

Britain: Strike vote by London teachers

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Members of the National Union of Teachers (NUT), the largest teaching union in Britain, voted overwhelmingly to stage a one-day strike in London on March 14 to protest the government's derisory London allowance offer.

The strike will be the first such action taken in 30 years. Over 86 percent of those who voted supported the action. The government offered a 3.5 percent increase in the London weighting, equivalent to just £70-£105 (\$US100-\$150) a year. London weighting is offered to all public sector workers in the capital to compensate for the high cost of living. London is the most expensive city to live in Europe for housing and public transport. The NUT has demanded a one-third increase—from £3,000 to £4,000—for teachers living in inner, outer and fringe areas of the capital.

The starting salary for teachers in April will be £20,733. A teacher would not qualify for a mortgage in London until they earned over twice that sum or £53,000. This figure is based upon the Halifax Bank's average house price in greater London of £175,900. Recent land registry figures showed the average price of residential property in greater London (based on sales between April and June 2001) to be £205,830, compared to £69,358 in greater Manchester.

The conflict over the bonus has come to a head due to the chronic shortage of teachers nationally and especially in London. The cost of living in London, coupled with the poor wages and conditions for teachers, has resulted in the worst recruitment crisis since 1965. The teaching unions have been pressuring the government to increase the bonus to attract and retain teachers in the capital. Many schools, particularly in the inner city areas, are forced to rely on supply teachers to cover teacher shortages. Whilst there has been an increase in recruitment to teacher training courses in England, an NUT survey found that for every 100 final year students, 40 do not go into

classrooms. Another 40 leave the profession within three years.

The support for strike action by teachers was met with a vitriolic attack by Estelle Morris, Secretary for Education and Employment. Morris condemned the strike vote as "absolutely nonsensical". She denounced the unions and teachers for "putting a block on change and reform". How a campaign over better wages and recruitment undermined reform, she did not care to explain. Instead she contemptuously announced, "It [the strike] won't change my mind, it won't make the chancellor suddenly pay out a higher London allowance, it won't change anything."

The Secondary Heads Association and the National Association of Head Teachers have also balloted for industrial action, for the first time ever. They are threatening to boycott a performance related pay scheme for senior teachers, claiming the government's funding for it jeopardises school budgets.

Morris claimed to be "puzzled and surprised" at their decision. Her reaction reveals that the Labour government is deeply alienated from the concerns and interests of broad sections of the working class, even amongst those once considered as the party faithful. Morris replaced David Blunkett as Secretary of Education and Employment following last year's general election. Blunkett had faced opposition to Labour's restructuring of the education system. Morris, touted as a former classroom teacher in touch with the "real" experiences of teachers, was drafted in to the job to escalate the government's drive for privatisation and selection. She has provoked an unprecedented reaction from teaching staff. It is a significant indicator of the pent-up hostility and anger over Labour's dismantling of public welfare and services.



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