

## Back to School

Schoolteachers throughout England and Wales are asserting that (like most of the public sector) their pay has not kept pace with the rate of inflation and the rising cost of living for the past several decades. Younger teachers especially indicate that they are considerably worse off than their peers.

Teachers are claiming that their working hours have increased on average from a total of 40 hours per week (including 1 hour of paid lunch per day) to more than 55 hours per week and that they are often unable to take lunches due to chronic lack of staff and the need to supervise pupils in the schoolyards and corridors. Teachers also cite disparities in school funding across the country, with per-pupil spending differing by as much as 44% in recent school years. The schoolteachers assert that the more than £4 billion schools budget must be increased, but even more urgently it must be allocated more equitably across schools in the country on a per-student basis.

The teachers also demand revisions to their contracts, with maximum working hours and overtime thresholds. If their other demands are met however, then they are willing to address this through further negotiation.

Although education is a devolved area, the situation in Wales roughly mirrors that of England. While England and Wales do not have a single trade union representing all schoolteachers, all of the leading trade unions have joined together in respect of this dispute. These include: National Union of Teachers (NUT), National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) and Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL). Combined, they represent over 750,000 teachers in England and Wales.

Schoolteachers have commenced industrial action in the form of working the 35 hours per week expressly required in their contracts and thus refusing to provide pupil supervision during scheduled lunch hours, and cancelling all extracurricular activities. Sporting tournaments are being cancelled up and down the country, school trips have been completely curtailed.

The schoolteachers' unions are now threatening further industrial action in the form of long term walkouts which would entirely shut down primary and secondary education.

Education is currently viewed as a highly significant political priority and a perennial hallmark of government stability. Given the recent chaos characterising the political landscape, a nationwide shutdown of primary and secondary schools is simply not an option. Government representatives have unofficially acknowledged that the disparities in per-pupil spending may not be entirely justified, and that the fund allocations may be adjusted. The prospects for an overall budget increase seem bleak in the current fiscal environment however, meaning that some better-off schools or entire postcodes may suffer if the worst-off are to be improved. The overall priority for the government is to avoid walkouts and shutdowns of the education system, as well as to restore stability by persuading teachers to supervise pupils for sporting and other extracurricular events.

Although the government possesses legislative capacity to prohibit industrial action, this may be perceived negatively as weakness or authoritarianism. As such, the matter must be resolved through this negotiation and not through legislative measures.