

Britain: Teachers take industrial action over staff shortages

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Members of the National Union of Teachers (NUT) and National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) are taking action in protest against staff shortages in London and Doncaster, Yorkshire. It is the first major teachers' dispute since the rolling strikes of 1985-86.

Teaching staff are refusing to cover for colleagues who are absent due to vacations or illness lasting more than three days, and will not accept changes to timetables caused by a school's inability to recruit sufficient teachers. They will also refuse to accept extra pupils in their own classes. About a third of the primary and secondary schools could be forced into part-time schooling in the two areas, which face some of the highest levels of vacancies.

Five more areas—Middlesborough, Leicester, Nottingham, Portsmouth and Southampton—have voted almost unanimously to join the action. Manchester, Reading and Kent are expected to produce the same results and a further eight areas are also to be balloted.

Before Christmas, staff shortages already meant a handful of schools were sending pupils home for part of the week. It is widely acknowledged that head teachers in many parts of the country are papering over staff shortages through the use of short-term contracts, supply teachers, teachers from overseas and the appointment of inappropriately qualified staff. The worst affected areas are London and the south-east, where the high cost of housing also presents an obstacle to many graduate teachers taking up posts. Secondary school head teachers have also found it more difficult to recruit in the West Midlands, Yorkshire and Humberside and Wales.

A recent study, *Attracting Teachers: Past Patterns, Present Policies, Future prospects* (December 2000) by Professor Alan Smithers and Pamela Robinson of

Liverpool University, showed that there were officially 2,732 vacancies in England and Wales, equivalent to 0.7 percent of the workforce. However, there was considerable variation across the country and across different subjects. Furthermore, the government's definition of what constitutes a vacancy excludes any empty post that is filled by an appointment lasting as short as one school term.

The study found that retirements and resignations mean that just over 30,000 teachers leave education each year. With the pupil population fairly static, this figure roughly equals the number of new recruits required, although cutting large class sizes in primary schools (a government pledge) would necessitate an increase in teacher numbers.

The overall target for teacher training in England and Wales for 1999 was just under 30,000, equivalent to 12 percent of the entire graduate output of the UK. In modern languages the target was 40 percent of all graduates and mathematics was nearly as high.

Since 1992, successive governments have repeatedly failed to meet secondary school teacher recruitment targets, which were 17 percent below target in 1999, despite offering incentive schemes for science and maths trainees. Secondary school pupil numbers are expected to rise by 5 percent over the next five years, while the most recent figures for secondary teacher training courses starting in September 2000 fell short again by just over 2,000 recruits.

Agencies that provide supply teachers are also having difficulties. London-based Teaching Personnel is offering teachers between £20-£30 more a day, which means higher charges to schools. Teaching Personnel say it is turning away 6,000 requests to supply staff a week because of a shortage of teachers on their books. The agency plans to campaign in Europe to attract

teachers with adequate English language skills. Another London based agency TimePlan has recruited 50 teachers for UK schools in South Africa, New Zealand and Australia.

Nigel De Gruchy, general secretary of the NASUWT, explained, "London teaching services have been kept afloat by thousands of young supply teachers coming from Australia, New Zealand and latterly South Africa. But increasingly, they have been used to plug permanent gaps so no one now is available to cover for staff absences, sickness, in-service training release and other short term matters."

Being taught by teachers who have been drafted in at the last moment, or who are not qualified to teach a particular subject, has an unsettling and damaging effect on children, as it disrupts the stable and secure environment in which children can learn. In many secondary schools experiencing shortages it is a common practice for a teacher to be given a post even though the subject is not their field of expertise. This increases stresses and tension on both staff and students alike. Personal relationships between the child, teacher and parent/carer are also badly affected by a lack of continuity.

Secretary of State for Education David Blunkett has accused the teachers who are taking action of "abandoning" schoolchildren and damaging their prospects. Blunkett told the right wing *Daily Mail*, "Far from being intimidated, we are getting increasingly iron souled about this and we are looking at ways we can deal with the unions in a way they could be surprised about." In an interview on BBC Radio 4, he said, "If you walk out on a class and send the kids home you damage their life chances."

The teaching unions condemned Blunkett for spouting "emotional claptrap" and attacked the government for doing nothing to improve conditions in which teachers operate. But their own record is one of cooperating with the attacks on education first carried out under Conservative rule and now by the Labour government. For many years, the unions have consistently opposed calls for strike action and sought to stifle any meaningful discussion over the crisis in state education.

Eamon O'Kane of the NASUWT made clear what the union was responding to in the present action, when he admitted, "Teacher unions are just reflecting the

pressure they have been under from members for months."

Staff shortages are only the thin end of the wedge for tens of thousands of teachers who work in poorly resourced schools, and have to tackle the impact of growing social inequality. The introduction of performance management and performance related pay, which adds to the mountain of paperwork classroom teachers are expected to cope with, are at odds with the outlook of many teachers. As central government makes education increasingly proscriptive with a far greater emphasis placed on individual attainment, many teachers are being driven to breaking point.

Labour claims that the 2,300 more people undertaking teacher training this year means the problem is being solved. The government has also written to 25,000 teachers who have retired in the past five years and promised them they can return to teaching for two terms without losing their pension entitlements.



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