

GMB

UNION

CEC STATEMENT: SCHOOLS

GMB

UNION

**MAKE
WORK
BETTER**

GMB Congress

Bournemouth 2024

CEC Statement: Schools

Introduction

GMB has been at the forefront of organising school support staff for more than 25 years. Over 100,000 members (a fifth of our membership) work in a school and are predominantly low paid women workers.

Through organising and bringing together school activists, we had got the previous Labour Government to commit to the Schools Support Staff Negotiating Body (SSSNB), only for it to be disbanded by the Coalition government in 2010. Ministers' refusal to recognise the hidden professionalism of support staff has led to more than a decade of low-pay, the growth of exploitative term-time only contracts, and drift in job descriptions.

There will be a historic opportunity this year. The Labour Party have given commitments to reinstate the SSSNB if it wins power at next General Election. Through this body, we will seek to introduce and national terms and conditions, proper training and progression routes, and pay rates that recognise the value of school support staff. GMB – along with the other National Joint Council unions – have fought for support staff since the beginning. This Congress believes that it is essential that the SSSNB is reinstated, with school staff represented by the NJC unions.

The School Support Staff Negotiating Body (SSSNB)

The School Support Staff Negotiating Body will be the body which negotiates terms and conditions in schools in England. This is what GMB has been building for since the Coalition Government disbanded our first iteration. At the time, Michael Gove said that a fair deal for support staff did “not fit well with the Government’s priorities for greater deregulation of the pay and conditions arrangements for the school workforce.” National pay and terms and conditions remained in place for teachers, however.

The laissez faire approach to managing and negotiating the workforce in schools who are not teachers or leaders has meant that low pay has persisted, funding has been tight, and job descriptions have not kept up with reality.

It is imperative that Labour establishes this body if it wins the next General Election. GMB was able to secure this commitment through the National Policy Forum:

'Labour will value and recognise the professionalism of the entire school workforce and address recruitment and retention challenges by reinstating the School Support Staff Negotiating Body. This body will be tasked with establishing a national terms and conditions handbook, training, career progression routes, and fair pay rates for support staff.'

GMB believes that the core work of the SSSNB should include establishing:

- National Standards
- National Job Descriptions
- National Terms & Conditions
- National Pay Scales

Job evaluation schemes have not kept up with the changing roles of school support staff, and we are recognising issues in local authorities around equal pay.

The issue of term time only contracts for school support staff remains important to resolve. These contracts have played a significant role in keeping overall pay low for school support staff. One GMB London survey found that 1 in 3 teaching assistants said they could be forced to rely on food banks.

In 2024 the Low Pay Commission (LPC) reclassified school support staff roles as low-paying occupations. This is a significant and important inclusion which GMB has long campaigned for. Our schools' members have given direct testimony about their pay and working conditions to the LPC this year.

Congress fully supports our members in their demand for fairer contracts. We are committed to a full consultation with school support staff over term-time only contracts, which was a demand in GMB's national pay claim covering England, Wales, and Northern Ireland.

Our members will be at the forefront of campaigning for the design of any new contracts that provides time for training and development and ends the national scandal of poverty pay in our schools.

We also call on the Government to fully fund pay awards for school support staff.

School Support Staff delivering inclusive education

Teaching Assistants – and other support staff – are essential to the delivery of an inclusive education. Schools have become increasingly dependent on our

members' Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) expertise – but this expertise is not recognised or valued by employers.

Most of our classroom-based members work with SEND children, and many also provide English as an Additional Language (EAL) support. Parents recognise that our members are an essential part of an inclusive education: when asked, parents say that more teaching assistants are in their top three priorities, alongside SEND provision and free school meals.

Funding and support for these workers, as well as training, is essential if the professionalism of our members is to be recognised. That's why, in recent years, our members have called for a SEN allowance under NJC terms and conditions, and Congress supports these efforts. They also want their pay and job descriptions to reflect the work they do, which we will also work on through the SSSNB.

Our members tell us that they have concerns over staff shortages and want recognition that schools cannot deliver the inclusive education that all children deserve without increased funding for SEND education.

GMB branches across the country have been campaigning for radical changes to SEND provisions. In Leeds, the School Support Staff Branch is working with parents' groups and campaigning for more coherent job descriptions and highlighting instances where Level 1 teaching assistants have been working above their grades to cover the shortfall in staff at higher grades. Congress expresses its full support for this campaign.

GMB will launch a National SEND campaign, which will learn from local and Regional campaigning on this issue. The fact of the matter is, SEND funding is falling short, and our members across the country need more support. We would look to include parents and SEND campaign groups where appropriate in our campaigning to aid our industrial aims.

High Needs Block Funding in England has increased over the last six years but SEND pupils, and the staff who work with them, are not feeling the benefit. Some private providers charge extortionate fees, and private equity is increasingly profiteering from SEND funding. Local authorities have spent almost half a billion to fight EHCP cases at tribunal, under an adversarial system that isn't working for pupils, families, or support staff. Much greater accountability and wholesale reform are needed as well as an increase in funding.

Staff Shortages

A Freedom of Information exercise was carried out at the beginning of 2024 by GMB to ascertain the level of staff shortages in school support staff roles. From GMB analysis it can be estimated that there was a teaching assistant vacancy rate of 18 per cent in England, and turnover rates are also shockingly high. The National Foundation for Educational Research warned last year that ‘the overwhelming majority of schools’ are ‘struggling to recruit TAs and other support staff. Large numbers of TA and other support staff vacancies remained vacant for more than two months, especially among special schools.’

Outsourcing of School Kitchens and Cleaners

Kitchen staff and cleaners have felt the sharp edge of outsourcing and privatisation in schools.

Since the start of the pandemic and cost of living crisis, the quality of school meals has garnered more attention. Companies such as Chartwells – in which GMB has many members – have been brought under media scrutiny, and Headteachers have been publicly criticising the quality of food and service these for-profit companies provide.

Workers are unable to actually cook the food they want to, due to poor products and cuts to hours. Slips, trips, and falls are caused by rushing to get meals out on time and causing stress. Members are telling us they are working overtime without pay to ensure that they can get the food cooked properly to serve it.

Due to the nature of outsourcing, our members can endure rounds and rounds of TUPE transfers. Workers such as cleaners are often subject to these changes. When unions like GMB are not present to assist in these transfers, workers can miss out on protecting their terms and conditions. It is essential therefore that school kitchen and cleaning staff are part of GMB.

If there is a change in government at this next election, GMB is committed to working to end outsourcing in the public sector. Our members want the Labour Party to include school kitchens as part of the public services that should be in public hands as part of ‘the greatest wave of insourcing for a generation.’

GMB remains committed to campaigning for free school meals, as championed by GMB’s Mary Turner so that our members in kitchens can serve quality food to the children in their care.

Activity Across the Devolved Nations

The vast majority of issues our members face in schools are shared across the devolved nations. Outdated job evaluation schemes, low pay, inconsistencies of job descriptions, deficiencies in SEND funding, and outsourcing are found across the country as a whole. While the SSSNB will be in place for England alone, we will campaign to ensure that conditions are raised across each nation.

Wales

In Wales the Education Workforce Council is seeing its funding being cut by the Welsh Government. This will mean all education staff will have to pay the full registration fee, which is currently subsidised. This is a flat fee of £46 for all education staff – meaning the lowest paid pay the same as the highest. This is unfair, and will affect our members the most. Like the proposed SSSNB in England, members in Wales want a Welsh equivalent. We will be working with the School Support Staff Task and Finish sub group of the Schools Social Partnership Forum to address issues such as pay, deployment, access to training and professional development and standardisation of roles.

Scotland

Members in Scotland have been campaigning to address the increased violence in schools. GMB members in Aberdeen City Council have been the union voice in rallies and consultations on the issue, which is spreading to other local authorities. School members have also been campaigning for job re-evaluations.

Northern Ireland

Our school members in Northern Ireland have endured the consequences of political stalemate and have been part of the widespread public sector action in the last year. The Education Authority has faced enormous budget pressures culminating in 700 SEN pupils not having a school placed confirmed in September 2023. There was also the withdrawal of 'non-essential' services affecting after school and creative programmes, and the holiday hunger payment. While members did receive the £1,900 payment awarded through NJC pay negotiations, they have yet to see the pay and grading review that was promised, which has been a concern for a number of years. Like school members across the country, members in Northern Ireland have not had their jobs evaluated for more than 14 years.

Building on our Organising Strategy, Keeping Focus on Schools

GMB has built a formidable membership base across UK schools through the work of dedicated activists and focused regional organising. This is because GMB prioritises visiting schools, listening to members, and campaigning on issues that mean something to them.

When GMB visits schools, we build our membership. School support staff are willing to join a union, they are engaged with the issues they face at work, and they care about the job that they do. Our reputation in schools is that we turn up, we talk about the issues, and that we want to make genuine progress on making work better.

We will have an updated Schools Recruitment and Organising policy, ready for activists to use. This will provide guidance on organising based on decades of knowledge and experience, as well as our foundational organising principles from GMB@Work.

We have always pushed back against the threats to our members jobs, and we have always seen the value in the work they bring to the schools they work in.

This is a pivotal time for GMB members in schools. The School Support Staff Negotiating Body is one of the most important industrial priorities of our time.

It will be imperative that our activists and members are campaigning and raising awareness around the SSSNB. We will be able to affect so much with a growing and informed schools' membership.

We have a chance to reshape the work of school support staff across the country as a whole, so that it is no longer an afterthought by employers and politicians.

We have always been proud to represent school support staff. This Statement sets out our commitment to better pay, better training, better job security, and better recognition of the valuable work our members do.

We will make work better for school support staff.