

UK teaching assistants march in Durham to oppose pay cuts and attacks on conditions

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Over 1,000 teaching assistants (TAs) and their supporters marched through Durham in the north of England Saturday, demanding an end to proposed cuts to their pay and conditions.

Among the supporters were TAs from Derby, who have been involved in a similar dispute and have taken industrial action to protest drastic cuts.

The 2,700 teaching assistants have been involved in an 18-month dispute with Labour Party-run Durham County Council. The council wants to slash their contracts from 52 to 39 weeks a year, paying them only in school term-time. They propose to fire and then rehire staff on a contract that will result in a 23 percent pay cut—or 10 percent if they work longer hours for no extra pay. For some this would mean a pay cut of up to £5,000 [US\$6,220] a year.

The cuts will hit Durham TAs particularly hard as the council pays its TAs one of the lowest rates in the country.

The TAs carried out four days of strikes last year but their action was called off in November by the Unison public sector trade union, when the council—who originally intended to impose the new contracts in January—suspended the action pending further talks.

Whilst the majority of TAs are in Unison, those in the GMB were forced, under pressure from the union leadership, to accept a two-year compensation deal and an agreement stipulating that they would not be put on the new inferior contracts until next April. Nearly 47 percent of GMB members voted against the deal.

Durham council has utilised legislation contained in the 2010 Equality Act to impose the pay cut. The council argues it has to slash wages and conditions 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.

Speaking at a rally following the march, various union officials aired no end of platitudes on the determined fight of the teaching assistants—but offered nothing except seeking further negotiations with the council.

Clare Williams, the Regional Secretary of Unison, said, “We are not going to solve this dispute until we are sat round the table.”

Kevin Courtney, General Secretary of the National Union of Teachers, which refuses to take up a fight against the overall onslaught on school level education, asserted—in the face of all evidence to the contrary—that the council was amenable to a negotiated settlement in favour of the TAs. “They [the council] will have to give way and have to recognise and reward the complexity of the work you do,” said Courtney.

The purpose of this sort of talk was to chloroform workers who want to fight back and channel their discontent into a bankrupt campaign aimed at appeals to a Labour council who have been imposing austerity for nearly a decade.

This was in sharp contrast to one of the teaching assistants, who at the end of the rally urged TAs not to vote Labour in the upcoming local government elections.

WSWS reporters spoke to TAs on the demonstration.

Jill Hope, from nearby Consett, works with 2-19-year-olds as a Higher Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA). She said, “I don’t know how they think they can take a third of our wage off us and expect us to not to do anything about it.

“The council couldn’t cope with more schools shut. We are not asking for more money but to stay the same to do the job we do. We plan lessons, prepare things and see to a child’s every need, liaise with outside agencies and organise trips. We are dealing with challenging behaviour on a daily basis—almost a social worker as many of their families are vulnerable.”

Jill said the proposed cuts were so substantial that, “If this goes through I will have to sell my house. These ‘equality’ laws are a load of crap and are one of the excuses the council are giving for this attack on us.”

Alison Havard, a teaching assistant also from Consett, said, “This has been dragging on for 18 months and many of these workers are single parents who will lose their homes.

“We are not looking for extra money, it’s about keeping what we have got. We have bills to pay and will end up losing about £5,000. We have the backing of the parents and teachers. It’s people’s lives they are playing with, who are at risk of losing their homes. The council have tried to divide us and because we are predominantly female, they didn’t count on this level of support for a fight.”

One TA explained that as medical advances now allow early births to live longer, this is producing an increase in the numbers of children with complex medical needs in mainstream schools.

Daisy, another HLTA, explained, “I work in a department with 10 staff at a school in Newcastle. They said they don’t need LSAs [Learning Support Assistant] anymore because they are not improving children’s grades fast enough in order to produce the outcomes required to improve results.

“These children are entitled to an education, but instead they are being left. Children with autism need to come to school early to miss the rush and leave later so parents can pick them up.

“This is in a mainstream school and they have hired mentors to boost the English and Maths results and got rid of LSAs.

“We also have a lot of children with speech and language difficulties which can’t be addressed in large classes. Out of 1,000 kids, over 300 are on the SEN [Special Educational Needs] register. Unison came in and said the head teacher had the right to do that. They [Unison] don’t stand by us at all.

“Staff were also told that if you take a job within a year of being made redundant you have to pay the money back. They have recently uncovered that the school is £750,000 in debt.

“TAs don’t get paid for school holidays, breaks and dinner time, yet they are expected to show good will by working their breaks and dinner across the week.”

Daisy, concluded, “My main concern is that by cutting down their pay, these workers will end up leaving. What will happen to the children at the lower level—the kids

with autism or PMLD [Profound Medical and Learning Disability]? I don’t see a teacher going to the toilet to change a child. We do the crappiest of jobs and don’t mind it. We have to feed kids, change tracheas etc.”

Sarah works in an infant school with reception-age children with autism and Special Educational Needs. She explained the advanced skills and many responsibilities that TAs have.

“People will have to leave because of the cuts. I’ve got a degree in Care and Education and done the Elklan [speech and language] training, so I can sign, I change a PEG [Percutaneous Endoscopic Gastrostomy, where a feeding tube is put directly into the stomach through the abdominal skin, feeding and administering medications] and work with children with autism. Normally children spend more time with the TA than the class teacher because they have to lead the rest of the class.

“At the moment a lot of TAs are the only ones in a family that are bringing in a wage. The pay cut will lead to unemployment.

“In addition a letter [outlining further required spending cuts] has been sent out since the budget which will affect loads of schools—so it’s a double attack. People are leaving, so if they cut even more we would have to leave and go work at Asda [supermarket retailer], where they pay more money.”

Eileen, who works at an infant’s school, said, “I have worked in this kind of job all my life. There will be redundancies and there are funding cuts still to happen.

“On a day-to-day basis you deal with all sorts of problems which the teacher is unable to do. They expect us to go in and feel the same—but all the goodwill has gone. I will never vote Labour again because of this and neither will my family.”



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