

UK: Teachers strike and parents protest at Co-op Academy in Salford amid rising COVID cases

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Teachers at the Co-op Academy school, Swinton, Salford continued their strike last week, walking out from Tuesday to Thursday. The strike began on September 29 with a two-day walkout.

The school is part of the Co-op Academies Trust. The 30 National Association of Schoolmasters & Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) members are in dispute over “excessive working hours, shorter lunchtimes, and the imposition of unacceptable practices with regard to teaching and learning and teachers’ performance management.”

Parents are backing the teachers, launching a petition signed by 276 against “unfair” and “intimidating” school rules brought in by new management. Each morning children line up and have their bags searched to check they have the correct equipment. Parents complain about short lunch breaks, not enough toilet breaks, and officious footwear rules.

One parent told the *Manchester Evening News* “it has been a relief to see that the teachers see the issues and it’s not just us.”

As the strike began, all pupils apart from those in Year 10 were advised to take a PCR test due to rising COVID cases. The same year groups will resume mask wearing in classrooms, which like other mitigation measures in UK schools were abandoned in line with government guidance when schools reopened in autumn.

WSWS reporters spoke to teachers on the picket line. “The working practices have been changed in school without consultation, affecting the pupils and our ability to care for them,” said one striker. “We have to do extra hours; we are expected to do more than expected CPD [continual professional development]. Mentors cannot carry out pastoral roles. It’s soul destroying.

“It all depends on what the people higher up decide. A

few surveys have gone in but members [of the NASUWT] haven’t been listened to. A few managers know better than 30 teachers!

“There are also issues over pay. Members at some Co-op schools have the lowest salaries in the Manchester [local] authority due to their approach to pay progression. Pay is linked to performance management, hard data targets. It’s really troubling.”

Performance management was introduced into UK schools in 2002 under the then Labour government. The education unions claimed it would enhance professional development, with the caveat that it should not be linked to pay. Performance linked pay was always the aim, however. When school Academies were rolled out the same year, supposedly to replace “failing schools”, rules governing teachers’ pay and conditions were ripped up. Automatic annual increments linked to experience became dependent on teachers fulfilling targets.

Several strikers expressed surprise that the Co-operative Group (Co-op) was such a dictatorial and exploitative employer. Originally founded in 1844, the Co-op promoted itself as an example of benevolent, profit-sharing capitalism. Its business interests are now as diverse as food, e-pharmacy, funeral services, insurance and banking.

Before the summer break, teachers at the Co-op Academy in Manchester planned a five-day stoppage to protest pay cuts, increased workloads and deteriorating working conditions. The NASUWT called off the strikes to enter negotiations.

At the Swinton Academy, “Our members worked really hard during the pandemic,” continued the teacher. “We’ve had the rug pulled under us. Teachers have got a pay freeze.”

Asked how many students were presently absent for

COVID related reasons, the teacher said, “The number of cases don’t get shared with us.”

Teachers were shocked to hear from the WSWs reporters that by then 88 children had died in the UK from COVID, including 11 since the start of term. “I’m sure they’re covering up the figures,” a striker said, “Because that’s what happened to the old folks. They tell us, get a jab and you’ll be alright.”

Another teacher emphasised her main concern was the pupils. “We want to be in there, but someone has to look out for us and our colleagues.”

Without consultation, management moved registration from the morning, when the form teacher carried out pastoral care, to the afternoons. Now after afternoon registration children have catch-up lessons “to fill the gaps because of missed education” during lockdowns.

“As a form teacher from Year 7,” she continued, “You are a child’s only constant”, staying with the same group throughout their school life. “It’s like a family, you have a good relationship with the kids. Before the changes to work practices were imposed, the form teacher would greet the children in her form and register them first thing in the morning and have time for pastoral care. I want to be their first point of contact.

“Children now go straight into lesson one. What if they are late? They need to settle down.” Precious time to deal with emotional or social problems, “setting them up for the day”, has been banished. “I’ve seen the direct impact of the changes in the behaviour of the children.”

Her colleague agreed: “The traditional role of the form teacher is gone, replaced with competition [between forms] over attendance. In this school they’re taking on more children, but they haven’t space to house them,” which is why lunchbreaks are so short. “The parents’ petition references pedantic school rules, and lack of time to eat, and space to eat.

“The very short lunchtimes mean there’s no time for any lunchtime clubs, we’re working on a 20-minute lunch,” said the teacher.

Short lunch breaks and lack of space are another detrimental consequence of the introduction of Academies, bound up with the marketisation of education. Schools compete to attract pupils. Parents choose a school for their child within a certain catchment area, their decision informed by attendance figures, exam results and Ofsted (Schools Inspectorate) reports. As funding depends on pupil numbers, schools are incentivised to cram in as many pupils as possible. At present the Swinton Academy has approximately 970 pupils on roll and is growing. The

Co-op Academies Trust, explained the teacher, is “having a turbo charged expansion.”

The education unions capitulated to the marketisation of education, which began with the 1988 Education Reform Act under Margarete Thatcher’s Conservative government. In the decades since, their collaboration with governments has deepened.

New Education Secretary Nadhim Zahawi pledged recently not to “stand back and let attendance fall... we must do everything we can to keep as many in face-to-face learning as possible.”

The unions agree with the Johnson government’s insistence that all “must live with the virus,” which accepts mass deaths as normal and schools remaining open so parents can work churning out profits for the corporations. The unions oppose the closure of schools, citing the fiction that a few mitigation measures can make them safe.

The virus is ripping through schools. Last week one in 14 secondary school children in England was infected with COVID, up from an estimated one in 20 pupils the previous week, with 270,000 children infected. The Office for National Statistics data shows that the infection rate has more than doubled in two weeks for those in Year 7 to Year 11, from 2.8 percent to 6.9 percent of the total population of that age group. The scale of virus in schools could mean 13,500 children may go on to have Long COVID symptoms

Last month, the National Education Union promised to “do everything we can collectively to ensure that as many young people as possible continue to learn on site”.

NASUWT General Secretary Patrick Roach said, “There is no excuse for the Government to allow further disruption to pupils’ education, when effective measures can be taken immediately in response to the clear and growing evidence of Covid transmission in schools and the wider community.”

We urge all educators, parents and students to sign up for the Educators Newsletter and join and participate in upcoming meetings of the UK Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee.



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