

Striking London teachers march through capital

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Tens of thousands of workers throughout London took strike action Tuesday against low pay in one of the most widespread protests seen in the capital for years.

Over 1,000 schools in London were closed and another 1,000 faced disruption as members of the National Union of Teachers (NUT), the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) and members of Unison, the local government union, took 24-hour strike action. The protest was to demand increases in the London weighting allowance—a wage supplement paid to workers to compensate for the high cost of living in the capital.

The strike action was the second for NUT members this year. The current inner-London allowance stands at £3,105, in outer London £2,043 and in fringe areas £792. Teachers are demanding a rise to £6,000 for those in inner London, £4,500 in outer London and £2,500 in fringe regions in line with allowances paid to police officers.

The action by local government workers also encompassed caretakers, classroom assistants, administrative staff and refuse workers. Currently council workers receive between £1,400 and £2,600 London allowance and want it increased to £4,000. Their 24-hour stoppage followed the tenth meeting between employers and unions, which failed to reach agreement.

The Greater London Assembly's advisory panel has concluded that workers in London should receive one-third extra pay to meet the high costs of housing and transport and to bring them into line with private sector pay, but the Blair government has rejected the recommendation. Instead, the School Teachers Review Body has recommended divisive discretionary bonuses under a performance-related pay formula.

The impact of low pay has resulted in a teaching crisis with hundreds of posts being unfilled, particularly in inner London, and schools left dependent on supply staff and casual teachers. Many of the responsibilities of teachers are being palmed off to unqualified workers such as teaching assistants.

A demonstration in central London organised by teaching unions to coincide with the strike brought together over 5,000 protesters. Teachers were joined by delegations of Unison members and striking firemen, who were in the fourth day of their dispute with the government over pay and conditions.

A teacher explained how he blamed the unions for the present poor conditions of workers. "For years they have accepted low wages and conditions to the extent that we are so behind now and we almost seem unreasonable for making large demands, but they shouldn't have gone along with it in the first place!"

Most of the chants and placards focused on opposition to the Blair government's support for a US-led war against Iraq, demanding, "Money for education, not war!" Firemen raising money for their strike spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site*. One asked, "Why do they have billions of pounds to go to war against innocent people, but we can't have a decent wages?" He explained how their dispute had forced firefighters to consider what the war was about, especially after the government branded the strike a national security threat. "The Americans want to control oil and the Middle East," he said. "Why is Blair supporting them? The workers have nothing to gain from this. Blair is trying to divert attention away from the problems at home."

Another fireman said his family is from Iraq. He explained that he is hostile to the war and that he has been discussing the issues with his colleagues. He said

he has often been asked by them to explain the issues.
“They are whipping up nationalism, which is no good
for anyone,” he commented.



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