

British Labour government to use unemployed as substitute for teachers

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The Welsh Office of the Labour government has launched a scheme for the long-term unemployed to work in schools as 'classroom assistants'. Peter Hain MP, Education Minister for Wales, claims this will help hard-pressed teachers and will improve literacy. Earlier this year, at the launch of the Welsh Office's new literacy policy, it was found that four out of ten 11 year olds fail to reach acceptable standards in the English and Welsh languages.

The scheme is to be piloted in Wales early next year and, depending on its success, will then be extended to the rest of Britain. It is being carried out under the New Deal workfare programme introduced at the beginning of 1998 to force the long-term unemployed (those out of work for over two years) and unemployed 18 to 24 year olds into low-paid, full-time employment. Employers receive subsidies for the first six months equivalent to the wage paid. Under the latest plan, schools will get a subsidy of £60 a week and a £750 training grant for taking on a New Deal recruit aged 18-24, and £75 a week for those over 25. The subsidies will be payable for six months.

Hain gave assurances that, 'People will only be recommended as suitable for schools after they have been interviewed by the Employment Service and after appropriate checks on their background. Even then they will only be taken on after an interview by head teachers.'

Once again, under the guise of raising standards and reducing unemployment, the government is embracing a project that will drive down standards even further. The proposal both seeks to use the unemployed as cheap labour and introduce the market into yet another area of education.

The government says that educational standards are falling, but rather than employ more qualified teachers

there is a de-skilling taking place across the board. The end result of this latest innovation will be to justify employing even fewer teachers to manage already over-sized classes.

Figures released by the Graduate Teacher Training Registry for courses due to begin in October 1998 show a collapse in applications for postgraduate courses in secondary (high school) teaching. Recruitment for trainee maths teachers is 60 percent below the government's target and 40 percent below in the sciences. There is a shortage of graduates for every subject except history and physical education. Other subjects with serious shortages are design and technology (65 percent below target) and information technology (52 percent).

In the past six years there has been a big increase in the numbers of classroom assistants. This formally reduced the adult-to-pupil ratio in schools at a time when class sizes are growing. From 1992 to 1997 the number of teachers in England and Wales went up by 2 percent, but the number of pupils rose by 8 percent. In this period there was a 40 percent increase in lower-paid non-teaching staff, including classroom assistants and nursery nurses, from 95,000 to 133,000.

The level of training and pay varies from area to area. Many of those who currently work as classroom assistants either complete a one- or two-year course in child care or have degrees or diplomas in relevant subjects. The pay of classroom assistants is substantially higher than those on workfare, but there is an increasing trend for classroom assistants to be on short-term contracts.

The latest proposals would complement this trend, as the subsidy received would be for six months. The Scottish Office has also launched a £66 million programme to introduce up to 5,000 classroom

assistants to primary classrooms over the next three years. In a letter to Education Authorities and unions, David Crawley, head of the Scottish Office Schools Group, said that local councils could decide on job specifications, pay and training so that the new posts 'reflect local needs and classroom circumstances.'

A number of statements by ministers of education emphasised that the way to improve teachers' pay and conditions is to use more classroom assistants as a substitute for employing more teachers. David Blunkett, Secretary of State for Education, told the *Times Education Supplement*, 'We have already acted decisively to cut bureaucratic burdens, but in the Green Paper [on the future of the teaching profession] we will go further. We will set out plans to provide additional classroom assistants so that teachers are freed to teach and so that we can make the most of the talents and the abilities of others in the classroom.'

None of the major education unions have opposed Labour's proposals. UNISON, the public service union, pointed out that a substantial number of their members working in education have been made redundant over the past few years due to the financial pressures placed on schools. John Lloyd for UNISON in Wales, however, gave a cautious welcome to the proposed scheme, asking only for the opportunity for union members to comment on the scheme before giving it 'our unequivocal support.'

The National Union of Teachers, the largest teachers' union, said they agree with this initiative to tackle unemployment. The National Association of Head Teachers said schools were crying out for more classroom assistants and the New Deal scheme could be a good way of finding them.

No assessment has been made by the unions of the impact of Labour's proposal on children's education or the jobs of their members. They have largely accepted the broader aim of the government that there should be a move towards a diminishing number of professional teachers supported by even more classroom assistants with minimal training.

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