

UK teaching unions stage token protest in North West

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1 May 2013

Britain's two largest teaching unions held the first of a series of regional rallies in Manchester and Liverpool on Saturday. Its aim was to promote the tactic of rolling strike action against the attacks on education instead of a national mobilisation against the government and its austerity measures, the intensification of the privatisation of education and the wholesale restructuring of teachers' working conditions.

A campaign team from the Socialist Equality Party intervened, especially to address the international character of the assault on public education, with the lockout of 90,000 teachers in Denmark, and to expose the fraudulent character of the teaching unions' opposition to the attacks in Britain.

The SEP explained that in announcing their "joint strike strategy," the National Union of Teachers (NUT) and National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) have given a clear signal to the British government that they intend no serious resistance to the devastating attacks on pay and conditions and the education system.

The timetable of rolling regional strikes is not planned to start until June 27 in the North West of England, just weeks before the summer holidays. It is designed to have as little effect as possible, while allowing the union to claim that they are mounting some kind of response to the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition's attacks. This is despite ballot after ballot of union members confirming overwhelming support for strike action.

The union's choice of an indoor rally in a conference hall at the Midland Hotel, which could only accommodate the 500 people that attended, was in keeping with efforts to stifle mounting opposition.

NASUWT General Secretary Chris Keates made clear from the platform that if the unions get their way

even a limited one-day stoppage would not occur. She made an appeal for the government to meet with the unions, spoke of how "if the strike takes place on 27th June the government will be responsible", and offered no further action other than people sending postcards to Education Secretary Michael Gove appealing for a government U-turn, and writing to MPs.

Kevin Courtney, deputy general secretary of the NUT, listed the attacks being implemented without answering what he was doing as a representative of the Socialist Teachers Alliance (set up by the Socialist Workers Party) to mobilise against this. Gove's inspiration was the Swedish free school system, reported Courtney, introduced 20 years ago to turn education into a source of profit by driving down wages. Since then Sweden has plummeted in the comparative league tables of educational standards.

Not one word was mentioned about the then ongoing lockout of 90,000 teachers by the Danish government. Even empty gestures of international solidarity could not be afforded, as Denmark highlights the role of the pseudo-left in collaborating with the austerity measures imposed by the Social Democrat-led coalition government and the restructuring of teachers' working conditions.

Another speaker at the rally, a young science teacher, Ashley, typified the dedication and enthusiasm of a profession that has been so vilified by successive governments and the media. Ashley received a standing ovation as she outlined her vision of education, where children are encouraged to become creative thinkers and problem-solvers, a vision that is diametrically opposed to Gove's stifling target-driven curriculum.

A school chair of governors, Bill Evans, told the rally how he has had to watch his own school, which failed its Ofsted inspection and was put in the category

special measures, being forced to become an Academy.

Seventeen-year-old student Robert described the bleak future facing young people today under capitalism. Should he go into higher education or get a job? Either choice poses big problems, he explained, as university has become unaffordable for the working class and youth unemployment is soaring.

Angela Raynor, mother of five-year-old Charlie who was born prematurely, told the rally how worried she was that the money to provide the necessary extra funds for her son's needs in school would be rescinded. Condemning the government's policies and Gove, she scathingly remarked that her son, whose spirit was an inspiration to all who know him, would not help any school get to the top of the league tables.

At the rally, retired teacher Gail from the now defunct ELS service, which specialised in helping children learning English as a second language, explained the detrimental impact of transferring Section 11 funding to schools away from a dedicated service on the education of children learning English. This happened in 2000 under the Labour government's creeping privatisation programme.

Jacob, a student, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "We need new forms of action. These people at the top think they have a god given right to do what they like and we need to fight it."

His mother added, "When the Academy people come in to change your school they are not there to consult, they are there to ratify things that have already been decided. It's another method of divide and rule."

April, a member of the NUT in Manchester working in the secondary sector dealing with children who have become excluded from the mainstream, said she had seen "not just education cuts, but other cuts that impact on pupils and families who rely on food parcels to get them through. The support they have received from other agencies has been cut back drastically, having a really detrimental effect on children's wellbeing. It's not just education that is suffering, it's the whole picture."

She continued, "We have this day of action coming up, but I'm not convinced there has been enough groundwork done to make sure that is a really successful strike and I don't think a one-day strike in the North West region is going to make Michael Gove sit up and listen. I think there has to be a national strike

to bring it home to everyone what this government is about."

Replying to the claim that there was apathy within the ranks of the teachers, she stated, "I don't agree that there's apathy. But when you think anyone who speaks out in schools can be targeted and the Academy process has made that easier, it can make people afraid. We don't have the leadership from the national organisation that is needed to support them to make any strike effective. Although the hall was filled, it's a strange venue; we needed to fill something much bigger."



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