
Standing Up for Education: organising at the local level

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ABSTRACT This article describes how one local teachers' union branch has developed an active and imaginative campaign as it has challenged both national education policy and also the very specific attacks on schools in the community. By connecting local and national issues, and by linking struggles on pay and pensions to wider questions of policy, the local union has been able to engage both teachers and parents in broad campaigns that 'stand up for education'.

Organising to Re-organise

In October 2013 joint strike action by the teachers' unions NASUWT and NUT was taken under the familiar slogans of 'fair pay' and 'defend our pensions'. However, alongside these demands was another cry – that of 'Stand Up For Education'. Green T-Shirts and banners bearing this slogan were a ubiquitous presence on demonstrations and rallies the length and breadth of the country.

Since then, the NUT nationally has turned the slogan into an organising and mobilising idea. Hundreds of 'Stand Up For Education' stalls have been organised by NUT activists in all major towns and cities, 'Stand Up For Education' leaflets and booklets have been produced, and the green T-Shirts and banners have featured in subsequent strike action.

Like other NUT groups, we at the Nottingham NUT took up the slogan and orientated our work around it. However, in addition to the national campaign we were involved in, teachers in Nottingham have faced their own, more local threat. This is why the union has sought to embrace the national turn towards social movement trade unionism – most clearly articulated by NUT General Secretary Christine Blower at the union's 2014 conference – but also to apply this in our own specific context as the union in Nottingham has sought to respond to the crisis faced by teachers in the city.

This article sets out the attacks experienced by teachers in Nottingham city and seeks to explain how the union has responded. It seeks to set out the organising drive we have started as a process of re-organisation, as the union seeks to rally support from its members and beyond to both resist the attacks and begin to turn the tide of privatisation that is devastating education in the city.

Ofsted Started It!

Between 12 and 15 November 2013, shortly after the joint NUT/NASUWT action, Ofsted literally swept into Nottingham to carry out simultaneous inspections of eight secondary schools. Only one of the schools emerged unscathed from these inspections; six were placed into special measures and one was identified as having 'serious weaknesses'.

Teacher trade union activists organised within the National Union of Teachers in Nottingham quickly identified these inspections as a political attack. It was our view that the results of the inspections were pre-determined and designed to undermine confidence in our schools in order to boost the prospects of a planned Free School. Many also felt that the attack was also designed to damage the confidence of Nottingham's teachers, who had not long previously taken successful city-wide strike action against plans to reform term times and holidays.

Recognising the real purpose of the inspections was relatively easy for Nottingham NUT activists because we already knew about similar 'mass inspections' from colleagues in Birmingham and elsewhere. We have collectively participated in hours of conference sessions, debates and discussions about Ofsted and we share a well-established narrative of Michael Gove's agenda. It would have been a simple matter for us to formulate this perspective into a motion for an upcoming NUT meeting, a sharply worded press release, a newsletter to our members, and leave our response at that. Instead, Nottingham NUT took a different approach.

Immediately after the local and national media reported on the inspections, Nottingham NUT announced that it would hold a 'Hands Off Our Schools' protest in response. Replicating the sort of platform encouraged by the leadership of the NUT for a recent day of national strike action, speakers at the protest included not only very angry teachers, but also parents and students from the city. The protest electrified the local media, which covered both preparations for the protest as well as the event itself. Close to one hundred people attended the protest, including groups from each of the affected schools.

If the aim of the protest was to mobilise all the teachers from the six schools then it would have been judged a failure. However, this was not the aim of the initiative. The protest was called in the knowledge that teachers and others associated with the six schools were under massive pressure. Someone who hasn't directly experienced an Ofsted inspection – let alone a politically motivated, damning inspection – will not fully appreciate the trauma involved.

Many of the core activists of Nottingham NUT bear Ofsted ‘scars’, and rather than focusing on mobilising the union membership in the schools with the expectation that they would take to the streets in defiance, we organised a protest with the aim of boosting the confidence of the teachers and communities under attack. Judging by the emails and reports received from the affected schools, this aim *was* met.

The second major aim of the protest was to launch an ongoing community campaign involving teaching unions, parents and students. The formation of Nottingham’s ‘Stand Up For Education Coalition’ was announced at the protest and leaflets were handed out inviting people to an organising meeting. This aspect of Nottingham NUT’s initiative was again inspired by the work of the national leadership of the union, which clearly recognises that the struggles teachers face extend beyond considerations of pay, terms and conditions. The coalition – in which it was essential to work to maintain the ‘spirit’ that led to its formation – was to become central to the next steps in our response to Ofsted...

Inspecting the Inspectors

The very first meeting of the coalition suffered from an affliction that is not uncommon in campaign groups. Several of those who attended – including NUT activists from outside Nottingham – expected a meeting to discuss organising for the next strike or thought the meeting would be a good place to air their personal criticisms of the national union’s tactics. This problem arose partly because the purpose of the meeting was obvious to everyone who had been involved in organising the initial response to Ofsted and, as such, the meeting didn’t start with a ‘what we are here for’ discussion. This initial problem was swiftly overcome when the focus of the meeting shifted towards organising activity.

The two key initiatives decided upon by the coalition extended and deepened our response to Ofsted. The first ‘initiative’ was very simple to organise but had a big impact: a Christmas card. The card itself – created by a parent involved in the coalition and her three sons – was to be sent to one of the last remaining local authority secondary schools in Nottingham – a school which had been attacked by Ofsted and which would be most severely affected by the proposed Free School. The secretary of Nottingham NUT persuaded other school-based unions to lend their support and put messages in the card. The card itself was the central ‘attraction’ on a Stand Up For Education stall held in the catchment area of the school and was quickly filled with signatures. Once delivered, the card took pride of place in the school staffroom and had a positive impact on staff morale.

The second initiative sounds a lot more complicated and ‘daring’ than it actually was – we decided to inspect the inspectors! Nottingham can boast the presence of its very own Ofsted office, handily located in the city centre. On 30 January 2014, an activist from the coalition hand-delivered a letter informing

Ofsted of our intention to inspect its offices. The following day, fifteen activists arrived in the reception area accompanied by the local press.

Naturally, we were not permitted to actually inspect the offices and had to make do with a short exchange with Ofsted's 'Head of Complaints'. We asked a number of basic questions like: 'How many of your inspectors are qualified teachers?'; 'Can we examine all documentation related to the recent inspections?'; and 'Had Ofsted decided on the outcome of the inspections before they took place?' The 'Head of Complaints' had an assistant who wrote down the questions while she repeatedly – and humourlessly – refused to answer them.

The inspection had multiple consequences: first, it significantly boosted the confidence of all those involved; second, it demonstrated to NUT members and others that it is possible to stand up to Ofsted; third, the 'inspection' received yet more media attention, thus raising the profile of our campaign; and fourth, within days Ofsted invited the NUT to a 'sit-down' meeting to discuss our concerns.

Purely by chance, the coalition's 'inspection' coincided with national news coverage of claims that Michael Gove and his co-thinkers had been conspiring against Ofsted chief Michael Wilshaw. Under pressure and under the spotlight, Ofsted conceded that teaching trade unions need to be taken seriously.

Still Standing Up

In his 'trouble-making manual' *Rules for Radicals* the American organiser Saul Alinsky (1971/1989) suggests that we should '[w]herever possible go outside of the experience of the enemy'. The work carried out so far by Nottingham's Stand Up For Education Coalition has lived up to this advice. By publicly challenging Ofsted – something which they are certainly unused to – we galvanised a layer of teachers, parents, students and others into action. As a result, the NUT in the city enjoys unprecedented support and coverage of its ideas and activities in the local media. This means that when we come to take further days of strike action, there is an already active layer of people who understand our aims and who understand that our fight isn't simply over pay, conditions and pensions. At the same time, there is a grassroots activist group in Nottingham with a focus on education which enjoys the support of an outward-looking, organising-focused trade union. Activists in Nottingham NUT understand that we are playing a role in building a 'social movement trade unionism' as part of the national union's overall aims. This is not what Lois Weiner (2012) describes as a 'you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours' relationship, but a long-term effort to build and sustain a grassroots organising effort.

As Micah Uetrict (2014) argues in his brief account of recent events led by the Chicago Teachers Union, social movement trade unionism is not only the 'proper thing to do' but also the '*only* thing to do' because '[t]eacher unionism cannot survive the attacks it is currently facing by neoliberal education

reformers without answering those attacks head-on, taking up an agenda that both defends teachers *and* fights for students' and communities' best interests' (p. 111).

The Stand Up For Education Coalition in Nottingham is still in its early days. Since launching the campaign against Ofsted, the coalition has more recently been focused on running public stalls and gathering strike support. It also organised an Education Question Time with local politicians and the public. However, the world of education in Nottingham presents some very sharp problems for campaigners. Not least of these are plans to open two new schools in September 2014: one is to be a Free School, the other a STEM academy catering for KS4 and KS5.

The Free School is set to open in a space located between a factory shop and a workshop in an under-occupied industrial building. Regardless of its exact location, the Free School will inevitably undermine other local secondary schools that have recently been put in a category by Ofsted. To highlight the absurd choice of location for this 'school' and to raise awareness of the issues at play, the coalition is already planning another 'direct action' event.

The issues relating to the STEM Academy are manifold but one of the starkest issues is that fact that there will be no arts or humanities provision (with the exception of geography) and languages provision is severely limited. In response, the local Stand Up For Education Coalition is making plans to offer its own 'provision' of these subjects as a way of highlighting the negative educational impact of a narrow curriculum. Expect history classes taught in somewhat unusual locations!

Neither of these plans is earth-shatteringly original, nor will they fundamentally shift everything in the favour of those who want democratically controlled, comprehensive education. What they are examples of is the sort of strategy outlined by Alinsky for building movements that exert power. Where the Ofsted campaign illustrated how dramatic albeit simple-to-organise action can shift the terrain, the coalitions' plans for future action could well do the same.

A movement of solidarity and activity in defence of education is taking its first steps in Nottingham. The Stand Up For Education Coalition hopes to see similar efforts emerge elsewhere. The challenge will be to make sure that we all learn from each other. Nottingham has its own specific contextual issues – and the local response of activists will reflect this. But we hope that others will learn from our efforts, as we hope to learn from the organising activities of others. If we can connect with each other, and learn from each other, there exists the real possibility of turning our local campaigns into a much broader movement that seriously challenges current government policy.

References

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