

Socialist Party

SUPPORT THE CLASSROOM ASSISTANTS

Which way forward?

Over three thousand classroom assistants are taking strike action in defence of their basic wages and conditions. The Education Boards, the Assembly, the Executive and the Education Minister Caitriona Ruane are behind proposals to reduce assistants' hourly pay rates by up to 18.5 % through lengthening the working week from which the 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.

NIPSA members rejected the proposal in a secret ballot and returned a massive 93.4% vote for strike action. A one-off average payment has been offered in order to entice assistants to accept the proposal. This one-off payment would cover losses for 12 months only. **NIPSA members have overwhelmingly rejected this enticement in a series of mass meetings.**

Strike action was temporarily suspended on October 15th to allow negotiations. Ten days of strike action up to that date 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.



Management made no attempt to meet the demands of the classroom assistants in the talks however and at mass meetings members once again rejected the offer and voted to resume action.

Strike-breakers

Since the strike ballot result was announced NIPSA has recruited over 1000 classroom assistants, bringing its membership up to 3100. 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's leadership publicly accepted the June deal but then had to rapidly backtrack. They held a consultation with their members during the summer which returned strong support for action. The consultation ended on 28th August but instead of starting a ballot for industrial action at that time they have delayed repeatedly. The ATL and GMB unions in particular have not acted to further the interests of the classroom assistants either. Eamonn Coy, a GMB official, has played an open and strident strike breaking role. Officials of other unions, including T&GWU (Unite), have been less strident but have also acted to undermine the strike.

The truth is that a number of union officials are completely outside 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.

Renewed Action Can Win

A renewed determined strike can win. The classroom assistants are supported by the overwhelming majority of working class and young people. NIPSA represents many more assistants than all the other unions put together. **Now ALL classroom assistants should get organised and join the action.** NIPSA activists should strive to win over unorganised assistants and engage with those who belong to other unions to join the picket lines. NIPSA activists should also go to teachers and other education workers and ask for their support. The support of parents, other education workers, young people and the wider working class should be mobilised through demonstrations, pickets, days of action, street collections and the formation of support groups. For the moment members have decided

Management Attack the Socialist Party

There have been a number of attacks on the role of Socialist Party members in the classroom assistants' dispute. Socialist Party members have been heavily involved in this dispute. We have always been open about our involvement, are democratic in our approach and have publicly campaigned to build support for classroom assistants.

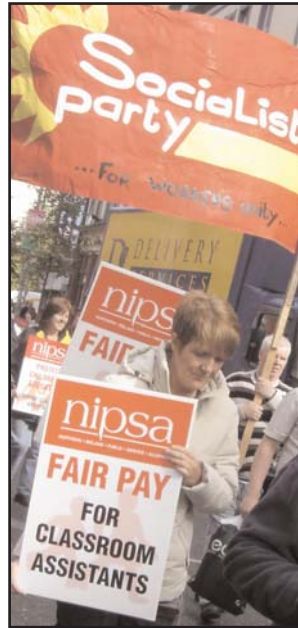
Socialist Party members have over many years strengthened NIPSA classroom assistants position. NIPSA Branch 517, in which Socialist Party members and other left activists play a decisive role, has recruited 79% of local assistants and has involved them in building the strike at every point. General members 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.

This is a model for how the dispute should be run in every area. We reject any attempt to weaken the dispute by targeting Socialist Party members and are prepared to be judged on our record in this struggle.

The Socialist Party campaigns on many issues affecting working class and young people in the communities, workplaces, colleges and schools. We have consistently stood for unity of working class people against attacks from Government & bosses and against sectarianism.

We have been the most active political party to fight the introduction of water charges and the attempt to privatise the water service. In 2003 we initiated the We Won't Pay Campaign to build support for and organise mass non-payment of water charges. Socialist Party members, against the opposition of the right-wing trade union leaders, successfully campaigned for the trade unions to support mass non-payment of water charges.

on a strategy of two days strike action every week between now and Christmas. This will keep the pressure on Caitriona Ruane and the Assembly. The Minister and the Assembly should be directly targeted through protests and pickets. It may be necessary to escalate the action further however if it is to be successful. The question of escalation, including a return to all-out strike action, must be kept on the agenda.



Democratic Control

Every aspect of the dispute should fall under the direct democratic control of classroom assistants. A negotiating committee made up of classroom assistants' representatives from the five Boards which is democratically accountable to classroom assistants should be established to control all negotiations. This is a vital dispute. It is time for all workers to stand behind the classroom assistants.

Politicians Fiddle

The Assembly parties have direct control over the terms and conditions of the assistants but pretend otherwise. The main parties not only hold the purse strings in the Assembly but also are the employers through their seats on the Education and Library Boards. Fifty-six local councillors from the UUP, DUP, SF, the Alliance Party and SDLP sit as Board members, as did the Greens until recently. 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.

Instead of 'lobbying' the right-wing parties in the Assembly, the unions should support the building of a party which represents the interests of workers, the unemployed & youth and challenges the Assembly Executive's agenda of attacks on workers conditions, cuts and privatisation of public services. Such a political challenge would be a great source of strength for all workers involved in struggles.

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