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Building a Social Movement for Education in England: policy and strategy

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ABSTRACT This article addresses the programmatic and strategic choices facing the progressive and left movement in education after the May general election. It draws a critical balance sheet of the education policies in Labour's election manifesto and of the strategy of attempting to influence them in a more progressive direction. An analysis of the education policies of the four Labour leadership candidates reveals that only one, Jeremy Corbyn, marks out a new and radical direction. The article argues that a new strategy is needed, based on building a popular social movement for education, in order both to develop resistance to the policies of the Conservative government and to transform those of the Labour Party as the only governmental alternative. The article ends by offering examples of the resources on which the project of a radical social movement for education can draw.

We are confronted with five years of an aggressively neo-liberal Tory government which will continue and consolidate the process of reconstructing school education begun by Michael Gove, in a context of deepening social inequality. How should advocates of progressive and socially just education respond? What strategy is needed to defend education against the government's offensive, and what alternative policies to the government's agenda? Central to both is the question of the Labour Party.

Labour's Election Manifesto

The Labour Party's manifesto for education in the general election in May was called 'A Better Plan for Education'.[1] Terry Wrigley's assessment of it on the Reclaiming Schools website (established by a network of education researchers supporting the National Union of Teachers' (NUT) Stand Up for Education

campaign) is worth quoting because it reflects the views of many education campaigners: 'There are strengths in Labour's manifesto regarding improved benefits, the under 5s and the transition into work, but many crucial questions are avoided or fudged'.[2] He continues:

> The foundational logic of Labour's education policy remains the *Blairite neoliberal assumption* that education is the chief way a government can develop the economy and, conversely, that *producing human capital is the prime purpose of schools*. Both are clearly articulated in the introduction to the education manifesto. Social justice issues tend to be raised within that set of assumptions, i.e. because they are holding back the economy. (Original emphasis)

Among Wrigley's main criticisms are the following.

> This manifesto fails to tackle the *punitive accountability regime* – a toxic mix of Ofsted [Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills] surveillance (and the widespread fear of it) and bullying by numbers. There is no recognition of Ofsted as a problem. (Original emphasis)
>
> Staff turnover and loss is acknowledged but with little understanding of what is causing it. Staff development is often poor, but nothing here to suggest an understanding of why (e.g. LA education departments stripped to the bone, schools relying on commercial provision of variable quality).
>
> The issue of unqualified teachers is raised. This is an important line in the sand, but perhaps less significant in its overall impact on teaching quality than minimalist training routes, punitive accountability processes, excessive workload, and teacher demoralisation and loss.
>
> There is no mention of how the new National Curriculum is damaging education, nor any proposal to stop this. The manifesto leaves intact Gove's legacy of a primary curriculum based on early cramming in maths, science and limited aspects of literacy. Will the primary curriculum continue to be framed by baseline, phonics and SPAG [spelling, punctuation and grammar] tests?

At secondary level:

> The manifesto appears to leave intact the narrowed down GCSEs (e.g. English without speaking), and the new grading system which will make most 16 year olds appear to have done badly.

The response of Labour's manifesto to the Conservatives' exclusive focus on academic subjects is to 'Build a gold standard vocational route through

education and into the workplace, with a Technical Baccalaureate, English and maths to 18 and an apprenticeship for every school leaver who gets the grades' (p. 6). Labour's proposal is echoed by recent statements by John Cridland, Director General of the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), calling for the status of vocational learning to be upgraded: 'For too long, we've just "pretended" to have a multiple route education system. Yet in reality there has been only one path the system values – GCSEs, A-levels, University'.[3] But as Martin Allen and Patrick Ainley argue:

> The main problem with Cridland's approach ... is its refusal to be critical of 'academic' education in itself – only to say that it's not suitable for everybody. Thus 'For many – including me, and most Ministers – that path was the right one. But for many others, it's not'. Isn't this just another way of saying that 'vocational qualifications are all right for other people's children'?[4]

For Allen and Ainley, 'At the upper end of secondary education, rather than Labour's proposals for an alternative Techbacc for half of 14+ school students, a general diploma should be available for everybody'.[5]

The manifesto's solution to the question of school improvement is to assign the responsibility for raising standards to regional Directors of School Standards (not actually very dissimilar to Gove's Regional Commissioners). There is virtually no mention of local authorities and none at all of enhancing local democratic participation in the school system.

On academies and free schools the manifesto states:

> Simply changing the structure of schools, turning them into academies or setting up new Free Schools, has failed to deliver high standards. Free Schools are failing at a greater rate than other schools, one in five academies is underperforming and whole areas have been left to languish. (p. 11)
>
> Labour will end the underperforming Free Schools programme. (p. 12)

But elsewhere the manifesto makes clear that Labour would in fact maintain and build on the existing structure of the school system created by Michael Gove. Existing academies and free schools (rebranded as 'parent-led academies') will continue, and remain outside local authorities, and new ones will be created, including by academy chains:

> Directors of School Standards will also be responsible for commissioning new schools where there is a local shortage of places, encouraging innovative bids from established providers, good local authorities, parents, teachers and entrepreneurs. (p. 12)

Influencing Labour Policy?

For the last year or two, leading up to the general election, a number of organisations and individuals from what one might call the 'centre left' of education politics, led by the Campaign for State Education and the Socialist Educational Association (the Labour Party affiliate), including Comprehensive Future and *FORUM*, came together to set up the Reclaiming Education Alliance with the aim of trying to influence the Labour Party leadership to adopt some more radical policies for education. Its instrument was a programme of '7 Principles'.[6] We can now draw a balance sheet of its effectiveness.

Some of the Alliance's policies were uncontentious and had been or would have been adopted by Labour anyway, such as qualified teachers and a common national curriculum to age 14. But others received no support. Principle 2, an end to selection, was completely ignored by Labour – selection isn't even mentioned in Labour's education manifesto, 'A Better Plan for Education'. Principle 6 says that Ofsted should be replaced. Again, this was ignored by the Labour leadership – its manifesto makes no mention at all even of the need to reform Ofsted, let alone to replace it.

Principle 5 is about a 'locally elected education service'. This is a weak and ambivalent clause because it does not refer specifically to local authorities and says nothing about academies, academy chains run by private organisations, or free schools. These are central pillars of the Tory agenda so it is extraordinary that the Reclaiming Education Alliance chose not to contest them.

As the election approached, the Reclaiming Education Alliance published a draft Education Bill, presented at an open meeting at the House of Commons on 25 February, which significantly strengthened its position on academies, stating, 'Return all academies to maintained status so that these proposals apply to all schools. All schools should have the same rights and responsibilities and the same level of autonomy'.[7] The logic of this position, though it isn't drawn out, is that academies would be no different from other local authority schools and there would be an end to control by chains. But this too had no effect. Labour's manifesto continued to promote academies, chains and free schools and made no mention of reintegrating them into a democratised and resourced local authority system.

The strategy for influencing the Labour leadership adopted by the Reclaiming Education Alliance was to publish the '7 Principles' and related policy material, hold some conferences, and arrange meetings with the politicians leading Labour's education policy with the aim of persuading them to adopt the '7 Principles'. This strategy of persuasion and negotiation was of course not the only strategy available. It could have been complemented by an active campaign around the country to mobilise public and professional support through public meetings and the setting up of local groups or local branches. The many Education Question Time events organised by the NUT across the country, some of them attracting audiences of over a hundred, show what was possible. But this was eschewed by the Reclaiming Education Alliance. No such mobilisation and organisation of support was attempted. It is difficult to escape

the conclusion that the balance sheet of the strategy pursued by the Reclaiming Education Alliance is one of complete failure. It had little or no influence on the Labour leadership and neither did it build public support.

The Education Policies of the Labour Leadership Candidates

In *The Guardian* on 7 July Fiona Millar, a *Guardian* education journalist and a leading member of the Reclaiming Education Alliance, reported the education policies of the candidates in response to interviews by her. Commenting on them later, Millar concluded that 'I certainly didn't find them ideologically opposed on any of the big questions'.[8] But the interview responses demonstrate the opposite: on a number of key issues there is a fundamental division between Jeremy Corbyn, who marks out a radical change of direction from current Labour policy, and the other three candidates, who represent continuity with Labour's election manifesto and by and large accept the architecture of the Tory school system.[9]

Take what should be a defining issue of Labour policy: the abolition of selective schools (by making future admissions non-selective). Corbyn is unequivocal: 'I would want all grammars to become comprehensives and to end the 11-plus where it still exists'. Yvette Cooper and Liz Kendall think existing grammar schools should remain. Andy Burnham wants to leave it to local parental ballots to decide. It is strange that Millar, as vice-chair of the 'Comprehensive Future' campaign, chose not to see this as an ideological divide between the candidates.

Or take another pillar of Tory policy, academies and free schools. Again, Corbyn is unequivocally opposed: 'I am not a supporter of the principle of free schools and academies, and I would want to bring them all back into the local authority orbit'. Burnham and Cooper avoid the issue entirely. Kendall says nothing about academies but would retain what she calls 'good' free schools.

What about local democracy? Burnham, Cooper and Kendall all advocate a minimal level of local oversight or accountability, extending no further than school place planning, admissions, standards and exclusions. Only Corbyn supports the restoration of a local authority system, including integrating academies and free schools.

In August Andy Burnham announced, presumably in response to pressure from Corbyn's manifesto, that he would 'phase out' academies and free schools, rather than leave it to parental ballots.[10] However, his only specific proposal was to restore control over admissions to local authorities. So in other respects there would be no change: academies and free schools would remain outside local authorities, accountable only to the unelected Regional Commissioners put in place by Michael Gove, and with chains left in control.

Far from restoring the role of local authorities, Cooper actually said she was in favour of education being handed over to the new Combined Authorities. This would mean even less local accountability than there is now, because while local authorities' role in education is accountable to elected local

government through the local council, there is no equivalent elected assembly at Combined Authority level.

Two key instruments of Tory control, which dominate teachers' lives, are testing and Ofsted, so it is vital that Labour has a clear alternative policy. Corbyn stands for fewer tests and says bluntly, 'Reform or refound Ofsted'. In contrast, the other three candidates all avoid the issue. Finally, Corbyn is the only candidate to comment on teachers' pay and conditions: a pay rise for teachers and restoration of the national pay system.

In summary, there is general agreement among the candidates that a Labour government should reject the Tories' narrow curriculum and should value 'vocational' subjects, but on these other key issues one candidate, Jeremy Corbyn, stands out. His policies are concrete, they are what the majority of teachers want, they would be electorally popular and they are entirely practical. All it would need by a Labour government is the political will. The other three candidates by and large accept the framework of the school system that Gove created.[11]

A New Strategy, a New Programme: a social movement for education

By the time this issue of *FORUM* is published the outcome of the Labour leadership election will be known, but at the time of writing there are two scenarios for Labour education policy – change, represented by Corbyn, or continuity, represented by the other three candidates. But whoever wins, the principal task facing advocates of progressive policies in education will be the same: to defend education against the continuing Tory offensive. It hardly needs saying that the government will not be influenced by rational argument and evidence, as the case of academies has repeatedly shown. As Howard Stevenson argues in his editorial in the last issue of *FORUM*, 'Public education needs a mass movement in which teachers, parents and students mobilise around an education system that places the values of social justice and democracy at its heart'.[12] While Jeremy Corbyn has a consistent track record of support for active campaigns on education, as on other issues, there is no indication that the other candidates would actively support teachers, parents and local communities who will be campaigning against Tory policies over the next five years.

A mass public movement is necessary not just to resist the Tory offensive but also to transform the education policies of the Labour Party and a future Labour government. The strategy pursued by the Reclaiming Education Alliance, based on aiming to influence the Labour leadership through persuasion, had little or no effect. If one of the candidates of the Labour establishment, Burnham, Cooper or Kendall, wins the leadership election, they will continue essentially the same policy agenda and will be just as immune to persuasion. Only mass public pressure for more progressive policies is likely to change their trajectory.

But building a popular movement is equally necessary if Corbyn wins, in order to drive forward his programme for a new National Education Service [13] and prevent it being sabotaged by the Labour establishment (aided by a relentless right-wing media). In short, a new, mass, progressive, popular political-educational project is needed: a social movement for education.

What do we mean by a social movement for education? In our research into local campaigns against academies Ken Jones and I have drawn on social movement theory.[14] Our analysis can be applied more generally to campaigns in education and is, I think, worth revisiting in the current context, but here I will reduce it to two defining and intertwined elements: programme and strategy.

By 'programme' I mean a process of contested policy framing in which dominant discourses and policies are challenged and reframed. (Eddie Playfair's proposal in the last issue of *FORUM* for a new education Great Debate is a case in point.[15]) There is, of course, a rich repertoire of alternative policies to draw on from within the broad progressive education movement, but a particularly compelling set of proposals is embodied in the Donaldson Report, *Successful Futures*, for education in Wales, published in February 2015.[16] I am going to quote from the report in some detail because it represents radical and progressive policy in the process of actually being put into practice.

A New Direction for Education in Wales: an inspiring model for England[17]

Imagine a country where education is based on trust in schools and teachers. Where the school curriculum is based on broad areas of learning and experience, not on discrete subjects, and a continuum of learning, not divided up into stages. Where assessment is based mainly on teachers' formative assessment, with standardised testing kept to a minimum. A country where there are no punitive inspections, no academies, no free schools.

This is the future of education in Wales if the Donaldson Report, *Successful Futures*, is implemented by the Welsh government. The immediate response of Huw Lewis, the minister for education and skills, is very positive: 'To my mind it is, by far, the most exciting and thought-provoking set of proposals for Welsh education for a generation and truly deserves our attention'.[18] The report by Professor Graham Donaldson has gained cross-party support from the Welsh Conservatives, Welsh Liberal Democrats and Plaid Cymru, and it has been welcomed by all the teachers' and head teachers' unions in Wales.

A Rejection of a Narrow Prescriptive Curriculum and High-stakes Testing

The report begins by rejecting the existing model of curriculum and assessment in damning terms which accurately echo the views of most teachers about policy in England.

> The high degree of prescription and detail in the national curriculum, allied to increasingly powerful accountability mechanisms, has tended to create a culture within which the creative role of the school has become diminished and the professional contribution of the workforce underdeveloped. The extent of legislative control and associated accountability mechanisms, seen as necessary at the time, have inhibited professionalism, agility and responsiveness in dealing with emerging issues, and have forced too-frequent political intervention in non-strategic matters. For many teachers and schools the key task has become to implement external expectations faithfully, with a consequent diminution of local creativity and responsiveness to the needs of children and young people. Partly as a consequence, much of the curriculum as experienced by children and young people has become detached from its avowed aims and too focused on the short-term. At its most extreme, the mission of primary schools can almost be reduced to the teaching of literacy and numeracy and of secondary schools to preparation for qualifications. (p. 10)

The report continues:

> There was a recurring view that the curriculum had become unwieldy, overcrowded and atomistic, and that it was inhibiting opportunities to apply learning more holistically in 'real life' situations, or to use that learning creatively to address issues that cross subject boundaries. A curriculum defined largely in terms of discrete subjects can become directly translated into a timetable within which important cross-curricular learning can be marginalised. In addition, separate subject planning, combined with a narrow interpretation of how best to develop literacy and numeracy skills, was sometimes inadvertently resulting in a narrow and repetitive set of experiences. (p. 35)

We are accustomed in England to new policies just being announced with no justification in terms of underlying pedagogic principles. *Successful Futures* is different. It begins with a set of principles of curriculum design (p. 14). The curriculum from age 3 to 16 will be organised into 'Areas of Learning and Experience': Expressive arts; Health and well-being; Humanities; Languages, literacy and communication; Mathematics and numeracy; and Science and technology, each with a 'core of disciplinary or instrumental knowledge' (p. 38). Each will encompass three 'Cross-curriculum Responsibilities' that should be the responsibility of all teachers: literacy; numeracy; and digital competence.

Education for active citizenship is a theme of the new curriculum.

> Engaged citizenship requires the kind of understanding of democracy, human rights, interdependence, sustainability and social justice that should inform their personal views and sense of

> commitment ... Active citizenship requires the confidence and resilience that underpin the ability to exert influence and participate in vigorous debate. That confidence should be built on a strong base of knowledge and respect for evidence. (p. 28)

Assessment of Learning Led by Teachers

Teachers in England are all too familiar with the dominance of assessment by accountability. In contrast, the report stresses that 'Assessment arrangements should give priority to their formative role in teaching and learning' (p. 77). It recognises that 'learning is crucially affected by how progress and outcomes are assessed and how the results of such assessments are used ... Where assessment becomes dominated by accountability processes, as can happen, the consequences for children and young people's learning can be damaging' (p. 6).

It also recognises that 'Teacher assessment, which allows a wide range of learning to be covered, should remain as the main vehicle for assessment before qualifications' (p. 80) and that 'External, standardised testing provides important benchmarking information and should be used in combination with school tests and teacher assessment. Its frequency should be kept to a minimum in view of its impact on the curriculum and teaching and learning' (p. 80). Further, 'Local and national policies and practices for assessment should be carefully designed to be as light-touch as possible, while giving sufficient information to assess progress, and avoid unnecessary bureaucracy' (p. 83).

In England, data is collected every year about every school to measure and judge the performance of students and teachers. But not in Wales: 'The Welsh Government should no longer gather information about children and young people's performance on a school-by-school basis but should monitor performance in key aspects of the curriculum through annual testing on a sampling basis' (p. 103).

Putting the Report into Practice

Teachers in England are used to new policies being imposed without adequate planning and support. In contrast, the report says, 'The proposals flowing from this Review are radical and fundamental, and imply deep and enduring change. The scale of the changes will take time to implement and this suggests that the changes should be carefully phased in as part of a comprehensive implementation plan' (p. 93). Central teams will work on developing the basic curriculum structure in the report, and 'there needs to be an extensive, well-coordinated and sustained professional learning programme that involves all leaders, teachers and other practitioners' (p. 96).

Following the publication of the report in February, Huw Lewis, the minister for education, has opened up a serious debate and consultation process:

> I cannot emphasise enough that your ongoing participation in the Great Debate will be critical to shaping our new curriculum and

> assessment arrangements. To get this right everyone must play their part in building our new school system so please be assured that this is not a one-off exercise. I will be coming back to you throughout the process to consult, test and refine our proposals to make sure that Welsh education is seen as leading the way.[19]

A Progressive Alternative to Both the Tories and Labour in England

The teaching unions have welcomed the report, but there are some concerns. One is the pressure that can be exerted by the Tory government. As Gareth Evans warns:

> More high-stakes testing, tighter budgets and an expansion of controversial 'free schools' and 'academies' will take precedence across the border and operate in stark contrast to the policies being championed by the Welsh Government.
>
> Relations are certain to become increasingly strained and Welsh Labour will need to be on its guard.
>
> Despite devolution, the Education Secretary arguably still holds sway over GCSEs and A-levels and is ultimately responsible for the setting of pay and conditions in Welsh schools.
>
> It will be up to Education Minister Huw Lewis and his team to fight Wales' corner. The coming months and years will be a real test of the Welsh Government's mettle.[20]

In addition, there are concerns about whether there will be enough money made available to fund the professional development of teachers, including time for preparing for the new curriculum and assessment model, and whether Estyn, the Welsh version of Ofsted, will undergo the same radical reform as the curriculum and assessment model it will be responsible for engaging with.

Finally, the most important issue facing education in Wales, as in England, is social inequality. It is not prominent in the Donaldson Report, and of course it requires radical change in policy beyond education, though what can be said is that the report's proposals provide a favourable policy framework for tackling it within schools.

The Donaldson Report marks out a progressive agenda for curriculum and assessment in schools in Wales which is very different from that of the Conservative government in England, and significantly more radical than the policies of the Labour Party for education in England. The implementation of the Donaldson Report in Wales will provide a tangible alternative, one close enough for cross-border visits and information gathering which can inspire a social movement for education in England.

The developments in Wales also raise questions about the use of the term 'Global Education Reform Movement' (or 'GERM') as a rather homogeneous concept for education under neo-liberal capitalism. Howard Stevenson suggests in his editorial in the last issue of *FORUM* that this is 'a neoliberal age in which

national borders are becoming less and less relevant. National governments still matter, but there are powerful commercial interests that matter more'.[21]

Yet, clearly, national borders within one capitalist state, the United Kingdom, demarcate very different education systems within its four national components. The explanation lies in a distinction between what the economic requirements of the school system are in terms of the formation of the future labour force, and the political exigencies in play in terms of the ideology of the party of government. We have noted already the CBI's criticisms of examination policies in England. We can add its recent support for the NUT's report on how schools have become exam factories.[22] The basic requirements of employers from the school system in terms of 'employability' are summarised in the European Commission's framework of eight key competences: communication in mother tongue; communication in foreign languages; mathematical competence; basic skills in science and technology; digital skills; the capacity to learn how to learn; social and civic competences; a sense of initiative and enterprise; and cultural awareness and expression.[23] For the Organisation for Co-operation and Development, 'this set of skills and competences becomes the very core of what teachers and schools should care about'.[24] The agenda of the Donaldson Report for Wales, while representing a progressive political alternative to that of the Tory government in England, still conforms to the economic agenda of capital for the formation in schools of its future workforce.

Building a Social Movement: the question of strategy

A radical progressive programme for education is of little use without a credible strategy to make significant and ongoing progress towards achieving it. What can we learn from previous campaigns and social movements in education? Collective struggles in education in England (and I am referring here particularly to the past four decades) represent a hidden history which has largely been neglected, even by those on the left. Disinterring this history is a vital task because it reveals the agency of teachers and communities: their ability to collaborate to make policy and to construct themselves as collective agents of change.

Campaigning for Gender and Racial Equality

The most significant struggles which have taken place in education in England since the introduction of comprehensive education in the 1960s have been on the issues of gender and racial equality during the 1970s and the first half of the 1980s, between the introduction of comprehensive education and the defeat of the teachers' strike, followed by the 1988 Act. Madeleine Arnot has provided one of the few analyses of what she too notes is a hidden history [25]:

> in recent reassessments of the New Right and conservative educational reforms it is rare to find anything other than lip service

> to the significance of feminist and black struggles in education. (p. 461)

It was a grass-roots movement by teachers to make their own curriculum reforms, influenced by the wider women's movement and Black and anti-racist movement, and supported by their unions, in particular by the NUT.

> Initiatives on gender and race equality have largely grown out of teachers' and grass-roots community struggles to reform education. They represent, therefore, an attempt at promoting change from 'within' schools, through 'bottom up' strategies rather than the 'top down' approach normally associated with social engineering. (p. 460)

Within the broad movement the more radical currents recognised the limits of consensual change and saw the need for a strategy of collective campaigning based on strategic alliances between teachers and wider forces. On gender, anti-sexist education was a dimension of the women's movement. On racial equality, a strategic alliance was constructed between teachers (in their large majority, white) and organisations of the Black community:

> Radical feminist, socialist and black teachers campaigned for sex and race equality politics, along with black community groups and teacher unions. (pp. 455-456)

The campaigns on gender and race, strenuously opposed by the Conservative government of the time, achieved significant success: while their goals still remain to be fully met today, they transformed the discourse of education in ways which have now become widely accepted.

Campaigning against Academies

In the period since then the issue that has stimulated the greatest amount of public campaigning by teachers and the highest level of popular involvement in education policy by parents and communities has been opposition to academies. In the decade and a half since the launch of the Academies policy there have been numerous local campaigns involving the construction of broad alliances of teachers and parents, together with other labour movement and community forces. They are not just defensive struggles; they typically raise fundamental democratic questions about who schools belong to and what rights parents have.

Many local campaigns against academies have involved strike action by teachers. Should that be part of the broad social movement for education that we need to build? There are some in the centre-left education milieu who think not, such as Fiona Millar in her column in *The Guardian* on 14 April. The headline is 'Strikes are no Solution to the Funding Crisis. Let's Join Forces Instead'. Millar says 'they pit teachers against parents'. But there is ample

evidence (see the Anti-Academies website for numerous examples) of local campaigns against academies which have done precisely the opposite – they have brought together teachers, including those taking strike action, with campaigning parents. It is inconceivable that effective resistance to the Tory attacks on education over the next five years can be built without the need for strike action where appropriate, and with public support for it. Strike action by teachers has to be one legitimate element in the new strategic orientation.

Learning Lessons from Chicago

The ability to build a powerful social movement in education based on strike action by teachers coupled with mass community support and campaigning has been most recently demonstrated by the Chicago teachers' strike in 2012 against the neo-liberal education policies of Rahm Emanuel, the mayor of Chicago. At stake was the closure of a large number of schools, mainly in Black and Latino neighbourhoods, and their replacement by privately run charter schools. The struggle has been a potent source of inspiration for education activists in England. It is the subject of an article in the last issue of *FORUM*: 'Learning Lessons from Chicago'.[26]

The most detailed account of the campaign is Micah Uetricht 's 2014 book, *Strike for America: Chicago teachers against austerity*.[27] The Chicago Teachers' Union (CTU) strategy exemplified 'social movement unionism' – 'a more militant unionism with close ties to communities to build a broad educational justice movement in Chicago' (p. 14). Uetricht quotes one CTU organiser:

> I don't think it is an overstatement to say that the overwhelming majority of CTU members really believe that this was a strike against the neoliberal corporate education reform agenda; I really do believe this was a strike about the future of education in black and brown neighbourhoods in particular, about the future of public education. (p. 10)

Teacher activists established relationships with community groups throughout the city, including in African American, Mexican and Puerto neighbourhoods. Another commentator, Robert Bartlett, notes that 'Leading up to the strike and afterwards, parent organizations like Raise Your Hand, 19th Ward Parents, and Parents 4 Teachers – all predominantly white – vocally opposed the mayor's policies and spoke out for adequate resources for all Chicago schools'.[28] Uetricht reports the level of popular support:

> during the strike, polls showed that the public – and parents of colour in particular – supported the teachers' union by overwhelming numbers. The first poll released showed that among registered voters in Chicago, 47 percent supported the strike while 39 percent did not by the fourth day, another poll showed similar numbers but noted that 63 percent of African Americans and 65

> percent of Latinos – in a city where 91 percent of the public school district is made up of children of colour – supported the strike. (p. 70)

He concludes:

> The CTU transformed itself from an organisation representing the narrow economic self-interest of teachers into the principal body fighting for educational justice for CPS [Chicago Public Schools] students – both in the eyes of the public, which came to trust the union's education reform agenda over the mayor's, and in the eyes of its own members. (p. 78)

Bartlett notes that immediately after the strike, Emanuel warned that up to 200 schools would have to be closed. The mayor's threats did not go unchallenged, and the CTU led a campaign to link parents, communities and educators in combined opposition to the CPS plan. Over 20,000 people attended hearings to oppose the closings, the largest number of people ever to do so.

What these campaigns in England and the USA begin to demonstrate is what a social movement for education based on an alliance of teachers, parents and communities looks like. They comprise a combination of programme and strategy to mobilise popular and professional pressure on political leaders, involving a range of tactics including teachers' strikes with public support.

Building a Social Movement for Education: the question of the Labour Party

There is one other exceptional feature of the Chicago teachers' campaign which I want to draw attention to. The labour and progressive movement in the USA has historically largely relied on a strategy of attempting to influence the Democratic Party, both from outside and from within. But it was a Democrat mayor, Rahm Emanuel, who was implementing the neo-liberal policies in Chicago, and with the support of the Democratic government. In 2014 the CTU took the unprecedented decision to stand its president, Karen Lewis, against Emanuel as an Independent candidate for mayor in the 2015 city elections, not just to put pressure on the existing political leadership but to replace it. Serious illness forced her to withdraw and the CTU made a fall-back decision to endorse Jesús 'Chuy' Garcia, who stood as an independent Democrat against Emanuel, the official Democrat candidate. In addition, the union endorsed four teachers standing for city council aldermen. In April 2015 Emanuel was re-elected with 56% of the vote but Garcia got a remarkable 44%, and one of the four CTU teachers was elected to the council. These are unprecedented developments in post-war US history. A video by Larry Duncan documents this remarkable campaign. As Duncan says, 'The video shows a labor movement in the early stages of a political transformation'.[29]

What relevance does this have for us in England? While recognising the differences between the contexts of the USA and England, there is, I think, a suggestive parallel. I have referred to the traditional strategy of the centre-left in education of reliance on influencing the Labour leadership through persuasion and negotiation. In an article in August 2015 Owen Jones, a leading left commentator and Labour Party member, notes that 'Social democracy across Europe has accepted the underlying principles of austerity and it is crumbling in multiple directions'.[30] He argues that from the 'New Labourite' mainstream in the United Kingdom 'you'll struggle to find any coherent vision', and continues:

> The thoughtful Blairite blogger Stephen Bush was asked on Twitter: 'Have we reached a point where the purposes for which the Labour party was created have largely been achieved?' His response – and not to damn him, because he implicitly challenges New Labourites to come up with a reason to exist – summed up why his fellow travellers have rendered themselves politically superfluous: 'Arguably'.

Jones emphasises: 'the very founding basis of Labour is "arguably" redundant, according to this prominent Blairite writer'. Jones's conclusion is as follows: 'that "social democracy" or the "centre-left" or whatever you want to call it has lost its purpose and is disintegrating in favour of other political forces seems pretty indisputable'.

This hypothesis – let us call it no more than that – has fundamental implications for the progressive movement in education. It implies that the whole historical tradition of progressive reform in English education for which the Labour Party has stood, and which reached its peak and more or less its culmination in the (partial) achievement of the comprehensive school (with some subsequent addenda such as Sure Start), has substantially come to an end. Certainly, the education policies of the Labour manifesto and of the three establishment candidates in the leadership elections provide convincing support for that hypothesis. On the other hand, does Wales, with a Labour government, offer a counter-argument? It would be valuable to investigate the determinants of the Welsh education reforms, and the extent to which they might be specific to the Welsh context. And does the extraordinary wave of support for Jeremy Corbyn signal that there is still potential for radical reform in the Labour Party?

If Jeremy Corbyn becomes the leader of the Labour Party it will transform the possibility of building a broad popular social movement for progressive, democratic and socially just education based on, and filling out, his policy positions. But even if he doesn't win that potential is still there, energised by the tens of thousands of people inside and outside the Labour Party whom he has inspired. The question for the forces around the Reclaiming Education Alliance is whether they will reassess their strategy and commit themselves to joining and building that new social movement for education.

Notes

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[3] John Cridland (2015) Speech to the Sunday Times Festival of Education, 19 June. http://news.cbi.org.uk/news/john-cridland-festival-of-education-speech/

[4] Martin Allen & Patrick Ainley (2015) https://radicaled.wordpress.com/2015/06/19/cbis-curriculum-proposals-a-step-forward-but-big-questions-remain/

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[8] Fiona Millar (2015) The Labour Leadership and Schools. Local Schools Network, 24 July. http://www.localschoolsnetwork.org.uk/2015/07/the-labour-leadership-and-schools/#sthash.20QNcDjX.dpuf

[9] An earlier version of this analysis appeared on the Birmingham Campaign for State Education website on 13 July: https://birminghamcase.wordpress.com/2015/07/13/what-are-the-education-policies-of-the-labour-leadership-candidates/

[10] Andy Burnham Sets Sights on Education and Rail Revolutions in Manifesto, *The Guardian*, 5 August. http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/aug/05/andy-burnham-sets-sights-on-education-and-rail-revolutions-in-manifesto

[11] Remarkably, as I write, well over a month since the *Guardian* interviews with the leadership candidates, there is not a word on either the Campaign for State Education (CASE) or Socialist Educational Association (SEA) websites (including Education for Everyone) about the leadership election – let alone an acknowledgement of Corbyn as the candidate with the policies closest to theirs.

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[13] Jeremy Corbyn (2015) Education is a Collective Good – it's Time for a National Education Service, 27 July. http://labourlist.org/2015/07/education-is-a-collective-good-its-time-for-a-national-education-service/

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[15] Eddie Playfair (2015) Market Madness: condition critical, *FORUM*, 57(2), 213-225. http://dx.doi.org/10.15730/forum.2015.57.2.213

[16] Graham Donaldson (2015) *Successful Futures. Independent Review of Curriculum and Assessment Arrangements in Wales*, 25 February. http://gov.wales/docs/dcells/publications/150317-successful-futures-en.pdf

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[19] Ibid.

[20] Gareth Evans (2015) What Election Result Means for Welsh Education, 9 May. http://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/news-opinion/gareth-evans-what-election-result-9219937

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[26] Carol Caref & Kristine Mayle (2015) Learning Lessons from Chicago, *FORUM*, 57(2), 167-178. http://dx.doi.org/10.15730/forum.2015.57.2.167

[27] Micah Uetricht (2014) *Strike for America: Chicago teachers against austerity.* London: Verso.

[28] Robert Bartlett (2014) Two Years after the CTU Strike, *Against the Current*, 173 (November/December). https://solidarity-us.org/node/4280

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