The NUT campaigns for Fair Pensions for All
What has been your response to Michael Gove’s proposals of 5th December 2012 to dismantle the national pay structure and introduce performance related pay for all teachers?

The proposals from the School Teachers’ Review Body, accepted by Michael Gove, are the biggest change to teachers’ pay in living memory. As one would expect, the NUT has voiced our opposition to these proposals. We are now engaged in a series of briefings and rallies with our members all over the country to both ensure that members understand the seriousness of the situation and to gauge members’ attitudes towards further industrial action.

How will this impact upon schools with the poorest financial status and what is the NUT doing to counter what is reported as very low teacher morale?

Any attempt to create individualised pay will mean that those schools with tighter budgets may well seek to hold down teachers’ pay.

On the question of teacher morale, we have been taking action short of strike action since October 2012 and in conjunction with the NASUWT. With this action, we aim to win back greater professional autonomy and reduce an unacceptably high workload.

Why did the NUT support the large-scale mobilisation of workers and activists for the TUC demonstration on the 20th October 2012 and why should people come out to demonstrate?

October 20th was an important part of the TUC’s ‘A Future That Works’ campaign for an alternative to austerity. As the fifth largest affiliate to the TUC and the largest teachers’ union in the United Kingdom, it is critical that we play a role, not merely on behalf of our own members, but a role to promote policies based on fairness and social justice. What we are getting from those policies the Government is currently pursing is just the opposite.
What else do you think could co-ordinate people to effectively challenge the Government’s austerity agenda?

The NUT is keen to take action alongside the greatest number of other unions. 30th November 2010 showed us what we can do if we act in concert. Our policies are always about working with others where we have common interest. This complements the TUC’s work of building a coalition so as to fight the Government’s welfare cuts and to undo the damage being done to our public services.

The national executive of the NUT has been criticised over its decision not to strike over pensions in June 2012. Why do you think this decision was made and what is your response to this criticism?

The decision to take strike action at a particular time is always a difficult one. It must be said that the NUT certainly always reflects carefully before calling members out on strike.

Members of NUT and NASUWT have voted for strike action before Easter 2013 and the NUT executive are in agreement to ‘build towards strike action in the spring term.’

Over what issues are workers calling for a strike?

The NUT Executive will take a decision on strike action on the 24th January 2013. At this time, the current issues we are facing are reflected in our extant ballots: attacks on our pensions; on our pay; and on our workload.

You are the first female to be elected General Secretary of the NUT. Twenty-twelve also saw Frances O’Grady elected as the TUC’s first female General Secretary. How do you think the fact that women are filling these positions impacts upon leadership, policy and the rank and file in the union?

I am pleased to say that there are now more women in senior positions in the trade union movement than ever before. Teaching is a predominantly female profession and it is important that women see other women achieving high office. It is my hope that this will encourage more young women to become active in whichever union they join.

The Government has revealed plans to scrap all GCSEs in the English Baccalaureate subjects and replace them with an English Baccalaureate Certificate. What are your views on the proposal?

The NUT is opposed to the Government’s plans to move to English Baccalaureate Certificates. The NUT is concerned that the effect of these proposals would be to skew the curriculum away from sport, technical subjects, and creative as well as vocational areas of learning. Schools will become even more like exam factories, and this is not what teachers want. It is clear from the sheer breadth of the EBacc campaign and petition that the NUT is running that numerous people and interest groups oppose these changes.

The change in GCSE grade boundaries and subsequent GCSE results has sparked suspicions of political interference, which has led to a
judicial review of the exam boards and the exam regulator in December 2012. What are your views on this?

At the time of writing, we do not yet have the outcome of the GCSE results scandal. The NUT was at the forefront of legal action taken in order to ensure justice for those young people robbed of the grades they deserve. Prior to the court action, we petitioned Michael Gove as the Secretary of State at the Department of Education to follow the lead of his counterpart in Wales, who required the exams to be re-graded, but all the real power resides with the Secretary of State at the Department of Education. Michael Gove has changed the rules so that he can ‘force’ schools to become academies on the basis of criteria which he sets. A key issue for the NUT is the correction of the false claim that academies ‘improve standards’. Some do, some do not. We wish to emphasise that there are better, proven ways to secure school improvement. The outcomes from the ‘London Challenge’ programme (established in 2003 as an initiative which uses independent, experienced education experts, known as London Challenge advisers, to identify need and broker support for underperforming schools) demonstrates that schools working together, without being taken out of local authority control, can be greatly successful.

Do you have any thoughts regarding the current balloting requirements for trade unions? What would you suggest to improve them or, alternatively, to replace them?

The anti-trade union legislation remains a big problem. It is a matter of much regret that nothing was done to improve matters during Labour’s years in office. One small, but entirely fair, change would be to allow industrial action balloting to be extended beyond its current methods. One example would be the ability to ballot electronically. Of course, solidarity action is another major issue which we would like to see addressed.

What do you think accounts for the fall in trade union membership overall? Conversely, how can numbers and union sentiment grow at the NUT in times of austerity and more generally among workers as a whole?

Despite an overall fall in trade union membership generally, the NUT continues to grow as trade union values resonate with all who stand for social justice and fairness. Across the movement we have to be more responsive to the concerns of those whom we wish to recruit. This means paying attention to the campaigns that catch the imagination of young workers and ensure that we always put ourselves on the side of anyone who suffers discrimination or disadvantage.

Since the interview was done Michael Gove announced on 7th February 2013 a U-turn on his plans for an English Baccalaureate.

The judicial review of GCSE grades has been dealt with. The NUT’s press release responding to the judicial review decision can be found at www.teachers.org.uk/node/17598

Emily Elliott and Natalie Csengeri are both members of The Haldane Society’s Executive Committee

You are a vocal critic of the privatisation of education, particularly of free schools and academies as well as the injustice of ‘forced academies’ under the Education Act 2010. What are your main concerns about these new schools and how do you feel the campaign against them is progressing?

The NUT is categorically opposed to State-funded education being run for profit. We believe this privatisation of education has always been Michael Gove’s ambition. Now we see it made plain in announcements from Bright Blue. [Bright Blue, according to their website, states that they campaign for ‘the Conservative Party to implement liberal, progressive policies that draw on Conservative traditions of community, entrepreneurialism, responsibility, liberty and fairness.’] In contrast, we are both pleased and surprised by the extent to which the joint report released by the Pearson Centre for Policy and Learning and RSA on ‘academisation’ reinforced many of our own criticisms of the academy programme.

We are still achieving successes in opposing the conversion of individual schools to academies but all the real power resides with the Secretary of State at the Department of Education. Michael Gove has changed the rules so that he can ‘force’ schools to become academies on the basis of criteria which he sets. A key issue for the NUT is the correction of the false claim that academies ‘improve standards’. Some do, some do not. We wish to emphasise that there are better, proven ways to secure school improvement. The outcomes from the ‘London Challenge’ programme (established in 2003 as an initiative which uses independent, experienced education experts, known as London Challenge advisers, to identify need and broker support for underperforming schools) demonstrates that schools working together, without being taken out of local authority control, can be greatly successful.

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