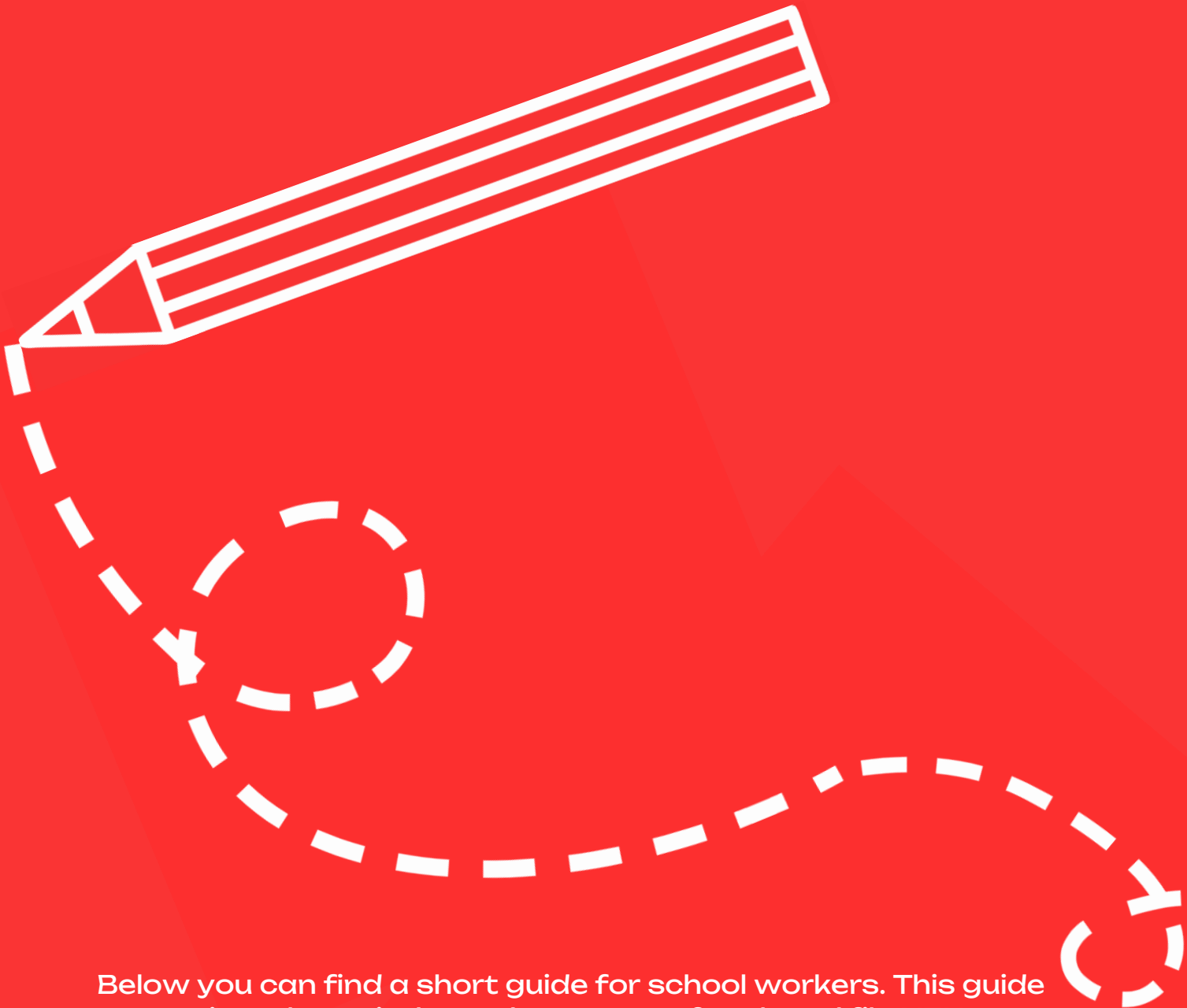


NEU Reps Guide to Winning the Strike



Below you can find a short guide for school workers. This guide was written by an independent group of rank and file NEU reps. We wanted to collectivise our knowledge and create this guide, on workplace strategy in terms of recruiting reps, growing pickets, shutting schools, and building our leverage. If you have any feedback or other ideas, please email us at: neurepsnetwork@gmail.com

Introduction


From one perspective, you could measure the success of the National Education Union strike so far in school closures. The first strike day on February 1st was a highpoint, with over half of schools in England forced to partially or fully close, and 9.3% of those being full closures.

Even on that first day however, when heads were most likely to shut as they had the least knowledge of which teachers would be out on strike, nearly half of schools were fully open. The [DfE was able to celebrate that over 90% of schools were fully or partially open](#). We could be moving in the right direction with partial closures, [as on May 2nd, we had the highest number of schools restricting attendance](#) in some form or another at 49.8%, but full closures have now dropped from that first day to around only 4.9%.

Despite many triumphs since its creation, NEU currently lacks the level of workplace organising needed to shut down the vast majority of schools, colleges and nurseries. It's important for us to think about how this can be achieved, because maximising disruption through school closures is one of the most effective ways to win our strike. This is not to say that we shouldn't be increasing the financial, reputational and political costs to the government through other means, just that disruption which hurts the government economically is our strongest point of potential leverage.

This guide was written collectively by NEU reps in secondaries and primaries who've been talking a lot about how to win this dispute. Hypothetically, if we wanted to win as quickly as possible, we'd go on indefinite strike *and* start taking forms of escalatory direct action such as occupying the DfE, disrupting events where the cabinet are speaking, and blockading parliament. The issue is that members probably aren't in a place right now where the NEU exec could call on them to take indefinite strike action. We're going to have to organise in our schools to maximise disruption as much as we reasonably can, but also to build our collective strength and level of organisation so all of us are ready to take the action necessary to win.

Which brings us to this guide, written by reps for reps, distinct and branch officers, and members. We think that the reps' perspective on growing the strike is so vital because reps do the frontline work of building power by: recruiting members; organising pickets; talking with parents; developing members as organisers; pressuring school leaders, and winning on issues in workplaces. Reps have to put

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tactics and strategies into practice in dynamic and evolving workplaces. Reps are also directly engaged with the wider membership on a day-to-day basis.

Our primary reason for making this guide is our contention that to win this dispute we need to be able to take action, which is far more escalatory, and that this strategy will derive its strength from organising education workers in their schools, colleges, and nurseries. If we really want to change the face of education, we'll probably need a majority of school workers to be properly organised. This guide aims to be part of the conversation about how we can start to achieve that.

Currently we have four sections:

1. How to build power through pickets
2. How to close your workplace - and win other demands in schools
3. How to use workplace organising to recruit more members - and get all your members more active
4. How to do useful things at the distinct and branch level

Every workplace is different, so make your own judgments about how you interpret or implement this guide. We also don't claim to have all the answers and we'll adapt this guide based on the responses we get to it.

1. How to build power through pickets

The importance of picket lines

Pickets are fundamentally a tool to close workplaces by standing outside and trying to get people not to enter. Forming a picket line means other school workers will be less likely to go into work, but it also means non-NEU members - or NEU members without a strike mandate - have the right to refuse to cross, which effectively allows them to join the strike.

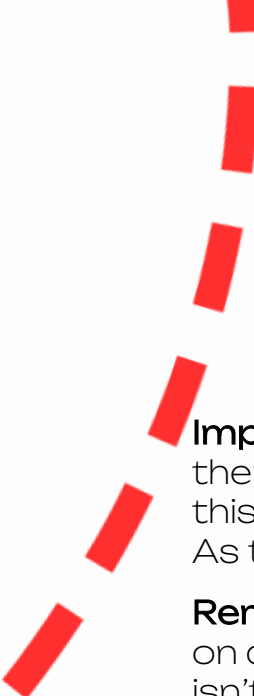
Picket lines also:

- Provide members with a space to have conversations that can strengthen their resolve to strike.
- Help members form social bonds.
- Give us a public platform to engage with staff, parents/guardians, local community members, and other potential supporters.

All this means you should always try to have a picket, even if it's one or two people.

How to build a successful picket line in five steps:

1. Persuade all your members both individually (through 1-1 conversations) and collectively (down the pub or in meetings) to join you on the picket line. In primary schools a rep can aim to talk to everyone personally. In secondary schools you're going to want deputies in every department, or to be action pointing your fellow active members to chat with people who haven't been ticked off on your spreadsheet (but don't action point anyone if they have a tendency to put people off.)
2. As part of this process, you need to be trying to persuade non-members to refuse to cross the picket line and join you as a supporter. Use your members to help you reach everyone. Crossing a picket should be a taboo (although it's probably not useful at this point to call anyone a scab to their face, as we eventually want to persuade these people to strike, and maybe even to join NEU). Any TA or other staff member (NEU or not) [can refuse to cross the picket and join you](#). Make sure people know that head teachers shouldn't be pressuring them to work, and that NEU members (including TAs) can claim some, or all, of their pay from the local district's hardship fund.
3. If you're doing a picket for the first time you may want to let your headteacher know. You also generally want everyone to make sure they're really clear about what the plan is, and when to be there. Central NEU has been running picket line supervisors training, but ask around your branch as you may not require your own picket supervisor (and to be honest we haven't heard of anyone actually needing one.)
4. Plan to make your picket line as vibrant as possible. Invite parents and children to picket lines. The optimum situation is a fully closed school with a picket line full of workers as well as supportive children and families. It may take a while to build up to this, but keep this image in mind as you work towards it! Bring snacks, a speaker to play some music, cardboard and paint to make placards, chalk to draw on the ground, or face paint and games for the kids. There are few limits to what you can do on a picket so let your imagination run wild. One of the writers of this guide once did a 'teach out' on union renewal on a picket using chalk on a wall and a portable amp and microphone.
5. After the picket, go to a local cafe/pub/house for breakfast or tea and coffee (districts should allow you to expense strike



breakfasts). Discuss what went well and how you can all work together to make the next strike day even stronger. Our struggle could take a while so it's always worth making space to have a good time together. It's going to be important in the long run that union members get to know each other.

Important: If you know any reps/ schools without pickets, talk to them about why it's so essential to have one! It's our duty to build this strike so we can win, otherwise what are we doing all this for? As the old phrase goes: *the longer the picket the shorter the strike*.

Remember: challenge anyone that says you can only have 6 people on a picket. That's just another piece of government 'guidance' that isn't binding in any way whatsoever.

2. How to close your workplace and win other demands in schools

The Importance of Pressuring Headteachers (if Necessary)

At the beginning of our strike the Department for Education (DfE) tried to force all schools to stay open to minimise disruption and closures. The unprecedented non-statutory [guidance](#) stated that the DfE "expects the headteacher to take all reasonable steps to keep the school open for as many pupils as possible".

This guidance reinforces that headteachers are key local targets, as the [DfE admits](#) that the decision to partially or entirely close a school will be made by headteacher (or head of an academy trust) and not by central government.

As well as closing or partially closing the school there are several things every rep can try and get headteachers to do:

- Agree not to ask staff whether they are striking (and [NEU has said they should never ask](#)).
- Communicate that non-striking staff will not be asked to undertake the work of striking staff (essentially that there won't be any strike breaking).
- If they haven't already, they should close the classes of striking teachers - although we should always suggest they close the school. Since they don't know until the day who will be in there are strong health and safety grounds that would allow them to fully close.
- Ensure that teaching materials produced by NEU members will not be used during strike days.


- Communicate to all staff that employees not directly involved in the industrial action (e.g. teachers and support staff not in a union) are entitled to [exercise their legal right to refuse to cross the picket line](#).
- Communicate to all staff that teachers and support staff who are members of a trade union other than NEU and who refuse to cross the picket line will not be subject to unfair treatment, dismissal or any other disciplinary action, other than pay deductions.
- Allow the NEU Rep (but fine if the head does it themselves) to send a letter or email to parents/guardians about the reasons for strike action. This is particularly useful if you want to bring parents with you - although if you're primary you'll have a lot of other chances for NEU members to talk to parents.

Our suggestion for how to put pressure on your headteacher in three steps:

1. Once you've re-written [this template](#) letter with your members, email your headteacher making the requests. Communicate to your members once you've done this.
2. Meet quickly with your headteacher to discuss your requests and lobby for them to be introduced.
3. If necessary, consider escalation carefully. You could ask the headteacher to explain their refusal to staff in an in-person briefing. At this point you could write a joint letter from all school workers to the headteacher supporting these requests.

Some examples of escalatory tactics if the head still refuses to budge on certain issues:

- Get multiple people to have one-to-ones with the headteacher to persuade them.
- Get more workers and parents on your picket on strike days, and bring the issues up with the headteacher and other staff when you see them.
- Getting parents to email the head asking about the issue(s).
- Use the issue(s) to persuade more staff to join you, as if you have a majority it will be easier to protest the issue. Going on a recruitment drive will almost always increase your leverage.

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- Get local teachers whose schools are closed to join your picket for the day.
 - Make sure you're regularly trying to persuade staff not to go in when they arrive for work, and you can give them self-made info sheets about why they shouldn't. This will increase pressure on the headteacher more generally.
 - Start some [union group social media](#) to highlight the issue (this could make heads panic as they won't want to lose potential job applicants).
 - If all else fails, [march on the boss](#).

Reminder: all of this section is about potential demands you can make in school, but the most important thing is closing schools as fully as possible. The difficulty of achieving this will vary widely from workplace to workplace, and the steps needed to achieve it will vary as well. The above are all tactics you and your members might use to move towards full closure (and full closure means full closure, and includes stopping NASUWT members going in to do planning and marking, for example.)

3. How to use workplace organising to recruit more members, and get all your members more active.

The Importance of Workplace Organising

The biggest strength of our union is collective power in workplaces. That means turning as many school workers into union members as you can, and then getting those members active in the fight for higher pay and more school funding (although active can mean different things).

An effective workplace union group tends to be one that finds out what people care about and wins on those issues. Even in the middle of a strike we can find issues to campaign on. Finding ways to reduce teacher and TA workload is always a good one but it might even be something small to start with such as getting a microwave for the staff room, or winning freedom to wear blue jeans at work.

How to organise your workplace:

- Turn every conversation into an [organising conversation](#), where you have a specific objective such as getting someone to wear an NEU badge at work, or to join the picket next time. In organising conversations we ask people open-ended questions, listen 70-80% of the time, and take a genuine

interest in what members think. Once you've listened, don't be afraid to give them your opinion if you need to inspire them with confidence or offer political information. Good questions to ask members are: what are three things you would change about the school? Or, how can we get more school funding and win the strike? The more conversations you have, the more useful things you'll learn.

- Form a workplace NEU committee or team. Even in small schools it's good to make a little WhatsApp (with a nice group pic) for your strong supporters. Make sure you share responsibility, and give people things to do, so that everyone is helping to build your NEU group by whatever means necessary. A general members WhatsApp group can also be useful for building a collective identity and helping to keep momentum and relevance. However, it's important to never let WhatsApp take the place of actual conversations and organising.
- Try to consistently recruit NEU members, and get your other NEU members encouraging other staff to join NEU. The more members we have in the workplace the higher the potential bargaining power and leverage we have. Imagine you're a headteacher, you'd be more likely to listen to someone who represents 90% of the school workers compared to someone who represents just over half of the teachers. More members also means more people taking on action points, and more potential leaders. You particularly want to recruit anyone that people tend to respect, and who can bring others with them.
- It helps if reps are social animals who continually speak with members, to buoy them up and make them feel part of their union. Some useful pointers to think about when having those conversations were recently written on Notes from Below: "Talking through ideas for how to win the dispute, making sure co-workers are fully informed of plans for action, taking on board their ideas and listening to their reservations, encouraging co-workers to understand the importance of their active participation in the fight - all of these things can help workers to be prepared to make bigger sacrifices and take more risks." From the article [How To Win The Current Strike Wave](#).
- For non-reps: if you're at a school with a rep who seemingly dislikes being a rep, whether they're asocial, apolitical or just generally AWOL, then ask them if you can take over (or at least become their official co-rep.) As long as members vote





for it, then congratulations, you're co-rep (it's as simple as that). [Don't forget to tell NEU](#) about your plans though.

- If you're already a rep then don't forget to read the [actual NEU reps guide](#) and more importantly do your workplace rep training. The legendary [1199 advice to rookie organisers](#) is also a must read, and this pdf of [Secrets of a Successful Organizer](#) by Labor Notes is quite useful for starters.

4. How to do useful things at the district and branch level

Districts and branches are often neglected by members, and we suggest all NEU members get a lot more involved with their local district/branch if they aren't already. There are a number of positive reasons for doing so which we won't go into here - for our purposes we'll just note that whether it's an extremely active district in London, or an very inactive district in a more rural area, districts and branches have all the money and all the membership data you'll need to organise to win the strike. There are real limits to what you can do if you're not involved at that level. Even if you have a 100% NEU membership rate in your school, and pickets so good they're on the front page of the local paper, we still won't win this strike if workplace organisation is weak across the rest of our districts and branches.

Districts and branches should be coordinating rep recruitment, which is always a top priority. We need a rep in every school to directly communicate about the wider union to members, and to be the point of contact for the district and branch, or central union, to receive information, materials and support. Workplaces with engaged reps also have a higher vote turnout and produce less of the casework that tends to swamp local secretaries. Ask your district or branch committees how you can help with rep recruitment.

An engaged rep should be attending district and branch meetings anyway, to get resources and find out information, and to feed into the local strategy. These meetings can also be great for rank and file members to meet members in other workplaces, and build wider networks of workplace militants who can coordinate across schools.

Some ideas for branches/districts

- On strike days book out the town hall or some other large venue for a rally (rather than gambling on British weather.) Inside is also more social and you can collect phone numbers



of members who want to get active. In the summer it may be more advantageous to hold big outdoor rallies.

- Form a strike committee to empower members to do anything they can think of to build the strike locally. Strike committees can be made up of any active members who are on strike, and can undertake any event planning or member organising activities that support the strike. Secretaries on committees can end up with a huge amount of union work to do, so empowering these local strike committees to do things can be really beneficial. Strike committees are also a great way to develop potential reps and other local leaders.
- Districts and branches should try to have events for reps such as training and socials - if they're not doing it ask if you can do it for them.
- Every district could have a 'winning the strike' event where we get ideas we can use to win from members and action point them to people.
- Don't sit around and wait for the national leadership to win the strike. We're only limited by our own creativity, there's no limit to what you can do but here are some final examples: plan parties; picket line activities; direct actions; make up chants and songs; introduce yourself to other members at other schools; and make your own merch and posters etc.

Remember districts should fund all of the above and probably have reserves to spend from periods of low spending in the pandemic. If they're somehow broke, then that's a good opportunity to get people together and fundraise.

What Next?

This guide is a first sketch, not a final blueprint. Help us write the next version by contacting us with ideas, comments, and criticism: neurepsnetwork@gmail.com.

- There is currently a campaign to get the executive to implement motion 36 from conference, and rebalot support staff asap. Sign the letter here if you want to support that: <https://forms.gle/NyF6AodgcyHBin6s8>
- We'll be at [Troublemakers' Conference](#) talking to people about forming a rank and file network in NEU so hopefully see you there.

Solidarity!