

Written Ministerial Statement

The content of this written ministerial statement is as received at the time from the Minister. It has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process.

Department of Education

INDUSTRIAL ACTION TO BE TAKEN BY TEACHERS

Published on Friday 7 February 2025.

Mr Givan (The Minister of Education): The following statement provides an update in relation to the decision by four of the recognised teaching unions (NASUWT, NEU, INTO and UTU) to commence industrial action in the form of action short of strike action (ASOS) with effect from Monday 10 February 2025.

Teachers' Pay Offer 2024/25

Intensive negotiations in recent weeks led up to a formal pay offer made by Teachers' Negotiating Committee (TNC) Management Side on 31 January 2025.

The offer included a 5.5% increase in pay and allowances for all teachers, along with a commitment to timeframes for future pay negotiations and an undertaking to jointly progress over 20 workload measures aimed at addressing concerns about workload expressed by teachers and school leaders. The offer made clear that while these measures would not address every concern, the implementation of them would signal significant and positive progress that would make a meaningful difference to teachers and school leaders.

Whilst it was agreed by the Executive Committees of the four unions to put the offer to their membership with a recommendation to accept, following a brief consultation process all four unions have advised the employers that their membership has rejected the offer, and further industrial action is to begin next week.

I am disappointed by this response, and I am very concerned that this action will once again cause unnecessary disruption to the education of our children and young people.

I firmly believe teachers should receive a fair and appropriate pay award and that is why I prioritised securing the £48m required to offer a 5.5% increase in pay and allowances in line with the award offered and accepted in England and Wales. The 13.5% requested by the unions, which would have cost c.£118m in the current year and resulted in a recurrent cost of c.£202m next year, is completely unaffordable and would be disproportionate in comparison with pay awards made to other public sector workers.

The right to take Industrial Action

It is important to clarify that the right to lawful strike action referenced in the pay offer was not being withdrawn from staff. In order to reverse the negative impact that industrial action and action short of strike has had on the educational experience of our children and young people for more than a decade, the offer included a commitment that industrial action should only be taken as a last resort in any dispute in line with the recognised Code of Practice: Industrial Action Ballots and Notice to Employers.

Contrary to misinformation falsely claiming that this was an attempt to remove the right of the unions to legitimate industrial action, the offer was conditional on a commitment to a period free from industrial action tied to specific commitments on a joint programme of work agreed to resolve workload issues and a shared understanding of the timing of future pay negotiations which reflect Northern Ireland Executive budget timeframes.

Workload

Whilst the trade union ballots were on the basis of pay, I am aware of the concerns raised by teachers about workload which is why Management Side is committed to a process aimed at addressing workload issues. This is important work which needs to be taken forward. Many of these actions need to be delivered in partnership with the trade union representatives and ASOS will simply delay the agreed work programme. It was for this reason we sought a commitment to a period of stability free from industrial action to enable workload issues to be properly addressed.

Pay Award Timescales

During both the informal discussions commencing last September and formal negotiations in January, there was an acknowledgement that the timeframes for negotiation on teachers' pay in Northern Ireland are heavily impacted by the annual budget process and financial climate.

These timescales were communicated to the Trade Unions in September 2024 with a commitment to progress formal negotiations in January 2025, or sooner if possible. Management Side were therefore disappointed that some Trade Unions progressed to ballot members on the issue of pay in November before negotiations had commenced or concluded.

Therefore, as part of the latest offer Management Side had committed to a timeframe for the 2025/26 pay negotiations to ensure greater transparency for staff and those who represent them. I believe that pay settlements should be reached as quickly as possible each year, but the process must recognise the financial challenges we face in the context of one-year budgets and therefore must be clear about what is achievable.

Teachers' Terms and Conditions

In a letter to teachers' yesterday, Management Side explained that references in the formal offer to the Jordanstown Agreement (which defines Teachers' Terms and Conditions) reflect the existing, contractual position for teachers and they emphasised that the offer is not a change to these terms and conditions.

Management Side also made it clear that by taking part in the action short of a strike, as directed by the unions, teachers will not be meeting their full contractual obligations under the Jordanstown Agreement and that they are considering their options in this regard.

Impact on children and young people

Finally, and most importantly, industrial action has negatively impacted the educational experience of our children and young people for more than a decade. Over recent years, action short of strike has impacted on many different elements of school life, such as after school activities, early closures, teachers refusing to cover classes or attend meetings, training, assessments and inspections.

This has far-reaching consequences for the education of our children. With the resumption of inspection following the recent end of ASOS in April 2024, we are only now identifying schools for which intervention is critical and has been needed for a number of years. However, this is too late for the children who have been failed by a lack of inspection for many years previously. Northern Ireland is the only system within the British Isles that has been without functioning systems of assessment and inspection because of industrial action for almost a decade and lacks even basic data on school and system performance. This is not an acceptable basis on which to move forward.

While I can confirm that Management Side remains committed to resolving the current dispute, indeed that they have offered the unions conciliation at the Labour Relations Agency, I have also been clear that it will not be possible, from within my budget, to secure the funding required to improve what I consider to be a fair and reasonable pay offer.

It is incumbent on us all to put our children and young people first and, alongside Management, call on the trade unions to suspend the planned industrial action and to bring forward proposals to resolve this dispute.