

## TEACHERS' STRIKE

SCHOOLS  
OUT

For 10 months now the teachers' dispute has disrupted normal life at most of Britain's 34,000 state schools. JUDITH JUDD, our Education Correspondent, gives a depressing end-of-term report. Photograph by Jane Bown.

THE CAROL service at Ongar comprehensive school in Essex will go ahead this week as usual. It is, however, one of the few traditional activities to survive a traumatic winter term which has transformed this once bustling school into a shadow of its former self.

The pattern of disruption is devastating. Almost all of its dozens of clubs and societies have come to a halt; its busy sporting programme has almost ceased to exist; for nearly a year there have been no parents' evenings nor detailed end-of-term reports.

For the headmaster, John Swallow, the teachers' dispute has become an administrative nightmare. Each day he sends letters to parents telling them exactly when their children will be sent home to them in the next 24 hours.

Each day buses take about 200 of the school's 900 children to their homes—many up to 20 miles away. Later the same day the buses make their rounds again to pick up and return the children to school when the day's industrial action is over.

Sometimes as many as half the children decide that they cannot be bothered to return. Sometimes, if the action is in the first half of the afternoon, Mr Swallow may decide himself that it is not worth the buses going out again: 'Otherwise the children just spend all day riding round the Essex countryside.'

The entire administrative system of the school has been halted by the juggling the dispute causes. 'The buses must be costing the local authority a fortune. What worries me most is that it's the children who lack motivation who end up missing most lessons by not coming back.'

During the last few weeks the dispute's effects on the school have worsened sharply. For the first time last week three examination classes were sent home, two of them for two days

running. The previous week, 'mock' exams were postponed.

The examination boards say, encouragingly, they will take the disruption into account when marking. But how can they, Mr Swallow argues, when all schools are affected differently?

The fate of the children in the exam classes reveals the growing bitterness which is now afflicting Ongar.

Head, parents and pupils are all worried that the school is falling victim to the pressures which are similarly afflicting many of Britain's 34,000 other state schools. And it seems the damage may not be easy to repair, as teachers, parents and children know all too well.

'Some of the divisions will persist for a long time,' says Mr Swallow.

'I want to see the teachers win, but parents are desperately concerned. This is a very caring school, but there are signs that it is cracking at the seams,' says Jill Coward, one of Ongar's most loyal parents.

'It has spoilt the atmosphere here,' says one of the school's pupils, 18-year-old Martin Bird.

The divisions emerging within the schools are the legacy of a 10-month-old dispute which will almost certainly permanently change teachers' views of their traditional responsibilities. Already about three quarters of a million days' teaching have been lost and divisions have hardened between heads and staff, staff and parents, and, most importantly, between teachers and pupils.

But Ongar school is by no means the worst affected.

● In Northamptonshire recently children barricaded themselves in the dining room and hurried abuse at their teachers because they decided to ignore their usual lunchtime supervision duties and leave the



BACK ON THE BUS: Pupils at the Ongar school being ferried home early because of the teachers' dispute. Often it is not worthwhile them going back.

school premises until afternoon classes began.

● In Solihull last week, 350 children were dumped without warning at lunchtime on a headmaster who, staff said, was 'provocative.'

● Children in the first four forms in some north London schools broke up for their Christmas holidays two weeks early after their teachers began to stage a series of 20-minute strikes.

● In Wales, parents are so worried about their excluded children that they are running 'safe houses' for them.

### Most galling

For Ongar and similar schools it is a most galling aspect of the present dispute that, until February, it was pressing ahead with the sort of curriculum development dear to Sir Keith Joseph, the Education Secretary's heart: bringing children closer to the world of work and stretching the abilities of the least able.

There is a work experience programme which allows pupils to see jobs at first hand and that continues. There are lessons on managing money, health education, careers and how to claim supplementary benefit. Drama is a compulsory subject, because the school believes it develops social confidence—a valuable asset in a school-leaver looking for or trying to maintain a job.

Ten years ago, when jobs were plentiful, a delay might not have mattered as much. Now, the need to prepare pupils for employment—or unemployment—is urgent. If the dispute continues, many changes which the Government wants to see in schools, including the introduction of the new GCSE examination, will not come about.

The Ongar school's teachers are aware of this. NUT members on the staff have been in favour of the GCSE from the start and it is one of the ironies

of their dispute that they are now about to sabotage it.

But members of the NUT at Ongar are not enjoying their struggle. The warm feeling of industrial solidarity which sustained the miners in their struggle is noticeably absent. Habits of professionalism die hard. Exam classes which are missed are often made up at other times. Much of the school's good work goes on. Yet the teachers are more convinced than ever that they must continue their action. Their determination may be grim, but it is growing.

Like their headmaster, teachers are concerned about the divisions aggravated by the troubles. Alan Rawel, one of the 26 NUT members among the school's 53 staff, is aware that good relations with parents are at risk.

'We know we are shooting ourselves in the foot to some extent,' he says, 'but a point has to be made and there are a limited number of ways in which we can make it.'

Most parents, despite the persistent inconvenience and potential damage done to their children's education, have been understanding of the teachers' position. A few have not. Letters have just been sent to parents asking them not to make abusive phone calls to the school when their children are sent home. And some angry parents have even gone so far as to oppose the school's campaign to continue its existence: its future is in question because of falling rolls.

Most are torn between sympathy for the teachers and desperate anxiety about their children's future. Mrs Judy Lake, who has a daughter doing O-levels and a son doing A-levels, described herself as 'highly ambivalent.'

'If you asked me whether they should be on strike I should find it very difficult to answer,' she said. 'I am completely in sympathy with their financial problems and

lack of career prospects, but I think they should now say openly that they are prepared to damage children's exam chances, because that is what they are doing.'

The divisions are not only between parents and teachers but are heatedly discussed within the staffroom. What chance is there of these rifts healing when the schools return to normal?

Most of Alan Rawel's colleagues outside the NUT are in the moderate Assistant Masters and Mistresses Association, which has advised its members to apply sanctions but not to strike. Mr Rawel is confident the staffroom will escape the hostilities which follow many industrial disputes. But, though courtesies remain, resentments exist.

John Harrop, senior teacher and AMMA member, says: 'Relationships have been reasonably cordial, but attitudes are hardening. I think the action being taken now is totally wrong because it isn't affecting the right people.' In 25 years he has never known morale so low in teaching. 'All the joy has gone out of it.'

Of all the people affected by

the dispute, the children remain the most resilient and matter-of-fact. They grumble of minor irritations, like not being able to go swimming in the lunch hour, but appear to regard the dispute not as a crisis, more a way of life.

They are as divided on the rights and wrongs of the dispute as their parents are. Whereas the head boy at Ongar, Martin Bird, argues: 'You don't respect a teacher who goes on strike as much as one who puts you first,' the head girl, Susan Davis, says: 'I support the teachers completely. They should put their families first, not their pupils.'

Sixth-formers say that pupils lower down the school have become lethargic and are taking advantage of the dispute. Susan Piper, 16, who did CSEs last year, said: 'I enjoyed it at first, until the exams came along. Then it was annoying, because some people hadn't done any revision.'

Perhaps children are phlegmatic about the dispute because they do not know what they have missed. Professor Ted Wragg, Professor of Education at Exeter University, believes the extent of the damage can

never be assessed. 'So many adults who have a life-long interest in music, drama, sport or electronics have it because they were inspired by a teacher,' he said.

On one question, however, Professor Wragg is certain: the teaching profession, whether it wins or loses, will never be the same again. And surprising unanimity exists about the future. Many doubt that teachers will return to doing dinner duty or will be happy giving up their own time for voluntary activities.

Peter Snape, General Secretary of the Secondary Heads' Association, says: 'The pattern has always been that after every dispute teachers do less, let alone after one as long as this. The hostilities and resentments in schools will take years to go away. Schools are very unhappy places at the moment.'

The Government is offering £1.25 billion over four years if teachers agree to a package including new contracts which would make some voluntary duties compulsory.

John Swallow says conditions of service for school life after the dispute have already been

established by working practices evolved during the dispute. Teachers have now become accustomed to working until lunchtime, taking a break for lunch, working until 4 p.m. and then going home. 'Teachers won't have their free time eroded,' he said.

Ironically, he believes educational standards in the schools have improved since February, because teachers are concentrating solely on teaching. They are less tired because they are not running clubs in their lunch hour or staying for three-hour meetings after school.

Tim Brighouse, Oxfordshire's Chief Education Officer, takes a less pessimistic view. The long-term effects, he says, will vary enormously from school to school. City schools will take much longer to get back to normal. Many teachers will in the end return to their usual round of clubs and societies simply because the personal contact with children which they provide is one of the greatest pleasures of the job.

He says, however, that the return to normality will be slowed if Sir Keith remains as Education Secretary. The dispute is now as much about teachers' pride and esteem—which Sir Keith has injured—as it is about pay.

Mr Brighouse's main concern is not *what* will be left after the dispute but *who*. Good teachers are beginning to leave the profession at an alarming rate. In the first eight months of this year, 30 out of 120 staff left one of Oxfordshire's most famous comprehensive schools. Twenty of them left teaching in mid-career. And a further six are expected to join them at Christmas.

At all levels of teaching the story is the same. Increasing numbers of heads are seeking early retirement and applications for postgraduate certificate of education (PGCE) courses are down by 26 per cent.

Both Wragg and Brighouse report increased numbers of PGCE students giving up courses without completing them, often after they have talked to teachers in schools. Sir Keith's market forces, says Brighouse, are at work with a vengeance.

David Hart, General Secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers, points out that schools have now suffered industrial action in three out of the last four years, a record which would be considered almost terminally crippling in an industrial concern. He adds: 'If we don't get a settlement of this dispute soon, by next summer we shall see the beginning of the break-up of the education service as we know it.'