Talbot Specialist School teachers strike over workload and safety in Sheffield

Our reporters
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Teachers at Talbot Specialist School in Sheffield have begun six days of strike action against safety and excessive workloads and cuts in staffing levels they say is undermining the safety and well-being of children and staff.

The school has over 200 children and caters for children with profound, multiple and complex learning difficulties, (PMLD) as well as children on the autistic spectrum with complex needs and children with challenging behavioural needs.

The strikes called by the National Education Union (NEU) began on November 5, and two further days of action were taken on November 10/11. Additional walkouts took place November 17-19.

The union's press release stated: "Member concerns include excessive workload and administrative demands, inadequate staffing levels and support, insufficient protected 'planning, preparation and assessment' (PPA) time, and a lack of meaningful consultation over changes to working practices."

The number of industrial action ballots reported by the NEU has tripled from 76 in 2022-23 to 229 in 2024-25. The NEU says the increase is a "consequence of sustained and chronic underfunding of our schools".

The surge in support for strike action among teachers represents a readiness to tackle underfunding in education and ever-increasing workloads. This has hit the SEND (special educational needs and disabilities) sector more sharply as the surge in children identified with SEND has sky-rocketed without the accompanying funding, staffing or resourcing.

The Department for Education 2026 school census data shows there are now more than 1.8 million pupils receiving provision through SEN Support or an Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan—an increase of 91,400 pupils (5.2 percent) compared with data released in 2025.

Since 2016, the number of pupils with EHC plans has more than doubled, while those receiving provision at SEN Support has risen by 33 percent. The pupil population growth in the same period was 4.2 percent.

The Labour government under Keir Starmer announced its White Paper on SEND "reform" in February. It proposes an overhaul of the rights of children with SEND to access education over the next decade. Stripped of the jargon of "inclusion" and "equality for all," the measures will remove the statutory right of hundreds of thousands of children to receive necessary support, slash funding, and offload SEND provision onto cash-strapped schools and exhausted teachers. Andy Burnham is continuing with the policy.

The increased demand for EHCPs has not developed in a vacuum. The criminal policy of placing profit over public health in the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on children. Thousands lost a parent, around 2 million suffer from Long COVID, and mental health is worsening and child poverty rising.

The education unions have repeatedly blocked strike mandates by teachers seeking to defend their conditions and oppose below-inflation pay settlements.

WSWS reporters at the picket line spoke to strikers, raising the need for teachers to expand their action and mount a collective campaign to insist funding for education must be determined on need and not subordinate to funding war and lining the pockets of the rich.

Teachers, names changes to ensure anonymity, commented on the increasing challenges they face in attempting to deliver quality teaching experiences.

Sally said: "What brought me out on strike? Unsafe staffing levels, workloads, well-being for staff and meaningful negotiations with the union.

"SEN schools have been chronically underfunded now

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for over a decade and a half. What that often means is that we don't always have enough staff to be able to keep our students safe. We have students with really high needs and we want to give them the best possible outcome.

"We got to the point where we felt that we had no other option but to come out. It's for our students. It's for their parents and carers that we're doing this.

"A lot of our students need one-to-one or even two-to-one care. You could have a classroom where it may appear you have enough staff, but that doesn't mean that a student who needs that one-to-one or two-to-one is getting it. Or you might have a situation where a student is experiencing quite a difficult moment, and that leaves other students vulnerable if there aren't enough staff in the room to help support them.

"This situation has arisen due to chronic underfunding from the government going back a decade and a half. Then there has been an increase in people's needs. We've seen a lot of our students need more support than maybe they did in the past.

"It is a widespread issue; I think it exists across all schools. We know that class sizes in mainstream schools of 30 students to one teacher is really untenable for giving the time and space any young person needs to do their best."

Grace, who is newer to teaching explained: "The big thing for me is the staffing issue. Whether it's not having enough or not having adequately trained staff. I've been given supply staff who don't have the medical training that they need to be in my class.

"Then it's come down to me to find the right trained people around the school and make that swap and get in touch with SLT, and do that all myself, rather than them.

"It was very different last year. Coming back this year in September, we've come back to TA [teaching assistant] cuts. So, I've considerably less this year in my class compared to last year. It has made a real difference. It means that we can't really do all the things that we that we want to do with the students.

"Quite often I'm left by myself with five students. I've got three TAs, but one has left to support a student, one's left to go to the bathroom with a student, a student's ran out of the room, so someone's gone after them. And then it leaves me alone with five students, whereas, last year, I had an extra member of staff, an extra pair of hands in there.

"One of the things we used to do was go walking in the woods. But I can't now because I've got too many one-to-ones and not enough staff.

"Staffing cuts mean I can't deliver all the lessons I want to; we can't go to all the places that we want to. A lot of the time, lessons must stop to deal with the baseline things first, like toileting, like feeding. So, I'm stopping my lessons to be able to do other jobs that usually TAs would do. Because I don't have the number of TAs I need, I'm taking those roles on myself, which means less teaching can take place."

Mel explained that she has worked at the school for many years in different capacities but now works as a teacher. "We've come out on strike because things have not been going very well at our school.

"We feel that things haven't been very safe. The work environment has been very stressful and toxic for some. We just want to create a better school for everyone.

"We have quite a few students. I don't know the exact number but it's like two to three hundred. We have teachers, but there aren't enough, and we have teaching, assistants as well. So we have different staff-student ratios within classes, but some classes don't seem to get cover. If someone is ill, some classes don't have their correct staffing ratio to meet their needs.

"I think some of the school has been running on the bare legal, minimum, which is just not good enough for our very complex young people. It makes people stressed. We seem to have an increase in people going off with work-related stress, which then has a knock-on effect. If the teacher is off, there is no cover so the students are missing out on education. It's just an all-around, negative effect on everyone's mental health.

"I think these issues are quite widespread. I think at Talbot, things seem to have kind of imploded slightly with a lot of changes in our management and governance, but I think these issues affect all other schools."

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