
The Teachers' Action, 1984-1986: learning lessons from history

RICHARD RIESER

ABSTRACT Thirty years ago teachers in the NUT and NASUWT were involved in a protracted industrial dispute. The outcome of the dispute had huge implications for education policy in the years that followed (most obviously the introduction of the 1987 Education Bill), and has important lessons for teacher unionism today. The author offers a personal reflection on his involvement in that historic dispute, and connects the struggles of 1986 with those happening in 2016.

Introduction

I was late coming into teaching, having done postgraduate social geography research and a spell in industry. I started teaching humanities and geography at Hackney Downs Boys' Secondary School in 1978. The union in the school to join was the NUT. Having carried out the bulk of my postgraduate certificate in education placement at the school, I was offered a job.

As a socialist committed to fairness, equality and democracy, I had always seen the importance of building from the grass roots in my workplace against the false realities of the capitalist media and consumer society. This meant organising the rank and file in my trade union against the dead hand of the trade union bureaucracy. As a teacher, I was committed to creating understanding, creativity and opportunities for all my students. I was committed to comprehensive education and teacher-developed resources and assessment which could engage our students. I saw no reason why they all could not benefit from a curriculum which helped them to understand the world, how it worked as both a physical and social entity and to develop the requisite knowledge and skills to achieve this. Following the raising of the school-leaving age to 16 a few years earlier, there had been a range of curriculum expansion, with the introduction of the Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE) and much curriculum development, through organisations like the

Schools' Council and teacher involvement in Exam Boards. I was fortunate in finding myself at Hackney Downs, with a liberal head, John Kemp, and a staff that were engaged and wanted to develop the curriculum. The lower school teaching developed many innovative practices, merging history, geography, English, drama, religious education and social studies into humanities and team teaching. We developed a spiral humanities curriculum for Years 1, 2 and 3 relevant to the large ethnic minority population, focusing on world history and geography. This approach attracted and retained many radical teachers, but on arrival I was surprised there was little engagement with the union, which was dominated by teachers from various left groups (left and left groups in this article means politically to the left of the Communist Party and right-wing Labour Party) with what I call 'revolutionary politics', i.e. primarily engaged in passing resolutions rather than activity.

The Hackney Teachers' Association (HTA) monthly meetings had a wide array of politically committed left inclined teachers attending, but few ordinary and non-aligned members and representatives. The officers were elected annually by a ballot of all members in the schools and had for the previous six years been dominated by the Broad Left (an alliance of Labour Right and the Communist Party). This was also the ruling current of national officers and executive members in the union. This tendency attracted and supported those with right-wing and conservative (with a small 'c') ideas. I did not know this at the time, but I saw that they seemed to operate in a very bureaucratic and inefficient manner, hardly challenging the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) or the employers through the Burnham Committee.

In my probationary year, the ILEA, faced with falling secondary rolls, proposed the closure of 5 of our 15 secondary schools. I was instrumental, with a few other teachers, in starting a campaign, 'Hackney Schools Stay OK'. One of the main arguments for this reorganisation was that the schools needed six forms of entry to guarantee a sixth form. We challenged this on the basis that there was not a fixed pool of ability and that with smaller classes and more individual support, many more students could progress to benefit from sixth-form education. We put forward the idea of keeping all 15 schools and their current staffing with fewer students. This was very popular and widely supported by parents, the local Labour party and trade unions. At a large public meeting with Peter Newsam, Chief Education Officer of the ILEA, a vast majority supported this view and it was adopted as the policy of the HTA. But the HTA officers and the Trades Council met with Newsam in private and put forward a 10-school model compromise. This was eventually adopted, leading to an uneven distribution of schools across the borough and the loss of many posts. However, on the back of the campaign I was elected in 1980 to be an HTA officer and conference delegate. I was then the only one with left politics on the HTA Committee.

I set up a School Cuts Sub-Committee and organised meetings and protests with school representatives, parents and governors. This led to a wide range of politically unaligned representatives, especially in primary schools,

mainly women, getting involved in the union. In 1981 we ran a slate of candidates in the local branch elections on an anti-cuts platform and were all elected and I was in turn elected General Secretary. This meant going against the views of teachers in the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), which I had been in for 10 years. Similarly, at school I challenged the SWP incumbent for the post of school Union Rep – and won. Over the next three years we doubled the number of NUT members to 62, through taking up their issues and carefully explaining the wider issues in education politics. This was not difficult, as the newly elected Thatcher-led Conservative Government was imposing ideologically driven cuts on schools.

Locally, the ILEA was the largest education authority in Europe and had just been taken over by Labour. It had many progressive policies, especially the equalisation of resources across Inner London which meant the richer boroughs paid more in the rate precept, a feature developed by the Board of Education in the 1890s, taken over by the London County Council in 1902 and the ILEA in 1964, based on the idea that deprivation could be overcome by well-resourced education.

In Hackney we developed an effective collaborative team of officers and committee members, based in a wide range of schools, and achieved many local victories, including a campaign for the removal of asbestos from schools which went on to become London and national policy; and setting up a caucus for black teachers, who comprised most of my case work – an early example of institutional racism, which later became Inner London-wide and national.[1] However, we were just one of 12 associations that made up the Inner London Division–Inner London Teachers' Association (ILTA). The officers of ILTA and our two executive members negotiated teachers' terms and conditions with our employer, the ILEA. As the largest membership union this meant we effectively negotiated for all Inner London Teachers (some 26,000) and this seemed very remote to the experience of classroom teachers. ILTA was dominated by the Broad Left (1 left executive member) and had a cosy relationship with the ILEA. This meant various groups of teachers did not have the same terms and conditions – part-timers and supply teachers, home tutors, those in off-site units and black teachers. They all seemed to be treated as an expendable buffer to keep full-time teachers in a comfortable position. It was not that comfortable as a programme of teacher compulsory redeployment took place each year which forced teachers to move from the school and community they knew to the other side of London. I ran with two members of the Socialist Teachers Alliance for the London officers. After a ballot-rigging scandal by members of the Broad Left, sorted out by the Electoral Reform Society, I was elected General Secretary of ILTA, John Bangs was President and Carole Regan, Treasurer. This, together with Bernard Regan as executive, gave us a majority of 4:3 on the ILTA Officers Committee.

As General Secretary, I was able to stop negotiations on a London Contract that the Broad Left had been negotiating, where they were selling conditions, such as not doing lunch-time duties and doing cover in exchange

for non-contact time and other terms. We also made a number of gains for the marginalised groups of teachers mentioned above, including permanent contracts for all part-time teachers. But the political clouds were gathering: the 1984 miners' strike, which we fully supported, rate capping and reductions in rate support grant, the abolition of the ILEA/Greater London Council (GLC) and the crazed and unpopular ideas of Keith Joseph as Secretary of State for Education.

The NUT, as the largest teachers' union, led negotiations on the teachers' panel with the employers – county councils, metropolitan authorities who employed teachers and the Department for Education and Science. This committee was known as Burnham. Teachers' pay had fallen a long way behind other professions, inflation was in double figures, despite uplifts following the Houghton inquiry of 1974 and Clegg in 1979/80 which restored teachers' pay levels. The discussions of the 1984 pay claim met with a resolute offer of 3% and no referral to arbitration from the employers. In the past we had done well from arbitration. The employers had a cash limit of 3% on the Rate Support Grant from the Government. So Doug McAvoy, General Secretary, and the Broad Left-dominated Executive engaged in some 'Duke of York' tactics, a one-day strike on 9 May 1984, refusal to cover absences known in advance or after the first day, withdrawal of lunch-time and after-school duties, refusal to attend meetings and withdrawal of good will from the second day of the summer term with the aim of going to arbitration. The NUT calculated that, by 1983, teachers' salaries had fallen behind by some 30%, and many teachers felt themselves trapped – one-quarter on the top of the bottom two scales. In addition, the local education authorities, as employers, were pressing for changes in conditions of employment and the salaries structure.

I found increasingly, as a London officer committed to a rank-and-file programme, that the other left officers were relating to the ILEA as a friendly employer because they were in the Labour Party and it was a Labour-run authority. The hard politics of Thatcher and the fact they were employers who had to cut their cloth to meet rate support grant settlements meant the differences between us opened up. We did force the ILEA with a strike on 6 November, supported by the NUT, which led to ILEA setting a budget with fewer cuts than had originally been proposed.

A number of teachers, dismayed by the closing down of Rank and File, which had been a successful left, grass-roots current in the union, set up Rank and File 83. Here we argued that we must have a big increase in salary and it must be flat rated to benefit the lower paid, rather than senior staff and heads. Rank and File 83 successfully organised around the NUT Conference at Easter 1985 and with other associations and left-wing groups defeated the executive salary policy for 1985, but left the conference without policy. A Special Salaries Conference was called in Scarborough where a £1200 flat claim was agreed with escalating action. The Miners' Strike was increasingly looking to be a parallel struggle against an intransigent government. We sought more ways of showing solidarity with a number of unofficial strikes in support of the miners

across many primary schools in Hackney, collecting increasing amounts of money and organising fund-raising socials. We produced a badge intertwining our initials, which proved very popular. As the pressure increased from the Government to get rid of the GLC, we worked for a joint day of action and through the South East Region of the Trades Union Congress (SERTUC) to open up a second public sector front against the Government. Unfortunately, our Executive would not go along with this approach.

The NUT leadership had misjudged what was at stake. The NUT held 14 official action ballots over the dispute. Locally in Hackney the ballot results were very strong with 14 schools out on strike for three days in the summer of 1985 to force the employers to go to arbitration. The No Cover action was very popular, but the primary school members were not happy withdrawing from meetings as this made their job harder. We had strike days that involved all members, held mass meetings and more members were getting involved. In the end, with a change on the employers' side due to local elections giving a Labour majority, they agreed to arbitration but the result was only a 5.1% increase in salaries. The NUT now said arbitration had failed. The Scarborough Conference (September) was followed by ballots for three half days of action. Some secondary school members were keen to stagger the action in five-minute blocks, forcing maximum disruption, but this left primary school members isolated as they took half-day strikes, so in Hackney it was decided the secondary schools would also strike half days. The new claim for 1986 included restructuring of salaries as well as a £1200 flat rate increase, which unified all teachers. The employers' side wanted to link this with conditions. The NASUWT members were taking action alongside NUT members, but their leadership was prepared to concede the link with conditions and Keith Joseph intervened and said the majority of teachers were no longer in the NUT (216,138 out of 441,536). This meant that after 60 years the NUT lost the Chair and Secretary of the teachers' side of Burnham. The way was clear for a historic sell-out. Bearing in mind the deal the Broad Left had been prepared to make with the ILEA until stopped by the Left, I think there were a number of NUT negotiators who were happy to sell conditions for a salary restructuring, particularly as it meant higher salaries for senior teachers and heads, of whom there were a number amongst the NUT Executive on Burnham. The settlement was 6.9%, end loaded to 7.5% in March 1986 with agreement to enter into discussions at ACAS on conditions. The flat rate was forgotten.

Another Special Salaries Conference was called in Blackpool on 18 January. Not one of the 400 amendments from local associations was calling for less action, but more. This time a group of primary teachers from Hackney produced a fantastic critique of the NUT Executive's poster supporting the deal the union was recommending. This went down very well at the Conference, but sectarianism on the left meant that a primary delegate who had helped write the poster was blocked from speaking and answering the Executive's scaremongering. The deal was accepted by a majority. There is every chance that if she had spoken as an ordinary classroom primary teacher it might have

been defeated. An escalation to exam boycotts was lost by 99,000 votes to 120,000. Amendments for all-out action were also put, attracting a significant number of delegates. If the leadership had argued for it, this would have been carried. The conference left us with a one-day strike, but the NUT attended the ACAS talks and following more pressure for the flat rate at the Easter 1986 Conference, part of the deal agreed was 5.5% or £519 for all teachers. In July there were four continuous days of negotiation in Coventry, which Hackney organised a coach of teachers to lobby. The new structure was agreed with a one-off payment of £750 on 1 January.[2] The No Cover action continued in many schools, but the feeling of betrayal by the NUT Executive and the leadership of NASUWT ran very deep.

During and shortly after this dispute, there took place a number of changes related to working conditions for schoolteachers, which were officially instituted by the Teachers' Pay and Conditions Act 1987. Among these, a major change was the abolition of the Burnham system. Kenneth Baker, who replaced Keith Joseph in May 1986, did not fully accept the Coventry Agreement. He wanted stronger differentials in the new salaries structure and instead announced forthcoming legislation, which eventually led to the Teachers' Pay and Conditions Act 1987. Repealing the Remuneration of Teachers Act 1965, the 1987 Act put an official end to the ... Burnham system, which had existed from its inception in 1919 as a national negotiating body operating on the basis of collective bargaining for schoolteachers. In addition, this Act gave new powers to the Secretary to issue regulations to determine pay and conditions of service. Now, the Secretary was empowered to make such provision 'as he thinks fit' (Section 3(1)) through statutory instruments. Teachers would be paid according to the terms of the order, and other prescribed conditions were to take effect as terms of their contracts. Obviously, this growing central control over teacher pay and conditions of employment reflects government strategies focusing on reducing the powers of Labour-dominated local authorities and trades unions.[3]

The failure to lead when tested was rooted in the Broad Left's approach, which had worked over the previous period when there had been a consensus about state education as a partnership between teachers' unions, local authorities and the Government. They, despite many speeches from the Left, failed to understand the full scope of the Thatcherite project to enforce a strict centralised regime on the public sector while getting it ready for privatisation. The forced introduction of a National Curriculum without any meaningful teacher involvement was a sign of the disdain in which the Government held teachers. The subsequent New Labour Government carried on Thatcher's uncompleted work with the introduction of teacher appraisal, not restoring negotiating rights, introducing Public Finance Initiative built schools, where

local authorities did not improve results replacing democratically controlled local authorities with private businesses, introducing more accountability measures, the literacy and numeracy hour and of course the first 200 academies.

The loss of the miners' strike had a hugely dispiriting impact on all unions, but solidarity action from the public sector unions during 1984/85 could have seen a different outcome. The failure to challenge the New Labour Government in any effective way from 1997 to 2010 is another sign of the weakness of the trade union leadership. The massive rank-and-file support for action during the 1984-86 dispute showed that with a strong and principled leadership, the outcome and recent history could have been different.

Now, in spring 2016, 30 years after the dispute ended, we are facing the full dismantling of state education with the government White Paper 'Educational Excellence Everywhere'. There is no evidence to support the claim that undemocratic Multi-Academy Trusts can improve education any more than local authorities. The NUT has voted to build a political campaign against the White Paper combined with industrial action: a one-day strike in the summer term and two days in the early autumn, to defend pay, terms and conditions of teachers and for the establishment of a national contract for all teachers, regardless of who employs them. It may be that other unions, including the head teachers' (NAHT) join that campaign. However, what is clear is that the NUT has changed, with the national officers and executive majority on the political left and many more associations involving their members, especially women and young members. The NUT, learning from the successful Chicago teachers' strike, knows it must mobilise parents and other allies in its fight. With a left-wing leadership of the Labour Party who support the NUT, hopefully the lessons of this 30 years of defeat and deconstruction of a quality teacher-led education system have been learned and with widespread support we can win!

Notes

- [1] Richard Rieser (1984) Five Years in Hackney NUT, *Race Sex and Class*, 14. ILEA.
- [2] Richard Pietraski (1987) Teachers' Action 1984-86, in Martin Lawn & Gerald Grace (Eds) *Teachers: the culture and politics of work*, ch. 9. London: Routledge
- [3] [http://opus.bath.ac.uk/18560/1/TEACHER_POLICY_IN_ENGLAND_\(UN_YONG_JEONG\).pdf](http://opus.bath.ac.uk/18560/1/TEACHER_POLICY_IN_ENGLAND_(UN_YONG_JEONG).pdf)

RICHARD RIESER has been an active member of the NUT since 1978. He was General Secretary of the Inner London Teachers' Association from 1983 to 1985 and an officer in Hackney NUT from 1980 to 1987. He is joint Equalities Officer, while providing training and consultancy through World of Inclusion (www.worldofinclusion.com). *Correspondence:* rlrieser@gmail.com

