

Cuts lead to staffing crisis in UK education

Tom Pearce
16 January 2016

Teaching recruitment is at “crisis” level as a new term begins across the UK.

A YouGov survey suggested that more than half of teachers (53 percent) are considering giving up their careers in the next two years. The main reasons given were “volume of workload” (61 percent) and “seeking a better work/life balance” (57 percent). Some 50,000 teachers quit in 2015 alone--more than those who joined the profession.

The crisis has resulted in head teachers struggling to recruit for certain posts. As a consequence, schools are spending ever more money on “finders fees” to recruitment agencies, significantly damaging school budgets. The National Association of Head Teachers said a survey of members shows some schools are having to pay £10,000 to fill a single vacancy.

The Labour Party has weighed in with its own study. Shadow Education Secretary Lucy Powell said, “Half of all schools had unfilled positions at the start of 2015 academic year and are being forced to turn to unqualified staff, temporary supply teachers, non-specialists and larger class sizes to try to plug the gaps.”

Labour’s criticism of the Conservative government for this situation masks its own record of attacking education, including support for pension changes and pay restructuring that have added to the pressures teachers are under by expecting them to deliver teaching with larger classes and less money for resources.

The Association of School & College Leaders (ASCL), the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL), the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT), the National Union of Teachers (NUT), Undeb Cenedlaethol Athrawon Cymru (UCAC) and Voice have submitted a joint document to the School Teachers’ Review Body (STRB). It warns that the recruitment crisis has been caused by the government

undermining teaching standards due to a reduction in funding in real terms and the continued erosion of teachers’ pay. The joint statement opposes the government plan to continue to limit teachers’ annual pay increases to an average of 1 percent for a further four years, on top of five years of imposed pay restraint.

The statement deals with the crisis of teacher recruitment, cuts to school budgets and the pay of teachers. But its empty rhetoric is framed in opposition to teachers waging any struggle against these attacks. Deborah Lawson is the general secretary of Voice, formerly the Professional Association of Teachers, which boasts its belief in “the power of negotiation to protect the interests of our members--who never resort to industrial action.” She declared, “Many years ago, strike action was, perhaps, the only way to get your voice heard, but we have a different society now. We are far more sophisticated and complex and, actually, I don’t think there is room for strikes anymore, they harm too many people.”

This theme is continued by the ATL. During talks of a “super-union” created through a merger with the NUT in 2015, Peter Pendle, the ATL’s deputy general secretary said, “With one teachers’ union, we’d be so powerful we would rarely need to strike.”

Other solutions to the crisis are peddled by Russell Hobby, general secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT), who said in the *Guardian* in May 2015, “We are going to be in tight financial straits, so let’s get schools together in groups. If we don’t do something, the politicians will close schools and join them together. Let’s find our own way to build federations or trusts that you choose voluntarily because others share your values and vision... If someone is short of a maths teacher, then one of you will give them a good maths teacher.”

This solution goes hand in hand with government

policy. Teachers in Hobby's view are to be treated as commodities that can be shipped from one school to another without a care for working conditions or the quality of education received by students.

A contributing factor to teacher unrest which the unions are intent on suppressing is performance related pay (PRP), which has made the impact of the pay freeze even worse. The NUT has surveyed its members to ascertain how PRP is being implemented in schools. It found that one in five eligible teachers did not progress, with 44 percent stating that the pay policy is unfair. Of those teachers who did not progress, 91 percent said they were never told they were not meeting the standards needed to obtain a pay increase. The useless advice from the NUT is to appeal. The teachers' unions oversaw the implementation of the PRP system without a whimper. At the time it was brought in the NUT declared that it was unfair and it was committed to supporting its members in ensuring fixed scales.

Kevin Courtney, deputy general secretary of the NUT and a leading figure in the Socialist Teachers Alliance, backed by the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), said in January 2015, "The NUT will be seeking further information from employers on rates of progression and patterns among particular groups. We are calling on the government to declare a moratorium on this PRP system while all concerns are properly and thoroughly addressed."

A year has passed, with no change to this damaging policy, only further empty rhetoric.

The last token strike action taken by the teaching unions, in March 2014, protested about PRP, pensions and excessive workload. Since then the unions have failed to defend workers and have stood by as all these changes have been implemented by the Conservative government with the support of the Labour Party.

The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) has studied the trends in teacher recruitment. Significantly, teachers are not leaving for higher-paying jobs, at least not in the short term. Data indicates that on average when teachers move they experience a 10 percent fall in wages.

Its proposed solution "to reduce the need for more teachers would be to allow class sizes to rise." Fleshing out its reactionary proposal, the NFER asserts:

"Research suggests there is a weak relationship

between class size and attainment, at least for small changes in class size. Slightly larger class sizes may not be detrimental for pupils and would almost certainly be cost effective. Such a move would be politically difficult, but not impossible if the public understanding of the issue was raised. There would be practical challenges given classroom size constraints, but as new classrooms are having to be built to meet rising pupil numbers, some schools could begin to make this shift. This approach would need to be accompanied by careful monitoring of the impact on teachers."

This exposes the harsh reality of what is being planned for the teaching profession.



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact