

Pupil support assistants strike against Glasgow City Council

Stephen Alexander
21 November 2013

Pupil Support Assistants (PSAs), who provide educational support to pupils with additional learning needs and disabilities, took part in a fourth strike on Tuesday as part of a dispute with Labour-controlled Glasgow City Council.

The strike encompassed support assistants, school care workers and instructors in the northwest of the city, leading to the closure of Kelbourne Park School, a specialist institution for pupils with complex learning disabilities. A number of other schools were disrupted, with picket lines held at Dunard, Scotstoun and Bankhead Primary Schools.

This latest strike was part of discontinuous action called by Unison, the largest public sector union in Britain, and supported by members of the GMB union, after the council moved to impose greater health care responsibilities on support assistants.

These include a range of supervisory care tasks for pupils with asthma, diabetes, epilepsy and anaphylactic shock, as well as medical procedures such as the administering of medicines, injections, catheterisation, tracheotomy care, gastronomy tube/peg feeding and blood glucose monitoring.

Unison has said that PSAs are contracted only to provide educational support and have not received the appropriate training to safely provide health care.

The council threatened to dismiss the 1,500-strong support assistant workforce in December before hiring them back on new contracts.

The Labour Party administration claims that support workers have routinely carried out these tasks for years and have offered extra payments in compensation.

Support assistants are currently amongst the lowest-paid public sector workers in Glasgow. They receive a salary of £11,800, below the annual earnings of a full-time worker on minimum wage (£6.19 per hour) and well below that considered necessary for a single person to

achieve a minimum acceptable standard of living.

Earlier this month PSAs took part in two other strikes in the northeast and south side of the city, and a 24-hour citywide strike on October 31. The latter involved around 1,000 support assistants and led to the closure of ten specialist schools alongside the primary classes of one mainstream school.

Rallies held outside Glasgow City Chambers on each day of strike action have attracted hundreds of support workers.

Negotiations are to resume as union officials and council leaders try to reach an agreement.

Labour councillor Stephen Curran, who is responsible for education and young people on the council executive, has attempted to discredit the grievances of PSAs, blaming them for taking part in “industrial action which will stop our most vulnerable young people coming to school.”

Curran claimed “Unison is not prepared to agree a compromise, which would be in the best interests of their members.”

This is an utterly dishonest portrayal of the union’s role, which is closely integrated with the Labour Party.

It is more likely that Unison executives thought it prudent to organise some token show of opposition to let off the anger of PSAs and prevent the dispute from escaping its control.

Carol Ball, education convener for the Glasgow branch of Unison, argued, “Pupil support assistants are angry at reports that they are only after more money and falsehoods that they are already paid for this task. The lies need to stop and an agreement reached that puts the educational needs of the children first.”

“Strike action is the last resort”, she reassured the employers, “but feelings are running high.”

Unison has no intention of defending PSAs. Amidst the most severe social cuts since the 1930s, it has worked to

impose concessions on public sector workers across the UK on behalf of the British government, the devolved regional executives and the local authorities.

As is standard practice for the trade union bureaucracy as a whole, Unison is seeking to restrict the present dispute to an innocuous localised protest designed to isolate the support assistants from workers undergoing similar attacks.

The Glasgow branch of Unison has set about petitioning the council to change course on the basis of very limited and ill-defined demands for the introduction of a higher pay grade and appropriate training schemes for assistants. It has also called for the removal of a single councillor, Maureen McKenna, the director of education.

Union officials know full well that these demands will have no effect.

The plight of PSAs is part of a broad assault on Scottish local government workers at the hands of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA), the umbrella organisation for Scotland's 32 councils, and the Scottish government.

The Glasgow city council alone has cut 256 jobs in the last year and will axe hundreds more as part of a £71 million package of spending cuts to be carried out by 2014-15. It is estimated that 35,000 Scottish local government jobs have been lost in recent years through "voluntary" redundancies and a policy of not filling vacancies.

On the back of a two year pay freeze, COSLA recently enforced a pay increase of 1 percent for 2013-14 and a further 1 percent for 2014-15—a de-facto pay cut given rapidly inflating living costs. In real terms, pay for local government employees has declined by 13 percent in the last three years.

The Education Institute for Scotland, the country's largest teaching union, is presently working with COSLA to foist an identical deal on primary and secondary school teachers.

Despite Unison having registered its members' support for industrial action in an "indicative" ballot last April, and COSLA's insistence throughout the 12 months of "negotiation" that the deal initially offered was final, the union delayed resistance for months until it was able to secure a narrow majority against a strike from demoralised workers in August.

The initial deal had been for 2013-14 only. When in October COSLA moved unilaterally to replicate this for the following year, the trade unions, including both Unison and Unite, acceded without even consulting their

members.

If this were not treacherous enough, the deal allows separate council administrations to conclude additional pay deals with their own employees including further attacks on wages and conditions, depending on local financial circumstances.

Stirling City Council is one of the first to impose additional concessions, including a 1.5 percent pay cut, an expansion of the working week from 35 to 37 hours, and an additional 7.5 days per year.

After staging a token one-day walkout in August, Unison, alongside Unite, GMB, and UCATT (Union of Construction, Allied Trades and Technicians), have this week arrived at a deal which includes all the demands of Stirling's Conservative/Labour-led executive. The unions will advise their members to accept the deal in an upcoming consultation.

The Scottish section of the pseudo-left Socialist Party, which controls leading positions within the Glasgow branch of Unison, is fraudulently seeking to rehabilitate the union in the eyes of working people.

It recently reported on its misnamed "socialist"[party.org.uk] web site, that "The [PSA] strike has mobilised anger over a whole number of issues and has given the mainly female workforce a chance to fight back against an administration which has implemented £200 million worth of cuts."

Working people should place no confidence at all in the trade unions or their pseudo-left accomplices.

The destruction of jobs, wages and vital social services can only be halted by unifying the emerging struggles of workers across Britain in a mass political offensive aimed at bringing down the Cameron government and replacing it with a workers' government dedicated to socialist policies.

In the first place, this requires the formation of action committees independent of the trade unions, which are directly controlled by workers and committed to genuine class struggle.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact