

Teachers to the Front Line

**The Growth of Teachers'
Struggle in Britain's
Schools and Colleges**

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PREFACE

This pamphlet has been written to outline our Party's attitude to Education, the role of the teachers in that Education, some of the major struggles in which teachers have been engaged, and finally some of the points which can be drawn from such struggles.

We seek to show that teachers are a part of the working class and are worthy of that position by virtue of their fighting history. The National Union of Teachers has proven itself the organisation through which the teachers have fought for their basic interests. The N. U. T. 's strength or weakness has depended upon whether the teachers were weak or strong. So long as teachers were prepared to fight for their rights, so the Union has been a force against the employer. Conversely, when teachers were sluggish, apathetic and not prepared to fight, leaving it to the Union officials, the Union was the weaker and the teachers were the losers. A Union can only be an effective force with the mass membership directly involved.

We do not write this pamphlet in order that it would be read and then put aside. Rather, we hope that teachers, having had a sense of the struggle in which they are involved, would find it helpful in seeing the way ahead. We make no claims that it is comprehensive or says a lot. If it is too elementary then we will write another on the basis of your experience. Our Party seeks to be a part of every struggle of workers, to assist workers in moving towards what we believe to be the necessary outcome of those struggles — the conquest of political power by the working class.

EDUCATION: A WEAPON FOR THE WORKING CLASS

Education is the life-blood of British workers. They require it for the machines and other implements which they operate with such pride; they require it in the organisation of their daily struggle against the employer; and finally they require it to develop, out of their everyday experience, the theory which illuminates the path towards the complete upheaval of society - revolution, when their present subordination is changed to a position of control.

Needless to say the employer, too, needs an educated workforce. Their profits are made from the labour of workers. An educated worker, one that can handle sophisticated machinery in the factories and difficult calculations in the offices; such a worker is a more productive one. But the insoluble dilemma which faces the ruling class is: how to train a worker to think about and handle his job on the one hand and how to prevent his thinking about how to take on this same ruling class on the other.

Convinced that education is a weapon for the working class, the implication for teachers is that they should demand the highest standards from their pupils. It is to the teachers' credit that this has been largely the case. As we shall see later on, teachers have always been at the forefront of the demand for better education and have shown conscientious attention towards their own pupils.

EDUCATION A STRUGGLE

Education for the British working class has always been a struggle. The "free" education up to the age of 15, paid for out of workers' taxes, was not given but demanded. At the turn of the century, when popular pressure insisted on, and began to implement secondary education, the 1902 Education Act hastily introduced a formal scheme of secondary schooling which was designed to exclude those very people that were demanding it - the working class who were "getting beyond their station". Even today, only a minority of workers are able to go on to higher education. They lack the money, time, and opportunity and are encouraged to feel they are not clever enough. The 1960 Crowther report revealed that only 1 in 8 people in the years 16 to 18 was engaged in full-time education.

When the N. U. T. calls for a raising of the school leaving age to 16, it has to counter the stupid claims that such a raising will keep "delinquent" 15 year olds in the schools. In fact the peak time for adolescent disturbance is in the year just prior to leaving school, whenever that is. It is then that children face the uncertainty of perhaps unemployment, or an unsatisfying job.

The papers for our educated "elite" of course tell us daily that the raising of the school leaving age will "lower the standards". Similarly in higher education they claim that more university places will be a "waste". Such has been the rallying cry of reactionaries throughout the history of education: "more means worse". The Government backs up these cries with a deliberate effort to cut school building plans.

Streaming, too, has been a method of denying the majority of working class children the opportunity of education. The children of the ruling class of course are safely tucked away in private schools. But even in the State sector the ruling class has always sought an efficient system of streaming designed to prepare different children for different jobs. They have always failed in their efforts but whatever their failure, the working class has always been the victim of that streaming. Teachers fought against the despised eleven plus because it marked a whole generation of children as failures. Today, "comprehensives" are supposed to do away with this iniquity. But a more vicious streaming exists in such comprehensives, and the class background of the pupil, his geographical area and home opportunities, continue to determine whether he is likely to enjoy the luxury of the 'A' stream or suffer the gloom of a futureless 'C' or 'D' stream.

CRASS MISMANAGEMENT OF EDUCATION

Teachers, like workers in many sections of industry, suffer first hand from the crass mismanagement and inadequacies of their field of work. The bitter struggle to extract even a few pennies from the Government continues.

Last year, Swansea for example, spent 45p on each child's books. In the most modern secondary school in Coventry, no pupil is able to have his own textbook until the third year. Another headmaster said that his library allowance was just sufficient to buy two comics per child per year.

The Government never tires of dreaming up new plans for mergers, for split-site "comprehensives" with hopeless facilities and always designed to reduce the educational opportunities and to get fewer teachers per child. Many mothers are at full stretch in looking after one or two children at home. Teachers have not only to look after sometimes 40 or more but to try to educate them as well.

THEORY DIVORCED FROM PRACTICE

The basic problem that teachers face in the British education system is that ideas disseminated in the classroom are divorced from practical activity in everyday life. Such has always been the case in societies ruled by a small leisured class, whose province is traditionally the theory while the working class deals traditionally with the practice. Schools are not linked intimately with such things as factory production, or construction, or agriculture. The result is that a child can spend 15 years or so cooped up in a classroom or lecture hall gaining an academic knowledge which is not linked to something useful for society.

In the face of this division of theory and practice some teachers try all sorts of "progressive" ideas; team teaching, visits to factories, surveys of the local area, even "free" schools. But within the framework of present society such efforts are doomed to failure and are even reactionary. They can at best be superficial, condescending efforts which replace a rigorous training with illiteracy, indiscipline and distasteful memories of a factory which they've probably seen already.

IDEOLOGY IN SCHOOLS

The ideology which the ruling class will always try to maintain in the schools, and come hell or high water they will maintain it so long as their State (with the Army as its backbone) remains intact, is the ideology of capitalism. They encourage the spirit

of competition, of "getting on" where the most successful can save themselves from the prospect of "mundane" production work. The schools are geared to exams, of individual attainment where the teachers' ingenuity is sacrificed to the syllabus. Such an ideology serves to divide the pupils, to encourage individualism, to denigrate the working class and its skills, to flout reality and adopt fanciful ideas.

The contradiction is that, as we shall see, the teachers through their everyday fighting against their employer have to develop the rudiments of the ideology which is directly counterposed to that which they are supposed to advance, and which they themselves fall a victim to, in the schools and colleges. This is the ideology that says unity is strength, that mass advance can only be won through uncompromising struggle, and furthermore that lasting gain can never be made until the working class as a whole, with teachers an integral part, takes on and smashes the employers' State. This is the ideology of working class revolution, the ideology of Marxism-Leninism.

THE GROWTH OF THE TEACHERS' STRUGGLE

When mass education got underway in 1870, the teachers responded with a strengthening of their own organisation. For years, teachers had been battling against the iniquitous "payment by results" system which, apart from lowering wages, allowed nothing but mechanical learning of the three R's for the pupils and left teachers a prey to the inspector. The resistance was small-scale and scattered, but out of this disarray emerged the National Union of Elementary teachers - a few years later to become the N. U. T.

Many of the teachers in 1870 had been working class children who through hard work had become certified teachers. Yet many others were from a different background; they wallowed in their liberal traditions, and in more placid surrounds bestowed their knowledge on the children of the ruling class.

SOME ILLUSIONS

The N. U. T. recruited most of its members from the certified teachers. These early pioneers had visions of elevating themselves to the lofty heights enjoyed by some of the members of other professions. But such elevation was to prove the road of only a few individuals. In the next 100 years the teachers were to learn that the way forward for the mass meant a recognition of their true destiny; to take their part as one division in the working class army.

Whatever the illusions of those early teachers about their future social position, they pursued their quest for more status with great militancy. Whether demanding a bigger say for teachers in the running of their schools, or defending a teacher dismissed by a high-handed rural parson, the N. U. T. was an energetic campaigner. Public petitions, lobbying at School Board elections, appeals to M. P. 's, legal action - all methods were used by the Union as it fought on many fronts.

MORE FORCEFUL IDEAS; MORE FORCEFUL ACTION

But appeals and lobbies, like "arbitration" today, only made an impact when teachers were hard-hearted and determined enough to back up their "rational arguments" with more forceful action.

In 1907 the first major confrontation between the teachers and the employers saw the West Ham authorities back down when the teachers withdrew their labour. It was hard cash which the employer was so reluctant to pay out - it was hard cash which the teachers were so determined to extract.

Teachers were beginning to see that they were being exploited and indeed were only one monthly pay packet away from poverty. They saw their lot as similar to that of workers in factories or elsewhere. Their salaries and conditions of work are closely connected with those of other workers on the shop floor. Salary increases put forward by teachers' Unions, and this has been in one sense a measure of weakness, have always been based on what workers get in other industries. Any advance by workers in Fords or the docks is also an advance for teachers. And any defeat or attack on the working class is also felt directly by the teachers. In the twenties, teachers also suffered from the mass unemployment at the time. In the years of the great depression that followed, when the living standards of the working class came under heavy attack, the teachers had to suffer, as we shall see, a 10% reduction in their salaries.

The principle of collective bargaining was established with the Burnham Committee at the end of the First World War. The teachers had learned that in wartime, profits soar, while the workers are encouraged to "make sacrifices". A vigorous campaign on scales and wages was commenced in 1916 with strikes in 32 different areas. But the Burnham agreement, once instituted was soon under fire from the employers.

The early twenties saw many authorities attempting to depress salaries below the nationally agreed level. The teachers responded by closing down several schools. A signal victory was scored at Lowestoft where the teachers, supported by 1600 children, continued a strike for 11 months before the authority finally capitulated. However, setbacks were to follow. In 1925 the Government introduced compulsory arbitration and in the years of the depression, the Government bypassed Burnham and imposed a 10% cut in wages.

TACTICAL CLEVERNESS

Meanwhile, the teachers were becoming more sophisticated in their tactics. Resentment among teachers was high in 1954 when they were asked for an increase in their pension contributions. The N. U. T. took up the issue, broadened it and after a two year struggle in which teachers refused to collect the highly lucrative National Savings money, the basic scale was almost doubled. Furthermore, the teachers set an example for other workers when they achieved the principle of equal pay for women. This was to be fully gained by 1961.

Again, in 1967, the N. U. T., recognising the disgruntlement of teachers over compulsory supervision of school meals, initiated, by means of sanctions, a successful struggle which embraced several long-standing demands - the elimination of the difference between the wages of primary and secondary teachers, and the removal of unqualified persons from employment.

The teachers were learning of their power and how to use it. But too often in the past, teachers only acted upon their grievances in a response to an attack from the employer. In 1969, the initiative was seized by the teachers when in the same month that a two year wage agreement had been signed, they issued a demand for an interim pay award. The Government was at its weakest point - just prior to a general election. With the employers unmoved by this display of temerity, the N. U. T. launched its first national strike with overwhelming response from school teachers as well as technical college lecturers who came out in sympathy. The result was an award of £120, only £15 short of the original demand.

FLUCTUATING STRUGGLE

Struggle however does not always advance forward at an even pace. Struggle has its ups and downs; periods of intensive activity followed by periods of quiescence. There is still a tendency to tail behind the achievements of industrial workers - in 1969 the teachers only raised their voice against the Prices and Incomes Policy after the dustmen had driven a bulldozer and the BOAC pilots a jet plane through it. Furthermore, the stipulation attached to the winning of the interim pay award, that a new pay structure should be worked out, was regarded by teachers as a gentleman's agreement. The most advanced industrial workers

are not reluctant to accept "strings" today, for tomorrow they will abrogate or find a way around any agreement which does not suit them. Teachers should adopt the same attitude towards 'chivalry.'

When the ruling class launched its onslaught in 1971 against the working class the teachers, having witnessed the bitter struggle of other sections - the council, electricity, and postal workers - preferred not to enter battle with the employer. Rather they crossed their fingers and left it to the N. U. T. executive. Their wishful thinking was not rewarded; the employer took advantage of this passivity to introduce their new pay scheme disguised as a 10% wage increase. Teachers will have to take up the cudgels again. The scheme was bent on undermining that very unity and spirit which had emerged and been tempered in 100 years of struggle.

THE NATURE OF OUR STRUGGLE

The history of teachers struggle and its development shows that the teachers have learned the lessons for fighting the employers, and in recent years began to use the power of their labour to their maximum advantage. Like all workers, the teachers have thus been involved in perpetual war with the employers, the end of one battle signalling the beginning of the next.

These battles, whether for higher salaries, equal pay for women or new scales structure, will all be of limited value if restricted to their direct objective. Winning any of these demands is secondary to using every such struggle to strengthen the unity and determination of teachers, to prepare for the next battle with our forces intact and learn the nature of our struggle.

Today, with the rapid development of the corporate state, heralded by the Industrial Relations Act, the teachers have as much at stake as the rest of the working class. The Industrial Relations Act is aimed at the whole of the organised working class. It is aimed at the dustmen, workers on the assembly line, the miners, the engineers, the draughtsmen, as well as teachers in schools and colleges. Every action taken by the teachers in the last few years; the national strike by school teachers in 1969, the sympathy strike of teachers in technical colleges, etc., will under the Act be illegal. Those who say that the Act will at least provide an "agency", i. e. one recognised Union for the N. U. T. and the A. T. T. I., should consider that it is no use having a "closed shop" when the price to pay is to have the chains of the state round our hands, thus negating the very function of the Union.

NEED FOR UNITY

Of particular importance in the present situation is the unity in the ranks of teachers. The Government has all along attempted to split the teachers' ranks through wage differentials between teachers in primary and secondary schools, between teachers in schools and colleges, between men and women and between graduates and non graduates. The latest pay structure imposed

on school teachers has the aim of dividing the teachers among themselves. In all this; the role of the National Association of Schoolmasters is to intensify these divisions and create further contradictions. The concept of career teachers is directed primarily against women teachers who have to leave teaching for a few years to have babies and raise their families. The N. A. S.'s idea of raising salaries is not so much to get more out of the employers, as to redistribute the total amount from one section of teachers to another creating larger and larger wage differentials. This strategy plays directly into the hands of the Government and does not strengthen the teachers' case and their fight. In fact, as was shown by the latest salary negotiations, the N. A. S. acted as a lobby within the teachers on behalf of the Government.

Also dangerous are current ideas that teachers in technical colleges have their own separate negotiating machinery. This is bound to weaken the teachers in both schools and colleges. The teachers in technical colleges will not be able to gain more by fighting on their own. On the contrary, the government will use one section of teachers against the other and weaken them both. The close relations between the teachers in schools and colleges and between the two respective unions helping each other has always been an important feature in teachers' struggles, and it should be strengthened rather than weakened.

Our struggle, like that of the rest of the working class is a protracted one. Individual struggles should not be seen as ends in themselves but as links from one battle to the next; each at a higher level, learning the lessons of the previous ones. Our demands for higher wages, better schools and colleges or smaller classes will ultimately solve none of these long term problems. Neither will "participation" in the running of schools and colleges through teachers representation on the governing bodies, the academic boards etc., make any real change in the nature of the present education system and its anti-working class aims. Only by adopting a long term strategy of utter defeat for the ruling class with each struggle a marker on the road to the destruction of the capitalist system, only with such a strategy will we have an education system that corresponds to the needs of students and teachers and society in general.

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