

Teaching unions stage token one-day strike in North West of England

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The following is the text of a leaflet to be distributed by the Socialist Equality Party to striking teachers in the North West of England.

Thursday's regional strike in the North West of England, called by the National Union of Teachers (NUT) and National Association of Schoolmasters and Women Teachers (NASUWT), is a cynical attempt to diffuse teachers' determination to fight against the devastating attacks on the UK's education system and the pay and conditions of teachers.

Since the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition came to power in 2010, teachers' pay has been frozen and pension contributions and the retirement age increased, whilst pay and conditions are under full-scale assault with performance-related pay taking effect in September of this year.

In addition, the government has greatly expanded the Academies and Free Schools programme, including the forced academisation (turning schools into "academies") of many schools against the wishes of parents, teachers and governors. A new "fact-based" curriculum is also being introduced from September 2014, aimed at rolling back the progress made in teaching and learning over the past 60 years, much as the austerity programme is destroying the welfare gains of the postwar period.

In the face of this vicious assault, the teachers' unions, alongside their counterparts in the other public sector unions, have consistently worked to sabotage any united response by their members. Ever since joint action by 20 different unions on November 30, 2011, against the attack on pensions resulted in the largest strike seen in Britain in 30 years, involving 2.5 million public sector workers, the unions have scrambled to make agreements with the government to prevent opposition spreading beyond their control.

In March 2012, 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 union (PCS) and the Educational Institute of Scotland—was sold out before it had even begun. At the last moment, the action was restricted to London, with only NUT members in schools 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. All this despite clear mandates for strike action from the unions' membership.

The result of the demobilisation of this fight is clear as the government has felt strengthened to mount ever more draconian measures to drive down wages and costs in preparation for full-scale privatisation. A recent letter from Education Secretary Michael Gove to the School Teachers' Review Body proposed that the maximum limit on teachers' working hours and the entitlement to preparation time be abolished.

The response from the NUT and NASUWT to the abolition of the current, hard-won, national pay policy has been to send a "School Pay Policy Checklist" to all head teachers asking them individually to adopt their model.

The document itself states that the policy "is entirely consistent with the revised statutory provisions for teachers' pay due to take effect from 1 September 2013" and "consistent and compliant with all statutory guidelines". The document fully accepts the government's agenda, cuts off any possibility of defending national pay and conditions and hands over the right to determine teachers' pay and conditions to individual head teachers and governors.

Despite leaflets claiming "It's time to stand up for education!", the timetable of rolling regional strikes

beginning in the North West, just weeks before the summer holidays is expressly designed to have as little effect as possible, while allowing the unions to claim that they are mounting some kind of response to the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition's attacks. It is almost ironic to claim to be defending a national pay structure with a token, regional strike, with another one not even scheduled until the autumn.

Such is the unions' deliberate fragmentation of teachers' opposition to these attacks that on June 25, entirely separate from the North West strike, the London region of the NUT organised a "March for Education", to include a protest outside the Department for Education. The publicity poster for the protest, headed vaguely "Stand up for schools", did not even mention that teachers in the North West were set to strike. The turnout of only around 1,000 for the demonstration is evidence of the extent to which the unions are demobilising teachers' hostility to the coalition's agenda.

Opposed to any serious struggle on the basis of mobilising their joint membership of around 600,000, such entirely harmless protests, as well as the rolling strikes, are the means by which the NUT and NASUWT are smothering all opposition.

The union bureaucracy did everything they could to call off even Thursday's North West action. On June 17, the NUT and NASUWT met with Gove, in order, as a joint statement by the unions read, to provide "him with an opportunity to avoid strike action on 27 June and demonstrate that he values teachers and wants to support and work with us to help students achieve the best start in life."

The unions are not demanding that the government withdraw all its reactionary education policies and attacks on teachers but instead put, "three reasonable demands" to him "in order to avoid strike action". They requested only that Gove hold a "series of meetings" with them and "suspends the implementation of the changes proposed to the School Teachers' Pay and Conditions Document, pending the outcome of these discussions".

Meanwhile, academies, which the unions have taken no action whatsoever to oppose, are already "free" to set their own pay and conditions, and many already have teachers working longer hours, including Saturdays, for whatever pay they choose.

The unions are being fully backed in their fraudulent campaign by their apologists in the pseudo-left organisations, including the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). These groups are far more frightened of mobilising workers in a genuine fight and thereby threatening their own privileged positions within the higher echelons of the union bureaucracy than they are of the attacks by this right-wing government with its big business agenda.

On Tuesday, the SWP published an article that didn't say a word about the recent sell-outs of the unions, including the NUT and NASAWT. Instead, it glorified the token walkouts, stating, "The unions plan further regional strikes in the autumn and a national strike in November", and adding, "Many teachers are pleased that the unions have a strategy of action to take on the Tories."

Teachers and education staff must categorically reject the attempts to overturn their pay and conditions and mobilise a genuine opposition by setting up rank-and-file committees, independent of these bankrupt unions. They must join with support staff, parents and local communities to resist all cuts to pay and conditions and unite with other workers fighting to defend jobs and services, against the government's brutal austerity measures.



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