

UK National Union of Teachers sabotages struggle against funding cuts

By Tom Pearce
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Teachers across the UK are at loggerheads with the Conservative government over its huge cuts to education funding. Over the next four years, £3 billion in funding will be cut from school budgets, under a supposedly “fair” national funding formula for England.

Anger is mounting, with three schools in southeast London having already held strikes against the cuts imposed by a Labour-run council. At Forest Hill School, teachers have held seven days of strikes in opposition to Lewisham council, which is demanding cuts of £1.3 million.

Last week, members of the National Association of Headteachers (NAHT) threatened to go on strike for the first time in six years over education cuts. This brings home the gravity of the situation, considering the NAHT has only been out on strike once in 120 years.

Teaching assistants in Durham, also run by a Labour council, have been striking for months against pay cuts.

The impact of education cuts continue to worsen, with the latest story coming from a Cheshire primary school.

Speaking to the BBC, Andy Canham, chair of governors at Elton Primary School and Nursery, said, “We’re already having to consider over the next three years losing at least two teachers, merging year groups and potentially shortening the school week by one or maybe half a day.”

There have already been a number of protests led by parents in Cheshire over this issue, and parents have set up groups to fight for funding for their schools. The fact that groups of parents, headteachers and governors have been left to take up isolated struggles against education cuts is an indictment of the trade unions.

The National Association of Schoolmasters Union of

Women Teachers (NASUWT) highlighted a survey that showed that schools are increasingly relying on money from parents. Based on almost 4,000 responses, it found that 18 percent of parents have been asked to sign up for direct debits or standing orders for their children's school, typically for about £50 per year. In some cases the cost to parents was found to be even more, with more than 1 in 20 parents paying £400 or above. A further 13 percent of parents have been asked to make donations in cash or cheques.

The issue of funding cuts and the willingness of teachers to fight them was the main theme of the National Union of Teachers (NUT) April conference.

Because of action taken by teachers and various campaigns that have sprung up, NUT General Secretary Kevin Courtney motioned a vote, which was supported, for the mobilisation of teachers against funding cuts.

However, even before the conference Courtney had ruled out any national strikes. A week before, he had stated, “National strikes are a possibility. I don’t think that’s where we are immediately. National action is not where our planning horizon is at the moment.”

At the conference, strikes during the general election campaign were ruled out, with the NUT stating that any initial action would only go ahead in the summer term—with the caveat that this only happens if there is no change in the Tory government’s policies. Courtney said the union must “take immediate steps to identify regions where national strike action could be called using the existing funding ballot and to call a one-day strike in those regions before the end of the 2016/17 academic year.”

The stalling of any action against the cuts is standard NUT policy. NUT branches called for strikes in September 2016 over funding and asked the executive

to reconsider its position, as Courtney had argued against naming dates for further strike action.

Not only is the union opposed to any mobilisation of teachers nationally, it is actively working to ensure that any action that does go ahead is strictly curtailed, and isolated on a regional basis with limited impact.

While the NUT continues to oppose action, the other education unions like the NASUWT are equally concerned about preventing strikes.

Courtney is not averse to using rhetoric to condemn the cuts, while doing precisely nothing to oppose them, hailing as he does from the ranks of the pseudo-left.

He is the chosen candidate of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), who backed him for years as he rose through the ranks of the union bureaucracy. Before he was general secretary, Courtney was a leading member of the Socialist Teachers Alliance (STA) within the National Union of Teachers (NUT), where members and supporters of the SWP have long been active.

The SWP supported his campaign to become deputy and subsequently general secretary. They also supported the then NUT general secretary Christine Blowers and Courtney's ticket, against a pairing of a joint ticket of the Socialist Party's Martin Powell Davies for general secretary and the Alliance for Workers Liberty's Patrick Murphy for deputy general secretary. Whether he remains part of the SWP today makes no difference, as Courtney can be sure of their constant hailing him as a fighting union leader.

The SWP and Socialist Party (SP) are playing a critical role in seeking to prop up the increasingly discredited NUT, and ensure that the line of the trade union bureaucracy holds sway. They carry out such a role, not simply to provide a "left" cover for the bureaucracy, but as an integral part of the union hierarchy, with a comfortable career with its many perks and privileges.

The SP proposed the regional action with one of their members, James Kerr from Lewisham, south east London, moving the amendment for it. This was moved despite Kerr acknowledging that the struggle was a "national dispute." The NUT had to remain in control and the union needed a "strategy to win", he said.

At the conference, there were calls for the union to "take immediate steps" alongside others to "organise a national demonstration" to defend education.

SWP leading member Paul McGarr, while telling

delegates, "we need strikes. Strikes work," praised the NUT for instead calling a lobby of parliament. "Let's make that a mass lobby," he said. McGarr advocates this in the knowledge that any such event would be utilised by the NUT only to allow teachers to let off steam, with Courtney having the opportunity to spout rhetoric from the stage as he tells all that nothing can be done.

The union bureaucracy is yet again using the anti-union laws in order to prevent a unified offensive by workers. In March, the latest such legislation, the Trade Union Act, became law. It did not take the NUT long to cite these laws in order to oppose the mobilisation of teachers.

Courtney stated that the Trade Union Act means that, "barriers to national action are higher."

"We would have to do an awful lot of work to pass the 50 percent [of union members voting] threshold, and the 40 percent yes vote thresholds that apply in education.

"School workers have power that other groups don't have," he said adding, "it's true that the Trade Union Act is draconian. But unions shouldn't simply accept its limitations—and they should defy it."

This is a cynical fraud. As Courtney is well aware, no union has defied the anti-union laws in the last 25 years, to the extent that the government has not even had to enforce them. They have successfully relied on the union bureaucracy to oppose strikes and, where they have broken out, to ensure their isolation and defeat.

The NUT's conference demonstrates that in order to oppose the education cuts, teachers and parents must break out of the straightjacket of the union bureaucracy. Teachers must organise themselves in rank and file committees, independent of the unions and based on a socialist programme, which fights for free, and high quality education for all.

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