

UK teachers in regional strikes as unions seek accommodation with government

By Tania Kent
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A one-day regional strike of the NASUWT and NUT teaching unions saw more than 2,500 schools in 49 authorities in England closed or partially closed on Tuesday. Teachers struck in the Eastern, West Midlands, East Midlands, and Yorkshire and Humberside regions.

Thousands of teachers took part in the strike action in opposition to changes to pensions, attacks to terms of national pay, the introduction of performance pay, privatisation, attacks on the curriculum, and a further offensive planned by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition aimed at the abolition of preparation time, extension of teaching hours and the use of unqualified teachers in the classroom.

The two main rallies and marches in Birmingham and Sheffield saw collectively about 8,000 participate, while hundreds of others took part in protests and demonstrations in other towns and cities across the region.

The strong turnout by teachers revealed the broad-based resistance and anger amongst teachers to the offensive of the government.

There is no question that the coalition government is on a war footing with the teaching profession. Since coming into office, its attack on the education system has been relentless. Its aim is the full-scale privatisation of state education and the entrenchment of a two-tier education system.

But any hope of a fight back by the unions is misplaced. What was on offer was a pile of empty rhetoric.

Christine Blower, general secretary of the National Union of Teachers (NUT), was the main speaker at the Sheffield rally. She outlined some of the attacks that have been implemented, focusing on the spread of academies—schools that are outside of Local Education

Authority control and which set their own pay and conditions. She admitted this was preparatory to full-scale privatisation, without explaining how thousands of schools have already become academies without the unions lifting a finger in opposition.

As of September 2013, there were a staggering 3,304 academy schools. When the coalition came into office, there were already 203 academies created over an eight-year period under the Labour government of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. In its first year in office, some 600 new academies were created under the coalition. This then doubled to 1,513 in 2012 and doubled again to 3,304.

When asked directly by a teacher on the platform to name a date for national strike action, Blower refused. The NUT and the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) are both desperate to prevent such a mobilisation.

The October 1 strike is the second in a series of regional actions that have taken place, with a third regional stoppage planned for October 17 in London and the South East. But the union leaderships are exploiting the anger and preparedness of the teachers to fight only in order to convince the government that their services are needed. Having proven that they can be willing allies in imposing the government's agenda, they have been sent reeling by the refusal of the Conservative Party education secretary Michael Gove to negotiate with them.

Blower and Chris Keates, general secretary of the NASWUT, have produced statements commending the Welsh secretary of education for agreeing to negotiate with them and have called an end to industrial action in Wales. In their joint press statement, the unions said, “The Education Secretary should do as his counterparts in Wales have done and enter into

meaningful dialogue with the NUT and NASUWT.”

The Socialist Equality Party campaigned at the demonstrations, calling on teachers to have no confidence in the teaching unions and reject the claims of the pseudo-left tendencies that the unions are the vehicle for a fight back against austerity. Our leaflet urged that teachers “mobilise a genuine opposition by setting up rank-and-file committees, independent of these bankrupt unions. They must join with support staff, parents and local communities to resist all cuts to pay and conditions and unite with other workers fighting to defend jobs and services, against the government’s brutal austerity measures on the basis of a socialist programme.”

The SEP spoke to striking teachers in Sheffield taking part in the rally.

Roseanna, who teaches in Chesterfield, said, “I absolutely love teaching. It is the best job I have ever had, and I love it every day, but the workload is becoming unmanageable. A quiet week for me is about 55 hours in school and at home, most weeks it is more than that.

“It has got to the point where we do not have any faith in the exam system. We do not have any faith in what the government are asking us to teach the children. We are being made to do things that are not in the kids’ best interests. If the government gets its way, our pay is going to be related to children’s performance as though children are something that is just a product.

“Performance-related pay would be linked to the children’s exam results. For instance, last year, I had one GCSE [General Certificate of Secondary Education] class in which every child achieved their target or higher, and I had another GCSE class in the same subject, same year group, and not a single one of them achieved their target. That is not my teaching clearly. It is because of other issues in the school, because of the experience of the children so far in the school, because I took them over from someone who had been on long-term sick and they had had supply teachers for a year. Yet my pay would have depended on that.

“A lot of non-teachers I have spoken to think this is just about pay and pensions, but it is not. It is about our concerns about what the government is going to do to the children’s education.”

Wendy Vowe said, “I am here because even though I am a retired teacher, having taught for 39 years, I am really worried for the young teachers that are coming into the profession in terms of how long they are going to teach, how their conditions are being eroded. I have come from a school which became an academy, and I saw in the last four or five years how everybody’s rights as union members and professionals were being undermined.

“That has been supported by people like Gove but unfortunately started by people like Blair.”

Andrew, who teaches in Wakefield, said, “What gets the most headlines is pay and pensions. But for me and many teachers I speak to, it is not the pay, it is the conditions. When I was speaking to parents about the strike this week, I asked them about what they want for their children, and they said they want a great education for their children. That is what I want, that is what all the teachers I know want, and that’s what we’re here for.

“We can’t really do that with Michael Gove in charge. He is attacking teachers on a daily basis. Constantly, media reports cast us all as work-shy, lazy, enjoying long holidays and generous pensions. None of this is particularly true. He doesn’t like the arts. He is trying to stifle creativity, going back to rote learning, using examples that do not make any sense.... It is setting up education that will just benefit the rich. They are taking away opportunities for children in poorer catchment areas such as I work in.”

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