

UK: Durham teaching assistants vote to strike

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Teaching assistants in County Durham in the north east of England have voted to strike in a long-running pay and working conditions dispute with the Labour Party-led council. Unison represents the majority of TAs in the area, and 93 percent of members who responded to its ballot voted for strike action.

The council intends to dismiss its entire 2,700-strong school support workforce and re-employ them on term-time contracts. This means not just paying them for fewer weeks of the year, but making them work longer for less pay.

The dispute has focused on the move to pay classroom assistants for term-time only. For Durham TAs this will result in a 23 percent cut in their wages, or 10 percent if they work longer hours for no extra pay.

Durham County Council has utilised “equalities” legislation to impose the pay cut, arguing it has to slash wages and conditions in order to avoid equal pay claims from other staff, such as cleaners and dinner staff who work in schools and are only paid term-time. The majority of these workers are no longer employed through the council and have been contracted out to private firms.

Last month, the Durham TAs, some of who are also in the GMB union, accepted a two-year compensation deal and an agreement that they will not be put on the new inferior contracts until next April, on the recommendation of the union leadership. Those in Unison are to be “dismissed and re-engaged” with just a single year of compensation from the beginning of next year.

Unison has attacked the council, with its general secretary Dave Prentis stating: “These are the sort of shabby tactics we’d expect from the worst private sector employers, not a Labour council. I hope all Durham teaching assistants vote to go on strike, the council rethinks its pathetic offer and stops behaving in

such a distasteful manner.”

This rings hollow as Unison has not only accepted the imposition of identical attacks in region after region, but also secretly attempted to impose the offer that is being put by the council to the teaching assistants.

So transparent has been Unison’s refusal to wage a struggle that even the *Guardian* drew attention to its role. An article by Aditya Chakraborty, one its senior economics commentators, published September 6, with interviews with many TAs involved, stated, “Sold out by a Labour council, the TAs have also been badly let down by their union. The officials of Unison have been painfully slow to organise serious action. In all the months since the pay cut was announced last winter, they have failed so far even to ballot for any kind of industrial action. They now promise to hold one this month—which might yield a strike in October, just two months before the members are all laid off.”

The article continued, “Aghast at such spinelessness, some councillors have shown the TAs correspondence from paid union representatives. One email suggests a one-off compensation payment that, it promises, would ‘gain overwhelming support’ from the membership. That pledge was made without either the knowledge or the agreement of the TAs I’ve spoken to.

“At the very point when Unison bureaucrats should have been digging in for the fight of their lives, they have instead spent months drawing up the terms of defeat.”

The *Guardian* has had very little to say over the past four years as TAs’ wages have been slashed and conditions overturned up and down the country. Their concern is that the unions have begun to lose control of an angry membership and that, “TAs have been forced to fight for themselves.”

The Durham TAs are the second group of TAs involved in industrial action over the implementation of drastic cuts in their living conditions. TAs in Derby,

Derbyshire have undertaken eight days of strikes since the Labour-run city council cut their pay in June. The Derby TAs have been in dispute with their employer since last September last year when the council announced plans to put them onto school term-time contracts. The move means some employees will lose as much as £6,000 a year.

The Durham TAs were also informed in October 2015 of the plans to change the terms and conditions of their contracts. The unions representing the TAs made no effort to unite the struggles of their members. Unison, the largest public sector union with over a million members, has 250,000 members in schools, including teaching and classroom assistants, librarians, technicians, caretakers, facilities and maintenance staff and caterers and cleaning workers. Instead, TAs have been isolated and the unions, Unison, GMB and Unite, have all either imposed the new conditions or attempted to do so behind the backs of the workers.

In Derby, unions have organised strikes after the contracts have already been imposed. In Durham, Unison has presented three slightly varied proposals to date, offering only one-year's compensation for loss of income. This could see staff being sacked on December 31 and reinstated on January 1 under new and worse terms and conditions.

TAs' pay was restructured in many English regions two years ago, meaning that some staff have already experienced significant wage reductions. The proposed changes mean that these staff will have a further reduction of up to £200 per month in Durham.

Across the country, the vast bulk of TAs had a major overhaul in their conditions in 2012. This resulted in a new pay and grading system which imposed term-time-only payments, as well as a loss of special needs allowances for TAs working with vulnerable and complex children. These were all imposed with the full complicity of the unions.

The cuts to education budgets, as a product of the imposition of austerity, is seeing thousands of TAs losing their jobs or confronting a major reduction in their hours. An example of the scale of cuts on the agenda is in the London borough of Newham—also Labour-run—where an estimated 500 teachers and 1,000 teaching assistants could lose their jobs over the next five years because of cuts, with a 17 percent shortfall in education funding.

In order to take up a struggle against the devastation being wrought, TAs must break from the unions who are acting as an arm of big business. No confidence can be placed in Unison leading a struggle as they have proven consistently their aim is to stifle and suppress opposition.

The fight of the Derby and Durham TAs reveals a renewed spirit of struggle and defiance against austerity that exists more broadly throughout the country. However, due to the role of Labour and the trade unions in carrying out the imposition of these attacks this willingness to fight has no progressive outlet.

TAs and other local government workers are in struggle against Labour-run authorities, under conditions in which the party has just re-elected its nominally “left” leader, Jeremy Corbyn, for a second time. Corbyn has not once opposed the attacks being imposed by Labour councils. Rather, at Labour's September conference at which his victory was announced, a policy motion was passed insisting that Labour councils could not set “illegal budgets,” i.e., budgets challenging the cuts demanded by the central Conservative-run government.

Teaching assistants must organise meetings in every school, independently of the trade unions, to discuss the implications of the cuts in education, and organise rank-and-file committees in defence of public education. TAs must link their campaign to broader sections both within the education sector, and other sections of workers and youth, including those in the National Health Service in a unified offensive against austerity.



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