

UK teachers' pay freeze meets no opposition from unions

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The Conservative government has announced a pay freeze for teachers in England along with that proposed for all public sector workers, excluding the paltry 3 percent offered to some National Health Service (NHS) staff.

The announcement has angered many teachers who will be confronted with a real term loss of income following inflation of over 3 percent for this year alone.

The government has utilised the massive bailout of the financial elite and major corporations during the pandemic as a justification to impose the real term cuts on wages and conditions, insisting on the need for “restraint”. A government spokesman said, “The pause to most public sector workforce pay rises ensures we can get the public finances back onto a sustainable path after unprecedented government spending on the response to Covid-19.”

This is meeting no opposition from the Labour Party or the education unions. While many educators have labelled the announcement as a “slap in the face”, no action is being called by unions that have subordinated all opposition to the terrible impact of the pandemic on the safety and well-being of staff to the need to protect profits. They played the key role in the repeated reopening of unsafe schools, resulting in an explosion of Covid infections in the wider community.

According to the *Times Educational Supplement* (TES), next year's pay freeze will result in a real-terms pay cut for experienced teachers of around 8 percent, taking teacher pay back to levels of 15 years ago. The calculation by the Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS), shows the drop in real-term pay for less experienced teachers is also about 4-5 percent lower than in 2007, just before the global financial crisis.

Luke Sibieta, IFS research fellow, said, “It is astounding that teacher pay levels remain so far below what they were before the financial crisis in 2007.” The

crash precipitated a decade of slash and burn of working conditions and social devastation for the working class internationally through the programme of austerity. The financial impact of the pandemic by the bourgeoisie and its defenders in the corporatist trade unions is meeting the same response.

The pay freeze will further hit teacher recruitment, which has been in crisis for well over a decade. The National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) issued a statement noting that its own survey research “has found that nearly half of school leaders are considering leaving the profession sooner than originally planned.”

NAHT general secretary Paul Whiteman said, “This pay cut risks further eroding leadership supply, and risks prompting an exodus of leaders when the pandemic finally lifts. A slap in the face doesn't begin to describe it.”

The government announced its plans last November after chancellor Rishi Sunak warned in his spending review that public sector pay rises would have to be paused in 2021-22 for all but NHS staff. Nothing was done by the unions to mobilise against it. They were busy imposing the reopening of schools, leading to a catastrophic rise in infections and deaths that necessitated a further lockdown in January.

In an unintended indictment of the unions' role, Geoff Barton, general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, declared, “Following a year in which teachers and leaders have worked flat out on managing a battery of Covid control measures as well as assessing students following the government's decision to cancel public exams, the decision to implement a pay freeze is an absolute insult.”

The unions were the mechanism used to ensure that already overworked teachers worked “flat out” in order to impose the government's deadly agenda. Teachers were vilified and attacked repeatedly by the government and its

lap dogs in the media for their opposition to unsafe schools, denounced as “lazy” and “selfish” for daring to protect themselves and children in their care as schools became a key vector for the transmission of the virus.

The unions appealed to the School Teachers’ Review Body (STRB), which advises the government on salaries, to reject the pay freeze. The STRB responded to these pathetic appeals by lining up with the government and agreeing with the “need for restraint”. Referring to a pay rise last year of up to 5 percent, the STRB claimed that teacher wages had become “more competitive” in recent years. The reality is that this offer was only for some new recruits, to be funded by schools’ own budgets, and then only implemented in 51 percent of cases.

Conscious of the escalation in those leaving the profession, the government utilised the pandemic and handouts to big businesses to implement a recruitment campaign. Although there has been a 23 percent increase in teacher training recruitment in the context of the pandemic, the STRB said that more than a quarter of young teachers (27 percent) quit within three years and raised concerns about teacher wellbeing.

The Department for Education has continued to warn that the increase is expected to be a “short-term gain” for the sector, based on recruitment trajectories from previous recessions.

The department’s report to the STRB notes that there are still “significant gaps remaining in key subjects, despite the uplift in recruitment”. It continues, “The supply context remains challenging, particularly in secondary schools where pupil numbers are projected to grow by 15 percent between 2018 and 2025.”

The government has offered a minimal one off payment of £250 for teachers below £24,000 annual income. This is set to be available only to unqualified teachers as start-up pay is over £25,000 for qualified teachers. Some 6,400 teachers may benefit from it.

With the pay freeze, the government has ditched its 2019 general election manifesto pledge for the salaries of new teachers to rise to £30,000 by 2022-23. In his July 21 “Teachers Update” statement to parliament, Education Secretary Gavin Williamson repeated the government’s position that “The pause ensures we can get the public finances back onto a sustainable path after unprecedented government spending on the response to Covid-19.” Only sometime in the unspecified future, and then with strings attached, will the government supposedly implement a £30,000 start-up salary for new teachers.

Kevin Courtney, joint general secretary of the National

Education Union said, “Teachers and other education staff are key workers—all of whom have contributed hugely to the country’s pandemic response. All education staff deserve a significant pay increase, not another real-terms pay cut.”

That is where the NEU’s protest starts and ends. There is no proposal for a ballot for industrial action of its nearly 450,000 strong membership, nor from any other union, let alone a joint campaign of all educators and public sector workers. Courtney’s “opposition” is more of the hot air he specialises in, with the unions committed to the restructuring demanded by big business.

A decade of underfunding 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.

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. Just £650 million will be shared across all state primary and secondary schools and a £350 million National Tutoring Programme is being set up. This is nothing compared to the hundreds of billions in bailout funds handed to big business.

The pandemic is massively intensifying the attacks of the last decade. The billions handed out by Sunak to big business are being systematically clawed back from the working class through cuts in pay, terms and conditions, and speed ups across the public and private sectors.

In this struggle, teachers require fighting organisations which act independently of the trade unions. Rank-and-file committees should be established in every education setting, 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.



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