

Third regional teachers' strike in UK

Our correspondents
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Thursday saw the latest one-day regional strike by teachers.

Teachers from around 3,500 schools in London, the South East, the South West, North East and Cumbria took part in the stoppages called by the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) and the National Union of Teachers (NUT). Demonstrations and rallies were held across the country.

Like the previous one-day strike two weeks ago, Thursday's action demonstrated the determination of teachers to fight the offensive against education being waged by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat government.

This offensive includes a rise in pension contributions, raising the retirement age, abolition of the national pay structure, the introduction of performance-related pay, imposition of a target-driven rote-learning curriculum, the abolition of preparation time, the extension of teaching hours and the use of unqualified teachers in the classroom. The end game of all of these measures is forcing schools to become self-governing academies as a step towards the full-scale privatisation of state education.

Ten thousand people marched through the centre of London, meeting widespread support from bystanders. A rally in Bristol brought together around 3,500 teachers and supporters from across the South West and South Wales. Other events also took place in Durham, Brighton, Carlisle and Plymouth.

The scale of the strikes indicates a shift in political response. The unions have noted this. In Bristol Claire Nicholls, a young teacher and NUT rep, noted that strike action could be daunting, especially if it is the first time you have undertaken it. NUT Deputy General Secretary Kevin Courtney said, "The mood is changing." The unions' concern, however, is how to channel and control this rising anger.

Once again the venues booked for the rallies were completely inadequate for the turnout. In London the 1,200-seat meeting room could accommodate barely a tenth of the protestors. Kevin Courtney of the NUT, conscious of criticisms that the majority of strikers could not enter the rallies, told the Bristol demonstration that no venue large enough was available in the city.

As their speeches made plain, the officials' main aim is to secure the place of the unions in negotiations.

Regardless of the rhetoric, the strikes do not signal a fight-back by the unions. They were called over attacks that have already been imposed in the last two years in collaboration with the unions.

As the Socialist Equality Party noted in a leaflet distributed at the demonstrations, calling the strikes does not signify any newfound militancy by the unions. The union bureaucracy is aware of the increasing anger of teachers, and fears that unless it makes a token show of resistance opposition will develop outside its control.

This was made clear by NASUWT Deputy General Secretary Patrick Roach, who told the Bristol rally that teachers' "solidarity" was a tool for getting the government round the table. In words that stand as an indictment of the unions' passivity and complicity in the face of the government assault, he said the union had "stood waiting" for 508 days, waiting "any time, any place, anywhere" for the Secretary of State to engage in negotiation with the unions. Strike action, he made clear, is a last resort.

Martin Powell-Davies of the pseudo-left Socialist Party was distributing campaigning material for the forthcoming NUT Vice-Presidential election at the London rally. In it he called only for a "united one-day national strike." If Michael Gove, the Secretary of State for Education "won't step back," this should be stepped up to a two-day strike next term!

Socialist Equality Party and International Youth and

Students for Social Equality members and supporters campaigned at the demonstrations, calling on teachers to have no confidence in the unions and to reject the claims of the pseudo-left tendencies that they are the vehicle through which to defend jobs, working conditions and the education of young people. Our leaflet urged that teachers “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 on the basis of a socialist programme.”



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