



ANNUAL²⁶ BIRMINGHAM
CONFERENCE

General Secretary's Address

President, Conference,

It is a great honour and privilege for me to address Conference.

It is my first as General Secretary.

It has been a very interesting year for me and, as others have said, for the Union too.

Thanks

I would like to take a moment to thank all those who have made me welcome: our wonderful staff at Rednal and in all our centres, the Union's Officers and the National Executive.

I'd especially like to pay tribute to outgoing President Wayne Broom who has provided calm guidance to the Union, despite facing some unprecedented and surprising challenges both at the start and the end of his tenure.

Thank you, Wayne, for your support through the past year. Congratulations and good luck to Mark.

I particularly want to thank the activists and the members I have met across the Union at conferences, at association meetings and in visits to schools and colleges.

I have wanted to be out on the road as much as I can, hearing directly from those delivering on the frontline. It is possible to understand a brief on an issue of education policy or on issues of funding, but nothing can replace listening to how those issues play out in the real world; in the college and in the classroom.

So I give a special thanks to those who have facilitated such visits: to the heads, principals and other school leaders who have enabled that to happen and, in many cases, who have allowed us to see first-hand the approach taken on many of the issues we are discussing here: behaviour management, workload, special needs provision and other issues under debate.

I've sometimes attended such visits fearing the worst. We know there are many, many challenges facing education.

I have actually found many examples of well-run schools and colleges, filled with highly professional people working extremely hard to deliver for the students they teach and the communities they serve.

I have found caring, dedicated professionals doing their best, sometimes in extremely difficult circumstances.

I know teachers don't go looking for praise. Nevertheless, praise is rightly due and I hope Conference will support me in paying tribute to all NASUWT members, working in very different institutions in different types of communities but all dedicated to doing the best for the students they teach. You, and they, should be rightly proud of the profession and of the vital, essential public service our members deliver.

Teachers across the world

I will return to this theme in a moment, but I want to take a couple of minutes to think about those in the teaching profession elsewhere and who may face challenges which we don't.

I'd like to add my welcome to our international guests from teacher unions around the world.

Early on in my time here, we became aware of alarming events in Turkey where the education union Eğitim Sen faced a clampdown from the government and at one point the entire union executive was placed under house arrest. We sent our solidarity.

We should spare a moment to think about teachers trying to deliver education in almost impossible circumstances during war; in Ukraine, in the current war on Iran. Let us think of the 165 or more girls killed in a school in Tehran on 28 February.

In Gaza, at least 800 or more education staff were killed alongside more than 18,000 students. More than 90% of schools have been destroyed. So I was very pleased at our Northern Ireland Conference to attend and listen to the Fringe event on Palestine, discussing what teachers can do in such terrible circumstances.

Turning to the United States, the Government sends masked and heavily armed paramilitary forces into cities to round up people. Regrettably, schools, school students and their teachers are on the frontlines of this.

We have seen the unlawful arrest of various school-aged US citizens, the infamous arrest of a five-year-old carrying his Spiderman backpack. And, of course, we have seen the murder, on the streets of Minneapolis, of two US citizens: Alex Pretti and Renee Good.

Teachers and teacher unions in the United States, our colleagues, have found themselves on the frontline of these alarming and scary issues. I was proud to reach out to teacher unions in Minneapolis and Minnesota to send our messages of solidarity.

There is absolutely no contradiction between standing in solidarity with those abroad and standing up firmly and proudly for teachers here.

By standing together internationally, we can make things change.

And standing together, we can make things change here too. Let's look at some of the changes we need.

Maternity rights

I came from a very male-dominated industry and trade union. The education sector is an overwhelmingly female workforce; I am often amazed by the dedication of what teachers deliver. I am also often surprised at what teachers are expected to put up with.

We have a widely recognised crisis in recruitment and retention.

It is recognised – but little or nothing is done to correct it. The fact that seems to be ignored by politicians is that you will not improve education, you will not push up standards, and you will not improve attendance and behaviour unless part of the plan is to tackle that recruitment and retention crisis; unless you convince more people that teaching is the job for them and convince more teachers to stay in the profession.

But what is really being done on this front?

On the publication of the recent White Paper in England, the Secretary of State and the DfE made great fanfare about the fact that the period on full pay for maternity leave would double. Of course, that sounds good; until we dig a little deeper.

Full maternity pay will indeed double, from four weeks to eight weeks. But when we start to look deeper, the fanfare fades.

The truth is that many parts of the public sector and the private sector already have much better maternity provision.

So doubling from Not Much still leaves us with... Not Much.

Too many teachers leave the profession. Too many women teachers in their 30s leave the profession.

Too many women teachers leaving the profession cite poor maternity provision as one of the reasons for leaving.

That is a scandal. It should be a national scandal.

And please don't tell us little can be done. I have myself in the past negotiated a deal to double full pay on maternity leave.

The deal also doubled maternity pay. But in that case it was doubled from **13 weeks to 26 weeks**.

Why should women teachers be treated any less favourably?

So we should set out from this Conference with a clear intention – **together we will change this**.

I say **together**. Don't leave this to the General Secretary. Don't leave this to the National Executive.

If we want things changed, if we want things improved, join in the campaign. Let's organise and build together.

I speak not just to you here at Conference, but to those not here: to your workmates, your colleagues, to the young teachers starting out in their careers.

Join together to improve maternity pay. Together we will change things.

Together we will win better maternity pay in teaching. Together we will win better parental leave and improved flexible working.

Let us take up that challenge, together.

MATs and world of opposites

And there is also need for change on many other fronts.

Every survey we do highlights the concerns of teachers. Every survey undertaken by the Government highlights the same.

When I go out and speak to people, I hear the same. I see and hear the same stories and experiences.

I recall a recent visit to a special school in Belfast with wonderful, dedicated and professional staff but with a long-term leak in the roof of the hall that's used as a gym and for assembly; a school with broken doors still waiting to be fixed after months.

I say to politicians, don't talk about delivering world-class 21st-century education when, in too many cases, you can't even pay to maintain crumbling 20th-century buildings.

Everywhere we go, we see the same: dedicated staff, but schools worried about the future, worried about budgets, about having to restructure, having to make cuts and job losses.

Everywhere we go, we hear stories of those struggles to deliver for children, in difficult circumstances caused by staff shortages, poor buildings, or poor policies which remove the autonomy from professional teachers and treat them like robots. These are just some of the issues which remain unaddressed.

That's one side. Teachers' side/teachers' experience. There is, of course, another side. There is a world of difference at the top.

Those running multi-academy trusts; the bosses of the MATs.

They don't struggle with their pay. They are doing very nicely.

They are building their little empires – or their not-so-little empires.

Some live in the world, the wonderful world, shall we say, of Ken and Barbie. Yes, it appears that there are even family members who get senior jobs at the top of the same trusts.

But in truth, nepotism should have no place in education.

And yet, there are the company cars; the taxpayer-funded Teslas.

And then, there are the trusts who instruct staff to attend the dreaded Team-building Day.

A (highly paid) so-called 'motivational speaker' is booked. A big venue is booked, perhaps a football club? And the staff are forced to attend to listen to drivel, at the costs of tens of thousands of pounds – of taxpayers' money. Nothing educational is achieved. And many staff simply feel they have wasted a day.

So, what a shock, what an insult, that – without any serious consultation – the Westminster Government announces that this is the model for all remaining local authority schools.

They don't even appear to have considered a basic employment issue – that for employees 'academisation' means a change of employer and (regardless of the protections of TUPE) potential changes to terms and conditions. You'd think they might have spoken to trade unions about something like that!

In truth, we already have a massively fragmented and unaccountable school system in England. The Government apparently does not see this as a problem. But it is.

White Paper and SEND

We know that workload and excessive hours are key reasons why people leave the profession.

In general terms, it is impossible to cut workload significantly while cutting staff numbers at the same time. Yet that is what we face in all too many of our schools and colleges.

So do not talk to us about delivering improved standards and more inclusive education while delivering budgets that cut the staff necessary even to stand still.

In England, we have seen the recent White Paper and the associated consultation on SEND. Similar debates are taking place elsewhere.

There may be some very good ideas in these documents, but one thing about them strikes me when I listen to teachers and school leaders talk:

Nobody in the real world has any confidence whatsoever that there will be sufficient resources to actually deliver.

I have said that to Bridget Phillipson on a number of occasions.

I have visited special schools and schools which specialise in mainstream inclusion. What is glaringly obvious is how demanding and resource intensive such provision is, so increasing expectations at the same time as cutting resources is a recipe for failure; a recipe for disaster.

Let's consider this issue further. I don't want to interfere in other debates, but these issues are addressed by the Executive 2b motion which you will debate later.

But let's take issues around behaviour. I visited one school which had significantly improved its performance and improved its behaviour. It had built a solid dialogue and relationship with parents, setting out expectations on staff, on students and on families.

What struck me was that the acting principal who showed us round was highly experienced and had worked hard to make sure staff wanted to stay in the school.

The staff were undoubtedly part of the picture of the school's successes. But, the big BUT is how is that delivered everywhere when so many want to leave the profession and when so many do actually leave the profession?

How do you hope to maintain and build that core of excellence and experience – at all levels – when too many people are burnt out and simply want to get out?

Tackling recruitment and retention is an essential part of a sensible and successful approach to improving education. Addressing the professional concerns of frontline teachers is vital to improving education.

Addressing the real, current problems in schools is essential for any discussion about tackling the SEND crisis.

However, our view is that the concerns and experiences of frontline teachers have not been adequately considered in preparing the White Paper or the SEND proposals. The views expressed on your behalf, the evidence presented by NASUWT, has not been adequately considered.

So, Conference, teachers face a very real threat. We face the prospect of new requirements and new expectations on teachers.

In reality, that will mean new responsibilities and new workload. But budgets continue to be squeezed, jobs continue to be cut, at the very time when a significant expansion of staffing is required.

On top of that, the end result will be schools facing accountability and inspection against new inclusion requirements, but while budgets are squeezed and staff numbers are cut. Providing bits of new training for teachers and other staff is not going to resolve this.

Vicious cycle of underfunding

This brings us to the nub of the question: the long-term underfunding of schools and colleges all across the UK.

NASUWT has a target of UK spending on education being 6% of GDP.

At its highpoint, UK spending on education reached about 5.7%.

Today, after a decade and a half of austerity, it is down to around 4.1%.

So, as a share of national income, education funding has suffered.

This showed itself last year with the unfunded 4% increase for teachers in England.

While the situation differed according to school circumstances, schools, broadly, had to find a quarter of that themselves.

This approach was repeated in the Government's spending review and then in the Secretary of State's directions on teachers' pay.

She recommends 6.5% over three years.

In itself, that utterly fails to address years of falling real pay. It does nothing to restore teachers' pay.

Indeed, as a result of the war on Iran, 'Trumpflation' means this is likely – on any inflation measure – to mean a further pay cut.

But even such low figures are not to be funded. The Schools' Costs Technical Note, published just a few weeks ago, shows very clearly that schools will not have the funding available – even for the pitifully low pay rises Bridget Phillipson wants to see imposed on teachers.

The result of all this is a dangerous and vicious cycle of decline:

- Underfunding means budgets are squeezed.
- Low pay rises exacerbate the recruitment and retention crisis.
- Underfunding means even low pay rises are not funded.
- This means school budgets are squeezed again.
- Schools face restructure and a drive to cut staff costs.
- Jobs are cut, redundancies are made.
- So, instead of tackling excessive workload and excessive hours, things are made even worse.
- And then, the following year, the whole thing starts again.

This vicious cycle needs to stop.

If not, it will exacerbate every single problem which teachers identify as problems in every single survey.

But there is an alternative.

It is here in this Conference and it is in every staffroom and in every school and college.

Our union does amazing work in representing our members facing individual problems. We stop people from being sacked and victimised.

We protect teachers against career-ending accusations.

But we can also do more. By acting together, by working together, by campaigning together, by standing together, we can actually change things.

We can say this is not acceptable.

We can say you need to change course.

We can win improvements in pay, terms and conditions.

It is possible to challenge excessive hours and excessive workload.

Fighting back

We know from the proud history of NASUWT that when teachers stand together, we can change things for the better.

We do fantastic work representing our members:

- as we have shown in winning over £15 million in compensation for our members over the past year;
- as we have shown in Wales by forcing the issue of learner behaviour onto the agenda and forcing political parties to begin to take this issue seriously;
- as we have shown in Scotland by working with others to provide new tools to support teachers in tackling disinformation and divisive rhetoric;
- as we have shown in Northern Ireland through our battles for pay and for an independent review of workload.

Conference, over the past year NASUWT members have taken action in schools and colleges across the UK. No teacher wants to be on industrial action. But, where necessary, we will not shirk.

Since last Conference, we have undertaken 114 ballots for industrial action.

And, as we speak, in current disputes we have issued notices to employers of strikes at:

- Cowley International College, St Helens;
- Arnold House, London;
- Llantwit Major, South Glamorgan;
- Kent College, Canterbury;
- Budmouth Academy, Weymouth; and
- Haydon Bridge, Northumberland.

And we are in the process of achieving a satisfactory settlement thanks to the determination and strike action of our members at Tewkesbury Academy.

Conference, let's congratulate and send thanks to every single NASUWT member who has stood up and taken action for decent standards and for decent working conditions.

They stand up for all of us.

Conference

It is possible to build a better future for teachers and for those they teach.

That task sits with all of us. It also sits with those not here: the people you work with; your colleagues.

Take the message from this Conference into every single school, every college and every staffroom.

- Let's stand together to build a better future for education.
- Let's build NASUWT – The Teachers' Union.
- Let's build our membership.
- Let's build our activist base.
- Let's build a better future for teachers.

Thank you.

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