

General Secretary's speech to STUC pre-budget mass lobby, Scottish Parliament 8 December 2022

Colleagues, Comrades...

It's an honour to be here with you on behalf of the EIS and the STUC Women's committee.

The EIS along with every other teacher trade union in Scotland is in the middle of a major dispute with the Scottish Government and COSLA over pay.

And it's worth noting that 80% of our collective membership are women.

Two weeks ago, EIS members were forced into taking strike action over pay for the first time in 40 years-

Not since Thatcher was in Downing Street have our members been left with no other option but to strike for fair pay.

There's an embarrassing lesson in that for the Scottish Government today.

More than 9 months of negotiations have brought nothing but a series of offers that amounted to deep real-terms pay cuts when teachers' wages have already lost 25% of their value since 2008.

A starting offer of 2% - even less than last year's 2.2% settlement- underlines that the other side have been intent on game-playing from the outset and trying to get a settlement for the cheapest possible price rather than delivering a fair pay award for a majority female cohort of workers.

This doesn't add up whatsoever when you've got stated commitment to closing the gender pay gap.

And it doesn't add up for a group of workers who staged a heroic effort over the course of the pandemic, keeping Education going, in very challenging conditions, putting the needs of children and young people head of their own health and safety.

That effort has yet to be recognized by this government or our employers.

Today our colleagues in the SSTA and NASUWT are striking the length and breadth of the country as part of the same dispute.

Solidarity to them- the EIS looks forward to coordinating strike action with them in the new year now that they've won their mandates.

We will be striking in the new year unless the Scottish Government and COSLA can get into the Christmas spirit, stop being Scrooges and bring a decent offer to the table before the holidays.

The EIS and the other unions have given them plenty of options to think about. Ten months after our pay claim was submitted, it's way past time that they gave some serious thought to those options instead of dismissing them out of hand or ignoring them altogether because it doesn't suit their political agenda.

Because if they don't come back to the table with something sensible very soon, we're looking at teacher strikes on the 10th and 11th January – primary first, then secondary;

and for 16 days solid from 16th January until 6th February rotating across all local authorities.

One day of strike action is a big deal to our members.

They want to be in their classrooms with their young people, teaching them, caring for them, helping combat the impact of poverty on the quarter of kids who're in it through no fault of their own or of their families... but of politicians in cahoots with billionaires and big business.

One day of a strike action is a big deal; 18 days across January and February is a huge deal but the fact that they're prepared to do it demonstrates the strength of our members' resolve in this dispute.

They won't accept another deep real-terms pay cut. Our members- mostly women-have got homes to keep, bills to pay, their own kids to feed and clothe...

And they're feeding kids in school, buying them clothes and essential materials and equipment that families can't afford and that schools can't afford...

because the overall investment in Education as a vital public service just isn't enough.

And that's not the responsibility of teachers

That's the responsibility of the Scottish Government and local authorities-

They make the political decisions about priorities

They do the budget planning

They do the spending...

Our teachers teach and look after everyone's children.

They provide valuable education to our young people while politicians dissemble and spin...

In our dispute, the Scottish Government has disgracefully tried to spin it that teachers asking for fair pay will cost children and young people free school meals, ASN support- will even undermine support for Ukrainian refugees...

Trying to make a group of workers feel guilt and shame about asking for fair pay...

Very disingenuous.

And they've tried to spin it that teachers asking for 10% have no right to when other unions have settled for less.

In the trade union movement, we don't let ourselves be divided and we don't negotiate down-we negotiate up because we know that helps our members and in the end that helps everyone. We stand together.

We don't accept poverty as a benchmark of acceptable wages for workers in one of the richest countries in the world- awash with wealth that now needs to be shared.

We don't accept that the Scottish Government can't afford to provide every school-child in Scotland with a free meal or the means to buy one every day, and take away the shame and stigma that thousands of young people are put through every day at school when it comes to trying to feed themselves.

This government needs to do everything that it can to give our citizens, including our young citizens, decent, dignified lives.

The Scottish government has been talking a lot about democracy these past few weeks, and how important it is.

When 96% of EIS members vote to reject 5% and then when 96% vote to strike for better- if you care about democracy, you don't bring 5% or worse back to the table.

That's disrespectful of trade union democracy and completely flies in the face of Fair Work.

And so do the strike breaking tactics of COLSA this week that have sought to intimidate EIS members into undermining the action of striking SSTA and NASUWT colleagues by covering their classes. Shameful.

Comrades, I'm an English teacher and listening to Scottish Government talk the talk, I'd given them a B- not an A because there's a lot of repetition in what they say...they could vary their vocabulary a bit more... and there could be more substance to the ideas...but they talk confidently, fluently, good eye contact with their audience- all those performative things. So a B.

But for their Modern Studies, their Maths, their Moral Education, they'd get very low grades.

Must do better. Can do better.

So some revision notes for them:

The additional funding needed for the teachers' pay claim is £175 million...or half a CAL-Mac ferry and less than a tenth of last year's £2BN underspend.

The SG budget has taken a 4% real-terms hit; teachers and their families are facing more than double that pain with a 9% real-terms cut to their incomes this year alone.

No one should be putting up with this.

Teachers and other public sector workers- the majority of them women- have said enough is enough.

The STUC and all unions within it are demanding better for Scotland...

And when good folk all around you are saying the same thing- must do better- Scottish Government, your conscience should tell you that you need to pay attention.

Listen to the trade union movement.

Value workers as people and as citizens.

Value trade unions as social partners...

Who can work with you to tackle the gender pay gap and do something decisive about poverty.

Listen to their advice about how to raise the revenue needed to invest properly in public services so that our citizens get the help and support that they need to live well.

So that your public sector workers, including your teachers, can be paid fairly paid.

Scottish Government- it's past time for you to walk the walk and not just talk the talk.