

# UK ex-left groups cover up collapsing support for education unions

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Marches organised by the National Union of Teachers (NUT) and NASUWT in Sheffield and Oxford, July 14, were billed as a major new initiative in the fight to defend public sector pensions.

In the lead-up to the demonstrations, the two main teaching unions declared an “historic agreement” to join forces to jointly campaign to defend education.

The June 26 *Oxford Mail* wrote that Oxford “is facing ‘major disruption’ when an estimated 10,000 people descend on the city centre for a protest by public sector workers next month.... The Oxford event is for the whole of the south of England and London, with organisers planning to bus in groups from as far afield as Reading, Birmingham and Surrey. The other rally, for the north of the country, is being held in Sheffield.”

No one was more enthused by the prospects for the demos than the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and Socialist Party (SP). The SWP called them a “key part of building towards” a planned Trades Union Congress demonstration on October 20 that “could open up the next stage in the fightback.”

On the day, the marches were a debacle for the unions. Substantially fewer than 200 turned up in Oxford and not much more than 200 in Sheffield. The vast majority of participants were trade union bureaucrats and delegations of the pseudo-left groups, who had not even been able to mobilise their own members.

The rhetoric from the platform, speaking of a “fight back” and a “hot autumn” of strikes, was generally ignored by bemused passers-by, even when accompanied by swearing by some speakers.

The two unions have a joint membership of more than half a million. Oxford was targeted as it covers the seat of Prime Minister David Cameron, while Sheffield covers the seat of Deputy Prime Minister Nick

Clegg—two of the most hated politicians in Britain. Yet so insignificant and embarrassing were the protests that there was not a single report on them in any of the national press.

At the Sheffield rally, every speaker identified as a representative of teachers was a member of either the SWP or SP, without declaring it. Christine Blower, president of the NUT, was handed the platform to rapturous applause and without a hint of a criticism.

“This is a brilliant turnout”, she declared. “We need more of events like this. We need everyone in London on October 20.”

Following the event, the SWP clearly did not know what to say and issued separate perfunctory reports on the event, made up in each instance of a factual opening statement and a quote from a local union bureaucrat. The SP’s similarly non-political report claimed that there were 500 on the Sheffield protest. But that was the absolute limit at which even it felt able to stretch the truth—and is still cold comfort for its members who were told to expect a mass mobilisation.

The pathetic turnout is not the product of the lack of broad-based opposition among teachers to the unprecedented offensive against the state education system or the assault on their livelihoods and conditions. It reveals an ongoing and historic collapse in the political and moral authority of the trade unions.

The Socialist Equality Party issued and distributed a leaflet, “Teachers need a new socialist leadership, not protest stunts,” describing the rallies as “a desperate attempt by the two unions to bolster their credibility, “when both stand discredited by their sabotaging of the struggle against the government’s attacks on pensions and public education.”

Examining the actual experiences of teachers, rather than the boastful claims of the bureaucrats, the SEP

noted that following a November 30 TUC protest last year, “when over two million public sector workers took action in defence of pensions and to voice their hostility to the austerity measures, the unions did all in their power to wind down resistance.”

The TUC called off its campaign against the pension cuts and the leading unions rubber-stamped the government’s “reforms”.

Teachers have been involved in two national strikes over pensions in the past year. On March 28, a third national strike by the self-proclaimed “rejectionist unions” was abandoned altogether by the Public and Commercial Services union, while the NUT overturned a mandate for a national strike—restricting action to a token 24-hour stoppage of its members in London.

In the week leading up to the demonstrations, three of the largest public sector unions, the GMB, Unison and Unite, who were all represented on the platform, signed off on an agreement to impose the government’s pension reforms.

For this reason, the government has in fact already imposed the new pension scheme, meaning public sector workers will have to work longer for a substantially smaller retirement package. Teachers have started paying higher contribution rates from this April.

In addition, there has been an unprecedented level of privatisation in which no aspect of education from the providing of resources, curriculum development, teacher training and staffing has been spared. Hundreds of schools have been transformed into Academies under the threat of closure and massive budget cuts. The Academies are being used to tear up teachers’ hard fought pay and conditions as well as providing a substandard education to children.

“As far as the union bureaucracy is concerned,” the SEP wrote, “the ‘pensions fight’ is a fiction perpetuated only to shield themselves from the anger of their members.”

Indeed, the government fully relies on the trade unions to sabotage all resistance to its attacks, while the union bureaucracy “in turn relies on the pseudo-left groups to bolster its credentials, and to prevent a challenge to its stranglehold on working class resistance.”

We also noted that “Over many years, the various fake socialist outfits have successfully ensconced themselves in the higher echelons of the union

apparatus. From this vantage point they enjoy a privileged lifestyle in return for providing a verbal left cover for whatever rotten manoeuvre the union bureaucracy carries out.”

This is particularly the case in education and other public sector unions, where the ex-left outfits often have control or a leading position on executive bodies.

The SWP and SP are characterised by a politically rooted contempt for the working class and a worshipful attitude to the bureaucracy, which they view as the real actor in historical events. They might believe that they can continue to treat teachers as pliant fodder for the union’s cynical machinations with government and the employers. But the failure of these latest protests is another indication that more and more workers are sick and tired of being marshalled for protests only in order to let off steam while a betrayal is cooked up.

In contrast to the pseudo-left handmaids of the bureaucracy, the SEP stands for an independent movement of the working class to bring down the coalition government.

The defence of public education and the campaign against austerity can only be taken forward in a political rebellion against the trade unions. New organisations of class struggle must be built, which unite all sections of the working class, youth, students and the unemployed, against the ruthless offensive of the capitalist system.



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