7,000 teachers are being balloted for strike action as fair pay rise talks fail

THOUSANDS of teachers could be walking out of the classroom in December as Ireland’s largest teachers’ trade union has announced its intention to ballot its members for strike action.

The Irish National Teachers’ Organisation (INTO) has sent letters to its 7,000 members less than a month after pickets took place at the school gates in protest of an ‘insulting’ pay offer from the Government after 13 months of talks failed.

The union says it is seeking a mandate to embark on a series of strikes in December and also says it will withdraw its co-operation from the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) to further escalate its campaign for a fair wage increase for teachers.

Gerry Murphy, INTO’s Northern Secretary, said prolonged negotiations with the Department of Education, and the Employing Authorities, have been a genuine attempt to resolve the pay issue but claims the employers and the Department of Education have been negotiating in bad faith.

Speaking about the decision to ballot for strike action My Murphy said: “INTO members, along with every other teacher, have been denied any wage increase for the 2015/16 year, despite the Minister’s claims to the contrary. They have been offered a mean one per cent for the 2016/17 year. This is also despite all other teachers in the education sector in Northern Ireland, and every jurisdiction across these islands, receiving a pay increase for the 2015/16 year.

"INTO, along with our other teaching union colleagues in the Northern Ireland Teachers’ Council (NITC), had been engaged in a prolonged negotiation with the Employing Authorities and their masters in the Department of Education (DE) for over a year in a genuine attempt to resolve the 2015/16 pay claim.

"However, it became clear the Employers and the Department were negotiating in bad faith when monies budgeted to meet the teachers’ pay bill for 2015/16 had been already earmarked to plug the gap in school finances arising from a re-alignment in National Insurance and pension contributions.

"The Minister for Education, Mr Peter Weir, wrote to schools during Halloween to break the news, echoing an announcement at the DUP Party Conference that he was putting an additional £14million into school budgets. He neglected to share with his DUP colleagues, and indeed the public, that half of that money was being taken from the pockets of teachers.”

Mr Murphy said INTO has not taken this step towards strike action lightly but said teachers have had enough and the power to avoid prolonged and significant strike action lies firmly in Mr Weir and the Department’s hands.

He added: "We are cognisant of the potential disruption further industrial action will cause for pupils and their parents but we are left with no option. The Department and the Employing Authorities
have been exploiting teachers’ goodwill for too long and we have reached a crisis point. We cannot stress enough how much of a crisis this is.

"The Minister and the Employers can still avert what will be a significant and prolonged period of industrial unrest by paying teachers what they are due for 2015/16 and engaging in genuine talks to reach a multi-year pay settlement with teachers for the remainder of this Assembly term.

"It’s wholly unacceptable that teachers who have seen the value of their take home pay reduced by at least 15 per cent since 2010/11 are being treated in such a dismissive fashion.

"Adding insult to injury teacher workloads have been increasing year on year as they fire fight the negative consequences of cuts to the education budget. The Minister, Mr Weir and the Employing Authorities seem intent on making teachers pay for their inept management of the education budget."

INTO members will be joined in balloting by colleagues in the Ulster Teachers’ Union (UTU) and the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL). The NASUWT has already announced a strike day with more to follow.

Mr Murphy said: "This is a demonstration of teacher unity on a scale seldom seen before."

ENDS:

NOTES TO EDITOR:

• INTO is the Irish National Teachers’ Organisation. It is the largest teachers’ union in Ireland. INTO has a Northern Office and a Southern Office. Our Northern Office is based at Vere Foster House, 23 College Gardens, Belfast

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