Unions in UK oppose struggle against massive school spending cuts

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Hundreds of schools and teachers are calling for action in response to an unprecedented funding crisis.

The National Audit Office (NAO) reports that schools faced £3 billion in spending cuts. A forecast from the Institute for Fiscal Studies said this equated to an 8 percent real-term cut to funding. According to a new Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) report, real-term spending on schools in England could drop by 6.5 percent over the course of this parliament. The IFS states, “This will be the first time schools have seen real-terms cuts in spending per pupil since the mid-1990s.”

Frustration with the situation has led to plans for a strike by school governors. Governors of 40 schools in West Sussex have written to MPs warning they may refuse to sign off school budgets for 2017-18 in protest at funding pressures.

School governors, who have taken a more prominent role in schools over the past decade, are being forced to make school staff redundant as budgets are cut. Although governors are not employees, they can refuse to carry out their duties, which include the process of recruitment.

The National Union of Teachers (NUT) has created an online tool called *Schoolcuts* to show the impact in England and Wales. The web site is supported by the NUT, Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL), GMB, National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) and Britain’s two largest unions—Unison and Unite.

One school, Thornhill Community Academy in Dewsbury, West Yorks, will lose an estimated £533,918—an average of £661 per pupil—by 2019. As a result, the school may have to shed 13 teachers.

The Department for Education estimates that 60 percent of secondary schools in England are in deficit. The NUT estimates that just in the southern English county of Hampshire, 1,700 teachers’ jobs could go by 2019-20 as part of a £62 million package of government cuts.

However, the only choices available to teachers and the public who visit the site is to share figures on social media or email their local Member of Parliament as if this is going to miraculously provide extra funding for schools. At the time of writing, no further action is planned beyond this.

The main focus of the NUT is on protecting its income from dues paying members, as it seeks a merger with the ATL in order to “be better positioned to effect change both at school and college and at national level.”

An NUT statement declares, speaking of a Conservative government committed to imposing vast spending cuts, “We will be better able to influence government around issues of concern to the profession such as workload, school funding and student assessment.”

Joint campaigns have been carried out before. In autumn 2012, education staff took action over pay and conditions. This was a joint strike organised by the NUT and the NASUWT (National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers). At the time, the slogan of the unions was “protecting teachers defending education. NUT, NASUWT together.” Nothing could have been further from the truth, with repeated attacks being made on teachers’ pay and conditions over the past five years, with no resistance organised by any of the unions.

Since the 2012 strike, strikes have been few and far between. The NASUWT stopped strike action altogether, in favour of a paltry protest short of a strike. This involves teachers refusing to take part in work that is beyond their remits. The NUT has held just two

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national one-day strikes since the joint action. In July 2014, NUT members took part in a day of action alongside members of Unison, Unite, GMB, Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) and the Fire Brigades Union (FBU).

At the time, the NUT cited pay, pensions and workload as three key reasons for walking out. According to the union, pension contribution increases and pay restraint had meant that teachers had seen a 15 percent fall in the value of their take home pay. Performance related pay (PRP) was also a key issue, but has now been implemented without further action.

In 2016, the NUT again cited workload as an issue, but focused solely on funding in their letter to the education secretary. Writing in June 2016, Kevin Courtney, then acting general secretary of the NUT, warned that the funding situation in schools could get "progressively worse."

The NUT argued that these funding cuts could have "negative implications," including an increase in class sizes, fewer subject choices for children, and cuts in support and teaching staff. As the union pointed out, all of these can affect standards overall. However, this dire situation is the reality in virtually all UK schools and has reached breaking point, but there is barely a whimper of protest from the NUT.

The pseudo-left Socialist Party (SP) and the Socialist Workers Party praise the NUT for supposedly continuing the fight against the government. NUT general secretary Kevin Courtney was part of the Socialist Teachers Alliance (STA), which includes the SWP and Socialist Resistance. Last year the SWP backed Courtney as he ran for the post of general secretary.

When Courtney won the leadership election of the NUT in 2016, he was congratulated by the Labour Party's nominally "left" leader Jeremy Corbyn. The pseudo-left sow illusions in a Corbyn-led Labour government improving the conditions of teachers, funding and reversing the academy schools programme. But a report on a Labour conference fringe meeting last September by *Schools Week* exposed the party's lack of opposition to the governments' schools agenda. "We don't have a policy on what would happen to academies if we were to win the next election," said Lord Watson, the shadow education minister in the House of Lords, who added, "We are in the early stages of developing education policy."

He continued, "Obviously, Labour started academies for a different purpose, to help schools that were in difficulties, but it's gone beyond that now. We should get back to the position where academies are for their original purpose."

The reality is that academies were introduced to start the privatisation of education in the UK, which has led to massive expansion of the academies programme and now the creation of Free Schools.

The darling of ex-education secretary Michael Gove, Sir Andrew Carter, chief executive of the South Farnham Educational Trust, proposes that schools should be able to ask for fees from families of around £500 a year and seek private investment to help with their finances.

Some heads already realise that complete privatisation is a distinct possibility. John Tomsett of Huntington school in York said, "Until we are officially privatised and charging becomes the norm, I will continue to refrain from asking taxpayers to make additional contributions towards educating their children beyond the tax they have already paid."

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