Britain’s teachers and civil servants to take one-day strike action

Liz Smith, Linda Slattery
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For the first time in 21 years, teachers in the National Union of Teachers (NUT) will come out on a one-day strike on April 24 in opposition to the government’s imposition of a 2.45 percent pay award. With the current rate of inflation running at 4.1 percent this represents a pay cut in real terms. To make things worse, the pay award offered in January runs for three years—with a 2.45 percent increase in September, and just 2.3 percent in each of the following two years.

Members of Europe’s largest teaching union will be joined by over 100,000 civil servants in the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) covering ten government departments and further education college lecturers in the University and College Union (UCU) in more than 250 colleges in England. Over 20,000 Birmingham City council workers will also begin strike action on April 23.

The government claims that pay restraint is necessary in order to keep inflation down. Schools Minister Jim Knight went so far as to tell the *Times Educational Supplement* that “it is because teachers have mortgages too that I know that they understand the need for a pay deal that helps deliver low inflation, low interest rates and a stable economy.”

Workers need higher pay precisely because they are facing rising mortgage, food and fuel costs, as well as credit card debts.

Teachers and other workers are not responsible for the financial crisis of the banking system, or the looming recession. Yet, while the Brown government is making available between £50 billion and £150 billion to the banks to cover their bad debts, and has spent billions more on the military occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, they are insisting that workers accept below-inflation pay rises for years to come.

The starting pay of a teacher in England and Wales, at September 2008 would be £20,627 and in London’s Inner/Outer/Fringe this only rises to £25,000/£24,000/£21,619.

Students and newly qualified teachers are beginning their working lives unable to afford a mortgage and with debts from student loans averaging £20,000. The interest rate on student loans has just been raised to 4.8 percent.

According to the BBC, “grants to cash-strapped teachers from the Teacher Support Network charity rose 70 percent in the first quarter of 2008,” and more teachers struggling with their mortgages sought help from the benevolent fund run by the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT).

Chief executive Patrick Nash of the Teacher Support Network, which gives hardship grants in addition to advice to teachers who are struggling, told the BBC, “More of our callers are having to seek help simply to make ends meet, showing that the national credit crunch is having a very real effect on teachers in particular.”

However, the NUT is not mounting a serious challenge to the government’s pay award. This is a one-day token strike to provide a focus for the rising anger of its members, after which the union is merely asking teachers to lobby local councillors and MPs leading to a protest at parliament in June. The summer break takes place for six weeks in July/August, so nothing further is likely to take place until September when the pay rise comes into effect.

The very fact that the NUT has not led a national strike in 21 years testifies to its refusal to oppose the constant attacks on teachers’ wages and working conditions. Indeed, over the past two decades the union has collaborated with successive governments in a massive overhaul of education, which includes the following:

* Implementation and extension of the proscriptive and unwieldy National Curriculum, without consulting teachers and with no reference to child psychology.

* Statutory annual tests for children at all ages including SATS, which have made children in the UK amongst the

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unhappiest in Europe, according to a recent United Nations report.

* The setting of arbitrary targets in line with continual testing of children, dressed up as “raising standards” and “inclusion” of children from poorer areas, which again bears no relation to how children develop. Teachers have to waste precious time that should be spent with children compiling meaningless test data about children as young as five years old. This information is sent to the government, to be used as a stick to beat teachers whose classes are not performing up to standard.

* The introduction of Performance Management as a way to smuggle in payment by results. Newly qualified teachers no longer automatically climb up the pay scale with experience, but have to prove they are worthy of a pay increment by being monitored. This is reinforced by regular OFSTED inspections.

* The drafting in of untrained classroom assistants, a so-called “army of mums,” as a cheap labour workforce on temporary contracts who can even replace, at the discretion of the school head, trained teachers in the classroom.

* The merging of the departments of Education and Social Services, using the pretext of the tragic death of Victoria Climbie, that will pave the way for further cuts to the social welfare budget.

* The introduction of privately run academies headed by dubious outfits such as the Vardy Foundation that favours the teaching of creationism.

Education has been used as an opportunity for big business to make huge amounts of money. Not only have schools been forced to run as businesses with their own budgets, but they have to buy in privately run services like school meals, repairs, educational psychology support, whilst the government hands over millions to the building industry in its Buildings Schools for the Future (BSF) programme.

Alongside the lack of funds for school and support services, schools have been transformed into instruments for the social policing of children with severe social and psychological problems—with unqualified “mentors” substituting for trained social workers.

The role of the NUT in allowing this to take place is only eclipsed by that of the NASUWT and the smaller Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL).

The NASUWT has opposed strike action, with the spurious claim that its members are more concerned about their increased workload. Its members will be carrying out business as usual on Thursday, with no challenge from the NUT. The ATL have said that under no condition must their members take strike action. (The lecturers in further education are striking for pay parity with teachers that were promised to them four years ago!)

One must add that the National Union of Students (NUS), which is Labour controlled, will do nothing to support the lecturers or teachers. The only listing for April 24 on its website is for a Student governor “toolkit day.”

Essential lessons must be drawn from these experiences. The attacks on the pay and conditions of teachers since Labour came to power in 1997 have taken place in the midst of a boom. Today the UK and world economy stand on the brink of a recession after the eruption of a banking crisis that is routinely compared with the Wall Street Crash of 1929. This must herald an ever more savage assault on the public sector by Brown.

Organisations that could not defend their members under an expanding economy will never do so when the recession really bites.

The working class must build its own organisations of class struggle.

Teachers’ pay is only one aspect of a broader fight to defend education from its systematic undermining by Labour and its big business backers. For this to be successful demands that this struggle is taken out of the hands of the trade union bureaucracy through the creation of rank and file organisations of teachers that cut across the carefully-cultivated sectional differences that divide and weaken workers in education.

NUT members must do what their leadership has refused to—oppose the collaboration with the government by the NASUWT and ATL and campaign for joint action by all teachers. This should be extended to all other workers in education. At the same time, support must be built amongst parents to reject the claims by the government and the media that the teacher’s action is endangering children’s education.

Only when working people organize a mass, independent political movement and assert their own social and class interests can the immense wealth of society be utilized to provide high quality schools and public services for all.

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