

UK government attempt to gag teachers as cuts deepen

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The broad-based opposition to massive austerity in education has provoked a threatening directive from the UK Conservative government to school staff to stay silent on the terrible impact the cuts are having on education.

An update issued by the government's Department for Education (DfE) to all schools as they returned from the summer break—billed as departmental advice for school leaders, governing bodies and local authorities—contained a new paragraph with a blunt statement in a staff management section.

In the document titled, "Staffing and employment advice for schools," the section reads: "All staff have a responsibility to ensure that they act appropriately in terms of their behaviour, the views they express (political views) and the use of school resources at all times, and should not use school resources for party political purposes."

A DfE spokesman added, "This update simply brings ... guidance in line with the law, which makes clear that headteachers and local authorities must not promote partisan political views in school."

The warning, first reported by the *Schools Week* newspaper, comes after campaigns by school leaders over budget cuts since 2016, which included lobbies of parliament by head teachers and letters sent to parents across the UK informing them of the impact of cuts, and calling on them to lobby MPs.

The government reaction, to what is a very limited opposition organised by the trade unions, must be seen as a warning, that not only will school cuts continue unabated, but that the government will move forcefully against any attempts to block their agenda.

Austerity has had a devastating impact on sectors in education across all regions.

Research has found that more than one in three

schools in England ran an operating deficit last year, with hundreds of schools having dipped into their reserves for three or four years in a row.

The education unions updated their campaigning website, School Cuts, to include the new national formula and found that nearly nine out of 10 schools would see cuts in real terms by 2020.

According to the unions' calculations, a typical primary school will be worse off annually by £52,546, and a typical secondary school will have lost £178,000 each year since 2015.

There have been cuts of £2.8 billion since 2015, with a £45.4k average cut to primary schools and £185.2k average cut to secondary schools. Per pupil funding has been cut by almost 8 percent since 2010, and compared to last year, schools have 5,400 fewer teachers, 2,800 fewer teaching assistants and 2,600 fewer support staff.

According to the Association of School and College Leaders, schools require a further £2 billion a year between now and 2020 if they are to be able to deal with previous budget cuts. Since 2015 alone, schools have suffered a real-term cut in funding of £2.7 billion.

Jules White, a headteacher behind the Worth Less? national group of school leaders that has organised letters critical of the government on the funding allocation to education, said: "If expressing political views is about biased and ill-judged grandstanding by heads and teachers, then I fully support the DfE's views."

"If, on the other hand, the DfE wishes headteachers to be gagged as they simply tell the truth about the financial and teacher supply crisis that our schools are facing then this is unacceptable."

Last year, Worth Less? organised 5,000 headteachers to lobby the government, while White and his colleagues oversaw a letter sent to an estimated 2.5

million households via pupils from thousands of state schools.

The directive takes place under conditions of growing opposition to attacks on wages and conditions by teaching staff. The school year opened with a major recruitment crisis in the sector. Forty thousand teachers quit in 2016 and there is a shortage of 30,000 currently in the sector. The government has ignored the pay review bodies' recommendation of a paltry 3.5 percent pay rise, after years of wage freezes.

This has resulted in England's teachers receiving the second biggest pay cut among teachers in the developed world.

Only teachers in Greece—where the education budget has been slashed by more than a third over a decade of austerity cuts—have taken a bigger hit than in England, where teacher pay fell 10 percent between 2005 and 2017, according to OECD reports.

The directive was met with an angry response by headteachers and teaching unions have said they will defy any attempts by the Department for Education to block criticism.

While the unions claim they will support the democratic right of teachers to speak out against the onslaught on public education, educators must view such claims with extreme caution. The teaching unions have done nothing to mobilise their members, who are angered by the dire crisis in school age education and have repeatedly overturned strike ballots in favour of organising lobbies and petitions that have done nothing to prevent the government's agenda being enforced.

The government's reaction, in seeking to curtail basic democratic rights, reveals how futile the token campaigns organised by the unions are.

The move by the government to censor teachers must be opposed by all teachers. If such draconian measures are imposed, they will no doubt be expanded to clamp down on workers' opposition throughout the public sector.

Opposition to this cannot be entrusted to the unions, who, despite posturing against the cuts, have organised no unified offensive to oppose them. No concrete campaign has been outlined by the unions or Labour Party to oppose an unprecedented attack on the democratic rights of hundreds of thousands of education workers.

Quoted in the *Guardian*, Geoff Barton, the general

secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, played down the authoritarian measures being imposed, merely stating, "It is perfectly reasonable for school leaders and teachers to be able to articulate their concerns ... and it is clearly in the public interest for them to have a voice. You cannot disenfranchise 450,000 teachers from talking about education."

On behalf of the Labour Party, Shadow Education Secretary Angela Rayner issued a perfunctory response, noting that the government "may hope to silence teachers, but they can't get away from the fact that they will have cut £3bn from school budgets by 2020."

The struggle to defend education must be based on a unified campaign amongst teachers, parents and the wider community, based on rank-and-file committees established independently of the unions, against austerity and privatisation and based on socialist policies.



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