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Teachers on Strike: a struggle for the future of teaching?

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ABSTRACT Teachers in England and Wales are involved in the largest campaign of industrial action since the mid-1980s. At the heart of their grievances are government plans to abolish a national framework for teachers' pay and the removal of important safeguards relating to working conditions. Wider questions of workload and pensions are also involved. This article argues that the changes to teachers' pay and working conditions cannot be divorced from the wider objective of establishing a largely privatised system of state-subsidised schooling. Such a goal is based on a much-changed vision of teaching, which in turns assumes a low-cost, flexible and fragmented workforce. The article seeks to link the changes proposed to teachers' pay and conditions to wider changes in the nature of teaching as work and the future of teaching as a profession. It argues that the teachers' pay dispute opens up important possibilities to interrupt the trajectory of current policy and to create spaces to present alternative visions of the future of teaching and what a democratic and public education system might look like.

Introduction

At the start of the academic year the two largest teachers' unions in England and Wales, the National Union of Teachers (NUT) and the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT), were already involved in a campaign of industrial action. This is the largest campaign of industrial action, including strike action, by organised teachers in England and Wales since the industrial action of the mid-1980s. It represents the most significant example of opposition to elements of coalition government education policy since its election in 2010.

This is high-risk action by the teacher unions. This is because there is clear evidence that the government has prepared and mobilised for this dispute. As early as December 2012, journalists were being briefed that the Department

for Education (DfE) was on a 'war footing' for a confrontation with teacher unions (Grimston & Griffiths, 2012). Indeed, I have personal knowledge that DfE preparations for a dispute were under way well before this. It is possible to make the case that the government has not only prepared for this dispute, but has provoked it. The stakes are high.

In this article I want to set out the issues over which teachers are in dispute, and around which their action is focused. These are issues of workload, pay and pensions, but at the heart of the conflict is the effective dismantling of a national framework of teachers' pay and conditions of service. On their own, the changes currently being implemented by government represent an attack on teachers' entitlements on an unprecedented scale. However, I want to argue that the changes being imposed are pivotal to the government's wider objective of reconfiguring public education in England as a largely privatised system. Central to achieving this objective is the creation of a low-cost, flexible and fragmented workforce without the organisational capacity to challenge dominant policy agendas.

The article discusses the industrial action currently being undertaken by teacher unions and argues the case for connecting an essentially economic dispute about workload, pay and pensions to a much wider set of questions about the future of teaching and the role and future of public education.

Identifying the Issues: changes to teachers' pay and conditions

Despite incremental change over a number of years, school teachers in England and Wales have largely worked within a nationally formulated framework of pay and conditions of service. Until 1987 pay was the outcome of a collective bargaining process, but since that time it has been replaced by a pay review body arrangement in which unions only have rights to be consulted. Conditions of service are, and have been, the product of more complex processes, with review body recommendations, social partnership discussions (Stevenson, 2012) and bi-lateral employer-union negotiations all playing their part at different points in recent, and not-so recent, history.

Ever since the abolition of negotiating rights there have been efforts to chip away at this national framework, in relation to both pay and conditions of service. However, what is significant is the durability of the framework, despite the best efforts of the state to erode it. The introduction of performance-related pay has made the most obvious dent in the national framework, and other pay flexibilities have also contributed. Generally though, until the present, their impact has been limited. Conditions of service, if anything, have proved even more durable with national conditions of service being consolidated and extended, albeit controversially, following implementation of the national workload agreement (DfES, 2003). There are several explanations for this, but perhaps the principal reason has been a deep attachment within the culture of the teaching profession to a common framework for all teachers. For example,

Ironside and Seifert (1995) have argued that the commitment to national pay and conditions has been seen historically as a key element of the professional status of teachers and has been an objective of organised teachers from the formation of state education in 1870. A national framework therefore has been both a goal and a reflection of a profession with a strong sense of a common identity. Not a homogeneous profession by any means, but one held together by many shared experiences and values.

Such has been the power of this commitment that even when headteachers have been provided with local discretion over pay and conditions they have shown little appetite to exercise it. Most recently, as the current government has pushed more and more schools towards academy status, there has been little evidence of headteachers eager to make use of the pay and conditions flexibilities that academy status confers. Rather, this reluctance within the profession has resulted in the Secretary of State having to impose change by making use of his substantial influence on the supposedly independent School Teachers' Review Body (STRB).

The first, dramatic sign of this came in 2012 when the STRB's proposals for teachers' pay in 2013-14 represented the effective abandonment of a national pay system (DfE, 2012). Specifically, the STRB recommended the abolition of fixed pay points within the teachers' pay spine, with schools determining the placing of their own pay points within specified maxima and minima. Crucially, there would be no automatic progression within the pay spine based on length of service, but only progression based on performance. In England the number of spine points based on length of service is quite limited when contrasted with other countries, but even this limited arrangement was to be abolished. The STRB also recommended that progression to the upper pay spine (an early example of performance-related pay introduced by the Labour government) was to be made more difficult, and that teachers would lose the right to maintain their salary at its current level when they moved between schools, introducing the risk that a change in employment might also involve a reduction in pay. All major recommendations were accepted by the Secretary of State and scheduled to be introduced in September 2013 (DfE, 2013a), with performance pay decisions impacting on teachers from September 2014.

However, the dismantling of a national pay system in 2013 represents only part of the picture. The Secretary of State's remit to the STRB in 2013-14 has shifted the focus from pay to working conditions (DfE, 2013b). In the DfE's evidence (DfE, 2013c) to the STRB it asks the STRB to consider removing the working hours regulations for teachers (currently at a commitment to work 1265 hours on 'directed time' activities, over 195 days). It also asks the STRB to remove the regulations covering the use of teachers' planning, preparation and assessment time and to remove the list of 21 administrative tasks that teachers should not be required to undertake. These latter issues amount to the almost complete undoing of any benefits achieved through the national workload agreement, and arguably return safeguards relating to teachers' conditions to a pre-1987 status.

All of these issues are also framed by the longer-term attack on pensions in which teachers' contributions have been increased and entitlements reduced. Teachers now face a raised retirement age, whilst they pay more and receive less.

Why Here? Why Now?

Michael Gove's argument for driving through these changes to teachers' pay and conditions is that the 'freedoms' they provide will be in the best interests of pupils. It is claimed that performance pay will 'incentivise' teachers to work harder and more effectively, whilst also improving the recruitment and retention of staff. Meanwhile, proposed changes in conditions of service will allow headteachers to deploy labour when and where they want, hence increasing 'efficiency'. Such changes will, for example, make it easier to extend the working day and the school year. The vocabulary of 'freedom' and 'flexibility' is deployed throughout the DfE's evidence to the STRB (DfE, 2013c), as is the language of teacher professionalism. It is apparently undermining of teacher professionalism to have contractual safeguards to ensure decent working conditions. Paragraph 42 of the DfE's evidence to the STRB is particularly interesting and worth quoting in full:

> For teaching to be recognised unreservedly as a profession, teachers and headteachers need to be able to demonstrate their professionalism. They need to be able to exercise appropriate professional autonomy in making judgements about what they do and how they do it within the context of the high standards expected of them, of the needs of the school or schools where they work and in the best interests of pupils. Detailed central prescription of what teachers and headteachers should do and how they should spend their working time limits the scope they have to demonstrate their professionalism. (DfE, 2013c, pp. 13-14)

In the Alice in Wonderland world of current government education policy, teacher professionalism is cast in terms of the 'freedom' to be compelled to work at any time of the day on any day of the year, but not, apparently, the freedom to make a professional judgement about the most effective way to teach reading to primary school pupils (DfE, 2010). Nor do freedoms extend to schools' ability to decide for themselves how they determine teachers' pay. Schools that seek to circumvent the government's drive to impose performance-related pay face the threat of being 'downgraded' by the inspection agency Ofsted (Govtoday, 2013). Freedoms, apparently, only extend so far.

It is important to be clear. There is no decisive evidence to suggest that these changes will generate improvements for students. Research evidence relating to performance-related pay (PRP), for example is, at best, mixed (Chamberlin et al, 2002; Harvey-Beavis, 2003; Lavy, 2007; Podgursky & Springer, 2007; Atkinson et al, 2009). Where there appear to be benefits, these

are largely in terms of encouraging particular forms of behaviour, or supporting teacher retention. In both cases the benefits are not necessarily clear. Promoting one type of behaviour may be at the expense of another; for example, an exclusive focus on student performance in standardised tests may be at the expense of wider educational aspirations. Meanwhile, retaining a teacher in one school may simply deny that teacher to another school. In both cases the benefits relate to specific managerial objectives, rather than to obvious educational and system-wide advantages. It is necessary therefore to ask why the Secretary of State has been so determined to impose major changes on the school system, with all the associated costs of disruption, when there is little evidence pointing to potential benefits, and little support for the changes from within the profession.

The answer lies in the longer-term objectives of the neoliberal state, which involve the recasting of the English public education system as one that is largely privately provided and market-driven, whilst supported by substantial public funding (Stevenson, 2011). Left unchecked, this is likely to be a system in which large academy chains (likely to become 'for-profit' if a majority Conservative government is elected) dominate the school 'market' and considerable sums of public money will be funnelled into the private sector. Where there has been a demand for change, it is from these organisations, as they seek to replicate the employment practices used by charter school bodies in the United States (to which many of them have links – see Stephen Ball's work published in 2007 and 2012). This is a vision of the future that has been fashioned in New Orleans, New York, Philadelphia and Chicago – where a combination of policy entrepreneurs and edubusinesses are systematically privatising America's public school system. It is what Pasi Sahlberg (2011) has referred to as the Global Education Reform Movement (acronym intentional), and it is rooted much more in Florida than in Finland.

Creating the Conditions for Privatisation

Given the drive to restructure public education as a private enterprise, then, the state's determination to dismantle teachers' pay and conditions becomes easier to understand. I want to argue that the drive to privatisation requires a number of supporting conditions, and dismantling teachers' national pay and conditions are central to securing three of these: driving down the costs of labour; decisively shifting managerial authority to headteachers; and marginalising the influence of classroom teachers and, more specifically, the influence of teachers in their organised form – teacher unions.

Driving down the Costs of Teaching

The drive to widespread privatisation across the public sector necessitates the driving down of labour costs. This is particularly the case in an industry that is labour-intensive and where average salary costs are considered relatively costly.

The challenge facing schools in a competitive market is to maintain quality while controlling costs. Reconciling this tension explains why a crude holding down of salaries across the board is not helpful. The new orthodoxy, rooted in business thinking, is that the competitive 'edge' requires the need for 'stars' – and to attract and retain stars, it is necessary to pay higher salaries. Such salaries are justified in terms of 'paying the market rate' or paying according to 'value added'. From bankers to footballers, these are the market-based arguments used to justify premium payments. They are increasingly the arguments used to justify high salaries to many headteachers, executive headteachers and CEOs of trusts and chains (the shift in language tells its own story). However, the challenge for the new edubusinesses is to restrict higher salaries to a small minority, while findings ways to depress the pay of the majority.

All of this becomes easier when labour can be deployed 'flexibly' and when pay becomes increasingly individualised. The teaching process is broken down into discrete elements, with low 'value-added' tasks being allocated to cheaper labour. Some tasks may not be considered to require 'high-level' teaching skills, and therefore can be allocated to teaching assistants or to teachers without a recognised teaching qualification (eased by the recent removal of Qualified Teacher Status [QTS] regulations for academies and free schools). Or it may be that a particular subject is deemed of less status, and hence of less (market) 'value', in which case it too may be allocated to cheaper labour. Individualising pay introduces new, and likely growing, inequalities as schools seek to simultaneously attract and retain a minority of 'stars', while holding down the pay of the much larger majority whose work is considered to add less 'value'.

Increasing Managerial Authority

The processes described above represent, in reality, a further step towards the de-skilling of the teaching process. Much teaching becomes routinised and is devalued, while divisions within the workforce are both increased and legitimated (Carter & Stevenson, 2012). Such processes are reinforced by the relentless efforts to quantify the value of teacher output, and this process is completed when the value of a teacher's 'output' is linked to their pay.

What is being described represents little more than a crude form of Taylorism, whereby the form of work is specified in detail, performance is monitored forensically, output is measured constantly and performance is linked to 'reward'. One clear consequence of these processes, and an explicit objective of Taylor's development of scientific management, is that managerial authority shifts upwards (Taylor, 1914). Common experiences and common interests, and therefore the basis of a sense of professional solidarity, are deliberately undermined by a much more competitive and hierarchical working environment. As Taylor argued, this shifts the balance of power away from individual employees, and in favour of the manager. The manager's 'right to manage' is reasserted, or what Goodrich (1975) famously described as the

'frontier of control' is shifted. Managerial authority is further reinforced by the power to reward or penalise particular work behaviours through the link between pay and employer-defined objectives. Management not only has the ability to dispense rewards selectively, depending on 'success', it also has the ability to determine what success looks like. In reality, 'success' is largely defined externally by league tables and Ofsted definitions of quality, with the managerial function in schools reduced to internalising these objectives and policing their implementation.

Marginalising Organised Teachers and Teacher Unions

The attack on national pay and conditions represents a deliberate attempt to weaken teacher union organisation. British public-sector unions have traditionally sought to centralise pay and conditions, and the bargaining arrangements that determined them. The centralisation of union resources, supported by the ability to mobilise a mass membership around a shared grievance, has traditionally been a source of union strength (although sometimes achieved at the cost of active workplace organisation). This is nowhere more so than for teachers, where even the abolition of negotiating rights did not fundamentally undermine the commitment to a centralised system. However, this centralised model is potentially in tatters following the introduction of the new regulations for teachers' pay. Fragmenting the system represents a deliberate attempt to deny teacher unions access to the nationwide solidarity that tends to be a feature of unified systems, while the need to negotiate with multiple employers threatens, intentionally, to dissipate union resources. Hence it is envisaged that unions will be weakened, thereby creating a more compliant workforce and marginalising a significant source of resistance to privatisation. However, while this may be the aim, it will not necessarily be the outcome. Decentralisation of control of the labour process can lead to a revitalisation of workplace unionism (Fairbrother, 2000), and this may yet be a consequence of these processes. Much will depend on the strategies and tactics of the teacher unions as they adapt to a much-changed environment.

Looking to the Future ...

The changes described are an attempt to fundamentally re-balance the school system, whereby traditional sources of power and influence are marginalised, and new voices privileged. Local authorities and teacher associations, both of which can claim to be rooted in a democratic tradition, are being challenged, while those individuals and organisations that are committed to the new educational marketplace are valued. Academy chains are touted as the new 'middle tier', while the state sponsors new forms of 'teacher voice', whether it be a Royal College of Teaching or organisations such as Edapt – the 'alternative' to teacher unions endorsed enthusiastically and repeatedly by Michael Gove (see *The Spectator*, 2012, for one example). Possibilities that are democratic, collective

and public are replaced by those that have little or no meaningful democratic engagement, and that are individualised and private. Public spaces are closed down and private solutions are promoted.

At this stage it is not yet clear how the future will unfold, and there can be little doubt that whatever the future is, it will be characterised by significant variation. For example, academy chains are becoming increasingly dominant, but it is likely that quite different approaches to employment issues and workforce configuration will emerge. Changes will look different in different contexts, and will develop at varying paces. There is a real need to research these developments comprehensively and independently.

However, my argument here is that if emerging trends continue, it is not only likely that teaching as work, and as a profession, will undergo rapid and substantial change, but that these developments will assume a particular form based on the extent to which strategic decisions in schools are guided by market pressures and the pursuit of profit. Commercial considerations are likely to triumph over educational ones. The more this is the case, the more likely it is that staffing models will be driven principally by business needs. In such cases the following developments are likely:

The further Taylorisation of teaching. Some job roles in schools will be considered high status (mainly managerial and those associated with premium subjects), while others will be considered lower value and lower status. Pay hierarchies will reflect this. Those with high-status positions are likely to have increasing control over the work of those subordinate in the hierarchy (what Braverman [1974] referred to as 'the separation of conception from execution'). For those lower in the hierarchy there is the possibility of increasingly prescriptive curricula whereby commercial curriculum packages are purchased and teachers and support staff then 'deliver' the package, with any deviation from the prescribed curriculum becoming a potential disciplinary/capability issue. Again, these are developments already well established in the USA and one teacher's experience of this is brilliantly described by Brian Horn's account of teaching in a school using the 'America's Choice' curriculum programme (Horn, 2013). (In 2010, 'America's Choice' was acquired by Pearson PLC for $80 million; see *Education Week*, 2010.)

The increased use of technology in teaching. This will inevitably be presented in benign ways, as though the deployment of technology is value neutral, and 'the future' uncontested and inevitable. However, what is likely is that the imperative driving change will be a business imperative, in which the objective is to reduce the cost of labour by replacing human labour with technology. This has an obvious impact on employees and their experience of work, but it also impacts substantially on students. The danger is that pedagogical considerations are subordinated to technological ones, and technological considerations triumph because they are driven by business considerations (the new 'bottom line'). One simple example to illustrate this, and again well developed in parts of the USA, is the use of computer technology to support standardised testing, whereby complex arguments about how to assess students' progress most

effectively are shaped largely by what a computer can process quickly (and cheaply). Readers of this article may also want to explore the emergence of 'virtual charter schools' in the USA, whereby students do not attend a physical school, but work online from home, using 'personalised' computer curriculum packages and supported online by a mix of teachers and support staff (although the precise nature of that 'mix' is often unclear).

A reconstituted teaching profession. This will see business and commercial considerations driving decisions about staff development, salaries and pensions. What is likely is that teachers' experience of staff development, career progression and long-term security is fundamentally transformed as private-sector providers seek to maximise their return on investment in staff development, while also seeking to control long-term commitments associated with pay and pensions. One development in this regard is the removal of the QTS regulation that makes it easier for employers to depress salaries. What is also likely is that professional development opportunities will be increasingly focused on 'business objectives' rather than on the personal and professional needs of individual staff identified by staff themselves. There is also a danger that staff development will be 'invested' predominantly in individual 'stars' rather than it being seen as an equal entitlement for all staff. Employers are also likely to eschew employment models in which long-term commitments to staff accrue long-term financial liabilities (such as higher wages and pension contributions). In these cases, rapid turnover models of staffing are favoured, whereby young staff with a temporary commitment to teaching are favoured over older and more experienced staff. (Again, this is a common approach in the USA where the 'Teach for America' [TfA] programme is widespread. TfA is also associated with driving 'cultural change' in the teaching profession and seeking to weaken union influence. It is particularly prevalent in areas such as New Orleans, where school privatisation programmes are most aggressive.)

The analysis presented here is deliberately bleak. I do think the future is uncertain and I have deliberately painted a 'worst-case' picture. As I have argued, there is a need for much more research in relation to many of the issues raised in this article. Moreover, it is absolutely the case that there are headteachers and teachers who are struggling hard to resist these tendencies, in the face of some very powerful pressure. These headteachers and teachers should be applauded and supported. However, my argument is that the analysis I have presented represents a clear direction of travel. It is already emergent in England, and current changes in policy serve to reinforce these trends. In the USA, where many of the major edubusinesses are more embedded in school systems, these developments are more advanced. Moreover, the analysis presented here is broadly shared by several mainstream academics, perhaps most notably Andy Hargreaves and Michael Fullan (2012), whose latest book is highly critical of what they describe as a 'business capital' approach to teaching – one which they demonstrate is already well developed in the USA and England.

These developments therefore are already in motion. They reflect the logic of the market that has been driving the education system in England since at least 1988. These processes are now accelerated by the current changes to teachers' pay and conditions. The changes outlined are ultimately predicated on a vision of education as education *by* business *for* business. This is the consequence of a system in which guiding principles are subordinated to market considerations. It requires a low-cost and compliant workforce in schools that 'deliver' a business-efficient curriculum to help produce the workforce of the future. For the vast majority of the population, school will be their route to work in a super-flexible, highly insecure and extremely hierarchical labour market. What better way to prepare young people for their life in 'the market' than to ensure that every aspect of their schooling reproduces the market experience? Privately owned and profit-making schools compete in a market in which take-overs, monopolisation, rationalisation and asset-stripping are part of the landscape. Students must pursue endless targets in order to compete for an advantageous position in the labour market, while they learn from their teachers that work is insecure, that everything must be measured, that only the best are rewarded and that competition is all. You can't buck the market, and there is no alternative, are the real lessons that young people must learn.

And herein lies the rub – that within this world of markets and managerialism there is no room for difference and the development of alternative ideas. In a context in which chasing targets is the be all and end all, then questioning the logic of this orthodoxy is a matter not of critique, but of treachery. Dissent is no longer a crucial element of debate, but rather it is evidence of disloyalty and to be considered as dangerous. The real danger, however, is that schools become places where teachers are afraid – afraid to question, afraid to teach in ways considered outside of the orthodoxy and afraid to present alternative ideas – either within the curriculum or in relation to school structure and organisation. Schools will cease to be places where a plurality of ideas and approaches can thrive, and will become places where the orthodoxy is based on 'what works' and a 'one best way' approach to teaching (decisions determined elsewhere, of course). Questioning the means, let alone the ends, is no longer an act of intellectual critique; rather, it becomes an act of rebellion. Those who seek to do it are branded as either 'disloyal' or 'disaffected' and cast out. At best they are ignored, at worst they are identified as 'requiring improvement' and provided with 'support'. Payment penalties and capability procedures are never far away.

When schools look like this, education is impoverished and democracy is diminished.

What Is to Be Done?

Until now there has been considerable and widespread opposition to many aspects of coalition government education policy but this has rarely translated into effective resistance. There have been some notable successes, especially

with regard to proposed curriculum reforms, but these have generally been few and far between. Rather, the pincer movement of markets and Ofsted-driven managerialism has served to isolate critics and fragment the opposition. It may well be that it is this experience that has given Michael Gove the confidence to 'take on' the teacher unions. In my view there is little doubt that the current conflict with the teacher unions is one that has been engineered in Sanctuary Buildings and planned for meticulously. The motivation for such a confrontation reflects the Thatcherite analysis that favours confrontation over consensus, and that argues that real progress is only possible when opponents are defeated and immobilised. It is not unique to England, but it does look very different to many other parts of the world where consensus and professional opinion are valued.

If this analysis is correct, even in part, then the decision of the two largest teacher unions to commence a campaign of national industrial action is indeed high risk. One response to the analysis presented above would be to avoid a confrontation on the basis that when a trap has been laid, it is generally best avoided. This is an understandable response, but in my view it is a mistaken one.

It is important to recognise that despite the government's apparent confidence, the strategy remains high risk for the state too. The public does not have to support the teachers to blame the government. It is perfectly possible for many parents to be unsympathetic to striking teachers, but to still place the blame for the dispute on the government. This is a real possibility, particularly if the teacher unions run an effective and well-organised campaign. The early signs are that this is the case.

First and foremost, the campaign has managed to forge an alliance between the two largest teacher unions. This has no doubt been extremely difficult to secure (and all credit to those who have brokered it), and it will no doubt generate some degree of frustration and anxiety amongst activists on both sides. However, such anxiety is likely to dissipate if the benefits of this approach become apparent, and thus far this appears to be the case. Certainly the regional action in the North West of England that took place in June 2013 was extremely well supported, and this is almost certainly attributable to the increased confidence union members gained from united action. Ultimate success will depend on maintaining both momentum and unity.

Success will also depend on the extent to which the teacher unions can use the campaign to re-engage and reinvigorate their membership. Rank-and-file union membership has been resilient, but faces problems. Anti-union attitudes from employers, the impact of academisation and the culture of performativity in schools have all made schools a more hostile environment in which to be a union activist. These are deliberate employer strategies and for a long time this employer pressure has appeared relentless and one-way. There is, however, the possibility that a major campaign of action by the teacher unions will both re-energise weary activists and bring new activists into union activity. There is the possibility that teachers will regain a sense of collective voice that

flows from being united and feeling a sense of influence and impact. In such circumstances collective confidence can grow. The challenge for the teacher unions is to capture this energy and nurture and develop it. Whatever the outcome of the dispute, the success of the teacher unions in the longer term will depend critically on their ability to organise at workplace level. The current campaign offers the real possibility of re-energising workplace organisation on a substantial scale. Teachers need to (re-)learn that strong, independent and effective unions are their most effective voice – across all the issues that concern them, and whether in school or when talking to government.

Ultimately, the success of the campaign will depend on the extent to which an economic dispute (about workload, pay and pensions) becomes a wider political dispute for the government. The unions need to maintain their focus on the grievances that are the basis of the dispute. More than anything they need to demonstrate to their members that they can deliver a result if they are to reverse the sense of demoralisation and powerlessness experienced by many teachers. However, if the teacher unions are able to maintain their unity and their momentum, and thereby sustain their campaign, there is every possibility that education will emerge as a major political issue.

My argument therefore is that this act of resistance by teachers offers a much more substantial opportunity. This is because the dispute opens up the possibility of a serious debate about the future of education. For the reasons that I hope are clear from this article, it is important to understand that an industrial dispute about workload, pay and pensions is in reality a conflict about the future trajectory of public education. To date the large-scale, but often piecemeal, transfer of public resources to private bodies has been achieved with only sporadic resistance. This experience has been echoed elsewhere in the welfare state where the role of the state is reduced to little more than dispensing contracts to private providers. Thus far it has appeared difficult to interrupt policy effectively. However, the current dispute by teachers in defence of their workload, pay and pensions does offer the chance to turn the tide. In doing so, it generates the possibility of both building professional self-confidence and opening up new spaces to discuss alternatives.

To date, neoliberal discourses about 'affordability' and educational 'standards' have been allowed to become the common sense of the day. From this, it is a short step to embed the argument that public is bad and private is good. Industrial action by teachers confronts this common sense. Not immediately, and not necessarily overtly – but it does so inevitably. The challenge for teachers is to stand up and stand together and thereby begin to rediscover the power of their collective voice.

It is important to show solidarity with teachers in their struggle, but beyond the teaching profession, it is also important to help to open up the spaces that the dispute will create. It is important, therefore, to ask serious questions about the future trajectory of a privatised school system, with all its attendant inequalities and lack of community control, and to present imaginative

and exciting possibilities about what a democratic and popular school system could, and should, look like. Another world is possible.

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