

# UK public sector workers explain their decision to strike

Our reporters  
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The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to workers in a number of towns and cities in England who participated in last Thursday's national public sector strike and protests.

In Cambridge around 100 workers joined a rally at Parkers Piece. Two primary school teachers, **Alex Bruce** and **Alex Oldaker**, attended the rally. **Alex Bruce** said, "We are on strike for a number of reasons: the level of the workload, two in five teachers leaving the profession and performance related pay. We don't need a race to the bottom. We need a race to the top. We need everyone to be having fairer working conditions throughout the country. If we all go along with the cuts then this deterioration in working conditions is what's going to happen."

He said he was disappointed to see Labour Party banners at the rally, explaining that Tristan Hunt, Labour Party shadow education secretary, had mirrored the performance-related pay policy of the Conservatives. **Alex Oldaker** said, "We can't believe that primary school teachers have to work until 68, we can't imagine being that age and taking PE [Physical Education]."

Another teacher said, "This is the third time I have been on strike over the year. The key thing is the cuts don't just specifically affect teachers but the whole public sector". She continued, "redundancies are happening due to austerity. Schools are cutting teaching staff to replace them with support staff. Instead of replacing them [teaching assistants], the class teacher has to cope without that support."

In Manchester **Alan**, a firefighter who joined the service when he was 26, said, "Every three years we have to do a fitness test. Now I will face the same test at 57, and if I don't pass I could lose three quarters of my pension. We're working longer and paying more. We should have all-out strike action." **Alisa** is a member of the National Union of Teachers. She said, "I'm striking for the children. Because of our current pay structure teachers are under pressure to fake children's performance. It's all about results. My issue is to get the best for our children. I don't know how to go forward."

Another teacher said he was angry about the way the trade

unions had worked to curtail an offensive by teachers against the education cuts. "We are just pissing in the wind. They say the campaign is building up a head of steam, but really there is no steam. It is about getting around the negotiating table. I read your last leaflet and it was spot on".

In Bournemouth, **Sharon**, a health and safety worker, was on the picket line at an Adult Learning Centre. She said, "I am on strike due to the pay freezes we have been forced to have over the last three years and against the measly 1 percent pay rise this year. In real terms we are 18.5 percent less well off than 2010. Most people don't have 18.5 percent spare income anyway. We have got members of staff who are going to food banks now. Our workloads have been increased as we lost staff as a result of cuts and everyone is picking up more work now."

"It is hard to meet ends meet now. My partner was out of work for six months. We really struggled. There is no way you can live with one income now and that one income is so low. MPs are having 11 percent pay rise and why are low-paid workers having just 1 percent? Attacks on the NHS and education are appalling and it has a knock-on effect on the society. It is only now people are starting to notice." **Miriam** is from the Focus E15 Mothers anti-eviction association in Stratford, London. She said they were marching to support people on strike for higher pay.

Their campaign has brought them into conflict with the Labour Party, which runs Newham Council. The campaign was set up by a group of mothers in the Focus E15 hostel, run by East Thames Housing Association to accommodate young people with support needs. The hostel houses 180 single residents and 30 young mothers.

Last August the mothers were issued with eviction notices and referred to Newham Council's housing office, where they were all officially registered as homeless. **Miriam** explained that many of the families were being told to look for rented accommodation outside London, because this saves money for the government.

While the campaigners have all been rehoused within Newham, their situation is still precarious as they only have

12-month contracts, and face soaring private rents. Miriam said she was facing rents of £900 a month and will lose the benefits that are supporting her if she goes back to work.

A group of carers spoke to the WSWS at the demonstration in Leeds. **Jane** said, “It is terrible to have to leave poorly and vulnerable people to their own devices. But we had no choice. We have had no pay rise for four years. We are suffering. We did agree at one point to a one percent pay rise because we thought it breaks the principle of the pay freeze. But it didn’t happen.”

“We are front line staff. We have people’s lives in our hands. We do a very responsible job and we do it because we love it. We have 21 separate duties that we have to perform, including administering medicines, promoting good diet, dealing with and advising families, and washing, dressing and feeding our clients. The list is endless. We are very skilled ladies who have to undergo continuous training in dementia care, diabetes care, health and nutrition. And yet we are paid peanuts.” **Bernadette** said, “We turn out 365 days a year, in all weathers. Our pay rate is £8.90 an hour. We get no overtime and the small enhancement we get for working weekends and holidays is under threat. The council wants to get rid of that and make us work for single time.

“Anyone who thinks we are paid massive pensions is wrong. I will get a pension of £5,000 a year and a measly lump sum of £3,000 after 25 years of work. Is that all it is worth?”

“And small private companies are springing up like mushrooms. They pay lower wages and provide practically no training. And Leeds City Council employs them because they are the cheapest. Long-term home care is gone!” **Katie** is a special needs teacher. She said, “This fight is not just about salaries and pensions but about working conditions as well. We are sick of working under so much stress. I have had time off because of stress related illness.

“A lot of teachers are leaving the profession, not because they want to but because they care about what they are doing and realise that things are going to get worse and worse. Most primary school teachers work at least 60 hours a week, much of it to fulfil stupid requirements and tick the appropriate box. The government doesn’t trust teachers.

“Performance-related pay is coming in thick and fast, but that is a farce. The best teachers work with the most difficult children so it isn’t a level playing field. We are supposed to give positive feedback to the children, but we never get any ourselves. If you beat someone with a stick you don’t get the best out of them, do you?”

Another teacher said, “There are many issues at stake but for me the biggest is to make sure that all teachers are fully qualified. I have two nieces and I want to be sure that the best people are teaching them. That’s why I went to

university for four years.

“If anyone thinks that teachers stop work when the bell goes they are very wrong. There are lots of activities after school and at the weekend. Some PE teachers are working till 7:30 or 8 p.m. at night.

“Ofsted [official schools inspectorate] is utterly useless. I would like to see them in an operating theatre with a clipboard whilst a surgeon is doing a heart transplant. And in any case they scare the children. They come into the classroom and ask questions like: ‘What do you think of your teacher?’ ‘Do they always mark your books?’ ‘Do they always teach like this?’” **Hannah** is a school pupil who has just taken her A levels. She said, “I came to support my mum and dad, but also to get rid of [Conservative Party Education Secretary] Michael Gove. He is taking education back about 50 years, not expanding education but narrowing it down. It doesn’t work in a world that is definitely broadening.

“Teachers’ pay has not changed for four years. And they have to retire later at an age when they will not be fit for teaching. People don’t realise how much they have to do out of school, not just marking or planning. My dad is a Physical Education teacher and he works all day either Saturday or Sunday and sometimes both.

“My favourite English teacher is leaving today. He is the best teacher I have ever had but he can’t take the reforms they are making, especially to the English curriculum. For example they have taken *To Kill a Mockingbird* off the list of books you can study. It’s just not enjoyable any more. Reforms have been slowly happening to a point where the teachers just can’t take it anymore.”



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