

UK teachers oppose attacks on pay, conditions, pensions and government's push for Academisation of schools

Margot Miller
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Since the pandemic struck, UK teachers are facing an acceleration of government attacks on their pay and conditions, the further marketisation of education, and victimisations.

The Conservative government's reopening the economy, backed by Labour, is predicated on schools being kept open and has resulted in over 150,000 deaths. Schools are proven major vectors for spreading the virus, and children as well as adults can catch the virus and become seriously ill.

Despite the deaths of hundreds of educators from Covid-19, trade union representatives (reps) who raise health and safety concerns in schools are facing bullying, intimidation, and disciplinary action.

Teachers at North Huddersfield Trust school in Huddersfield walked out April 28/29 in support of National Education Union (NEU) representative Louise Lewis. Lewis was suspended in October for trying to organise individual and whole school risk assessments.

At Oaks Park High School in Redbridge, teachers in an indicative ballot voted for a walk out in support of their NEU rep. The rep was disciplined for encouraging staff to use section 44 of the Health and Safety Act 1996 to work remotely from the safety of home during lockdown.

NEU rep John Boken from the Shrewsbury Colleges group has been fighting victimisation since December, for raising concerns with management around bullying, racism and discrimination. His colleagues walked out April 29 in support of his fight to overturn charges of gross misconduct and a final warning.

London teachers at the Leaways School in Hackney walked out April 28/29, in defence of victimised rep Ian Forsyth, as part of a dispute which began at the end of last year. More strikes are planned for May 5, 6, 11, 12, 18 and 19.

Leaways is a special needs independent school run by the Kedleston group, which provides children age 7-17 with Autistic Spectrum Disorder and Social, Emotional and Mental Health needs. Forsyth was sacked after complaining to management about work conditions, including sick pay, which is currently paid for only seven days in a year. Staff are unhappy with the lack of provision for students.

The NEU has not even compiled a list of those members suffering victimisation. It is literally throwing reps to the wolves, leaving them to fight alone on a school-by-school basis. Like all the unions, the NEU supports the reopening of schools and the economy, and health and safety concerns are unwelcome.

A spate of disputes in education have broken out, despite every effort by the unions to suppress opposition.

NEU members at the Victoria Education Centre in Poole struck for 10 days, including from April 27-29, against changes in their contracts, affecting sick and maternity pay in contravention of teachers' national pay and conditions. The special school is run by charity, Livability.

Around 50 teaching staff at the Marples and Cheadle sixth form college in Southport began a two-day strike April 28, following a previous 24-hour stoppage. The NEU members are protesting no pay rise the last two years.

Nine teachers at Greatfield Park Primary school in Cheltenham walked out last Tuesday. Two years after a poor Ofsted (school inspectors') report, a new head implemented changes at the expense of the wellbeing of staff. Further stoppages are planned by the National Association of Schoolmasters, Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) for May 6, 7, 11, 12 and 13.

Pupils in Years 10 and 11 stayed at home for three days

in April at St Peter's Collegiate School in Wolverhampton after a stoppage by 40 teachers. The NASUWT said the strike concerned 'adverse management practices including workload, health and safety and the failure to consult.'

An increasing number of disputes have arisen in opposition to government plans to turn all schools into Academies. The academisation of schools was first introduced under the Blair Labour government. A half-way house to the privatisation of education, Academies are publicly financed but privately run and are exempt from teachers' national pay and conditions agreements.

Addressing the Confederation of School Trusts annual conference, Education Secretary Gavin Williamson said his ambition was to turn the "...50 percent of pupils studying in academies into 100 percent," including schools with a "history of long-term underperformance, which have had three consecutive Requires Improvement or worse judgements by Ofsted, into strong multi-academy trusts [MATs run by private companies or charities]".

Underperformance is not a consequence of poor teaching, as Ofsted inspections infer, but a product of decades of cuts to education spending and entrenched socio-economic inequality.

Teaching staff at Peacehaven Primary school in Sussex are planning a stoppage May 5 in opposition to plans to transform their school into an academy. A survey of teaching staff reported two-thirds of them would leave or be likely to if the proposals go ahead.

Staff at Moulsecomb Primary School walked out on April 28/29 after the decision to turn it over to the Pioneer Academy Trust. A protest march is planned from the school gates on May 15. According to the unions, Pioneer Academy CEO "Mason-Ellis pays himself £145,000 to £150,000 annually to run 11 schools..."

Teachers in a number of schools in the private sector are in dispute over attacks on their pensions. NASUWT members at St Christopher School, in Hertfordshire walked out on April 15 for six days. Several teachers from Mount Kelly school, in Tavistock, Devon walked out on April 21—threatened with "fire and rehire" if they do not accept an inferior pension.

Strikes at a boarding school, Worksop College and Ranby House in Nottinghamshire, by NEU members were averted in favour of talks at the government arbitration service Acas. A strike however went ahead at Stoneyhurst College, a boarding school in the Ribble Valley.

These schools are in addition to the 114 schools which

withdrew from the Teachers' Pension Scheme (TPS), after the government increased the employer's contribution to the scheme from 16.48 percent to 23.68 percent in September 2019. This increase also applies to pensions in the public sector. The contribution by employees stands at 9.6 percent. The government is currently consulting with independent schools on a phased withdrawal from the TPS.

For employers at St Christopher school, for example, the increase in their contributions would translate to an increase of £221,000 for 2019/20—an added cost eating into their profits. This is a school where fees per term for its nursery starts at £1,680. For junior school, it rises to £ 3,993 per term for Years 1 and 2; £ 4,995 for Years 3, 4, 5 and 6. Senior School fees start at £ 6,648. Senior School weekly boarding costs are £9,015 and Senior School full boarding £11,515. St Christopher is not even at the top end of the the fees scale. Already by 2017, the average annual cost for private schooling stood at £14,102 for day school and £32,259 for boarding school.

The 2,600 "independent", i.e., private schools, provide education for the most privileged children in society. They educate just 7 percent of all school children. It says much about the sentiment of the ruling class that those responsible for educating their sons and daughters, in institutions that should be immediately abolished, are not even judged worthy of a decent pension.

None of the struggles being fought by educators can be won through the education unions, which have proved their bankruptcy throughout the pandemic. The Socialist Equality Party calls on workers to join the Educator's Rank-and-File Safety Committee and build a genuinely democratic organisation of struggle to wage a united offensive against the onslaughts on jobs, pay, terms, conditions and pensions.



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