

# Where's the teacher?

Classroom chaos looms in the United Kingdom, as the Blair government's deregulation puts teaching assistants in charge. **Steve Packer** reports.

## ATAGLANCE

- In a major shift in education philosophy, the British government has introduced an agreement that allows teaching assistants to take classes
- Other unions signed the agreement, which also offers more positive changes, but the National Union of Teachers is campaigning against it
- The NUT points to a government document stating that the position on school staffing has been "very much deregulated".

**T**he National Union of Teachers (NUT) in the UK is using a range of tactics, conventional and otherwise, to fight new regulations that allow assistants without teaching qualifications to take classes to cover for absent teachers. The regulations, which came into effect last September, represent a change in the Blair government's philosophy which can only undermine the quality of education, says union president Lesley Auger (pictured).

"The government says categorically that it's not to solve the teacher shortage," Auger told the AEU's Federal Conference in January. "They say it's a philosophical position that teaching no longer need be the domain of highly qualified, graduate people."

Teaching assistants must undergo some training before finding themselves with full classroom responsibilities.

"The government has said it won't happen until 2006, because the teaching assistants should be receiving training but haven't yet. However, the regulations say, and the minister has said, that schools can start this process themselves if they think they have the qualified staff."

"And it's happening. In Alden in Salford, which is my authority, the head teacher of the Radcliff School employed two learning assistants to cover classes for absent teachers for up to 14 days. Fourteen days!"

The NUT asked its members at the school not to prepare work for the assistants as part of its campaign "and more than one delegation went to talk to the head teacher", who reduced the maximum time involved to seven days.

The teaching assistants have complained of increased stress under these new arrangements which put them in an impossible position, says Auger. "That's telling, because this is one of the things we've been saying—that teaching assistants often don't have the status to be able to control

children. It's hard enough for teachers, but children know when they've been fobbed off, when they've been babysat."

Giving an ultimatum

Eighteen months ago, the NUT, along with the National Association of Schoolmasters and Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) and the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL), gave the government an ultimatum: if you don't do something about teacher workloads in the next 12 months, we'll take industrial action.

"The government came up with its workforce remodelling agreement to provide 10 per cent non-contact time for all teachers—primary and secondary. Guaranteed, so it couldn't be used to cover for absence."

Twenty-five tasks—anything that was seen as administrative, such as collecting money and bulk photocopying—were to be transferred to support staff. By 2006, teachers would not be expected to cover for absence for more than 38 hours a year.

"And head teachers should be mindful of work-life balance, but that's meaningless because no targets were set for that," says Auger.

To implement the workforce agreement, the government said it would employ four levels of support staff. Under the job description for the fourth and highest level, it says they "would work under an agreed system of supervision and management and could deliver lessons to whole classes alone, manage support staff and plan their own work".

"What does that sound like?" says Auger. "It sounded a lot like teaching to us, so we refused to sign the agreement. The junior minister in charge of the remodelling agenda exhorted all the unions to 'catch the bus' or be left behind."

"We had a look at it and it had bald tyres, dicky steering,

## UK: Testing issues

Opposing separate education centres for the children of asylum seekers and getting rid of standard assessment tests (SATs) are other major issues for the United Kingdom's NUT.

Union president Lesley Auger says there are parallels between Australia and the UK on the issue of refugees and asylum seekers.

"We too are campaigning against government moves to have children of asylum seekers educated in separate detention centres," she says. "Our home secretary is even discussing taking children of asylum seekers away from their parents if they don't keep to their visa requirements."

With almost a generation of children having been subjected



no brakes and was facing the wrong direction. So we had a non-signing ceremony in the building opposite the government offices in London where the signing ceremony was taking place. We invited the press, and they went across the road and made a bit of a nuisance of themselves at the signing ceremony. We were quite pleased about that.

“Since then, the government has refused to speak to our union.”

“Very much deregulated”

Auger says the unions that did sign the agreement contend that higher-level teaching assistants will not be replacing teachers.

“Six weeks ago our government produced the paper you weren’t supposed to see—the paper the Department for Education and Skills put out to the other unions that signed it. It reads: “The legal position on school staffing is that a maintained school must, as before, have a head teacher with qualified teacher status. But, beyond that, the position is very much deregulated. The school need not employ anyone else, other staff need not have qualified teacher status, and staff could be brought in from agencies or come in from secondment.”

“It goes on: ‘Gone are the days when every school had to

to SATs, the consequences of not achieving the required levels have been experienced first-hand in the UK.

“They pit school against school,” says Auger. “Of course, the ones that do well don’t mind having their results published. In my school [in Manchester], in quite a poor authority, we have to struggle all the time to try to meet the targets so we have the required funding and backing from the community.”

SATs have resulted in narrowing the curriculum and in stifling creativity, says Auger. “Children are not doing as much physical education and games as they should, and we have an obesity problem creeping up in our country too. And a lot of the creative subjects—music and dance—are having to be left out of the curriculum because we don’t have the time to do that and meet the targets.”

have a full complement of directly employed, qualified teacher-status teachers. The main proviso is that, where a school does not use support staff to teach, the new Section 133 regulations mean that this person must operate under a system of supervision by a qualified teacher, but that teacher might, of course, be the head.”

The NUT’s campaign includes weekly advertising to make sure parents know what is happening. It is also lobbying local authorities to try to get them to promise to employ only properly qualified teachers for teaching work. Nottingham’s director of education was an early success.

The agreement was signed by five unions, some of which compete with the NUT for members. “We try to talk to them, but they’re not too keen on talking to us. They think they’re in a stronger position,” says Auger.

“But we’re actually getting some of their members coming to us. Locally, there’s a lot of opposition to what their unions are doing.” ■

STEVE PACKER is a freelance writer.

PHILIP MARTIN PHOTOGRAPHY

amnesty international australia  
voices of hope

**STOP VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN**

Are you interested in promoting an understanding of women's human rights in your classroom? Voices of Hope is a national youth arts festival for secondary school students in Australia.

**Stopping Violence Against Women: Everybody's Responsibility**

We are interested in your students' creative responses to this statement in one of three broad categories: Performance, Arts/Multimedia and Literature. Entries close 9th July 2004. There are fantastic prizes to be won, and the opportunity to be involved in your region's September festival finale. Winning entries may be used in AIAs major Stopping Violence Against Women campaign.

For more information and entry details, visit [www.amnesty.org.au](http://www.amnesty.org.au) and follow the links to Voices of Hope, or email [voicesofhope@amnesty.org.au](mailto:voicesofhope@amnesty.org.au).