

UK teachers leave profession in record numbers

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The cumulative impact of the Conservative government's attack on the teaching profession has led teachers to leave the profession in their thousands.

When schools reopen in September, following the summer break, many local councils will be faced with shortages of qualified teachers. The crisis, which has been building up for the past four years could reach a "tipping point", according to a Press Association survey last week.

The survey states that almost three out of four local education authorities in England is experiencing a teacher shortage, and 18 percent of those polled said the problem had reached crisis levels. Of the 73 percent of English Local Education Authorities (LEAs) that said their schools were struggling to find suitably qualified staff, half said the shortage was either moderate or severe.

The latest figures reveal that applications to join the profession have declined by 27,000 in the last 12 months, whilst the numbers quitting the profession has reached a 10-year high.

The survey, which did not cover councils in the capital, where there has been a consistent shortage of teachers, found town halls as far apart as Torbay in Devon and East Riding in Yorkshire reporting difficulties.

Research by the University of Nottingham, commissioned by the Department of Education, shows that four out of 10 teachers quit within their first year, citing excessive workload, rapid pace of change and unreasonable demands from managers. A quarter of those leaving blamed the attack on terms and conditions.

The Teacher Support Network's health survey found that 91 percent of teachers have suffered stress, 74 percent anxiety and 47 percent depression in the past

two years.

Spending on temporary supply teachers, meanwhile, has gone up by more than £50 million in the last year, as schools struggle to fill gaps.

The Labour Party said England could face a shortage of around 30,000 of the required number of qualified entrants to teaching by September 2016, and that nearly 160,000 additional qualified teachers were needed over the next three years. Figures from the University and Colleges Admissions Service show that the government is set to miss its teacher trainee target for the fourth year running.

Trade union leaders have warned that the shortfall in applications for teacher training, combined with the growing primary school places crisis, has created "a perfect storm" of falling recruitment and rising demand.

According to a National Association of Head Teachers survey of 1,100 head teachers, almost 62 percent are struggling to recruit teachers on the upper pay scale, 14 percent have been unable to recruit deputy heads and 20 percent unable to fill posts for assistant heads.

The Conservative government has been on a virtual war footing with the profession. Since coming into office, its attack on the education system has been relentless, including:

- The academisation of state schools and setting of free schools (funded by the state but run by the private sector) programme has seen the majority of secondary schools taken out of local authority control. They can set their own terms and conditions and pay structures. Many schools have been forced to become academies in return for funding or to prevent closure.
- The abolition of the national pay structure and the introduction of performance related pay last year

leading to extra pressure on teachers to meet targets and take on additional responsibilities.

- The introduction of a new more limited and rigid national curriculum.

- Changes to pupil assessment and progress tracking as the previous national curriculum levels are phased out and new, tougher examinations introduced.

- A major attack on pensions, lifting the retirement age to 68 and increasing contributions by teachers of up to 12 percent.

- The introduction of unqualified teachers in 2012. There are now over 9 percent of teachers in the classroom who are unqualified.

Whilst teachers have repeatedly shown their willingness to fight the attacks, including taking part in three regional strikes and national strike action with other public sector unions over the past three years, this opposition has been dissipated by the teaching unions.

Two national strikes were cancelled by the National Union of Teachers (NUT) in 2013 and 2014, on the grounds the government was prepared to “negotiate”. This has enabled the government to press ahead with its offensive against teachers and education.

The implementation of a “work to rule” some three years ago by the NUT, ostensibly to resolve the workload crisis, was a diversion from carrying out a genuine struggle based on mobilising teachers in a joint offensive against the overall attacks.

Moreover, the campaign has clearly failed. Workload has escalated to the point that thousands are being driven out of the schools.

The sole aim of the teaching unions has been to ensure that they remain part of the negotiating process and maintain their own positions and privileges. On this basis, they have negotiated away pension rights, wages and conditions, and allowed the escalation of the privatisation process and cuts in funding.

This crisis will deepen over the coming year as the austerity agenda and privatisation escalates, coupled with the lack of school places for children. Two in five councils in England will not have enough primary places for the number of children by September 2016.

The Local Government Authority (LGA) said schools were “reaching their limits and could soon run out of space and money for extra places”.

“Britain is in the grips of a baby boom. We’ll have the biggest population in Europe by the end of the

century and clearly that’s having a lot of pressure on school places”, said David Simmonds, the chairman of the LGA’s children and young people board.

This has already resulted in increased class sizes across the country, and the situation is going to intensify.

Teachers must seek a political solution to the crisis in education by broadening their struggle in defence of wages and conditions with that of other public sector workers and organise their struggles independent of the trade unions, through the formation of rank and file committees.



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