

Starmer confirms Labour's UK education strategy is warmed-over Thatcherism

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16 July 2023

In a speech at Mid-Kent College, opposition leader Sir Keir Starmer outlined Labour's policies for education in the UK should the party win the next general election.

One of "5 Missions For A Better Britain" first announced in February, Starmer claimed Labour's mission was to "Break down the barriers to opportunity at every stage."

Given on July 6, amid the longest teachers' dispute in UK history—fuelled by decades of underfunding and changes to the curriculum that have squeezed out pedagogy and child-centred learning in favour of targets, testing and punitive inspections—Starmer offered more of the same policies that have gutted education. His speech, both banal and absurd, was a provocation and insult to the teaching profession.

Between 2010–11 and 2019–20 there was a real-terms cut of 8 percent, or £10 billion, in total education spending. In the late 1970s education spending represented 12 percent of total government spending and the largest area of spending. This fell to 10 percent in 2021–22, a historic low.

The cuts to Further Education are even greater. Between 2010–11 and 2019–20, spending per student aged 16–18 decreased by 14 percent in real terms in colleges and 28 percent in school sixth forms.

Underpaid staff work in poorly maintained school buildings in danger of collapse, with an unknown number harbouring deadly asbestos, teaching children in oversized classes with little support for special needs. It is no wonder teachers are leaving in droves, and declining numbers sign up to train as teachers. A prescriptive curriculum, which has undergone constant reforms, and unnecessary paperwork and planning has led to excessive workloads so that many teachers report having to put in a work week of up to 60 hours.

Starmer declared his mission was "To fight—at every stage, for every child—the pernicious idea that background equals destiny. That your circumstances, who you are, where you come from, who you know, might shape your life more than your talent, your effort and your enterprise."

This is just a paraphrase of Thatcher's assertion that "I do not know anyone who got to the top without hard work" and

an echo of Tony Blair's claims when prime minister between 1997 and 2007 that "New Labour" was committed to a "meritocracy". Denying the realities of class society—which determines education outcomes, economic prospects, health and longevity—Starmer cited his own rise from humble beginnings to support this.

He was raised in "a semi-detached house, pebble-dashed ... with Mum, Dad, four kids, four dogs, and a blue Ford Cortina outside". Through his own efforts, and because of a "sense that enterprise, hard-work and imagination would be rewarded in Britain", he managed to rise to the heights, becoming Director of Public Prosecutions (2008-13), and now prime minister in waiting.

Starmer is not being honest. In the first place he was among the generation who benefited from the reforms, not yet destroyed in the 1970s, that were concessions to a militant post-war working class, as well as the needs of capitalism for an expanded middle class.

Secondly, within that framework, as the son of a self-employed and skilled tool-fitter, with a firm registered at Companies House, he was able to access the privileged conditions available to a small section of the upper middle class in many areas long after the widespread turn to comprehensive, mixed ability, education. Starmer's selective Reigate Grammar School in fact became a private school while he was a student, putting him on a privileged track from which over 90 percent of pupils are excluded by circumstances of birth and levels of family income.

In 2023, the working class in the UK and internationally is facing an unprecedented cost of living crisis. Social spending has been slashed to pay for the bailouts of the banks and the major corporations during the pandemic, the bloated wealth of the super-rich, and the war against Russia fought out on the territory of Ukraine. It is estimated that 14.5 million people or 22 percent of the population live in poverty, of which 4.3 million are children.

Starmer may deny the reality of class and the class struggle, but he and his party are firmly rooting for the capitalist class in opposition to the interests of the working

class. An avid supporter of NATO, on the domestic front Starmer denounces strikes and threatens Labour MPs who attend picket lines with disciplinary action.

The rest of his speech consisted of a stream of throwaway pledges—more health visitors, expanding mental health services, stopping the growing number of nurseries closing their doors. But all of this was listed without any reference to increased funding. So much for shattering the “class ceiling”.

According to *Schoolsweek*, in February when a reporter asked Starmer if Labour’s five missions were “just a way of telling the public—sorry, there isn’t any more money,” Starmer’s cynical reply was, “Reform is as important as the money we put in.” He said the same on Saturday in a *Guardian* exclusive interview, urging the “left” to “care more about growth” and ruling out spending “vast sums of money” on public services where “it is reform or bust”.

The next Labour government will be firmly committed to the continued privatisation and marketisation of education, which Blair expanded after the defeat of the conservatives in 1997. It was Blair who introduced school academies (publicly funded, privately run schools), which can set their own pay and conditions for staff, tearing up national agreements.

The reforms Starmer is advocating—“oracy [the ability to express oneself fluently in speech] through a new national curriculum that finally closes the gap between academic and practical vocational skills”, “cracking the code on digital skills” and “high quality apprenticeships”—also echo Thatcher’s insistence that education must be geared to meeting the demands of industry for a skilled but cheap workforce fit to compete in the global economy. There will be no money for making schools safe, training teachers and support staff, ending tuition fees, or raising teachers’ pay. All will be subordinated to profit and war spending.

It was Starmer who enthusiastically led the clamour for the premature ending of lockdown during the pandemic, with the full backing of the education unions, so parents could return to the business of making profits for the corporations. He told then Prime Minister Boris Johnson it was his “moral duty” to reopen schools in September 2020, before the virus was suppressed, at great cost to the long-term health, and in some cases lives, of educators and children.

None of this has stopped the education unions from throwing their support behind the Labour leader, as they work to suppress the current wave of strikes.

One of the most grovelling supporters of Starmer’s speech was Kevin Courtney, Joint General Secretary of the National Education Union (NEU), who wrote of his “mission” on education, “If implemented boldly and funded well, it will repair much of the damage of the last thirteen years.”

Dr Patrick Roach, General Secretary of NASUWT, commented, “It is vital that more than a quarter of a century following Tony Blair’s momentous commitment to education, education, education, that parties at the next general election put our schools and colleges at the top of their priorities for government.”

Paul Whiteman, general secretary at school leaders’ union NAHT, said, “Many of these proposals have the potential to have a positive impact on schools if they are carefully implemented in collaboration with the profession.”

Geoff Barton, General Secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, said, “it is encouraging that Labour appears to recognise how central it [education] should be...”

The union leaders pay lip service to the dire state of education in the UK, but gloss over their own role in overseeing cuts to school funding and doing nothing to mobilise their members to fight back. The education unions are currently trying to ram through a well below inflation 6.5 percent pay deal to end the ongoing teachers’ strikes, despite the membership’s willingness to fight.

The fight for fully funded state education cannot be left in the hands of the union bureaucracy which encourages illusions in a future Labour government. Education workers must seize control of their struggle, democratically electing rank-and-file committees in every workplace. The committees’ first task must be to unify and expand the strikes across all sectors, preparing a counteroffensive against the Tory-Labour policies of war, wage cuts and worsening social services and living conditions.

These committees must link with workers internationally who are engaged in the same battles, above all with teachers and educators across the globe in defence of wages and conditions. We urge teachers to contact the Educators Rank-and-File Committee to begin to build an alternative leadership in the fight to protect and defend state education.



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