

UK regional teachers strike provides no answers

A Cambridgeshire teacher
4 October 2013

Around 1,000 education workers marched through Cambridge as part of the regional strike action called by the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) and the National Union of Teachers (NUT) in Yorkshire, Humberside, the Midlands and the Eastern Region.

Strikers marched through the city centre to a rally at the Cambridge Union. Demonstrators chanted slogans such as “What do we want? Gove out!”

Michael Gove, the Education Secretary, has been charged by the NUT and NASUWT with attacking teachers’ pay and conditions. However, the current state of the education system is a result of a much wider attack from all the mainstream political parties and the relentless push for austerity and cuts to vast swathes of public services.

The unions have sought to limit action as far as they can, calling action short of strikes and isolating strike action to token regional demonstrations. The choice of the Cambridge Union, an enclosed venue that only seats 300, speaks volumes of the unions’ attitude to the wholesale attack on education. The room was full, and many more workers stood outside the building, while a leading teaching union leader admitted that the NUT had tried to “minimize” strike action.

The slogans advanced by the unions and their pseudo-left allies aim to limit criticism to Gove, sowing illusions in the possibility that Labour and the unions might offer an alternative. The Socialist Workers Party (SWP), which was distributing “Gove Out” placards, had issued a leaflet on the “battle for education.” This mentioned other actions across the country, and particularly cited the importance of the recent Manchester protest against National Health Service privatisation, where Labour’s shadow health secretary Andy Burnham led the speeches.

The leaflet made no mention of Labour’s lack of opposition to any of the austerity measures that have been undertaken by the coalition government, nor its commitment to more of the same. The leaflet sought to pin workers’ hopes in a trade union bureaucracy that is channelling them behind Labour.

The NUT and NASUWT currently represent nine out of ten teachers across the UK, but they only offer negotiations and discussion with the coalition and will not be able to stop the continued drive towards cuts and austerity.

A recurring theme throughout the speeches was that everything would be fine if only Gove would open a dialogue with the unions. NASUWT Deputy General Secretary Patrick Roach made it quite clear that the unions were still open to negotiation with the government. Gove “needed to listen and to engage in genuine dialogue” with the NUT and the NASUWT, he said. He pledged no other actions other than another (time-limited and regional) strike in the future.

Roach also sought to present the current attacks on teachers as entirely national. His comment that “no other country in the world would attack their teachers in this way” was an outright lie. The situation in the United States, Greece, Australia and Denmark, to name just a few countries, indicates that this is not a national struggle.

Teachers speaking at the rally explained the pressures on their profession and why they were joining the strike action. Amy, a teacher at a local special school, said that the “working conditions of teachers are the learning conditions of children. The attacks on the teaching profession can only end up with a failed system.”

Tamsin, an NASUWT speaker, talked about her love of the profession, but said she has had to move back in

with her parents because of the squeeze on a living wage.

The speech by regional Trades Union Congress representative Martin Gould focused on Gove as a “here today gone tomorrow politician.” He then claimed that education had improved under the previous Labour government, the very government that had pushed academies and pupil exclusion.

The final speaker of the rally was NUT Deputy General Secretary Kevin Courtney. He too directed his ire solely at Gove and the coalition, pointing to a headline in the *Times*, “An attack on Michael Gove,” to demonstrate the impact of the regional action and the changing mood nationally.

In the next breath he stated that the union had “tried to minimise strike action, and “wanted to give the government a chance to see sense.”

The strike was “entirely Gove’s responsibility,” he said, and could have been avoided if the education secretary had only discussed with the unions. All Gove needed to do, he insisted, was suspend the new performance-related pay scale and publish the valuation of the pension scheme.

Courtney finished his speech by praising the cooperation and influence of both the NUT and the NASUWT, a coalition he said would never have happened had it not been for Michael Gove!



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