

UK White Paper paves way for the destruction of public education

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The UK Conservative government's White Paper on education, launched on March 17, has been met with widespread opposition among thousands of teachers across the country.

The White Paper, "Educational Excellence Everywhere", is not just a continuation of the right-wing offensive launched against education over the past 20 years. Its central aim is the complete privatisation of state education.

The paper demands that all schools are converted into academies—which are state funded but privately run—by 2022. Along with handing over statutory education fully to the private sector and abolishing local authority control, the wages and conditions of teaching staff will no longer be determined by national contracts and the state will no longer take responsibility for the training of teachers.

The announcement was met with shock and anger by masses of teachers. Within two days, over 140,000 teachers signed a petition of protest. Rallies were held across the country in opposition to the White Paper. The two largest teaching unions, the National Union of Teachers (NUT) and the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT), which held their national annual conferences immediately following the publication of the White Paper, announced strike ballots and called for industrial action to be held in the summer and autumn terms.

No confidence should be placed in the teaching unions whatsoever! The education system has reached this juncture precisely due to the complicity of the teaching unions with every single attack by both Labour and Conservative governments over the past two decades.

The vast majority of state schools will be forced to join "multi-academy trusts", charitable bodies which

run chains of schools. There is no evidence that academies have improved pupil performance. Rather, much evidence exists establishing that academies in poorer communities do worse than they did under state control. Over 80 percent of local authority schools are rated good or outstanding by Ofsted.

Sir Michael Wilshaw, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills, along with the Education Select Committee and the Sutton Trust's Chain Effects report, all demonstrate that academy status not only does not result in higher attainment but that many chains are badly failing their pupils. Several leading figures in the flagship academies are under investigation for financial irregularities as well as corruption charges, and have lost control and been handed over to other academy trusts.

The first academy was created in 2002 under the Labour government. Under the Tory-led coalition with the Liberal Democrats, academies became a significant part of schools provision. When Michael Gove was removed as education secretary in 2014, there were around 4,000 academies, nearly 20 times the number when he took office in 2010. Currently, 59 percent of secondary schools and 17 percent of primary schools are academies. There are only 16,000 schools that are still run by local authorities.

The White Paper will also end the requirement for Qualified Teacher Status (QTS), which is a university-accredited teacher training programme involving a year of in-school training. Instead, the decision on whether to accept that a teacher is qualified will be made at the discretion of a head teacher. This could mean teachers working years for low pay before someone in charge of the school budget decides to accept they have qualified. It means that non-teachers can be brought into schools

to take classes at the discretion of the head, based on the supposed benefits they bring. In addition, it will impact the international portability of England's teachers' qualifications, which will have no recognised status outside of the country.

The government also intends to remove the requirement for governing bodies to have parent governors. Multi-academy trusts will be allowed to close down the governing bodies of individual schools. Once in a multi-academy trust, there is no way for a school to leave. It will create the conditions where there is no public accountability or scrutiny. All decisions will be made by highly paid chief executives.

The response to this unprecedented assault by the teaching unions has been to promote alliances with the Labour Party and to foster illusions in petitions and protests to pressure the government to stop its policy. The NUT conference was addressed by Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn to rapturous applause. Corbyn, who is a member of the party that first launched the academy agenda, while stating that a Labour government under his leadership would rescind the Conservative government's anti-union laws, did not make any such promises on the abolition of academies.

Labour Shadow Education Secretary Lucy Powell merely called for a "pause". Kevin Courtney, deputy secretary of the NUT and a member of the Socialist Alliance of Teachers stated, "We agree with Lucy Powell's call for a 'pause' and we intend to work with all possible allies, including, importantly, parents and governors, to seek to defeat this White Paper."

These allies will include leaders of the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat parties in local government, who joined together to urge the government to rethink the proposals. Nicky Morgan, the Conservative Education Secretary, rejected such appeals and made clear in a statement to the NASUWT conference that "there is no reverse gear when it comes to our education reforms."

The NASUWT issued an evasive statement declaring that it will "carefully consider the proposals".

"All of the proposals contained in the White Paper will need to be carefully examined and teachers will expect the Government to avoid rushing into implementation of ill-considered or poor policy ideas which will fail to deliver excellence for all pupils," it declared. The NASUWT would consider industrial

action "in cases where academies fail to protect conditions of service and advance decent working conditions for members" and if they link teachers' pay to test results, pupils' progress or schools' inspection results.

What this means in reality is that there will be no coordinated national opposition to the White Paper, only isolated action against an individual academy school—and then only when teachers' anger prevents the unions from suppressing opposition.

The only concern of the unions regarding the White Paper is that they will be left out in the cold. The break-up of national pay structures could impact their negotiating rights with the government and, through this, their privileged positions as enforcers of labour discipline on behalf of the ruling elite.

The White Paper is an historic attack and will set back the education system decades if implemented. It necessitates the political mobilisation of teachers, along with broad sections of the community and students, in opposition to the dismantling of public education. The unions are hostile to such a struggle, as has been demonstrated time and again, year after year. Their "fight" against the White Paper will only ever go the same way as their "fight" in defence of public sector pensions or any other attack on teachers: To defeat via the road of betrayal.

Teachers must organise meetings in every school, independently of the unions, to discuss the implications of the government's White Paper and the privatisation agenda, and organise rank-and-file committees in defence of public education. These must form links with other sections of workers, such as the junior doctors who are engaged in a struggle against a work contract meant to pave the way for the further privatisation of health care. The Socialist Equality Party is ready to lead such a fightback.



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