

Movement to abolish Ofsted watchdog must be linked to fight for fully-funded inflation busting pay rise for UK teachers

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Following the tragic suicide of UK head teacher Ruth Perry in January following an Ofsted inspection, the education unions are calling for the reform of the inspectorate of schools.

Ruth, head teacher at Caversham Primary School in Reading, was just 53 when she took her own life after Ofsted downgraded her school from outstanding to inadequate. Her sister, Julia Waters, said Ruth's death was the "direct result" of the "deeply harmful" inspection and "the pressure put on her by the process and outcome."

Teachers and parents took to social media, blaming the government for her tragic fate. A petition launched by school business manager Rona Metters to the Department for Education to grant an inquiry into the inspection at Ruth's school, Caversham Primary, reached over 232,500 signatures as of this writing.

At its annual conference, the NASUWT union passed a motion calling for Ofsted to be abolished in "its current form". The larger National Education Union (NEU) called for Ofsted to be "replaced with a new system that is supportive, effective and fair", appealing to the government "to work with teachers, leaders and other stakeholders to develop an accountability system which commands the trust and confidence of education staff."

The unions proclaim the injustice of Ofsted only to put forward a radical veneer while they carry on with their main business of selling out their hundreds of thousands of members. NASUWT and the NUT are currently in a pay dispute involving strikes against the Conservative government and are desperately trying to impose a below inflation pay deal.

The government have no intention of responding to appeals by the unions to reform an integral part of their education policies. Neither will the unions pursue the wishes of their members to mobilise action against the inspectorate, with one teacher demanding at NASUWT's conference, "Let's put an end to this peddler of misery. Let's end this reign of terror and abolish Ofsted."

The response of the government to a petition by the education unions launched before Ruth's death calling for a review of Ofsted was a dismissive: "Ofsted inspections are hugely

important in providing assurance on educational standards and safeguarding and prompting improvement."

According to the NEU, "Nearly 40 percent of teachers leave the profession within ten years, citing excessive workload caused by accountability as the main reason." Teachers report working up to a 60-hour week.

Ofsted has contributed to the high level of burn-out suffered by teachers and stress-related illnesses. The mountain of planning and assessment required to satisfy Ofsted, along with oversized classes, has led to a staff retention crisis—disrupting children's education through a reliance on supply teachers.

The NEU, the NASUWT, and the NAHT and ASCL school leaders' unions have happily co-existed with Ofsted since it was established in 1992 by John Major's Conservative government. For over 30 years they heard their members' complaints that Ofsted has inflicted a regime of terror on schools. They have refused to mobilise the hundreds of thousands-strong collective membership in a fight for its abolition.

Ofsted was established as part of a major overhaul to marketise education, including the introduction of the National Curriculum and Local Management of Schools (whereby schools control their own budgets), and strenuous SATS (standardised assessment tests) in primary schools. Labour under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown (1997-2010) extended the "reforms", introducing Academies and Free Schools to end local authority control and run schools as businesses. Academies set their own pay rates, terms and conditions.

The reforms were justified on the grounds of raising standards in education, particularly in areas of poverty and deprivation, measured by test results. This is a nonsense, considering the years of billions of pounds in cutbacks to education since the banking collapse of 2008. While under-resourced teachers in the public sector teach class sizes of around 30 pupils, the rich send their children to private schools with class sizes averaging 15 and boasting a plethora of resources.

The line of Ofsted that poverty and deprivation are no excuse for lower exam results shifts blame from successive

governments' for starving education of funding and impoverishing the working class onto the supposed failure of teachers.

Based on the market model, schools are pitted in competition against each other for pupils depending on their Ofsted performance. Only better-off families could afford to move near schools with better Ofsted ratings, usually in wealthier neighbourhoods where schools are better resourced through parent teacher associations.

Schools judged as inadequate tend to spiral down, with teachers leaving and parents looking to remove their children. A study last year by the Education Policy Institute and UCL Institute of Education, "Stuck Schools", concluded that following a failed Ofsted inspection, "the intake of a school tends to become more disadvantaged and teacher turnover increases, both of which contribute to the difficulty in reversing the negative Ofsted judgement."

Ofsted is bound up with the ruling elite's privatisation agenda—imposed by successive Tory and Labour governments across all sectors to drive up profits—leading to deepening social inequality. In education, most ancillary services such as school meals and staff training have been privatised. Until 2018, many new schools, like hospitals, were built under the Private Finance Initiative (PFI), where private firms built and maintained new schools in return for mortgage-style repayments at taxpayers' expense. An estimated £4.8 billion was paid by schools to PFI operators by 2020, generating an estimated £270 million profits for the companies.

Ofsted is central to the expansion of Academies. Half the pupils in England already attend Academy schools. When a school fails its Ofsted inspection—they are graded outstanding, good, requires improvement or inadequate—it is forced to join a multi-Academy trust (MAT) consisting of two or more academies. The head teacher is retired in disgrace.

Schools Week reported government plans to merge existing Academies or create new MATs in 55 areas, justified on the basis of improving "underperforming" schools where SATs (age 11) and GCSE (age 16) results are lowest. Targeted are some of the most deprived areas of the country—such as Blackpool, Knowsley, Manchester, Tameside, Wirral, Liverpool and Salford, in the north west; Sunderland, Hartlepool and Darlington in the north east, and Bradford, Leeds, Rotherham and Wakefield in Yorkshire.

Ofsted has an ideological mission, tasked with imposing a statutory curriculum which enshrines "British Values" identified as democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect.

In practice this means that when children protest the illegal occupation of Palestine by Israel and the imperialist wars in the Middle East that have killed millions, they are referred to the government's counter-terrorism Prevent programme which is enforced by Ofsted. Anti-imperialist agitation is dubbed "extremism and radicalism", while pro-NATO protests in

support of the war in Ukraine are in defence of "democracy."

That the government's education policies are not driven by enlightened pedagogy is underscored by examining the qualifications of Ofsted head Amanda Spielman.

Ark Schools is one of the largest MATS in England, running 39 schools. It is a subsidiary of multinational charity Ark, established by a group of hedge fund financiers in 2002. Amanda Spielman was a founding member of Ark Schools, set up in 2005, supposedly to close the attainment gap in education between children from affluent backgrounds and those from deprived areas.

After reading Mathematics and Law at Cambridge university, Spielman worked as an accountant. In 2002, she received a master's degree (one year course) in Comparative Education, and from 2011-16 chaired Ofqual, the examination and qualifications regulator. In 2017, she became chief inspector of Ofsted, without ever setting foot in a classroom as a teacher. As she is about to retire, her £165,000 job is being advertised.

Ofsted, which operates at a cost of well over £100 million to the public purse (£134.1 million 2020-21) cannot be reformed and must be abolished. It upholds a system which is not based on providing a well-rounded education and developing future generations with a critical outlook, but producing a docile workforce to be superexploited or sent to war.

During the height of pandemic, the government only closed schools when faced with a mass rebellion of parents and educators who were poised to walk out. With the backing of the education union leadership, schools reopened before the virus was eliminated, at the expense of the lives and long-term health of staff and pupils.

To fully fund education, including a decent pay rise for teaching and support staff, the fight must be taken up by the rank and file, out of the hands of the union bureaucracy.

Contact the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee today. The Committee's Twitter page is here.



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