

Rage, rage against the regime

Almost unbelievable. Until you reflect on the shocking record of this government. Then perhaps predictable becomes the right word.

Even without the pandemic, every educator, every parent and every student should be boiling with rage at what this government has done on funding, on pay and on assessment.

We should not forget the pandemic of course, as we go back to school with Covid still looming over us all.

Everyone hopes at least some kind of normality in education returns. Yet the government is taking a huge gamble, one which could easily backfire.

It hopes vaccinations will limit serious illness, hospitalisations and deaths as cases inevitably rise over the coming weeks. Let's hope that's right. But let's prepare to act if it's wrong.

Already there are leaks about possible firebreaks and temporary shutdowns being needed as the autumn progresses.

Certainly the NEU is right to press hard for as much as possible to be done now to limit the spread and impact of Covid in schools - from protecting vulnerable staff to better ventilation and more.

And we need to be ready to act decisively as we have in the past if things start sliding back towards the chaos of the last 18 months.

Yet even without Covid the government's treatment of us and the families and students we serve is shocking.

Funding

The Institute for Fiscal Studies this month reported that by 2019-20 per pupil funding in schools in England was 9 percent lower in real terms than 10 years earlier. That's the price our schools, and students have paid for a decade of Tory rule.

Even with the woefully inadequate increase promised on the back of the pandemic, by 2023 funding per pupil will still be less than it was back in 2009.

The picture is worse due to the way the new funding formula from 2018 penalised the poorest areas. They are a whopping 14% worse off in per pupil funding in real terms since 2009, according to the IFS.

Now the increase to employers' contributions to National Insurance will mean another funding cut to schools- because the government is not funding schools to cover the cost.

We have less money just when everyone knows schools need a massive increase to help provide a proper recovery from the pandemic.

Even the government's "recovery tsar" Kevan Collins resigned earlier this year at the pathetic amount the government was prepared to put up.

The government's plans for school Covid recovery amount to an extra £50 per pupil. This compares with £1600 per pupil extra in the US and £2500 per pupil in the Netherlands. Almost unbelievable- yet par for the course with this regime.



Pay

The same is true on pay. Support staff are being insulted with an effective 2% pay cut.

Inflation, once you include housing costs, is running at almost 4 percent this year.

The government claims it is only 2.5 percent (they obviously don't have to worry about paying rent or a mortgage) but even that would mean already low paid support staff facing a pay cut.

For teachers the pay freeze we have been given this year is another 4% cut in living standards on top of the more than 15% cut in real terms we have suffered in the last 13 years. And the 1.25% extra on our national insurance contributions adds to that cut in our living standards too.

That's our reward for the work and sacrifices educators have made throughout the pandemic and it makes all the government's praise of educators or talk of us as heroes nothing more than hypocritical jabber.

Their money is there to pay us properly and to fund schools properly.

This government has announced this year the biggest ever peacetime increase in military spending- £24 billion for that just £1.5 billion for schools Covid recovery.

That translates as £2700 per pupil extra to be spent on the military but just £50 a head extra on education.

That single fact tells all you need to know about the priorities of Johnson, Sunak and their public school gang.

And if they need more money they could raise almost £70 billion just by putting a tax of 10% wealth tax on those with more than £100 million.

Rage, rage, rage is the only rational response.

Build a fight

The question is how to turn that anger into effective action on funding and pay.

The start surely must be to bang the drum loudly about what has been done and make sure every educator know the facts, the arguments and understands the need to fight.

We need to get that same message out to parents as it is students who will pay the price for an underfunded schools system and badly paid educators.

We are not alone - health workers and most other public sector workers have seen similar pay cuts and many face similar funding cuts.

Pay rallies and meetings pulling all this together in every region over the coming months are needed.

Drilling the argument down into every school with meetings, backed up by videos explaining the argument and backed up by stickers, posters and leaflets to popularise the arguments should be a priority for every activist.

The aim of this campaign must be simple, and must be clear to all.

We want to build the basis to call protests and to call and win ballots for national strike action if we are to have any hope of beating back this government, and protecting our members, our schools and students from the ravages of this regime.

That will not be easy, and will take work and judgement- but the work must start now and the aim of where we want to get to must be clear to all.

The government will have to set out its "parameters" or guidelines for the STRB pay award body for next year in the next few months.

If they plan to continue a pay freeze or an effective further pay cut we should use that to press hard for an immediate pay claim that busts this and not wait for the STRB but drive to see if we could get in a position to call and win ballots.

There are lots of obstacles to overcome. But if what has happened is not enough to fuel an anger that can fire such a campaign what will be? We must get started now.

End this assessment nightmare

Anyone teaching year 11 or 13 in a secondary school will have felt it sharply this month: that sickening mix of fury and sheer sadness standing in front of students asking what they will have to do in terms of assessment next summer and not being able to give any meaningful answer.

It is an outrage that students have been left in this position, and teachers too.

The government looks set to bring back some form GCSE and A Level exams. But not a single detail has been made clear leaving students and teachers in an impossible and unacceptable position.

Work students are told- but how are we to be assessed? Teach and make sure your students succeed- but how are they being assessed? Not a word yet.

It is simply wrong from any moral standpoint to leave young people in this position. Clarity is needed and soon.

And isn't it time to end the nonsense of the whole exam factory system too? Time to end the assessment regime of norm referenced exams where 40% of 16 year olds will fail whatever they do because that's how grades are set with the exam regime?

The NEU is right to campaign alongside others for an end to this and a move to a fairer assessment system- a criteria based one built around properly assessing what students can do not branding them failures in some Calvinistic pre-determination lottery as now.

Make October a Black History Month to remember- as a start

Just when you thought education secretary Gavin Williamson couldn't get any worse- he does just that.

His unbelievable comments on Marcus Rashford and Maro Itoje are either utterly shameful ignorance or the worst kind of racist trope

The racist outrage at the recent England game in Hungary reminds us too that fighting racism is still centre stage.

Let's not forget too the equally sickening racist attacks right here in England on Rashford, Sako and Sancho after the Euros football tournament and Boris Johnson's initial support for those boing England footballers taking the knee.

Anyone doubting the need to continue building on the Black Lives Matter revolt and develop the fight to stand up to racism need look no further for an answer.

That's why we should make sure this October is a black history month like never before in every school. And that's also why we should build in very area the anti racist movement- from supporting Afghan refugees to developing the fight to decolonise the curriculum

Climate emergency demands action

Hurricanes and fires ravaging the US, floods devastating Europe and China- the list of climate crisis driven disasters is growing.

Those in government and at the top of some big corporations talk of acting on climate- but too slow and not enough.

That's why it is right to step up the pressure to act.

Those joining the recent new wave of Extinction Rebellion protests are absolutely right to keep going.

It's why the Big Green Week in September and the Friday for the Future protests are vital and why building the protests around the COP climate talks in Glasgow in November should be top of the agenda.

In schools we should hold meetings, discuss and approach heads to ensure this is reflected, with drop down days, lessons and protests of various types too.

And it is why young people, including school students, deserve full solidarity and support when they march, protest and strike for the climate and the future