

UK National Union of Teachers stage one-day strike

Margo Miller
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Thousands of teachers across England and Wales took strike action on Wednesday to protest the continuing attacks by the coalition government on their pay, pensions and conditions. The teachers are members of Britain's largest teaching union, the National Union of Teachers (NUT). According to the Department of Education, 3,000 schools—12 percent of the total number of schools—were forced to shut their doors completely. This compares to the 60 percent of complete closures during the day of action when the whole public sector struck over pension changes in November 2011. After this strike in 2011, most individual trade unions including Unite and Unison proceeded to make their own pension deals with their employers, to the detriment of their members.

The teachers' unions held three regional one-day strikes and rallies last year and then called off a proposed day of strike action last November.

The other main union, the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) boycotted the Wednesday action on the grounds that they are in talks with the Department of Education.

In reality, despite pleas from both unions, Education Secretary Michael Gove and his ministers have refused to speak with them. Instead the unions have met with civil servants who have no authority to negotiate. In any case, the attacks on pensions and pay have already been implemented, due to the prostration and collaboration of the unions. A leaflet distributed by the Socialist Equality Party, entitled *Teachers need a new perspective to oppose attacks on education*, explained:

“There are no differences of principle between the two teaching unions. NASUWT claim the best way to achieve “concessions” is through continuing with negotiations whilst the NUT claim that the strike action will strengthen the hand of the unions in the

negotiations. The NUT stated in their press release confirming that strike action will take place: ‘We need to increase the pressure on Michael Gove to engage seriously and bring about real change to the direction of his policies and to their implementation.’

“This is a statement confirming the unions will not mount any opposition to the core attacks, but are desperate to defend their position as tools in the imposition of government policy.”

In reply to a letter to the teaching unions from Gove on the eve of the strike expressing the government's intransigence, the NUT requested that “he continue to publish the pay spine points as a shadow list that schools could use if they said they wanted.”

They are thus advising Gove how to implement performance-related pay, making it more palatable if the old pay scales are referred to. Whether teachers are ever able to achieve their targets (based on children's test results) and move up the pay scale is not the issue for the unions who have accepted performance-related pay in principle, despite protestations to the contrary that are for the consumption of their members only.

Further on in their reply to Gove, the NUT declares that “teachers should only need the evidence that comes from the appraisal process to earn pay progression.”

The fact that the unions have been able to get away with their double-dealing is in no small part due to the role of the pseudo-left groups, who continually foster illusions in the ability of the trade unions to fight back, and at each betrayal giving them a gentle reprimand with an appeal to try harder next time.

The Socialist Workers Party distributed a leaflet to striking teachers entitled, “Gove is the weakest link,” praised the NUT for calling the strike and then agreed with NUT General Secretary Christine Blower who “rightly invokes the successful campaign and strike in

2012 by Chicago teachers in the US. They won by building towards an indefinite strike that won after seven days.”

This is a lie.

The SWP are citing the Chicago teachers strike to create illusions in the unions and make a case for the efficacy of extended strikes as a means of winning concessions. What actually happened in Chicago was that the teachers strike was called off after nine days by the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU). This betrayal and defeat cleared the way for the acceleration of school closures and other attacks on education not just in Chicago but throughout the United States.

In assessing this defeat, the *World Socialist Web Site* pointed to the role of CTU President Karen Lewis and Vice President Jesse Sharkey, a leading member of the International Socialist Organization (ISO)—co-thinkers of the SWP—who “did everything to prevent the strike from becoming a catalyst for a broader mobilization of the working class against the Obama administration and the Democratic Party.” (See “The betrayal of the Chicago teachers strike: One year on”.)

At every betrayal, the SWP apologises for the trade union bureaucracy. In November 2011, they say mildly that the unions “stepped back from action and let the momentum disappear.” Workers in the public sector now have to pay more to receive a smaller pension at the age of 68 years.

At the strike rally in Manchester, University and College Union (UCU) officer Martyn Moss repeated the SWP’s position that Gove is a pushover and tried to sow illusions that a Labour government would reverse the attacks on education:

“In less than 14 months Gove hopefully will be sent packing in a general election,” he declared. Again focusing on Gove alone and ignoring the fact that the coalition government’s attacks are only a continuation of the previous Labour Government’s, Nick Wigmore of the NUT declared, “We need a united union to stop Gove. Gove is weak we are strong.”

He was referring to moves to amalgamate the NUT and NAS/UWT. Northwest Trades Union Congress chair Steve Farley called on teachers to “unite against Gove—It’s the issue that unites everyone.”

26 year old Amy, who has been teaching in a Primary School in Manchester for two years, and has recently decided on a change in career, explained why to the

WSWS:

“The working hours are incompatible with a personal life and family life. Last week I worked 68 hours. Normally I have to work a 60-hour week.

“Why am I on strike? I was told it would get easier but it doesn’t. The prospect of working for another 40 years like this is laughable,” she continued. “Also we had a fantastic curriculum for the early years from the Rose review, but that’s being scrapped and the one they are putting in place is as dull as ditchwater. All it’s going to result in is grade inflation. Children are getting very stressed, some are on anti-depressants. It’s a real shame the unions are fragmented.”

Another young Manchester teacher, Lucy, who works at a special school, explained, “Because my work is more physical, the prospect of working to 68, well I wouldn’t be able to do it. My husband is doing a PGCE [Teaching certificate] at the moment. There is no work-life balance, it’s very stressful.”



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