers. We know that this strike is not just for us, but also for our students, whose education has been decimated by years of real-term funding cuts. We know we care about our students, and that is why we need our strike action to be as successful as possible. It is therefore our duty to push in our workplaces and regions against these attempts to demobilise our action from the top of the union.

Let's push our struggle forward and win a better education system for all. **Solidarity!**

Strike report from Bristol

For each of the strike days so far, our school was closed (except for approx 20 children of 'critical' workers).

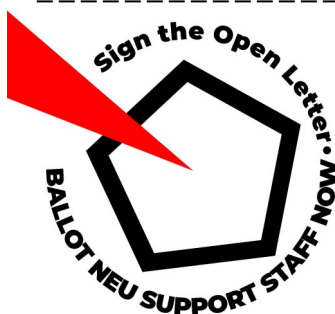
The first strike day was really exciting. We had several fellow workers not in the NEU refuse to cross the picket line, who also came to our rally after. We had some parents and children come to support and masses of support from the passing public. Some of the parents are nurses or postal workers who are also striking, and they expressed solidarity.

I am slightly concerned that the plan is for just more sporadic isolated strike days. We could be looking at the Chicago Teachers' Union's example, and proposing a longer set of strike days, (e.g. five days together) as a means to force the government's hand. This would need some serious organising to persuade teachers and support staff who feel they can't afford it in the short term to actually think it would be successful.

The first strike day was exciting as in the build up the head teacher was proposing to open one class per year group. The local NEU WhatsApp group was instrumental by making it clear workers should not be letting heads know if their intention to strike or not, and that ALL workers can refuse to cross the picket line. We held a meeting for all support workers no matter if in the NEU, a different union, or none at all to communicate this. At this meeting support staff in the GMB and Unison brought in guidance from their unions advising them not to cover striking workers' work. We also made a leaflet communicating this for all workers and left it in the staffroom. This helped several useful discussions to be had. There was a real feeling of solidarity at this point. Over the next few days the head announced that the school would now only be open to Year 6 children as it's too important for them to miss four days for SATS. The staff who would be expected to teach these classes would be the HLTAs. Again the local NEU WhatsApp group had discussions about how to challenge this, and we had discussions with these workers in our school. They agreed they would not cover the work, and also would not communicate their intentions. Then at the final staff briefing before the strike it was announced

that only critical staff children would be supervised. I asked the headteacher "not the Year 6 classes too?" and they said "well I don't know who's coming in, do I?"

The risk now is that momentum is lost, or that support workers will gradually be challenged to cover work. The support workers we spoke to don't feel like they can afford to strike, but also feel that as the school is more or less closed, that this is not breaking the strike. It is hard to argue with this in many ways. By re-balloting support workers successfully this could build more momentum in the strike. I also wonder how schools without strong reps, or in more complicated situations for example smaller rural schools, can be supported by other school workers to join the strike.



A number of rank and file NEU members have started this open letter, calling for the union leadership to name the date of the support staff re-ballot immediately. Sign the open letter and call for a support staff ballot now:

tinyurl.com/NEUOpenLetter

What is *Marked Absent*?

Marked Absent is a rank-and-file bulletin produced by school workers, for school workers. We've therefore created this bulletin to discuss and organise escalating action.

Send us a strike report!

We want to bring together school workers and supporters of their strikes to create a rank and file bulletin on certain strike days. Send us a strike report at: www.tinyurl.com/MarkedAbsent

Help us distribute!

There will be tens of thousands schools across the country. We want to be on all of them! Download the PDF from www.notesfrombelow.org/tag/MarkedAbsent and print some out.

Picketing is legal!

"It's illegal to have more than 6 people on a picket line". Sound familiar? It's **wrong**. This rule comes from a government written set of guidelines for picketing which are not legally binding. Pickets of over 6 people aren't illegal unless they're "likely to endanger safety of people and property". Anyone can attend a support demo beside a picket, including students. Workers from one school can attend support demos at other schools without breaking the law. We're not flying pickets, we're flying demonstrators. *Mob the picket lines!*

Keep up to date with the bulletin by scanning the QR code to join our WhatsApp

