Open letter from NEU members to our National Executive Committee: Reject 6.5%

Dear NEC,

This year, we have campaigned with our union for increased funding in our schools and an inflation matching pay rise. We have watched as our union skilfully negotiated a hostile media environment to build a campaign that brought teachers out in support: our union membership has grown rapidly and turnout in our re-ballot looks likely to be higher than in our first ballot. Our campaign has also won widespread public support.

We have picketed our workplaces, organised and attended rallies, given up our time to organise and attend ballot and strike planning meetings, drafted press releases and sacrificed our pay on strike days in order to actively support the campaign for an inflation matching pay rise.

On Friday July 7th, whilst we were picketing, we began to get a sense that NEU leadership no longer shared our aspiration of winning a fully funded inflation-matching pay offer. Joint General Secretary Mary Bousted told the Today programme that she believed NEU members would accept a fully funded 6.5% offer (https://twitter.com/BBCr4today/status/1677212596502503424?s=20).

On the same day, the NEU published a press release stating "'We believe that the STRB has recommended a 6.5% across the board pay rise, and if such a rise were properly funded implementing such a rise could bring this dispute to a close" (https://neu.org.uk/latest/press-releases/neu-strike-action-0).

We have not been consulted on this, and we do not agree with it. 6.5% would represent a further real terms erosion in our pay, and would mark a defeat in a campaign that was initially about winning a fully funded inflation-matching pay offer. **We believe strongly that the NEU should be making plans to reject an offer of 6.5%, and should be organising our membership to be ready to do so.**

There are instructive examples of other unions fighting for inflation-busting pay offers. The BMA have repeatedly called for junior doctors to receive pay restoration, setting out an intention of winning a 35% pay increase. EIS, the education union in Scotland, repeatedly rejected sub-inflation offers and escalated strike action to win salary increases that place teacher earnings in Scotland far above those in England.

There are also warnings to be heeded from unions where leaderships have sought to settle for sub-standard offers. When the RCN did so, members rejected the offer put to them by union leaders, and this fragmented the RCN's campaign to such an extent that their attempts to win a re-ballot collapsed. Meanwhile, CWU members are currently voting on a deal that many consider to be inadequate, again leading to fragmentation and division amongst members. When union leaderships seek to settle for sub-standard offers, the result is a divided membership and the perception of a failed campaign.

On Saturday July 8th The Telegraph reported that the Cabinet is divided over the STRB report, and that Gillian Keegan is fighting for a fully funded 6.5% offer. This is a sign that we have moved the government’s position. But we have not moved them far enough - we must retain a focus on winning at least a fully funded inflation matching pay offer. There is a very real danger that we risk falling into a political trap set by government. By withholding the STRB report they have allowed us to make the error of framing 6.5% as an acceptable offer, and have distracted us from our goal of a fully funded inflation-matching pay offer. We cannot allow ourselves to be distracted by government game-playing and must retain a laser-like focus on the goal of winning a fully funded inflation-matching pay offer.

Victory in our campaign requires unity in the call for inflation-matching pay offers. We call on the NEC to:

1. Cease public messaging that implies an offer of 6.5%, if fully funded, would be acceptable to members;
2. Begin a campaign to organise and educate amongst members to ensure that members are ready to reject an offer of 6.5% in unity with union leadership.
3. Make public statements calling for government to offer at least a fully funded inflation-matching pay offer.
4. In the absence of any such fully funded inflation-matching offer from the government, have clear plans in place to escalate strike action.

Our union has built a mass campaign around the intention of winning fully funded inflation-matching pay offers. We cannot relent now, and we must organise amongst our members to prepare for the next phase of our campaign. Messages from union leadership that imply we will accept below inflation pay offers are unacceptable and counter-productive, and we call upon the NEC to retain its focus on winning fully funded-inflation matching pay offers.