

London teachers speak on the public-sector strike

Our reporters
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Public sector workers in England, Wales and Northern Ireland held a 24-hour strike on Thursday. The National Union of Teachers (NUT) was one of six unions involved in the action over pay and pensions.

During the strike, Edward Wilson Primary School in west London was completely closed for the first time in the memory of staff. A large contingent of teachers and support staff from the school joined the main London march.

Sally, a reception teacher, said: “We’re not here because we don’t love our jobs or the kids. We want them to succeed, but with all the changes that have been brought in, we are working through our lunch hour, after school for no extra pay. Many of us are still in debt because we had to take out loans to train.”

“The amount that teachers add to the economy by educating children is never considered,” agreed **Agnieska**.

Sally continued: “Then there is all the extra work we have to do, social work, supporting parents and now we have to keep proving ourselves because of the pay reforms and performance-related pay. Our performance already outweighs our pay.”

An Australian teacher affirmed: “I tell teachers back home—it’s like you’re on a job interview every day. Your performance and the children’s progress are constantly under scrutiny. I’m becoming a worse teacher being here. At home we are allowed much more freedom. Here we’re told we have to have written work in their books every day.”

“I feel disenfranchised,” another teacher stated. “We are no longer respected for our skills and input into children’s education. I would like my weekends back!”

“The action would be much more effective if it was countrywide and more sustained. I’ve been on stalls working for parents’ support. We need the parents behind us. But everyone’s disenfranchised at the moment. People

are ground down by the government. I don’t understand why there has to be cuts. They say ‘we’re all in it together’ but the banks get given cash.”

A newly qualified teacher said she was striking because “I’ve just got into the job and I realise that the workload is very high. It is not fair that we get pay rises based on the progress of the kids. It causes friction and competition among staff that shouldn’t be there and then the team spirit collapses.”

Another young teacher explained what she would like to say to the parents of children at her school. “I want the best possible education for your children, who I love, so I’m on strike today”, she said. “There is pretty much nothing more important to me than helping children feel talented, successful and as though whatever possibilities they want are theirs. Sadly, changes to the education system over the last years move us a lot further away from that reality than they do towards it. I want children to have the opportunity to learn through play and at their own pace, explore the world themselves and enjoy being young.

“I don’t want children to feel like failures aged five in a phonics screening test, to have the work of the whole class ripped up in front of them because the handwriting isn’t good enough, to have to tolerate the trickle-down effects of the pressure teachers feel. I want to appreciate my class as individuals, not get asked, ‘So why are your Bengali children under-performing?’

“When you work in teaching, what children get out can be so disproportionate compared to what you put in, but it doesn’t have to be this way. I work hard for the children I teach because they matter to me and what I want is for children and staff to feel valued. Performance-related pay, pension changes and unsustainable expectations, stress and working hours take away from this. I know some people would argue that the changes to public sector working just mirror what’s already the norm in parts of

the private sector, but that's just a race to the bottom in which everyone breaks their nose. Today I'm making a point about what my priorities are and that's worth a day's pay."

Rachel from a Newham primary school was on the march with her daughter. She said, "I feel professionally demoralised. We are constantly under attack, we've had no pay rise, the hours are increasing and we have less autonomy. We need to make our voices heard or the attacks will continue until the profession is no more."

"There is an increase in the use of non-teaching staff to teach core subjects as well as a higher turnover of young teachers because of the lack of respect and low wages compared to other professions."

"It is great that this time the support staff are on strike as well. It makes us feel we can stick together. There is much more solidarity and it is important because the austerity impacts on everyone—parents, hospital patients, old people. Everyone needs their refuse collected."

"I think that more sustained industrial action is needed. I would be in favour of a general strike. It would be a financial sacrifice, but the only weapon we have is to withdraw our labour. I am frightened by the prospect of [Prime Minister David] Cameron changing the law so we need a 60 percent or more ballot turnout in order to be able to strike. If that were the case, in general elections he wouldn't be in power. It's absolutely terrifying that they could take away our right to strike."

Rachel's 12-year-old daughter said her school was closed for the strike. "I understand what [the government] is doing and it has a big impact on the morale of teachers," she added. "We have teachers teaching subjects which are not their own, because they can't get the right teachers—Physical Education specialists teaching geography, for example. Also, the fact that they don't feel appreciated has an impact on how they teach students and that affects students' motivation. I'm also here because I want to support my mum."

Teachers and support staff from Hawley Infants' School in Camden were also on the march. **Claire**, a teacher's assistant and Unison member, said she joined the union a couple of months ago and felt "duty bound" to support the fight for a living wage. "We are basically on minimum wage", she said, adding, "Prices keep going up and wages are not going up. If I didn't have my partner's wage I wouldn't be able to survive."

"The government should be focusing on collecting taxes from corporate tax dodgers. Poor people are an easy target. They are taking money from the teachers, not from

the bankers and the rich people. They are not facing any austerity."

Oonagh, a teacher, was striking due to the "enormously high workload". She added, "A lot of it is completely pointless. It has nothing to do with children or planning exciting lessons."

Tracey agreed: "It is all to do with policy, not education. Free Schools, academies, performance-related pay. The emphasis is all on results".

"We have to implement this new curriculum," Oonagh continued. "If it's so great why don't Free Schools have to use it? We've had no training, extra time or real direction and are having to do that at the same time as teaching. There are so many attacks that people are fed up. It's hard to know which of them we are striking about."

One of a group of Hounslow teachers told the WSWs: "I'm on strike because I'm worried about the state of education, because we're undervalued, the increasing workload and attacks on pensions. A lot of people don't realise what it's like in education at the moment. However, I think it would make more impact if the strikes were more frequent".

Another agreed: "It needs to be a continual strike until it makes a difference. The government is causing all this and it is filtering down to staff and affecting morale".

Explaining that support staff are now expected to teach children, she said: "I've realised that restructuring of support staff is going on, not just in my school, but across the board. Really experienced women from the local community, who are incredibly skilled at what they do, have a great relationship with the children and have been part of a school for years, are being forced to reapply for their jobs ... they are very valuable people who are part of a school and many lose their jobs. It doesn't feel like a school community any more—now they are turning them into businesses."



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