

UK: Money for the rich, money for war, but none for education

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As the academic year in the UK begins, schools face an existential crisis in funding. School leaders already struggling to balance budgets warn of cuts to the curriculum, staff redundancies and increased class sizes.

According to the Institute of Fiscal Studies, spending per pupil in 2024-25 is expected to be 3 percent lower on average than in 2010. The situation is even worse in post-16 education, with college funding per pupil in 2024-25 at 10 percent below 2010-11 levels, while sixth form funding per pupil will be 23 percent lower.

The funding crisis is exacerbated by inflationary pressures triggered by the government's response to the pandemic, and the NATO war against Russia in Ukraine—in which Britain is playing a major role and financing to the tune of billions of pounds.

Rising energy bills and the recent below-inflation 5 percent pay award for teachers, to be financed out of existing school budgets, mean that schools must lay off staff to make savings. There is already a chronic staff shortage due to excessive work overload and poor pay.

Richard Sheriff is the chief executive officer of the Red Kite Learning Trust of 13 schools in North and West Yorkshire. He told the *Guardian*. “In over 20 years leading schools, I have never before been faced with such a shock to our budgets. We are in the desperate position of having to look at cutting everything from school trips to teaching resources.”

At Passmores Cooperative Learning Community, a trust comprising four schools in Essex, music could be cut from the curriculum, and the price of school meals increased.

A rising number of children arrive at school hungry and cold. According to the Child Poverty Action, 800,000 children who live in poverty do not qualify for free school meals.

Sean Maher, headteacher at Richard Challoner school in Kingston, said, “I’ve been on various WhatsApp groups, and the consensus is there’s no school in the country that’s going to be able to afford these pay rises that have been passed on unfunded.”

Schools have been given a six months energy bills reprieve with the Energy Relief Scheme but still face huge bills immediately after. Bryn Thomas, the head of Wolverley CE Secondary School, told the BBC that without additional funding the school would be forced to operate at a loss after its fixed deal on energy ended in April. “If we’re not protected we’re looking at a trebling of that £125,000 bill, which will mean another £250,000 will come out of the £900,000 that we have to run our school.”

In desperation, school leaders are appealing to parents and parent/teacher associations (PTAs) for donations to plug the gap, further widening the quality of education offered to children in deprived areas compared to rich. For example, a small number of PTAs can raise at least £100,000 a year, while the average raised is £9,000.

A finance director at a small trust (group of schools) said, “I’m going to the PTA AGM in a couple of weeks’ time... Not for specific projects ... just so that we can keep our core services going.” The trust sent a letter to parents asking for a £15-a-month donation.

PTA fundraising, however, has been badly hit by the pandemic. In 2021, PTAs in England, Wales and Northern Ireland were only able to raise a total of £60.8 million, half their usual amount.

The plain fact is that voluntary contributions get nowhere close to bridging the growing deficit.

The Department for Education has forbidden schools restricting their hours to cope with the funding crisis with the usual hypocritical concerns about “children’s education, development, and wellbeing.” The real

concern is that nothing must come in the way of the accumulation of profits, which is why the government reopened schools before the pandemic was suppressed—so parents are free to go to work.

On September 23, Chancellor Kwasi Kwarteng introduced a mini-budget, saying, “For too long in this country, we have indulged in a fight over redistribution. Now, we need to focus on growth, not just how we tax and spend.”

The budget measures to be financed by government borrowing in fact represent an unprecedented redistribution of wealth to the corporations and the richest in society. According to the Resolution Foundation, someone on an annual income of £1 million will be £55,220 better off, while a worker on £20,000 will gain £157, an amount soon to be eaten up by rising inflation.

The budget follows the pandemic bailout in March 2020 in which the corporations received hundreds of billions. Government largesse, fully backed by the Labour Party opposition, knows no limits when it comes to handouts to the big business. The recent subvention to the energy companies, coupled with prime minister Liz Truss’s commitment to spend £157 billion more on the military by 2030, is ballooning government debt.

This will be paid for by increasing the exploitation of the working class and starving essential public services, including education, of funding.

Following the 2008 financial crisis, schools, health and public services suffered massive austerity cuts to pay for the government’s bank bailout. The pandemic revealed the resulting parlous state of essential public services, which will be further eviscerated.

Apart from the decrease in national insurance contributions, which benefits top earners the most anyway, the budget offered not a penny extra to address the education funding crisis.

The education unions continue to confine their response to cuts in education to futile appeals to the government. Geoff Barton, the general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, pleaded that the situation “is really a matter for the government to address—something which it needs to do with a sense of urgency.”

The unions’ aim is to suppress a mass mobilization of their members. They responded to the budget with

criticism in words only. ASCL leader Barton said schools faced “huge extra costs” from national pay awards “for which there is no additional funding, and energy bills, which the government’s support scheme only partially addresses”.

Dr. Mary Bousted, joint general secretary of the National Education Union, said the government was “electing to starve public services of investment and cut public sector pay whilst wasting billions on tax cuts for the wealthy and lifting the cap on bankers’ bonuses... These measures will not provide the economic growth we need, and it is simply unjustified to claim that real-terms pay cuts for public sector workers are needed to keep inflation down.”

Paul Whiteman, general secretary of the NAHT union, called proposed legislation to outlaw strikes “needless and unnecessary... Trade unions are already subject to stringent laws. Government should be focused on resolving the issues that cause dissatisfaction amongst workers rather than removing their ability to object.”

A successful struggle by educators to fight the cuts cannot be taken up by looking to these organisations. The September 4 statement of the Educators Rank-and-File safety Committee, No to another school year of mass infections, deaths, and education cuts, calls on educators and parents to build “local rank-and-file committees in every school, independent of the trade unions.”

It concludes that the “fight against the pandemic and the defence and expansion of state education is inextricably connected to the mobilisation of the entire working class to take political power in Britain and around the world and reorganise economic life on the basis of social need, that is, to replace capitalism with socialism.”

Join the Educators Rank-and-File safety Committee UK today and sign up for our newsletter. The Committee’s Twitter page can be followed [here](#).



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