

UK teachers hold one-day strike against education bill

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Teachers are striking Tuesday across England in defence of pay and working conditions, after some 91.7 percent of teachers voted in favour of strike action.

The strike by National Union of Teachers members (NUT) takes place under conditions in which the government's White Paper, "Educational Excellence Everywhere," launched in March and implemented in May's Queen's speech, sets out an agenda for the complete privatisation of state education.

One of the central aims of the paper, the basis for an Education Bill, is the transformation of all schools into academies over the next six years. The Bill stipulates 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 plan was met by widespread opposition across the teaching profession. Within two days of its announcement, 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 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.

Conservative Education Secretary Nicky Morgan, confronted with opposition, including within her own party, announced a "retreat" on the proposal of "forced academies." This was primarily due to the fact that it was not possible to implement it within the timeframe

outlined. The academy agenda will continue, targeting primarily "underachieving schools", which will be forced into academy status and failing local authorities, which will produce the same result.

Despite the repeated claims of the government that education funding is "ring-fenced," the Education Bill, under the misnamed "fairer funding" formula, will result in the highest real terms cuts for a generation--a cut in the real value of funding per pupil of 8 percent or more. The government is freezing total cash per pupil, but increasing the money school governors have to pay to the Treasury for each member of staff they employ. Local authorities in London, the Midlands and the North are expected to be hit particularly hard, but all areas will lose out.

The government's claims that the aim is to distribute funding more equitably to resolve child poverty is a ruse. The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) projects that the number of children in relative poverty will have risen from 2.3 to 3.6 million by 2020. On average, nine children in a class of 30 are growing up in poverty.

Continued intervention and restructuring of the state education system has already produced a deep crisis. Class sizes are predicted to increase further, subject choices are being cut and support staff made redundant.

None of this includes the impact that the outcome of the referendum vote to leave the European Union, which has produced the greatest economic and political crisis of British capitalism in decades, will have on public spending and government policy. The Conservative Party leadership contest is between the most right-wing, Thatcherite sections of the party, while in the Labour Party the right-wing Blairites have launched a coup to remove Jeremy Corbyn as leader.

Those seeking to oppose the attacks on education and austerity cannot look to the unions. The NUT is not

demanding the end of the academy agenda. They only opposed “forced academisation.” Academies have created the means through which teachers’ working conditions have been overhauled and the privatisation of education facilitated. The teaching unions have been complicit in every single attack by both Labour and Conservative governments over the past two decades.

The only concern of the unions regarding the Education Bill 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.

Kevin Courtney is acting general secretary of the NUT and a member of the Socialist Workers Party-backed Socialist Teachers Alliance. He said, “Nicky Morgan needs to engage properly with teachers to address the real problems that are occurring in our schools. The education secretary should negotiate with teacher unions on protections for school teachers from a workload crisis which is now completely out of hand.”

The Education Bill is an historic attack and will set back the education system decades if implemented. It necessitates the political mobilisation of teachers, along with parents and students, in opposition to the dismantling of public education. The unions are hostile to such a struggle, as has been demonstrated year after year. Their “fight” against the Education Bill will only 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.

Far-reaching political conclusions must be drawn from the putsch underway in the Labour Party. With the ruling elite facing its deepest political crisis since World War II, the highest echelons of the British state have concluded that no oppositional sentiment to austerity, militarism and war can be tolerated.

Teachers must organise meetings in every school, independently of the unions, to discuss the implications of the government’s privatisation agenda, and organise rank-and-file committees in defence of public education.

What is required above all is a new leadership—a genuinely socialist and internationalist party that fights for the reorganisation of economic life on the basis of social need, not private profit. This is the programme of the Socialist Equality Party.



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