

UK teachers walk out at two Greater Manchester schools over impact of rundown state education on pupil behaviour

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Teachers at two primary (nursery to age 11) schools in Greater Manchester, England, are involved in a dispute over working conditions concerning pupil behaviour, which they say constitutes a health and safety issue for staff and children.

The NASUWT—The Teachers’ Union (originally the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers)—called teachers out on strike at Lily Lane Primary School in Moston, Manchester, and Ravensfield Primary School in Dukinfield, Tameside, on January 6–8, again on January 13–15. Three days of strikes are planned for January 20–22.

Jo Ashcroft, the Chief Executive Officer for the Changing Lives in Collaboration (CLIC) Trust, which manages the schools, said they had remained open during the stoppages.

According to the NASUWT website, “pupil-on-teacher and pupil-on-pupil assaults have grown to untenable levels... In some cases, the schools’ culture of violence is causing pupils to be fearful of attending school.”

Teachers complain school leaders “are ignoring teachers’ concerns over the unmet needs of pupils with highly complex special needs”, warning that without “adequate policies for staff and pupils”, staff “remain unsupported to deal with aggressive or threatening behaviour from pupils.”

Former leader of the Fire Brigades Union and now General Secretary of NASUWT, Matt Wrack, referred to the strike as a “declaration of emergency” by the teachers, adding, “Not only are school and trust leaders failing in their basic duty of care, but they have gone as far as to intimidate and punish staff who report concerns.” Teachers voicing their concerns have faced suspension or non-renewal of contracts.

NASUWT National Executive Members for Greater Manchester, Rachel Knight and Jac Casson, described the effect on staff: “Alongside their physical injuries, teachers are suffering high levels of stress and anxiety... All they want is to go to work in a safe environment and... keep their pupils safe. Instead, they are subjected to contempt and negligence from leaders.”

Changing Lives in Collaboration Trust describes itself as a “Cooperative Multi-Academy Trust of four [now five] diverse

primary schools in the North-West of England”. Ravensfield joined the Trust in 2024.

Every teacher, staff member, and child deserves a safe environment—an essential foundation for learning to thrive. However, understanding breakdowns in staff–pupil relationships requires placing them in context. At their root are decades of funding cuts and attacks on public education, often disguised as “reforms” implemented by governments across the political spectrum.

The media reported the strikes with superficial, sensationalised accounts. The BBC’s headline read: “Primary teachers strike over ‘knives and assaults’”. Left at the level of behavioural issues, such commentary serves to demonise young children and parents and obscures the real causes of the problems.

Deprivation is a major barrier to teaching and learning. The Moston and Dukinfield catchment areas for the two schools are marred by high levels of deprivation. Statistics for the Moston ward reveal that 60.2 percent of households suffer deprivation. Child Poverty Action Group figures for last March show 4.5 million children in poverty in the year to April 2024—an increase of 100,000 from the previous year.

Teachers face a gargantuan task. Public spending in education has suffered decades of austerity cuts, such that £4.2 billion is needed immediately to restore spending on schools in England to 2010 levels—according to campaign group Stop School Cuts.

The group reported that 74 percent of state schools had budget cuts since 2010. Schools received £558 less in real terms in per-pupil funding for 2024–25 compared to 2010–11.

Budgets are so tight that many schools are threatening layoffs. Teachers at 20 schools in the Midlands run by the Arthur Terry Learning Partnership trust walked out for two days last week and plan further strikes on January 20–22 and 26–29.

Teachers are expected to teach oversized classes of up to 30 and over, and with inadequate SEND (special educational needs and disabilities) support. Special needs has been starved of funds and is undergoing a major overhaul (with no extra funding) under the Labour government, to the detriment of the

children as well as staff.

Many SEND children do not even have a school place, but the government plans to make the criteria for qualifying for SEND support even more stringent. Many children who need one-to-one support remain undiagnosed because of the shortage of educational psychologists.

Deteriorating conditions at work and an impossible workload have led to a major crisis in teacher recruitment and retention. The pressure on teachers is compounded by the stress of government education inspectorate Ofsted monitoring, which insists on proscriptive teaching to targets and tests and excessive planning in defiance of the science of pedagogy.

A research paper by Gina Sagers, reported in *TES*, argued that the “real drivers of teacher attrition in school settings” stem from failing external services supporting SEND provision and from “inclusion expectations that are impossible to meet.” Lack of special schools, appropriate units, or extra staff in the classroom makes it even harder for teaching staff to cope.

Health and safety is a major issue in education. Teachers have to teach in ill-maintained, crumbling school buildings that pose a danger to life and limb, many with asbestos in situ. The deadline to remove potentially life-threatening reinforced aerated concrete (RAAC) from many schools and colleges—which has already led to structural collapses—has been pushed back to the end of Labour’s term in office in 2029.

A joint education union report in 2024 reported the deaths of 431 teachers under 75 years from mesothelioma between 1980 and 2021. Mesothelioma is a lethal form of lung cancer caused by the inhalation of invisible asbestos fibres. The report estimated that 1,400 teachers and support staff in the UK died from mesothelioma and anticipates 25,200 future student deaths.

During several decades of systemic government underfunding, the education unions—the National Education Union, NASUWT, and the school leaders’ unions ASCL and NAHT—have refused to mobilise their members in unified action in opposition.

Teachers’ pay has fallen in real value by 20 percent since 2010, as the National Education Union (NEU) and NASUWT pushed through substandard pay deals for teachers each year despite teachers consistently voting for strike action.

The next pay award proposed by the teachers’ pay review body is a below-inflation 6.5 percent pay rise spread over three years.

On its website, NASUWT lists the key findings from its Behaviour Survey in schools:

“90% report verbal abuse or violence from pupils; 89% feel the number of pupils exhibiting violent and abusive behaviours has increased; 93% say the number of pupils verbally abusing staff members has increased.”

The closest it gets to the necessity for adequately funded education in its “Pupil Behaviour Statement” is the following—“Early identification and intervention are essential

factors in successful behaviour management. Schools need support and appropriate resources to enable them to respond effectively at an early stage.”

But there is no analysis of the assault on education by successive governments, both Labour and Tory, as this would draw attention to the complicity of the teaching unions. The union makes no attempt, let alone makes any demands, to mobilise its members in unified action along with the other education unions to reverse the cuts.

For all their hand-wringing about health and safety, the education unions led the charge back into the classroom—backed by the then Labour opposition under Keir Starmer and the Tory government—while COVID was still spreading virulently. The virus remains a threat, spreading unchecked with little monitoring, and impacting growing numbers who will sicken and develop Long COVID.

The unions don’t even mention the fact that UV light technology could purify the air to kill all airborne respiratory viruses that plague schools—if only it were installed.

No generation emerges in a vacuum. For the last quarter century, children have grown up in an environment where death and violence are celebrated and normalised in ruling circles. Their developing brains and psyches are bombarded with images of death and destruction—in Gaza, Ukraine, Venezuela. As if this is not going to have an impact, whether in the increase in mental ill-health in children now witnessed or in concerning behaviours!

All these issues, within school and wider socio-economic factors, impact heavily on pupil behaviour. What awaits them under capitalism is growing poverty to pay for increased military spending, conscription, and climate degradation.

The NASUWT has joined the growing voices calling for a ban on under-16s using social media, thus aiding the government’s criminalisation of opposition to its policies. The school climate change protests across the globe in 2018/19 were populated by millions of very young teenagers, informed and organised via social media and determined to fight for a future on this planet.

The future lies with the expropriation of the wealth of the ruling oligarchy internationally, in a struggle to end capitalism for socialism. This struggle, including the fight for adequate funding and the right to health and safety, cannot be left to the trade union bureaucrats. Contact the educators’ rank-and-file committee today to share your experiences, for more information, and to join the fight.



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