

Britain: Size of teachers' strike exceeds predictions

Teachers voice their anger at government policy

Our reporters
26 April 2008

Two hundred thousand teachers organised in the National Union of Teachers came out on strike on Thursday in opposition to the Labour government's wage-cutting pay deal. NUT members had balloted 3-1 to reject the three-year pay award of 2.45 percent this year, followed by 2.3 percent over the next two years.

Three teachers were joined by 100,000 civil servants in the Public and Commercial Service Union (PCS), who are opposing a similar cap on their wages imposed by Prime Minister Gordon Brown throughout the public sector.

According to the *Guardian*, "More than a million pupils at 8,000 schools were expected to miss school ... and those predictions may have been exceeded. Several local authorities reported more than twice as many schools closed or partly closed as expected."

One in three schools in England and Wales were closed, despite the fact that the other two teaching unions, the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) and the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL), refused to support the day of action.

In London, 708 schools shut down completely, and 769 were partially closed. In the South West the strike closed 254 schools, and in Liverpool 187 schools closed their doors, while 213 were only able to operate partially. In the North East 402 schools were shut, 500 were closed in Wales, and 600 in Yorkshire. The West Midlands saw 200 of its schools closed and 264 partially shut.

Teachers held marches and rallies up and down the country, expressing their determination to beat what is being dubbed as Brown's pay freeze. In London between 6,000 and 10,000 teachers and public sector workers marched together, and rallies were held in Liverpool, Preston, Leeds, Sheffield, Hull, Cardiff and Wrexham. In Birmingham, 1,000 workers took to the streets.

The London march began in Lincoln's Inn Fields, where singer-songwriter and political activist Billy Bragg played, then walked through the Strand, past Downing Street, and ended in a meeting in the Methodist Central Hall in Westminster. The hall held only 2,600 people, meaning that three-quarters of the marchers, including reporters from the WSW, were unable to enter.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to teachers Keith Marsh, Jan Moses, Adeola Oladejo and Sonia Jallone from a north London primary school about why they were striking:

"For more pay, so that we get more teachers in the profession rather than lose them," said Jan. "I have a 16-year-old daughter who would be a great teacher, but I would never let her do it with the way things are. It's about respect. Either the government respects us, or they don't.

"We are fed up with being told that teaching is a vocation and we should be grateful that we get paid anything at all. Why do you have to take on

Teaching and Learning Responsibilities just to earn a half-decent wage? Teaching itself is an important enough job."

"It's about other issues as well," Keith added. "The paperwork: the fact that we are now expected to be psychologists, social workers and nurses as well as teachers."

"Officially we work 27.5 hours per week, but how is it that I am working 60 hours?" Jan interjected. "Also everything is based on SATs [standardized tests] now, but there is so much more to what we do."

Keith agreed: "When you are teaching Year Six you have kids crying their eyes out or not coming in because they are so worried about SATs."

"I am on strike not just over pay but because of stress levels, workload and changing targets," Sonia said. "PPA [Preparation and Assessment time] has helped, but it is not always kept to. We need to go back to the old methods where we focused on teaching. We don't have to assess everything all the time."

"PPA time was the government admitting that the amount of paperwork we have to do is ridiculous," Keith stated. "Anyway, if they can find £50 billion to bail out the banks, why can't they pay us what we deserve? Some 50 percent of newly qualified teachers leave the profession within three years. What a waste of talent and training!"

The four agreed that the one-day strike was not enough and thought it was a shame that it had gone ahead without the support of the other unions—particularly those representing caretakers, teaching assistants and learning support assistants who in most cases are paid less than half the salary of teachers. These workers are also expected to do teaching work with groups of children and in some cases take classes while teachers are having PPA time.

Jo Boyle works at a West London primary school that had been closed down by the strike. "I came out because I think it is important to support striking en masse," she said. "I don't think it will change anything, but I believe in acting as a group to try and change things. I've never been involved with the teaching union before, but I expected people to be in support of the strike because I think of teachers as socialists who support change.

"It is not so much about pay, although it is difficult for teachers in London to get on the property ladder, but we have a reasonable quality of life compared to many people. It is more about the amount we do and how much of ourselves we put into it. We don't feel we are being valued. We see other people working less, with less responsibility and being paid more.

"The system of pay doesn't support people who want to just be a good class teacher. People are forced into management because of pay issues. I took on a maths TLR [Teaching and Learning Responsibility] after only one-and-a-half years in teaching because I needed more money to pay my rent and live in London, when it would probably have been better for me

to have more teaching experience first.

“The strike would have had much more of an impact if the rest of the unions had come out. I wonder why the other unions accepted the pay deal and why the NUT didn’t work harder to get them out with us.”

Jo agreed that the NUT had not opposed the constant attacks on education: “The union should have raised issues like the National Curriculum, SATs and Performance Related Pay [PRP],” she said. “We didn’t know anything about PRP until it was already accepted and in place and then you don’t feel you can do anything about it.”

Katie Noble said she was on strike because the pay deal was “completely unfair. It is below inflation. We are asked to pay more for various things in daily life, but this is not reflected in our pay.

“We put in extra all the time. We give up weekends and stay late planning, marking, filling in paperwork.”

Gilly Chapman agreed: “People have huge expectations of what new initiatives we will take on.”

“There is always something new,” Katie added, “you think you’ve got your planning sorted and the government brings in a new framework and you have to start all over again.”

Gilly felt that the strike could be the start of more general action. Katie agreed that there was unrest across social services. “I don’t think the government will back down, but I don’t think it will end here,” she said.

A 1,000-strong rally was held in Manchester at Friends Meeting House, which was packed to capacity. After the meeting teachers joined public sector workers organised in UNISON in a march through the city. Marchers were greeted by spontaneous applause from passers-by, in stark contrast to the media barrage claiming widespread opposition to the strike amongst parents.

“I am very surprised at the turnout,” said Lindsey Lenton, who has been teaching for two years. “I thought there might be hostility from the public. But people were clapping. I’ve brought my 10-year-old niece along so she knows why her teachers are on strike. I love teaching, but it is exhausting, and despite the fact that myself and my husband both have decent jobs, we still had a struggle to get on the property ladder.”

A retired nurse joined the Manchester rally in Albert Square and expressed her support for the strike. “When I was working as a nurse we had to come out on strike and I agree with the teachers. Now I’m retired it’s still a struggle, I have a mortgage to pay and all the bills.”

In Sheffield a young teacher from Rotherham told a rally, “I love my job passionately, but it places enormous demands upon me and is very time consuming.

“New teachers like myself have to make large sacrifices and it is an indictment of New Labour that I begin my teaching career with imposing debts from tuition fees and student loans. Many like myself have sickening levels of debt.”

She explained how she cannot afford to run a car, or buy a house, whilst everyday costs are rising too. She expressed her revulsion for New Labour and their reneging on promises, amongst them Tony Blair’s mantra of “education, education, education,” saying, “We deserve a government that puts its money where its mouth is. I’m disgusted that teachers cannot afford an average house in an average city.”

One teacher told the WSW, “It’s not just about teachers having financial difficulties. Education is being damaged. None of our Year Seven pupils have had an English teacher this year. I was wary about coming out on strike. I don’t take this action lightly.”

Another added, “I never have a weekend free. I cannot really afford to go on strike, but I am now doing the lesson planning for two or three other teachers on a regular basis. We have an excessive workload and it has increased all the time during the last few years. I think the problem is that we should all be taking action and speaking with one voice.”

One teacher had gone for a job interview at school and was asked whether she was going on strike. “There is no department in my school

that hasn’t been affected by staff absences,” she said. “People are leaving teaching, they can’t recruit new people and there are those off work with stress.

“It’s got so bad it’s nearly impossible to do the job. This strike is less about pay than it is about conditions. I know newly qualified teachers who can’t afford to miss a day’s pay to go on strike.”

Interviewed on Channel 4, Schools Minister Jim Knight attempted to talk up teachers’ pay by saying that their pay had risen by 19 percent since 1997. That means that on average over 11 years, teachers pay has risen by significantly less than 2 percent a year, a pay cut in effect given the level of inflation now standing at over 4 percent. There has been a huge rise in house prices, as well as burgeoning utility bills.

Newly qualified teachers are particularly hard hit because they start their working lives with debts from student loans averaging £20,000. The government are also claiming that teachers are earning on average £34,000. This is in fact the maximum salary after 10 years service, but only if teachers pass their annual performance management monitoring and reviews, and is wholly dependent on the constraints of the schools budget.

Knight also attempted to hide behind the School Teachers Independent Pay Review body, which recommended the pay deal to the government. This body is independent in name only, its members being hand picked by the government.

Teachers in Further Education colleges also joined schoolteachers in their day of strike action. Despite the fact that these workers teach A Levels and GCSEs [General Certificate of Secondary Education] to students aged 16 and above, they are not paid on a par with the rest of the profession.

At the rallies particular applause was reserved for calls for united action of all public sector workers in opposition to the government. Real unity, however, can only be achieved when working people build their own organisations that have as their aim the utilization of the vast wealth of society for the satisfaction of human need and not the profits of the minority.

The trades unions have proved themselves incapable of defending living conditions. The economic climate today—of banking collapses, the credit crunch and looming recession—means workers must begin to assert their own independent class and social interests.



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