

News

SEELB head claims strikers not fully involved in negotiations Education chief hits out

BY KATE CHAMBRÉ

k.chambre@newsletter.co.uk

STRIKING classroom assistants came under fire last night after rejecting the latest pay and conditions offer from management and embarking on a second walk-out.

Members of Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA), unlike colleagues in other unions, have begun a three-day strike with the possibility of another next Monday due to a 12-year dispute over pay and conditions.

Under the offer made last Friday, it was proposed by employers that £40 million be distributed to some 7,000 classroom assistants across the Province.

Helen McClenaghan, chief executive of the South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) said yesterday she found it extremely regrettable that NIPSA members had returned to the picket lines.

She said while the other three unions – UNISON, GMB and UNITE (ATGWU) – had been balloting their members on the package put to them last Friday, NIPSA is not fully consulting its members on the latest proposal.

"I greatly regret that NIPSA is not involving its members fully. I believe that if there was a clearer understanding on the part of classroom assistants they would find the offer attractive," Ms McClenaghan said.

"If we can't reach a settlement we can't get it out to those who deserve it and I'm sure want it."

Ms McClenaghan also claimed it had been "difficult to negotiate with NIPSA in the absence of proposals from them".

But last night NIPSA general secretary John Corey strongly rejected Ms McClenaghan's comments.

"NIPSA is involving its members fully in the dispute 93 per cent of our members have voted for strike action," Mr Corey said.

"NIPSA is now consulting fully with all members on the offer tabled by the employers last Friday."

He said NIPSA representatives feel the offer fails "completely to address the key issues that have caused classroom assistants to take strike action".

The key issues he said are "the employers' threat to remove the 32.5 weekly hours, special needs allowance and the recognition of qualifications".

"The reason members are continuing with strike action is because the employers' offer does not address these points," Mr Corey said.

Meanwhile, in relation to the new offer Ms McClenaghan insisted no classroom assistant would be given a pay cut.

"Firstly, all classroom assistants' pay is protected in a range of circumstances both if they remain in their school or if they transfer to similar posts in other schools," she said.

"Secondly, where posts are upgraded postholders will receive back pay to 1995 – and for that £25 million has been set aside."

Thirdly, she said in recognition of proposed changes to historical terms and conditions, boards are prepared to distribute a further £15 million.

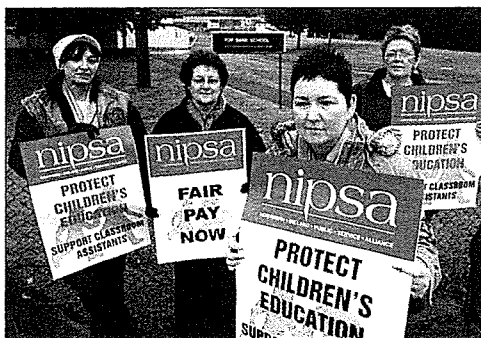
"The employers are also taking an account of an annual increase in the salaries of classroom assistants of £3.5 million per year," Ms McClenaghan said.

She said the offer would mean no loss of pay to any classroom assistant, but instead continuing increases in accordance with their scale.



PAY PROTEST: classroom assistants from Longstone Special School on the picket line

Pictures: Brian Little



CAMPAIGN:

Tor Bank Special School staff, from left, Tina Stevenson, Carol Cinnamon, Alison Duffy and Maureen Keenan in Dundonald yesterday

"For those who are receiving an increase let's say dating back to 1995 – it's a very considerable sum of money," Ms McClenaghan said.

Ms McClenaghan also insisted Job Evaluation – the system used to determine the correct grades – was not a cost-cutting exercise.

"Job Evaluation began in 1995 and has involved thousands of education staff and the basis of it is to ensure that people doing comparable jobs are receiving equitable salaries," she said.

The scales on which the classroom assistants are being placed by agreement with the trade unions, she said, apply to those who work full-time hours of 36 per week.

"When full-time classroom assistants traditionally work 32-and-a-half hours, the factor for calculation of the hourly rate must obviously be 36 otherwise there would be inequality with other full-time staff. And that's the importance of the protection of current salaries," Ms McClenaghan said.

"Classroom assistants have a contractual entitlement to a 32-and-a-half hour week."



"If we can't reach a settlement we can't get it out to those who deserve it and I'm sure want it"

Helen McClenaghan, chief executive of SEELB

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