

Protests underway in UK against school education funding cuts

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Massive cuts to the school funding budget in England by the Conservative government is provoking a growing movement of protests in opposition.

Over the next four years £3 billion in funding will be cut from school budgets under a supposedly “fair funding” formula. This amounts to an 8 percent cut in real terms. More than 90 percent of schools across England will be affected, with cuts in London amounting to £600 million. Pupils in other major cities, including Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester and Nottingham, will receive less funding per head under the new system.

The government is rationalising the cuts on the basis that schools in relatively better funded areas such as London will see their funding cut supposedly in order to be redistributed to under-resourced schools around the country.

On March 18, around 400 parents and children protested in the market town of Sandbach in Cheshire, which has a population of just 17,000. The funding cuts will reduce annual spending per pupil in Cheshire East to just under £4,200. The previous month a protest was held in nearby Nantwich.

Last Saturday parents protested in Chester city centre in the North West of England.

A number of protests have been held in London, including one attended by around 100 parents and teachers at Stoke Newington School in the borough of Hackney.

In the inner London borough of Lambeth, £25 million is to be slashed from school funding by 2020. For some schools this means up to 25 percent in cuts to their budget.

The impact of such draconian cuts will be devastating. With over 100 people per hectare, Lambeth’s population density is more than twice the

London average, making it one of the most densely populated areas in the country. With a ranking in the bottom 10 percent on the index of multiple deprivation, Lambeth is one of the most deprived boroughs in England and the eighth most deprived local authority in London. Lambeth’s children tend to have complex educational needs. Many of them are refugees, while an above average proportion speak English as a second language.

The Fair Funding For All Schools Lambeth campaign, a campaign group set up with the declared aim of opposing the cuts, held a meeting in Lambeth this month. The meeting at Sunny Hill Primary School in Lambeth was attended by over 250 parents, with the assembly hall filled to capacity.

While the high attendance of the meeting testifies to the broad hostility among parents and education workers to the government’s plans and their willingness to fight them, the campaign offered no viable strategy.

The national Fair Funding For All Schools campaign bases its strategy on a call for the government to “Increase investment in all schools by protecting per-pupil funding in real terms for the life of this Parliament.” This request is made to a government that is cutting billions in funding and is committed to the privatisation of education at all levels. The campaign declares that, “through a national petition and setting up local parent groups—we will bring pressure to bear in Westminster through an effective political lobbying and media strategy.”

Leaflets on the chairs set out a limited five-point action plan for parents to follow, which included responding to the government’s consultation online, signing a petition and writing letters to local MPs. A generic postcard addressed to Education Secretary

Justine Greening was handed out for people to fill out and send.

The only purpose of such a campaign is to ensure that broadening opposition to the cuts does not spiral out of control and remains within the straitjacket of Labour and the trade unions, which in turn allows the government to implement the cuts unchallenged. It is also designed to conceal Labour's direct complicity in implementing the government's austerity agenda.

The speakers at the event were the leader of Lambeth's Labour-led Council, Lib Peck, Labour MP Helen Hayes and National Union of Teacher (NUT) Vice President Kiri Tunks.

In her speech, Peck said, "Schools have already seen cuts in their budgets since 2010 and that's already beginning to have an impact," but failed to mention her own administration's direct role in implementing the government's cuts.

At the start of 2016, Lambeth council launched a web site "Tough Choices," on which it stated that its funding had been cut by central government by 56 percent. The web site declares, "That means tough choices about what we can afford." At the time Lambeth Chief Executive Sean Harriss told the *Guardian*, "It was a decision made by central government, but we're prepared to own the decisions we have to make with the hand we've been dealt."

Labour councils' adherence to the government's austerity has been promoted by Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn. In September 2015, Corbyn and Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell sent a letter to all Labour councils demanding they abide by the law and impose the cuts demanded by the Conservative government, under pain of disciplinary measures if they refused.

Peck mentioned her own opposition to the "forced-academisation" carried out by the present government, while praising the Building Schools For the Future (BSF) programme implemented under the Labour governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. Both policies, which extended the reach of the private sector within education, were in fact introduced under Labour.

Academies were introduced by Blair's government in 2000. They are schools directly funded by central government, but are outside local authority control and have the power to supplement their revenue from personal and corporate sponsors.

The BSF was a scheme under the Private Finance

Initiative, which handed out lucrative contracts for building schools to consortia of financiers, construction and IT companies.

The role of the trade union bureaucracy is no less criminal in enabling the government to implement its agenda. Having confined teachers' opposition to the government's attacks on education to a series of token strikes, the NUT sows illusions that the Tories can be pressured to back down on implementing the cuts.

In her speech, NUT Vice President Kiri Tunks stated, "There are indications that the government has started to backtrack a bit on the national funding formula and this is not the time to take the foot off the pedal." Tunks concluded, "I think we can win on this, I think we can win better funding and once we've got this movement going, and it is a movement, I think we can build a really fantastic vision for education."

As with NUT General Secretary Kevin Courtney, Kiri Tunks is a supporter of the Socialist Teachers Alliance, a current within the NUT backed by the pseudo-left Socialist Workers Party (SWP). Both Courtney and Tunks were officially backed by the SWP as they ran for election.

After the meeting, a WSWs reporter spoke to Natalia, a mother of two children from France. "It's so sad! Why don't they protect education?" she asked. "Education is everything in life. If you destroy kids at a young age then how can you be surprised that the country is such a mess? They can't even provide the minimum that our children deserve. That's a disgrace. I feel so sad for my son and my daughter who is only one year old. What is the point of giving life to children [under these circumstances]?"

After the reporter pointed out that education cuts have been implemented both by Labour and Conservatives over many years, Natalia responded, "They should be ashamed! They should never touch the money put in place for kids. Never."



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