

Strikes and protests hit UK schools

Harvey Singh
31 May 2021

Educators across the UK continue to fight attacks on their jobs, pay and conditions, the academisation of schools, and victimisation.

A spree of strikes and protests since the reopening of schools has been called attention to earlier this month and last month on the *World Socialist Web Site*. Despite the common issues confronting education workers all over the country, the education unions have worked to keep strikes isolated to single schools and colleges.

School staff at Tendring Technology College are fighting a staffing restructure by the Academy Enterprise Trust (AET) that will result in teaching and support staff job losses, a cut in the hours worked by school nurses and the slashing of £700,000 from the school's annual budget from September. A three-day strike took place from May 25.

Ian Silverton, head of history at the college, explained to ITV News, "As much as it can be sold in terms of restructuring, we fundamentally will have less people in the school. There will be less pastoral care, there will be less teachers able to have an effective role, because their hours might be greatly increased. There's also the situation where essentially we're losing staff like midday assistants."

Parents are especially concerned about the loss of pastoral support. Jessica Davis told BBC News, "I'm absolutely passionate about the plight of our [Tendring Technology] teachers. They were called into a meeting and told there was excessive staffing.

"We've had two children who have lost their lives in our local community in the last nine weeks... and their response to those needs, unfortunately, is to cut the support. It is dangerous, it is really, really dangerous. If we've lost those children with those staff in situ, what is going to be the situation with those support staff cut?"

The AET runs 58 schools. Its head, Julian Drinkall, receives £290,000 a year. It has been claimed that the trust takes £1,250 per pupil from the £4,500 given by the Department for Education, though the trust's managers claim the figure is £575. According to National Education

Union (NEU) representative Jerry Glazier, Tendring Technology College "had a surplus in its budget last year and was projected to have one this year".

Following the strike and talks with the NEU, the AET offered to pause the restructure.

Staff at Nottingham Academy, part of the Greenwood Academies Trust, took strike action on May 11 and 18 against a forced reorganisation by school management. The second reorganisation in two years threatened higher workloads and teachers being forced to compete with their colleagues in applying for their own jobs. The NEU suspended planned strike action on May 20, claiming to have "won significant concessions from the employer." No details of the agreement have emerged.

Another restructuring is taking place at Merrill Academy and Lees Brook Community School in Derby, both taken over by the Archway Learning Trust in February. At least 20 jobs are slated to go, and dozens of staff member will receive reduced wages. The Trust intends to make savings of around £1 million.

The NEU and the National Association of School Master Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) previously criticised the restructuring as "ill-timed" and "unreasonable", given the pandemic, calling for it to be postponed. The NEU said staff will be balloted for strike action but has not set a date.

Around 100 teachers at City and Islington sixth form college in London held a three-day strike beginning Tuesday last week. The dispute is over management's demand that teachers work additional evenings and afternoons interviewing prospective students. They have threatened not to grant teachers a recommended pay award if they participate in the strike.

Two schools on the south coast are fighting academisation. 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. Peacehaven Primary school's governing body was

instructed by East Sussex County Council in 2019 to explore academy conversion but decided against following strikes and protests. The council then imposed an Interim Executive Board (IEB), with a direction from the Department for Education to “actively consider a sponsored academy solution.”

A consultation on conversion is due this autumn but the IEB has already applied for academy status.

Parent Caroline Gridley was quoted in the *Brighton & Hove News* as saying, “The fact that they have applied for an academy order before any consultation is a joke. IEB chair Penny Gaunt has already told parents that it is a consultation and not a referendum which suggests she’s not listening to parents, staff or the local community.”

NEU members held a one day strike last week, protesting outside County Hall in Lewes where the council was in session. Staff last walked out on May 5, when many parents and children joined them on the picket line to show support before marching through the town centre.

On May 15, school staff and parents marched through Brighton to oppose the academisation of Moulsecoomb Primary school by the Pioneer Academy Trust. The government imposed an Academy Order on the school in 2019 after it was rated “inadequate” by Ofsted. However, parents and teachers say the school has significantly improved since then and the order should be revoked. Recently, 96 percent of parents voted to keep the school under the control of the local authority.

The two-year dispute has resulted in four days of strikes by teachers and three academy trusts have so far been deterred from taking over the school. Earlier this month, parents padlocked the gates of the school to prevent a visit by the CEO and representatives of the Pioneer Academy Trust. On May 25, campaigners delivered 93 pledges from parents to Pioneer’s head office in Farnborough threatening to withdraw their children if the trust takes over

Two victimised teachers, both NEU reps, have been reinstated after local strikes and protests. Louise Lewis, of North Huddersfield Trust school, was reinstated after four days of strikes, with more planned, by her colleagues. She was suspended last year after trying to organise individual and whole school risk assessments regarding COVID-19.

Iain Forsyth has been reinstated at Leaways Special School in Hackney, London, after colleagues took 20 days of strike action since December 2020. He was sacked for making complaints to management regarding work conditions, including sick pay, which was being paid for

only seven days in a year. Staff were also unhappy with the lack of provision for students.

The reinstatement of these local union representatives underscores the criminal role played by the NEU nationally. The union has never even compiled a list of those members suffering victimisation (in line with its earlier non-recording of educators who had died from COVID-19), let alone consulted its members on any national, or even regional, action. They have thrown their reps to the wolves, leaving them to fight on a school-by-school basis. Thanks to the solidarity and support of colleagues and parents, several have been reinstated, but many more are still sacked or suspended.

Whatever the fate of individual reps, the education unions have so fully sabotaged any fight for safety measures in schools that the requirement to wear masks in secondary school classrooms has been withdrawn even as infections surge .

At Leaways, Forsyth was reinstated with the promise that the school will provide sick pay for 10 days a year rather than the seven it had been paying. This is a fraction of the days received by most teachers: full pay for 25 working days and half pay for another 25 for teachers in their first year of service, up to 100 at full pay plus 100 at half after four years of service. Any Leaways staff members left with serious health complications in a new wave of COVID-19 will quickly be left destitute.

Educators cannot take forward a unified struggle based on the agenda of the education unions, which have proved their bankruptcy throughout the pandemic. The Socialist Equality Party calls on workers to join the Educators’ Rank-and-File Safety Committee and to read and share its regular newsletter. The rank and file committee is a genuinely democratic organisation of struggle mobilising workers in a united offensive for the right to a safe workplace, against the onslaughts on jobs, pay, terms, conditions and pensions.



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