

# Government threatens UK teachers with pay cuts as punishment for industrial action

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Education Secretary Michael Gove's demand that head teachers take "robust" measures against staff involved in industrial action is a declaration of war by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition.

Its immediate target is an assault on the pay and conditions of teachers, which are to be decimated as part of the government's drive to complete the carving up of public education by private sponsors under the guise of academies and Free Schools. But the government intends to create a precedent that will be used against all public sector workers to force through the privatisation of all social provision from the National Health Service to welfare.

Gove's demand was made in a letter to the heads of all state schools in England. Referring to the current work-to-rule by members of the National Union of Teachers (NUT) and the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) over jobs, pensions and working conditions, he published legal advice asserting that those taking action are in breach of their contracts.

"Pay deductions represent a lawful response, and the advice sets out how deductions can be made in a proportionate and reasonable way," he threatened.

Demanding head teachers "support your school(s)" Gove wrote, "I am convinced that by working together in a coordinated way we can protect the pupils, parents, teachers and headteachers who would otherwise suffer because of this irresponsible industrial action."

His claim to be acting in defence of pupils, parents and teachers is a barefaced lie. Public education has been deliberately run down and deprived of funds by successive governments for decades. The coalition is preparing to finish the job through a major offensive against teachers. Gove is considering legislation to outlaw industrial action by teachers and give schools

new powers to dismiss staff, while Chancellor George Osborne has announced the government is to break-up national pay bargaining for teachers in favour of performance-related pay based on individual assessments.

This was backed by the School Teachers' Pay Review Body. Chair Patricia Hodgson argued, "Individual schools are best placed to understand pupil needs and local circumstances and should be free to spend their money as they see fit, within the national framework."

While Osborne said that the government had set aside plans to introduce regional pay awards for the whole of the public sector, the assault on teachers' pay and conditions is clearly intended as a preparatory step towards this.

Gove denied that his letter amounted to political interference, claiming that he was responding to an appeal for clarity from a head teacher on how to respond to the work-to-rule in his school. The head teacher is thought to be from the Stratford Academy in East London, which in October threatened to dock teachers' pay by up to 15 percent for participating in the work-to-rule. Teachers responded with nine days of strike action, spread over three weeks.

Academy schools were first introduced by the Blair Labour government in 2000. Portrayed as a means of turning around "failing schools", the intention was to undermine teachers' pay and conditions and provide a means for private corporations to gain access to education budgets. Freed from the control of the Local Education Authority, and not bound by national pay and work agreements, schools taking academy status had their "failing" status wiped clean and acquired extra cash as sweeteners to the corporate sponsors invited on board.

The coalition extended this programme with the introduction of Free Schools, based on a similar model.

More than half of all pupils in England are now taught in schools with academy or Free School status. Now the government has said that 600 more schools will be converted into academies by the end of 2013, with the onus on primary schools.

Its weapon for achieving this objective is the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted). Far from being an independent inspectorate, it is utilised to cow teachers and prepare the ground for privatisation through its power to deem schools "failing" and in need of "special measures".

The argument that teachers' pay should be measured by results takes no account of a child's background, ability or individual needs. Given the social environment in which many public schools exist—which is being dramatically worsened by the government's austerity measures—and the vast increase in teacher workloads through the incessant introduction of arbitrary initiatives, it reduces teaching to a box-ticking exercise based on learning by rote. This was underscored by the announcement earlier this year that unqualified teachers working in academies will no longer have to achieve Qualified Teacher Status.

The main asset the government has in waging its assault on teachers is the NUT, NASUWT and other unions. Since the two million-strong day of action in November 2011 against the attack on public sector pensions, the unions have worked to close down any opposition to the government's measures, with the result that the pension changes have now been implemented.

On March 28, the NUT overturned a national ballot for a one-day strike, restricting it to token 24-hour stoppage in London. Conferences of the NUT and NASUWT in April rejected further strike action in favour of the work-to-rule.

Limited to 25 areas in which teachers can refuse to cooperate—such as by not filling in forms or covering some extra-curricular activities—it is a pretence of opposition and a divisive one at that. It pushes the extra workload onto other staff, which is why some teachers have refused to implement it. And the absence of certain plans, display boards and other items will be used by Ofsted to downgrade their schools and force them to become academies.

The teaching unions are fully aware of this. They are also aware that they are sitting on mounting anger—as expressed in recent strikes by teachers at Dunston primary in Chesterfield, Westfield Sports College in Sheffield and Sinfin Community School, Derby. The refusal of the NUT and NASUWT to agree any action against Gove's threats is therefore not mere cowardice. They are intent on enabling the government's attacks on pay and conditions and its privatisation measures to go through by demobilising and dissipating opposition and creating "facts on the ground". As Hodgson stated in justifying the move to performance-related pay, "I would be hopeful that the unions... will see how much was taken on board from evidence they gave us, how much of this is rooted in what already exists. I would be surprised if they could find any principle they haven't already accepted."

Once again, the union's complicity is being concealed by pseudo-left groups such as the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and the Socialist Party, which play a leading role on the National Executive of the NUT. Reporting on the NUT executive meeting on December 13, executive member Martin Powell-Davies of the Socialist Party claimed it had agreed "to hold protests, meetings and rallies to build the campaign against these attacks," before admitting "no firm plans were suggested."

In fact the meetings and rallies are solely restricted to the issue of pay, and vague talk of coordinated strike action with the NASUWT was mentioned only in relation to the spring term, if then.

Opposition to the government's assault on education cannot be built through the trade unions, but only in a rebellion against them. It requires the building of rank-and-file committees, uniting all education staff with parents, pupils and other workers in a political struggle to bring down the coalition government and for a workers government that will reorganise society on the basis of social need, not private profit.



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