

# Left- Horizons

## Academies: Labour must re-instate LEAs

**The annual conferences of the two biggest teaching unions, the National Education Union and the National Association of Schoolmasters/Union of Women Teachers, are taking place this week, one in Liverpool and the other in Belfast a few days later. Without a doubt the one issue that is uppermost in the minds of delegates, as it is for rank and file teachers, is the ever-increasing workload and the intolerable stresses that it places upon teachers.**

**Teachers are underpaid and their take-home pay has been reduced by inflation and deductions by something like a fifth since the Tories came into office in 2010. That is bad enough, and it is something the teaching unions will need to address. But nothing exercises the hearts and minds of teachers on the chalk face more than the burden of work that is sucking all the joy and fulfilment out of the profession and turning it into a never-ending treadmill. For many teachers now, it is a case of "whatever you do, it isn't enough".**

### **Survey shows unsustainable workloads**

Where teaching and learning was linked in the past to the so-called 'three Rs', it is now associated with the 'three Ts' – Tables, Targets and Testing. There is no longer an emphasis on genuine pupil-centred learning; instead, it is on number-crunching and data-driven initiatives, where the numbers and data are questionable at best, and useless at worst. It is hardly surprising that there is a growing shortage of teaching staff, because expensive older teachers are being forced out and younger, cheaper, teachers are coming to the conclusion that this is not the profession for them.

A recent survey by the National Education Union, of over 8000 teachers, showed how the "culture of fear" in many schools is

driving young teachers away. One teacher reporting on the huge workloads and the obsessive accountability regimes, complaining that "working 70 hours a week for many years has meant my health and family life have suffered...I am getting out before the job kills me." Another respondent said: "My job is no longer about children. It's about a 60-hour week with pressure to push children's data through."

More than half of those responding to the survey said that their work-life balance had got worse in the past year, with one teacher saying: "With a young family, and despite working part-time, I have come to realise that a job in education is not conducive to family life." The survey showed that of those who had been in the profession for between two and five years, more than a quarter were planning to leave.

### **Academies started under the Blair New Labour government**

Behind the incessant drive to increase workload has been the academisation of education. Academies were started, let us recall, by the New Labour government of Tony Blair, when Labour Education ministers, including David Blunkett, argued that local education authorities were no longer the best means of organising schools. Today, this is something the right-wing of the Labour Party want us to forget.

Since that time, the overwhelming majority of local authority secondary schools are now academies, most of which organise themselves in multi-academy chains, or 'trusts'. Primary schools are now catching up fast. Although the government has nominally dropped its previously-declared policy of forcing all state schools to academise, in practice it is using Ofsted and pliant local authorities to do just that. In some areas there have been very successful campaigns, involving local Labour activists, union members and local parents to stop conversions being pushed through, but these are the exception rather than the rule.

Where academies have been established, they have actively begun chipping away at the conditions of employment of teachers. Not only have they often withheld the meagre wage increases, but they have ramped up performance-related pay targets and piled on the workloads.

Teachers in one East London academy recently found that the management had slipped through changes to sick pay and

maternity benefit, without any consultation, so that payment for even a few days illness was at the head teacher's "discretion". Like so many aspects of school management nowadays, it was a recipe for intimidation, bullying and favouritism. When the local school NEU group took up this issue and threatened a strike, the school management quickly caved in and reverted to previous conditions. But once again, this is an exception and in many cases academy and trust managers actively look for ways around established conditions of employment for teachers.

## **Academies real purpose is to fragment education and teachers' industrial power**

The aim of academisation, dressed up as "improving attainment", was in fact to fragment the primary and education sectors to promote an internal 'market' and open education to profit-making organisations. Along with the abolition of national standards of teachers' pay, this was designed to undermine the workplace solidarity and industrial strength of the teaching unions and, at least in terms of national action, it has been successful. It has meant that union leaderships are now hesitant about any national pay struggles, with the result that teachers' relative pay has been driven further down. Terms and conditions of employment, although still (in most schools) *notionally* based on national agreements, are being further nibbled away by academy chains.

As educationalists have argued for decades, in fact, since New Labour first introduced academies, there is not the slightest evidence that they do anything to improve learning and attainment of pupils. What they do very well is to remove all accountability from the local community. A typical local authority school would have had elected representatives on its governing body from teachers, parents and the local council. Although far from perfect, these old governing bodies at least reflected and were accountable to the local people served by a school. Academies, on the other hand, are run by self-electing and self-serving 'trusts', in reality *cliques*, accountable only to the Secretary of State for Education. How many parents or teachers have the remotest idea who governs the multi-academy trust that runs their local school, or who appointed them? Answer – none.

The development of academies and particularly large, multi-school academy chains – some of them larger than typical local authorities, with dozens of schools – has opened education up as never before to profiteering and corruption. It is typical of a large secondary academy that one of the first things the governing trust does is jack up the salary of the head teacher. Some head teachers are paid astronomical salaries.

## **Panorama dishes the dirt on academies**

A recent BBC *Panorama* programme actually investigated two academies mired in scandal.

One of these, the Aspire Academy, teaches children who have been excluded from mainstream schools. According to *Panorama*, the school received final notice bills for gas, electricity and other essentials and it later emerged that the trust to which it belonged was bust and had to be bailed out by the Government. One of the reasons for the debt was the high salaries of its school management team. The Chief Executive received a salary package of £220,000 annually. It also emerged that the academy was claiming that their deficit was £700,000, when it was in reality £2-4million. Despite this, the Chief

Executive Officer remains in post! Next up was the Silver Birch Academy, whose boss was on a salary of £250,000. Many of her family members, it was revealed, were employed in senior positions. She had a caretaker removed from a property, then spent £99,000 on renovations, after which her daughter moved in and lived rent-free.

But this TV programme only scraped the surface. The Harris Federation of schools, which has 47 schools in its orbit, has no fewer than ten staff members with salaries over £150,000. The total remuneration of its Chief Executive, including a lavish pension arrangement, is around half a million pounds. In January, the Parliamentary Public Accounts committee published a report *Academy Accounts and performance*, which was described by NEU joint general secretary, Kevin Courtney, as "absolutely damning." The report described the misuse of public money through excessive salaries, payment through third-party transactions, and the use of arms-length subsidiary companies with dubious links to trust members.

The academisation process is nothing less than the legalised plunder of local community resources. State schools represent the accumulated assets of local councils, built up painstakingly and with the investment of capital over many years. Many state schools, particularly those outside the inner cities, sit on large amounts of valuable land. When a school become an academy, all these valuable assets are stripped away from the local community, without any question or consultation and with no mechanism in law for their return to local community ownership. Labour must address the ownership, management and governance of its primary and secondary schools as the **central element** of its educational strategy.

## **Labour must commit to restoring local education authorities**

It was good that Jeremy Corbyn, addressing the annual conference of the NEU, gave a commitment to abolish SAT tests at age 7 and 11. But it was disappointing that he didn't also take what would have been a golden opportunity to commit an incoming Labour government to restoring local education authorities to their previous position. All local schools must be accountable to the local communities they serve and their resources must be managed and organised in the most rational way.

Labour must become the champion of primary and secondary education and the champion of all of those who work in these sectors. Labour needs to give solid commitments on the big issues that matter:

- Restoration of education cuts since 2010
- Restoration of teachers and education workers wages, to at least the equivalent of 2010 levels
- Restoration of national pay bargaining
- Restoration of local education authorities responsible to local communities
- Abolition of separate categories of schools: academies, 'free' schools and the abolition of private schools and their incorporation into local authority education services.

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