

UK teachers at independent schools set to strike in defence of pensions

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Educators in UK schools are beginning a fightback against attacks on pensions.

Last week, teachers at the Girls Day School Trust (GDST), the largest network of independent (i.e., private) girls' schools in the UK, voted for strike action against the Trust's decision to withdraw from the Teachers' Pensions Scheme (TPS). This would cut the annual amount of pension payments they would receive on retirement by a massive 20 percent on average.

The action is due to commence with a one-day strike on Thursday February 10, followed by a two-day stoppage in the last week of February and three days the first week of March. It would be the first walkout in the GDST's 149-year history.

In an earlier consultative ballot, National Education Union (NEU) members returned a 93 percent majority in favour of strike action on a 93 percent turnout. The actual strike ballot returned 95 percent in favour of action, on an 85 percent turnout. NASUWT is currently balloting its members at three of the group's schools over the same issue.

The overwhelming vote in favour of strike action follows a consultation period in November 2021, during which the GDST pushed for teachers to join an inferior, defined contribution scheme with a 20 percent employer contribution.

Under the TPS scheme, both employer and employees contribute. The contribution by employees is 9.6 percent. In 2019, the government increased the employers' contribution so they would have to pay an amount equivalent to 23.68 percent of teachers' salaries, up from 16.48 percent previously.

The GDST is a group of 23 private schools and two academy schools across England and Wales, including 12 in London and 13 outside. Neither of the academy schools is affected by the proposed pension changes. Academies are publicly funded, though privately run.

The largest group of independent schools in the UK, the GDST employs 4,000 teachers to educate 20,000 girls aged 3-18 a year. Class sizes are approximately a third smaller than those in state schools, and fees are around £5,000 a term. With additional funds raised through donations from alumni and sundry wealthy patrons, they are resource-rich and can offer their pupils a higher standard of education than cash-starved government funded state schools.

It says much about the ruling and affluent middle class that those responsible for educating their sons and daughters, in a private education system which should be abolished, are nevertheless not judged worthy of even a decent pension!

According to the GDST, the increase in employer contributions would cost them £6 million a year which it says it can ill-afford. The Trust, however, has £43.1 million in reserves, and hundreds and millions of pounds in investments.

A statement from the NEU notes, "Financial accounts for the Trust, in the public domain, show Trust finances in good health. There is a healthy annual cash surplus. The Teachers' Pension Scheme, which is a contractual right of GDST teachers, is affordable.

"However, the Trust wish to spend heavily on capital expenditure at the expense to their teachers and leaders." This includes £100 million on capital improvements over the next three years. At the same time, the annual salary of CEO Cheryl Giovannoni is over £270,000.

The teachers employed by the trust feel angry and betrayed, especially after working through the dangerous and difficult conditions of the pandemic. This sentiment is compounded by the fact that the GDST responded to their opposition by threatening them with "fire and rehire."

In an NEU video, one teacher said she would lose 40 percent of her pension in the new scheme, while another said he would lose £14,000 a year. The new pension is

“dependent on the performance of the stock market” and it’s not ring-fenced like the TPS, said another. The choice facing staff is “sign the new contract or look for another job.”

The staff in the video all agreed they would be forced to leave the GDST if the pension proposals go through as they could not afford to stay.

Joint NEU general secretary Mary Bousted has claimed that during the 2011 public sector pensions dispute, the NEU fought to keep teachers in the private sector in the TPS and “we won.” The reality is that the pensions dispute, which had mass support, ended with a betrayal by all the trade unions, which in each sector separately negotiated their own giveaway settlement.

Teachers ended up paying in more and receiving less. Those entering pensionable service after January 1, 2007, must now wait until they are aged 65 before they can claim their full teachers’ pension.

Now the employers are pushing for more concessions from staff. Last year, teachers at Tring Park School for Performing Arts who took part in five days of strike action after being threatened with “fire and rehire” won a temporary guarantee that the school would remain in the TPS

Teachers at Southend’s Alleyn Court Preparatory School walked out for six days throughout July. Educators were threatened with the sack if they didn’t sign new contracts which removed access to the Teachers’ Pension Scheme, and pay was frozen.

Addressing the teachers at GDST, Bousted continued: “You’re not doing this alone, you’re doing this collectively with the weight and authority of 450,000 members of the National Education Union behind you.” But a joint mobilisation of teachers to defeat the attack on pensions is exactly what is being prevented by the union’s isolation of individual disputes.

While over 60 independent schools have been for the moment forced to back down from plans to leave the TPS, another 280 have opted out since the increase in employer contributions.

The NEU, along with the other education unions, have allowed the pensions, pay and conditions of their members to be slashed for years, accepting below inflation pay deals, last year’s pay freeze, and an impossible workload.

During the pandemic, the unions have opposed staff demands for remote learning until the COVID-19 virus is suppressed, insisting schools remain open so that education is not “disrupted”. They facilitated the

government’s plans to use schools as holding pens so that parents could remain at work churning out profits for the corporations. The most recent, very out of date, figures show that 570 school workers have been killed by COVID, and thousands more staff and pupils have had their lives blighted by Long COVID.

To imagine that these organizations will now organise a fight defend pensions, when they will not defend their members’ health and lives, is a pipe dream.

Joint general secretary Kevin Courtney has already appealed to the GDST hoping for an excuse to call off the strike, saying, “We sincerely hope that strikes can be averted. We call on the GDST to withdraw the proposal to leave the Teachers’ Pension Scheme.” The union is worried that significant industrial action could rapidly escape its control, triggering the mass anger that exists among education workers against their treatment over decades, and especially during the pandemic.

In their turn, the GDST urged their partners in the NEU “not to call for strike action before any decisions are made, or any further proposals are put forward.”

Teachers in the GDST, who have voted overwhelmingly for strike action, should reject the rotten leadership of the trade unions and reach out to their fellow educators across the independent and state sector confronting the same issues. Action should be organised through rank-and-file committees set up in each workplace.

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (UK) has worked throughout the pandemic to develop such committees and fight for a policy which puts lives and education before profits. This means a combined struggle for the necessary measures to safeguard children and school workers against COVID-19 and for high-quality, publicly funded education for all. For more information, [click here](#).



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