

UK teachers fight against attacks on pay, conditions and pensions

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UK teachers face an acceleration of attacks on pay, conditions and pensions. This led to an upsurge of strike activity during the summer term.

Teachers have experienced an academic year like no other. After the reckless reopening of schools in March by Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Conservative government, schools proved to be major vectors for spreading coronavirus. Children as well as adults caught the virus, and some became seriously ill. Children, like adults, can develop Long COVID and the disease has in some cases caused devastating neurological damage.

Though the virus poses a great danger to children's health, governments worldwide have already begun reopening schools and more will do so next month. They do so with the backing of the education unions, so that parents can go to work and profit-making can continue.

When the autumn term begins, educators and parents face a looming health catastrophe as children are herded into classrooms without any protection against the Delta variant. They do so amid an escalating struggle over pay, pensions and victimisations.

In a number of schools in the private sector, ongoing disputes over pay and pensions remain unresolved. At the end of June, teachers at Tring Park School for Performing Arts took part in five days of strike action. Teachers at Southend's Alleyn Court Preparatory School walked out for six days throughout July. The trusts at both schools removed access to the Teachers' Pension Scheme (TPS), and pay was frozen.

These schools are in addition to the 114 which withdrew from the TPS after the government increased the employer's contribution from 16.48 percent to 23.68 percent in September 2019—an increase which also applies to public sector pensions. The contribution

by employees is 9.6 percent. The government is currently consulting with independent schools on a phased withdrawal from the TPS.

Instead of a well-earned summer break, teachers at Alleyn Court Preparatory School were threatened with “fire and rehire” if they did not accept an inferior pension. Staff are waiting to be told whether they have a job in September.

A strike is set to continue into the autumn term as the Alleyn Court Educational Trust refused the demands of the National Education Union (NEU) members.

In the state sector, teachers at Valence Primary school in Dagenham, East London, took part in six days of strike action over three weeks. The teachers are fighting against restructuring, including attacks on working conditions. A precedent was set in 2019 when 50 support staff suffered pay cuts. Falling pupil numbers have significantly reduced the school's budget.

Chair of governors Avril McIntyre said that “the changes would affect 15 staff members out of 46, with some pay cuts and demotions”. Teachers' pay awards for teaching and learning responsibilities, or TLRs (for example, leading a subject), may be scrapped, leading to a further loss of earnings.

Management encouraged support staff to break the strike by covering classes for striking teachers. Teaching assistants have been taking full classes during the stoppage.

In the same London borough, strikers at Oaks Park High School in Redbridge protested the Labour run council's backing school bosses against the victimisation of NEU representative Kieran Mahon. In an indicative ballot, teachers voted to walk out. Mahon was sacked for encouraging staff to use Section 44 of the Health and Safety Act 1996 to work remotely from the safety of home during lockdown.

Mahon is one of many teachers victimised for raising safety issues during the pandemic, and the NEU bureaucracy refuses to lift a finger in their defence.

In other areas of the UK, educators are fighting the implications of school academisation. Academies, usually run as chains, are publicly funded but privately run and able to tear up agreed pay and conditions.

Teachers at Merrill Academy and Lees Brook Community School in Derby took strike action for three days in July. Staff opposed job and pay cuts, implemented during a multi-academy trust takeover. The Archway Learning Trust took over both schools in February.

More than 20 jobs are being culled and dozens of staff face pay cuts. The trust is also ending TLRs. A learning trust spokesman said, “We are now coming to the end of interviews to allocate staff to roles and a number of those affected have secured roles at our other schools in Nottingham.” The strike was suspended for the summer and NEU members will meet again to decide how to proceed in autumn term.

Senior regional NEU officer Nick Raine demonstrated how the unions work to impose the attacks of the employers, explaining, “Our members at Lees Brook and Merrill offered to make significant concessions to Archway Learning Trust to resolve the dispute and avoid further strike action.”

The NEU made appeals to the Labour-run council in Derby to stop supporting the school bosses, which fell on deaf ears.

In July, NEU members at the Co-op Academy in Manchester were about to walk out for five days when at the eleventh hour the strike was called off for “further negotiations”. Teachers wanted to fight against “adverse management practices [that] are affecting teachers’ pay, performance management, workload and working conditions.”

Teachers at the school were denied pay entitlements as part of a performance management pay structure, which stipulates that teachers prove they are worthy of a pay increase. Teachers previously received an annual pay increment for experience. They were “subjected to excessive workload and inappropriate practices on classroom observation and performance management.” This was happening during the increased stress of the pandemic with staff already burnt out.

Like the introduction of academies, performance

management was another concession made by the education unions, accepted based on the fraudulent claim it would aid professional development.

The NASUWT teachers’ union at the Co-op Academy have stated they are “seeking to work with the employer to address the concerns of our members.” Nothing but contempt has been shown by the trust, yet the union will sit down willingly with them at the negotiating table to sell out their members.

The role of the unions in all these disputes has been to keep them divided. The NEU has 430,000 members and the NASUWT has 300,000 across the UK, but they have bent over backwards to accommodate the trusts’ wishes and compromise at every turn, offering nothing but rhetoric and letters of concern.

None of the struggles being fought by educators can be won through these corporatist organizations, which are unions in name only. In the next period, educators face an onslaught on their pay and conditions, as the government attempts to make the working class pay for the soaring profits claimed during the pandemic.

The struggle to protect lives against a disease that can and must be eradicated and the defence of livelihoods are inseparable. The Socialist Equality Party calls on workers and parents to join the Educators’ Rank-and-File Safety Committee to build genuinely democratic organs of struggle which can wage a united offensive against the onslaught on jobs, pensions, pay and conditions, and to save lives not profits.



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