

London teachers' union branch denounces betrayal of pensions dispute

Jo March
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It was a day that most members of the National Union of Teachers (NUT) at Edward Wilson primary school never expected to see—the day they voted against strike action.

In every dispute for many years, NUT members at the London school have voted unanimously for stoppages to defend wages and conditions. But the last year has seen the teachers become increasingly frustrated with the unions' token campaign against the attack on pensions by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government, while they did nothing at all to fight against job cuts.

The teachers at Edward Wilson had taken part in the largest strike seen in Britain in 30 years involving 2.5 million public sector workers in 20 different unions on November 30.

However, the unions moved quickly to wind down this opposition. On December 20, the Trades Union Congress announced it had called off any further strike action to enter negotiations with the government. Along with the majority of the unions involved, it worked to divide public sector workers along sectional lines, holding "scheme-specific" talks on largely secondary issues.

Then a joint national strike planned for March 28 by the four remaining unions—the NUT, the University and College Union (UCU), the Public and Commercial Services (PCS) and the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS)—was sold out before it had even begun. At the last moment, the action was restricted to London, with only NUT and UCU members in post-1992 universities taking part. The PCS opted out of striking altogether, while the EIS entered into separate negotiations with the Scottish government.

This meant that just one week before an already much reduced day of action was due to take place, and two weeks before the increases in pension contributions

were actually to take effect, NUT members at Edward Wilson were told that all the other unions except the UCU had pulled out and that the NUT was taking action only in the capital.

The mood amongst the 20 or so teachers at a specially convened meeting was one of disgust. Speakers denounced the "pathetic" response by the unions to the government's attacks. Anger was voiced over the fact that the union leadership had no intention of putting up any real struggle against the pensions changes, but were now expecting teachers to lose a day's pay simply so the executive could save face and look as if they were still doing something.

Finally, members voted unanimously against taking strike action.

Several teachers spoke and insisted they wanted their position to be made clear to the union executive and other teachers. They were not against striking, but felt that they were being used and manipulated in the most cynical fashion, and enough was enough.

A letter was drafted and sent to the NUT executive, stating:

"Edward Wilson NUT branch deplore the actions of the NUT in calling a miserly one-day strike on the single issue of pensions under conditions where the wholesale privatisation of education is being carried out by the government, in conjunction with the break up of the National Health Service and the destruction of the welfare system in this country.

"We have voted against strike action on the 28th March, not because we do not want to fight against the decimation of our pensions, but because we think these occasional one-day strikes don't put any real pressure on the government and we believe that a longer or indefinite strike should be called if it is to have any impact whatsoever.

“We believe that the issue of our pensions should be linked to the massive attacks on jobs and the welfare state and that a general strike should be called uniting workers in the public and private sectors against these cuts.

“We also recognise that internationally workers around the world are being made to pay for the speculation of bankers and the profits of big corporations. We oppose the driving down of wages and destruction of services and call on workers internationally to join in a united struggle for the right to a decent standard of living, education, health care and basic services.”

After the meeting, Amanda Darlington, Edward Wilson NUT rep for more than six years, said, “As 73 percent of NUT members voted for a national strike, the executive went against the majority decision. This is unacceptable on such an important issue.

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“At our meeting the majority of people felt it was pointless to just have a strike in London. We felt that it wasn’t going to have any impact, so we were forced to vote against it. We would like to see a national strike of all unions over a few days.

“At the moment it feels like the unions can’t or won’t fight for us. What is the point of voting for a strike if they have already decided what they are going to do?”

When asked what she thought of the fact that the unions have not taken any action over the academies programme or the austerity measures, Hanan Wahabi, humanities coordinator, asked, “What are the unions doing about anything? It’s not right. Why do we pay them? They need to stand up for us.”

Phil Baldwin, reception teacher, said, “It’s not that I disagree with strike action. It’s that I disagree with the manner in which this particular day of action was called. London only? Surely this affects all teachers regardless of geography. I just don’t think a single day of action highlights the issue sufficiently. Get your act together, NUT, and actually tackle the problem properly.”

“I can’t see occasional one-day strikes achieving anything other than a few disgruntled parents every so often,” Brian Keeler, maths co-ordinator, stated.

“This government have an ideological remit”, he

said. “They want to dismantle all vestiges of the state and hand as much over to the private sector as possible. As far as they’re concerned, the public service provides zero growth to this economy. They want more private companies given a slice of the public pie so that they can push down wages and increase the profit-taking for companies and, more importantly, Tory-backing private investors.”

“The austerity measures stink,” Brian added. “The so-called wealth creators get their assets protected by the government through the crisis and then are given free rein again once things start picking up again. No banker has been jailed for their profligacy, yet the majority of the population will be paying for decades to help the bailout. The one percenters must be laughing their socks off at how the roulette table of global capitalism is so heavily rigged in their favour. Win, win in all situations.”



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