UK teachers' pay award: A shoddy deal for all

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The Conservative government is hailing as a major advance Chancellor Rishi Sunak's announcement of a pay-rise for teachers.

Nothing could be further from the truth. The offer is divisive and paltry. It will not be funded by the government, but out of already chronically under-funded school budgets.

The deal is being sold as a "generous offer," aimed at resolving the teacher recruitment and retention crisis but does not come close to resolving the strains of a sector on its knees. Only Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) will get the headline 5.5 percent pay rise, with more experienced teachers being offered 2.75 percent, equating to a measly 3.1 percent increase overall. When inflation is factored in, schools are left where they were 13 years ago.

Young people are being enticed into a profession at breaking point. The statistics are stark. There was a 4.6 percent increase in teacher vacancies last year, with almost 1,300 more vacancies advertised by schools in 2018-2019 than in 2017-2018. The Department for Education (DfE) reported that almost a "third of teachers leave the classroom within five years of qualifying." The overall number of teachers has not kept pace with increasing pupil numbers and the ratio of pupils to qualified teachers has increased from 17.8 in 2011 to 18.9.

Around 42,000 full-time equivalent qualified teachers left the state-funded sector in the 12 months to November 2018, a "wastage rate" of 9.8 percent. According to the House of Commons Library, "The wastage rate has ranged from 9.1 percent (2012) to 10.3 percent (2015) since the current series started in 2011." It noted, "32.3 percent of newly qualified entrants in 2016 were not recorded as working in the state sector five years later. This is the highest five-year wastage rate on the current series, which dates back to 1997."

It noted, "Overall pupil numbers are expected to continue rising, driven by a projected 15 percent increase in the number of secondary school pupils between 2018 and 2024."

The environment that newly qualified teachers (NQTs) will find is one of constant surveillance and pressure. UK teachers work 47 hours a week on average according to a study by the UCL Institute of Education. A third of teachers work over 60 hours a week and during the "holidays". These long hours are unsustainable and a major reason why teachers are fleeing the profession.

Since 2014, teachers have had to deal with performance related pay (PRP). This has been used to cap teacher pay, as schools are now allowed to award increases or not at their own discretion.

The 2.75 percent pay rise sanctioned by the Department for Education (DfE) for 2019-20, for example, was not implemented across all schools. The National Education Union (NEU) who surveyed their members, found that out of 25,000 responses only 49 percent received the pay award.

Overseen by the unions, workers have experienced pay freezes and cuts in pay for over a decade. This amounts to a 15 percent loss of income over the last 15 years for workers in education. The new pay deal does not come close to addressing this shortfall.

A decade of underfunding and budget cuts has seen school funding cut by 8 percent in real terms in the last decade, and sixth form funding by 21 percent. In the last three years alone, £5.4 billion has been lost from school budgets, affecting 91 percent of schools in England.

Headteachers have had to make desperate decisions about staffing redundancies and curriculum provision

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to balance their budgets. Schools now rely more and more on teachers and parents to plug deficits due to crippling budget cuts.

The pay deal will add to financial difficulties as schools will have to find the money themselves at a time when the funding situation is exacerbated by the costs of COVID-19. Schools are having to buy signage and cleaning resources out of existing budgets.

In September 2019, £7.1 billion was promised to schools over three years. The government has also promised a £1 billion catch-up plan for children affected by the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic. £650 million will be shared across state primary and secondary schools and a £350 million National Tutoring Programme is being set up. This is paltry compared to the hundreds of billions in bailout funds handed to big business.

The unsafe reopening of schools in September will elevate the crisis. That many older teachers will retire early, concerned about the impact of the pandemic on their health, is also a factor in the carrot of enhanced payments for new starts. The stick will follow the carrot. The stress levels involved in attempting to teach while keeping "bubbles" of up to 240 children and themselves safe with no protective measures, such as social distancing and masks, will weigh heavily on the mental health of staff.

The teaching unions are not opposing the unsafe opening of schools and have refused to mobilise the broad-based opposition among staff. They welcomed the government's empty promises for NQTs, saying they were merely "disappointed" that the deal did not reward experienced staff.

The National Association of Schoolmasters/Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT), General Secretary Dr Patrick Roach said, "Whilst [the] announcement recognises the importance of pay levels in making teaching more attractive to new teachers, the Government also needs to do more to retain experienced teachers in the profession."

Making no reference to how schools would find the money for such a raise, Mary Bousted, joint general secretary of the National Education Union, referred to the government's move as a "curate's egg":

"Raising starting salaries by 5.5 percent should make the profession more attractive to graduates," she said. "But the prospect of salaries tapering off as they progress through the profession means that progress made in recruiting teachers will not be sustained in retaining them."

The NEU, after only asking for a 7 percent pay rise for all teachers in their own ineffectual campaign and having again been ignored by the government, responded by glorifying the pay deal for new starts!

This is consistent with their response to the coronavirus crisis—to demand the government incorporate them in their decision making as the best-placed institutions for imposing the government's pro-business agenda. The NEU have called, yet again, "to establish, in consultation with the teacher unions, a timetable for further above-inflation teacher pay increases beyond 2020."

It then lists, without irony, the major defeats teachers have experienced under the watch of the unions in the last decade: "The dismantling of the national pay structure, imposition of PRP and real-terms funding cuts have resulted in many teachers not getting the cost-of-living increases announced in previous years."

The pandemic will only intensify the attacks of recent years. The billions handed out by Sunak to big business will be clawed back from the working class. Teachers need new rank-and-file organisations based on unifying workers in a struggle against the profit system, as the only way to secure a decent education for children and good working conditions for staff.

The author also recommends:

No to the reopening of schools! Build action committees to safeguard children and teachers!
[30 May 2020]

Opposition builds to re-opening of UK schools
[5 June 2020]

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