Thousands of independent sector staff took part in the national day of action on 30 November to protect their pensions. From every part of the country, and every type of school, independent sector staff joined thousands of their public sector colleagues on 30 November in the biggest strike for a generation. But why did they feel so strongly?

David Wiles’ placard summed up the thoughts of many who had joined demonstrations to protest against the government’s proposed pension changes: ‘On strike, with regret’.

“Our members are very well informed, and they have real concerns – particularly about the increased contributions, and working on so late into life,” said the religion and philosophy teacher from Berkhamsted School.

“There's a strong feeling among members,” continued David. “We think the proposals to exclude independent sector teachers from the Teachers’ Pension Scheme [TPS] are mad. Our governors are really worried about it because they’d have to find another scheme, and we’re a large school. They would have to put fees up to do it, and there’s a limit to how much you can do that, especially in a recession.”

“Lots of teachers will say, 'I'm off back to the state'”, said Brian Metcalfe of Dame Allan’s School in Newcastle. “And some of the schools will just shrivel. It’s not going to be easy for them.”

Maths teacher Caitlin Homes of Queen’s College London sported her own placard on one of the many day of action marches. “These changes are unfair and unnecessary. There’s been no proper evaluation and, until they do that, I will not be convinced,” she said.

Lesley Larkum of Dulwich College agreed: “That’s the question they’re refusing to answer. The actuarial reports of 2009 said the TPS was sustainable, and there’s been no revaluation since then.”

John Richardson, ATL’s national official for independent schools, said it had been a very difficult decision for independent sector members to strike to protect their pensions.

“We know it wasn’t easy for them. But their courageous and unprecedented stance was important to clearly show to the government the strength of opposition to its plans, so I congratulate them,” he said.

“Our members in independent schools faced greater challenges in taking strike action, based on their additional responsibilities for boarders and employer pressure arising from concerns about parental reaction. And while it was not our specific intention, there were a number of independent schools closed and others partially closed,” he added.

Mr Richardson also praised independent sector members who showed their support in other ways – for example by wearing yellow, writing to their MPs, lobbying parents, not covering for striking colleagues, or donating a day’s pay to the ATL trust fund or other charities.

Many members taking action expressed their worries about the effects of the pension changes on recruitment. “I’m marching for my younger colleagues,” said self-professed ‘chalkface teacher’ Ben Shepherd, also of Berkhamsted.

“These changes mean new teachers won’t want to come in later. Someone’s got to step up and say something. Young teachers will be paying 9% graduate tax, they’ll be paying 9% pension contribution, rents are appalling – they just won’t have anything,” he said. “We need new people coming into teaching to help UK Ltd.”

Summing up the day, Mr Richardson emphasised how the action taken had bolstered the hand of ATL’s negotiators: “By acting collectively, individual members will make a real and direct difference on the terms and conditions of all teachers. By taking action, you have made a difference.”
Busy conference sets the pace

The ATL independent schools conference, which took place in London on 12 November 2011, was a great success – featuring the pay survey, pensions discussions and a visionary keynote speaker in Dr Anthony Seldon.

Top of the agenda was a report from ATL general secretary Dr Mary Bousted on the latest pensions talks with the government – direct from the negotiating table.

The conference also saw presentation of the findings of the 2011 independent sector pay and conditions survey, while the revised edition of ATL’s work-life balance toolkit for teachers working in the independent sector was also unveiled.

Seminar discussion groups gave delegates the chance to discuss with colleagues:

• pensions campaigning at school level
• using the work-life balance toolkit to address workload issues
• the benefits of staff involvement in decision-making through trade union recognition (for this session, we welcomed Margie Burnett Ward, head of Wycliffe College, Gloucestershire).

Mary Bousted spoke about what is, without doubt, one of the most momentous years in the history of ATL. For the first time in our 127-year history, we held a national strike. Even more significantly for the independent sector, it was the first national strike in 1,400 years – since the foundation of King’s School, Canterbury in AD 597.

The general secretary commended members on their courageous stance – acknowledging that it had been a very difficult decision for many, but was nevertheless appropriate and proportionate to the threat of the government’s pension proposals.

The strike on 30 June was a great success in raising the profile of the pensions issue, as well as promoting organisation and unity. In addition, the parliamentary lobby on 26 October was the largest such event in many years, according to staff at the House of Commons.

As a direct consequence, the government has finally made concessions.

Mary welcomed these concessions as significant, but insufficient. ATL believes that if members maintain their strong stance, we can achieve greater concessions, e.g. keeping independent sector members in the TPS.

Keynote speaker Dr Anthony Seldon, master of Wellington College, Tony Blair’s biographer, and promoter of lessons on happiness, spoke on his vision for education and unions in the 21st century.

He characterised the late 20th century model as government directed, hierarchical, exam-led and driven by tension between government and unions.

In contrast, he saw the early 21st century model as autonomous schools, and consensual, holistic education, with the emergence of a collaborative approach between government and trade unions.

Disagreeing with ATL’s concerns that academies are not in the general interests of all pupils, he endorsed the government’s promotion of them, predicting that all schools will be academies within 10 years.

Addressing another area of great concern for ATL, he predicted that the academy system will lead to the demise of the local authority.

Dr Seldon added that he believed education was currently in a ‘bipolar phase’ – with the government’s tight control of issues such as the national curriculum and league tables counteracting the trend towards increased autonomy.

His view of the new ‘education-driven’ model chimed with delegates. In future, teachers will not be exam technicians but educationalists, providing a holistic education to enable pupils to cope with the demands of life.

Dr Seldon also recognised the important contribution made by trade unions now and in the future. Trade unions had an important role to play, working in cooperation with the government, he said.

ATL president Alice Robinson presented the headlines of ATL’s 2011 independent sector pay and conditions survey.

The president told members that, due to the tremendous engagement of members, with over 1,600 taking part in it, the survey provided an authoritative snapshot of the current state of the sector.

The survey showed that, while some schools continue to prosper, the recession has squeezed resources, jobs and wage increases for the third year running. Over one in three teachers and 40% of support staff did not receive a cost of living increase.

You can read more about the 2011 pay and conditions survey on page 3.
The ATL independent sector pay and conditions survey, unveiled at November’s independent sector conference, received a tremendous response, with over 1,600 members taking part.

The issue of the year is, of course, pensions. Most significant was the government’s proposal to exclude teachers in the independent sector from the Teachers’ Pension Scheme (TPS).

Previous ATL surveys have found that around nine out of ten teachers in the independent sector are in the TPS; so how important is the scheme to them?

Half the survey respondents said the TPS was crucial to their deciding whether or not to take a job. Many simply wouldn’t consider a school not in the scheme. This could mean a significant reduction in the pool of teachers independent schools recruit from.

If independent sector teachers were excluded from the TPS, 28% of respondents said they would consider leaving teaching, while 22% would think about moving to the state sector.

ATL does not believe that the government has fully considered the consequences for education of its plan to reduce the deficit by cutting teachers’ pensions. ATL has the authority, the voice and collective strength to challenge the government on the unintended consequences of its ill-thought-out plans.

While the government’s detrimental proposals to the Local Government Pension Scheme (LGPS) are equally concerning for ATL, membership of the scheme is much lower in the independent sector. Only 10% of ATL’s independent support staff members are in the LGPS.

More generally, the ATL pay survey provides a snapshot of the sector and how it is faring in the economic downturn.

This year’s findings are consistent with the previous couple of years: that the downturn continues to bite, but the effects are not the same for everyone, and indeed some schools are flourishing.

The balance between members reporting pupil numbers has shifted to the positive, with 37% of members reporting more, compared to 27% reporting less.

News on wages is less positive. The survey records suppressed wage increases, with the majority of cost of living increases below the rate of inflation. For a significant minority, the chill has become a freeze: 36% of teachers and 40% of support staff received no cost of living increase whatsoever.

Respondents report fee increases noticeably higher than wage increases, even where there has been an increase in pupil numbers. And this is not just because schools need the money to pay higher costs elsewhere. Members tell us that schools are using the money saved in wages to build up their reserves, while others continue to indulge in a ‘facilities arms race’, to have the biggest and the best.

But employers would be wise to remember that their most important asset is their staff. As one teacher from Edinburgh said: “Despite working with more pupils and increased administration, we have had no increase. I have never known such discontent among staff in Scotland.”

Long hours continue to be the norm, and here too the downturn can be felt – 65% of teachers said that, during term time, they work over the 48-hour maximum recommended by the European Union Working Time Directive.

One school leader said: “Financial constraints meant that when a member of the leadership team left, they were not replaced – and we are all doing extra work to cover it. Very long hours have now become almost impossible hours.”

Dr Mary Bousted, ATL general secretary, said: “The majority of staff in independent schools are feeling the full pain of a pay freeze or a well-below inflation increase. But despite this, many are being expected to work longer hours and take on more duties. While it is understandable that schools need to keep their costs down in the current economic climate, it is not acceptable for any to use it as an excuse to exploit their staff. We will vigorously fight to defend members’ interests in any schools where we find out this is happening.”

The survey was carried out in October 2011, with the results announced at the ATL independent schools conference. For full details of the survey, see www.atl.org.uk/policy-and-campaigns/debate/recent-surveys.asp.
The safety of school trips was discussed by ATL’s Independent and Private Sector Advisory Group (IPSAG), following two high-profile incidents involving independent schools.

One case concerned the death of a pupil in Devon, where the coroner was critical about the precautions taken, and the level of training and supervision. The second case involved a very serious injury to a teacher on a school trip abroad.

IPSAG felt that school trips were integral to the learning experience. But while they inevitably involved some element of risk, it was essential for that risk to be managed as best as possible. Pupils, parents and staff must have every confidence that robust checks and risk assessments have been carried out.

The issue had also been debated at ATL’s Annual Conference, earlier in the year. Delegates there reconfirmed ATL’s support and encouragement for independent schools to engage their students in off-site visits and trips, while calling on employers to ensure that necessary and proper arrangements are in place to ensure such activities are carried out as safely as possible.

From January 2012, responsibility for inspecting the welfare aspect in Independent School Council Association boarding schools will transfer from Ofsted to the Independent Schools Inspectorate.

ATL has updated its unique resource to help members tackle excessive workload. ATL’s Guide to Work-life Balance for Teachers in Independent Schools is designed to provide practical resources to help you to take workload-related issues and do something constructive about them.

The toolkit includes a booklet, surveys, poster and reminder stickers, and will help you work collectively with other ATL members and colleagues and management to find solutions that suit you and your school.

Members can view the toolkit on the website and order it for free from: www.atl.org.uk/worklifebalanceindependent.