



socialistworld.net
committee for a workers' international

Northern Ireland

3,000 classroom assistants poised to take more strike action

A militant struggle against 'power-sharing'
government attacks

Ciaran Mulholland
Socialist Party (CWI Ireland)
Belfast

12 November 2007

Northern Ireland

3,000 classroom assistants poised to take more strike action

A militant struggle against 'power-sharing' government attacks

Ciaran Mulholland, Socialist Party (CWI Ireland), Belfast

12 November 2007

Three thousand classroom assistants in Northern Ireland are locked in a battle with the Education Boards, the Assembly [local power-sharing government], the Executive [government cabinet] and the Education Minister, Caitriona Ruane.

They have already taken ten days of strike action since 26 September, and further action, at the time of writing, looks inevitable.

Classroom assistants provide support for teachers in schools and are employed by the Education and Library Boards. They have endured nearly 13 years of attacks on their pay and conditions, during which time the Education and Library Boards have deliberately used a "job evaluation" process to keep costs down.

When the executive was re-established, the Minister for Education, Caitriona Ruane of Sinn Fein, endorsed a new "offer" to the assistants, in June of this year. She argued that the offer would settle the long-standing demands of the assistants. In fact, the proposal reduces assistants' hourly pay rates by up to 18.5 % through lengthening the working week from which their hourly rate is calculated (from 32.5 hours to 36 hours), and by removing the Special Needs Allowance paid to some classroom assistants. The proposal also ignores the NVQ qualifications which many assistants hold.

Angry members of NIPSA [the main public sector union in N Ireland] rejected the deal and returned a massive 93.4% vote for strike action. The action began with a one day strike on 26 September and has been absolutely solid throughout. Picket lines have been in place in almost every town and village in the North, frequent local demonstrations have been held, and tens of thousands of leaflets have been distributed. On 26 September, over 1,000 striking assistants marched through Belfast city centre, in a militant and determined show of strength. The strike has dominated the local news for months and the assistants enjoy widespread public support.

The initial solid strike forced the minister to make a further offer in late September, which, if accepted, would see classroom assistants receive a one-off average payment of £1100 or £1700, depending on seniority, to accept the June offer. This one-off payment would cover the assistants' losses for 12 months only, leaving them out of pocket in the following years.

NIPSA members unanimously rejected the new offer in a series of mass meetings and voted to continue with strike action. A further three strike days followed on 3, 4, and 5 October and an all-out strike began on 8 October. The strike remained solid throughout with further schools joining the action as the week went by.

There has been a media onslaught against the assistants. The employers have exploited special needs children and their parents in an attempt to whip up public opposition. In one incident, seven buses of special needs children were convoyed to a picket line in an attempt to break it. T&G drivers showed magnificent solidarity by refusing to break the line. Despite these efforts, public support has largely held firm.

The strike was temporarily suspended on 15 October. The ten days of strike action had forced the employers to return to the negotiating table and to accept that the 32.5 hour week, the Special Needs Allowance and recognition of the NVQ Level Three qualification were historic terms and conditions which could only be negotiated away. Until that point, management had refused to accept this and intended to impose pay cuts and downgrading.

Ten days of talks, hosted by the Labour Relations Agency, followed, but management made no attempt to meet the demands of the classroom assistants and the talks broke down on 30 October. At mass meetings on 1 November, NIPSA members once again rejected the September offer and voted to resume action.

The role of other unions

Since the strike ballot result was announced, NIPSA has recruited over 1,000 classroom assistants, bringing its membership up to 3,100. The new members joined because they wanted to join the action. The fighting determination of NIPSA members stands in marked contrast to the

role of the leadership of other unions which represent small minorities of classroom assistants.

Unison claim up to 2500 classroom assistant members, but, in reality, its membership is far short of this figure. Unison's leadership publicly accepted the June deal, but then had to rapidly back-track. They held a consultation with their members during the summer, which returned strong support for action. The consultation ended on 28 August but instead of starting a ballot for industrial action at that time, they have delayed repeatedly.

When NIPSA came under pressure from management to delay or call off the first day of strike action organised for 26 September, Unison asked management to arrange a meeting with the unions on 21 September for so-called 'negotiations'. But at the meeting only one issue was really discussed: NIPSA calling off its action.

Unison joined management's call for NIPSA to cancel the strike. Since then, Unison has twisted this way and that but have done nothing to further the interests of their own members or classroom assistants, in general. As a result, a number of Unison classroom assistants have left and joined NIPSA.

The GMB and T&GWU (Unite) unions, who represent perhaps 150 and 20 classroom assistants respectively, joined Unison's call for NIPSA to cancel the strike in September. Since then, Unite has largely kept its own council, but Eamonn Coy, a GMB official, has played an open and strident strike breaking role. He has publicly

attacking the NIPSA strike action on radio and in the press on a number of occasions. He has lauded the benefits of the September offer and he has claimed that he has single-handedly resolved a thirteen year impasse in three months! The GMB inflate their classroom assistant membership to ludicrous levels. When challenged in a radio debate by a strike organizer, Coy claimed the GMB had 2,500 members, only to back down and claim 1500 members, just minutes later. When further challenged, he then blustered "The exact numbers aren't important". On 1 November, Coy claimed that GMB members had accepted the September offer.

Mark Langhammer of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) made a late entry into the strike breaking field, but he too has earned his place in the labour movement hall of infamy. Langhammer, the Northern Ireland organiser of the Irish Labour Party, went to the press to announce that the deal was the best that could be achieved and that he would be recommending it to his members. Langhammer admits that the ATL has "fewer than" 50 classroom assistant members - how many fewer he didn't say.

The truth is that a number of union officials are open strike breakers and are completely 'onside', as far as management are concerned. The elemental position that workers in struggle should be supported has been abandoned. Without the role of a number of union bureaucrats, the employers would have been forced to make serious concessions by now.

The role of the political parties

The Assembly parties have direct control over the terms and conditions of the assistants but pretend otherwise. Education Minister, Catriona Ruane, in particular, is playing Pontius Pilate, washing her hands of any responsibility for the attacks on the classroom assistants. Ruane claims she sympathises with the assistants and has called on the Boards and the unions to get together and resolve the dispute, while, at the same time, telling the Boards "nothing extra" could be offered to the strikers without her permission.

The main parties not only hold the purse strings in the Assembly, they are also the employers due to seats they hold on the Education and Library Boards. Fifty-six local councillors from the UUP and DUP [main Unionist parties], Sinn Fein, the Alliance Party [liberal unionist party], SDLP [nationalist 'social democratic' party], and the Greens sit as Board members.

Not one of the main parties has been prepared to use their position on the Boards or in the Assembly to back the classroom assistants. On 22 September, MLAs [members of the Assembly] sat on their hands when Dawn Purvis of the PUP [Progressive Unionist Party] moved a motion in favour of granting the demands of the classroom assistants. Only one MLA, Dawn Purvis herself, voted in favour of the motion.

A renewed determined strike can win. It will not be easy, though. Ranged against the assistants are all the main political parties and the bureaucracy of a number of unions. Lined up with the assistants are

the overwhelming majority of the working class and young people.

It is necessary now for NIPSA activists to win over unorganised assistants and those who belong to other unions. NIPSA activists should go to other education workers and ask for their support - there is ample evidence that such support would be forthcoming. The support of parents, other education workers, young people and the wider working class should be mobilised through demonstrations, days of action, street collections and the formation of support groups.

Every aspect of the dispute - negotiations, strike tactics, political initiatives - should fall under the direct democratic control of classroom assistants. Classroom assistants must have all information necessary to take decisions and the democratic structures in place which allow full discussion of the tactics and strategy.

The best organised classroom assistants work for the South-Eastern Board. NIPSA Branch 517, in which Socialist Party members and other lefts play a decisive role, has recruited 79% of local assistants, and involved them in building the strike at every point. General members meetings bring all classroom assistants together to discuss and vote on key developments. Five area strike committees have been organised in the Board area. At the meetings of the committees, reports are given on the latest developments and local activity is decided upon.

As a result of pressure from below, classroom assistants now have input into negotiations. They do not have control over

the negotiations, however, as they are a minority on the negotiating team. A negotiating committee made up of classroom assistants' representatives from the five Boards should be established to control all negotiations.

This is a vital dispute. If the classroom assistants win, it will open the way for more struggles and victories. If they lose, the Assembly parties will be increasingly confident in attacking the working class. It is time for all workers to stand behind the classroom assistants.