



The Tory attack on education

By Christine Blower*

NIGEL de Gruchy and the union he leads, the NASUWT [National Association of Schoolmasters / Union of Women Teachers, the second biggest teachers' union], are campaigning to win members from the National Union of Teachers. The NUT is not in favour of vilifying children. De Gruchy's high profile, sensationalist media campaign will clearly make a recovery in the Ridings School more difficult. But it is not just De Gruchy and the NASUWT. The Tories and Labour are vying with each other for profile, despite having only minimal differences in policy.

In the run-up to the general election the government will look for groups to blame for the failure of their social, economic and education policies over the years. Teachers are an obvious target.

Education has suffered from the Tory policies of privatisation and their fetish of the market. They have attacked education as part of their overall attack on local government. They have systematically undermined the gains of comprehensive education, both ideologically and financially. The crucial turning point was the 1988 Education Reform Act.

Firstly, teachers were deskilled and deprofessionalised by the state imposed

National Curriculum. Secondly, the opportunities for teacher classroom co-operation were limited by increases in directed time, more paperwork and workload (and by school management), and the education service was fragmented by local management of schools (LMS) and grant maintained (GM) schools. Ridings is an example.

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In Calderdale, where the Ridings School is situated, there are six Local Education Authority (LEA) schools and nine grant maintained. This means that there is less money from the local authorities for the LEA schools: the LEA has to pay the GM schools a definite amount, plus their 15% for services formerly provided locally. It has meant less money for borough-wide behavioural support teams, and educational psychologists.

Calderdale also has grammar schools, which means that the children who go to

the Ridings and who went to the previous schools (Ovenden High and Holmfild) had already been classified as in the lower ability and socially deprived range. In the context of high unemployment and poor housing it is not surprising that the Ridings School has suffered.

Exclusions arise out of this situation. The NUT says that we would ballot teachers in a school where a member has been physically or verbally assaulted, usually on whether or not to refuse to teach the child. The NASUWT goes straight for strike action. This is not the right approach. It vilifies the child, and it does not address the underlying social causes of the violence in schools. It is true that some children do benefit from a fresh start in a new school, but 50% of children excluded at secondary level do not return to mainstream education.

In the present climate, the LEA has much less room for manoeuvre in terms of addressing the children's needs, because the curriculum can no longer be adapted for them. One-to-one provision and the involvement of outside agencies would go a long way to addressing this problem.

League tables put additional pressure on schools to solve difficulties by ejecting children. Class sizes generally need to be reduced, and more resources made avail-

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able to address all children's needs. Real comprehensive education is the answer. The Tories' two-tier system is the opposite of this.

Someone has truly said that education now is about valuing only what we can measure, rather than measuring what we value. The National Curriculum does not address educating the whole child. There is a lot of talk about the 'intrinsic worth' of the child, but this is plainly not what is going on in education.

The key to many things in education today is the state of the national union.

Last October's demonstration by teachers was big and successful, but it has not been seen by the leadership of the NUT as part of a specific campaign. They have indicated no obvious next step, unless you count a vague general election campaign. The left needs to focus on things like a national petition and on a lobby of Parliament in February. We need to involve our allies, most notably parents, in real campaigning work.

Trade union unity among teachers is important. There are two broad views about how we might go about achieving it. One is to create a union of all teachers, and the other is to create a union that includes all workers in schools and colleges. Issues of poaching members from UNISON arise in the second option. Many issues in schools do affect all workers there. Organising all workers on one site would strengthen the trend towards seeing the school as the basic unit of the union. Overall, that would have an atomising, not a unifying effect. It is better if we continue to be organised on the level of the employer, and this means the LEA.

Within the TUC, the NUT has had talks about talks about merging with the NASUWT. The recent actions of De Gruchy have not helped, and in any case they are resolutely opposed to unity with the NUT. The Broad Left within the NUT [the right-wing faction, the current leadership] would probably prefer to merge with the ATL [another, smaller, teachers' union], especially if they succeed in joining the TUC. But whatever our trade union structures, the same issues arise: how to defend members, how to put forward alternative policies in education. Here the balance between left and right in the NUT is crucial.

On the NUT Executive now the Broad Left have 21 out of 43 seats, the Left has 19, and there are two independents who generally vote with the leadership. One of these, Marion Darke, is to become a Regional Officer and so there will be a by-election in Outer London, which the Left may well win. The prospects are that by the

conference at Easter 1998 the Left will have a majority on the Executive and be in a position to lead the union.

The 'Left' on the Executive are members of the two organised left caucuses, the STA and the CDFU, of both, or of neither. They share a common perspective of active trade unionism and agree on the need for the union leadership to adhere to conference policy. They are not, like the leadership, for a do-nothing policy until Labour wins a general election, nor do they believe that Labour will provide all the solutions to the problems of education.

Many of the differences on the left are about personalities, but clearly we should unite on a common platform on what to do in the union, and not be put off by differences on wider political issues in Britain or internationally. Rank and file movements in the unions should minimally be for union democracy and for fighting policies which are delivered by members' action.

In the CDFU, we have been accused of being "syndicalists", but we should unashamedly insist on addressing the immediate concerns of teachers.

If the Left stands to win a majority, we must have a properly worked out strategy by the time we do. Here the Executive members have an important role. We need to discuss how to campaign for what members have voted for, how to involve members in taking action, and how the union fits around this. Many of the committees in the union are not accessible to ordinary members or even to Left Executive members. These need to be opened up, or, if necessary, restructured. A rules revision conference should review union organisation, and look at the way officials work. I would personally want to expand the role of lay officials and include many of the local activists in union structures.

There is, unfortunately, a general trend right across the labour movement of lower participation. The STA has around 500 members and the CDFU around 100, and although these are generally the backbone of activists within the union, it's a paradox that the Left is now better represented on the Executive when its base has shrunk. A united, democratic Left should campaign and fight for members. It is not just about being accountable to a caucus; it is also and fundamentally about delivering on the promises we made to members when they elected us to the Executive.

Left victory in 1997 would result in incremental rather than dramatic change in the short term. We should use existing people on the Executive if they are willing to support our project. But the serious Left can afford to make no deals with the "Broad Left"!