

British teachers vilified for opposing performance-related pay

Julie Hyland
4 May 2000

A call by British teachers to ballot for industrial action against the imposition of performance-related pay drew howls of protest and condemnation from the government, media and union leaders alike.

Rank-and-file delegates defied their leadership at last month's National Union of Teachers conference and voted 105,208 to 82,114 in favour of holding a ballot for one-day strike action. Teachers are protesting the Blair government's plans to introduce performance-related pay, under which selected teachers will be awarded an extra £2,000 annually. Head teachers and external assessors are to decide who amongst a school's staff qualifies for the rise.

Teachers' pay has been subject to tight controls for years. The current starting rate is approximately £18,000 per annum rising to a maximum of £24,000. Despite this, opposition to the introduction of performance-related pay is widespread. In a pre-conference survey, 89 percent of respondents were against linking teacher's salaries to performance. Teachers point out that it is virtually impossible to judge the influence of an individual teacher on a pupil's progress, which is the result of many factors. The measure can only lead to payment based on pupils' test results—penalising those who work with socially deprived and less able students—and will create a divisive and competitive atmosphere within and between schools.

During their four-day conference, teachers stressed that the government should make extra cash available to finance a decent pay award for all. Whilst these egalitarian appeals won standing ovations within the conference hall, government ministers and journalists queued up to attack the teachers as conservative "opponents of change" and even more bizarrely, as "selfish".

Delegates booed and heckled government ministers and many staged a walkout during the remarks of Schools' Minister Estelle Morris. Education Secretary David Blunkett responded by attacking the conference as the "first time in history" that the union had voted for strike action against a "pay rise for simply doing their jobs well". Lord Puttnam, film producer and chairman of the new General Teaching Council in England, said teachers were generally regarded to be "whingers" rather than "winners".

This response was universally echoed in the press. The right-wing *Daily Mail*, for example, attacked teachers as "noisy, scruffy, chippy, boorish, truculent and self-pitying". The nominally liberal *Guardian* concurred, albeit in less strident terms. The teachers' conference was "more interested in looking back than forward", resistant to moves to "modernise pay" and highly disrespectful to government ministers, the paper intoned.

Independent newspaper columnist David Aaronovitch devoted almost half a page to venting his spleen against those taking a "highly egalitarian line, arguing that a school is a team full of equal participants, all deserving the same reward". A former member of the Stalinist Communist Party Aaronovitch is of course well paid for his sterling performance as a defender of the Blair government's latest policy measures on welfare, crime, etc.

He rubbished the goal of equality as outdated. Like a latter-day Stasi agent, he noted that he had identified at least one person in the audience as a Trotskyist before getting down to his root objection. He wrote: "We no longer live by the 'going rate'. Automatic annual uplifts have become a thing of the past; increasingly we negotiate individual contracts with our employers, turning to unions to help us over working conditions

and legal matters. We accept that we can be valued differently, since we may also have very different levels of commitment or value to the enterprise."

What Aaronovitch portrays as an entirely natural state of affairs is in reality the outcome of a concerted attempt to drive down workers' wages and living standards. The teachers' vote has earned such wrath because they have dared to challenge the prevailing set-up, and in doing so have counterposed to it the principle of equality. This is something that the powers-that-be cannot tolerate. With social inequality so blatant, they fear that the teachers' action may also encourage opposition amongst other workers.

Whilst labour productivity has increased across virtually every industry—due to technology and speed-ups—wages as a share of GDP have fallen over the last 20 years. The Office for National Statistics recently recorded that inequality in income distribution under Labour's administration has risen to its highest level since 1990, when Thatcher resigned her leadership of the Conservative government. Far from being rewarded for their efforts, workers are told that they must accept falling wages rates, longer hours and the eradication of virtually all allowances to maintain their jobs.

The share of the national income held by the poorest 20 percent has continued to fall, while at the other end of the scale the salaries of corporate executives have risen dramatically. The performance-related aspect of executive pay is based on how successful they are in lowering the wages and increasing the exploitation of the workforce.

None are more hostile to the fight for equality than the trade union bureaucracy. At the NUT conference, General Secretary Doug McAvoy thundered against "those in this hall who believe everyone should be paid the same". McAvoy's salary—excluding perks—is at least treble that of his members, and has been unaffected by the declining living standards of the teachers he is supposed to represent. The NUT bureaucracy has not lifted a finger against the measures implemented by both Conservative and Labour governments over the past years, which have produced crowded classrooms, under-funded schools and exhausted teachers now leaving the profession at the rate of one in every three. Despite repeated votes and calls for industrial action, the union has stifled opposition, leaving individual teachers, schools and parents to fight alone. The NUT

conference ended just days before it was disclosed that students at a Cumbrian school had failed to raise the money needed to retain two teachers through sales of a Christmas CD.

The NUT is nominally committed to opposing the new pay award, whilst sabotaging any real struggle against it by advising members individually to enter for appraisal. "There is no conflict in our mind between opposing performance-related pay and helping members to benefit from it," McAvoy stated, arguing for an ineffective work to rule against its introduction. When the mood in the conference hall became clear, the union leadership attempted to prevent a vote on industrial action, postponing it until the end of the conference. They hoped it would fall off the agenda through lack of time, but they failed.

Finally, after the result came in, McAvoy thumbed his nose to the membership. He rejected the majority vote, instructing the union to lead a campaign in favour of a strike, stating, "I have no intention of following such an instruction". McAvoy said derisively, the vote was the outcome of "political posturing", before denouncing strike action as "lunacy". The NUT then let it be known that it intends to hold a preliminary "indicative" ballot, in a further effort to stall industrial action.

That signs of independent resistance managed to make their way into the conference hall this year—despite the bureaucracy's best efforts—led some political commentators to warn McAvoy what he could expect if performance-related pay were not implemented. In September, Labour's new creation, the General Teaching Council (GTC), will come into existence. Presented as a means of bringing together appointees from the union, government and teachers' delegates, its real purpose is to impose an even greater bureaucratic straitjacket on any opposition to the changes in education. The implicit threat is that if McAvoy's own performance did not improve, the GTC could replace the teaching unions as "the voice of education".



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact