Annual Conference issue:

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Iranian union leader on hunger strike recognised

David Edwards
EI head chooses Conference for first major speech

Schools on the Frontline
Delegates hear of political violence in Zimbabwe
Countries across the world have adopted a set of goals to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure prosperity for all as part of a new sustainable development agenda. Each goal has specific targets to be achieved over the next 15 years.

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Jailed teacher Esmail Abdi, currently on hunger strike, was this year’s recipient of the NASUWT International Solidarity Award

Teachers are being attacked as political violence continues in Zimbabwe, PTUZ President Dr Takavafira Zhou told members

NASUWT shapes international education debate with global trade union leaders

David Edwards, General Secretary of EI, said NASUWT members had ‘solidarity in their core’
NASUWT delegates told

“You HAVE SOLIDARITY IN YOUR CORE”

Delegates at the NASUWT’s Annual Conference were told they were “the last best hope on the planet” in continuing to provide high-quality, free education to their pupils. David Edwards, General Secretary of Education International, said that the values and ideas of the NASUWT, along with other education unions, were crucial in a rapidly changing world.

Teachers and trade unions had to “absolutely defend” their core values, often in the face of threats from governments and also multinational corporations, Mr Edwards said. The former High School languages teacher from Pennsylvania had chosen the NASUWT Conference as the setting for his first major international speech since becoming General Secretary in March.

Education International (EI) is the federation of 32.5 million teachers and other education staff affiliated with education unions and associations, including the NASUWT, in 173 countries across the globe.

In an inspiring and confident message to a packed conference hall in Birmingham, Mr Edwards told his audience they had “solidarity in your core, in your blood”. He said that in the world of Presidents Vladimir Putin, Donald Trump, Recep Erdogan of Turkey and others, unions have to “assert our rights, not just defend them”. He said: “We have to push for the rights of our students, our communities, the vulnerable. And we have to lead. We have to lead with our ideas and our convictions and we have to lead with our actions. “We have to be close to our members and you are close to your members. There is no alternative to that. “You must be where they are, you must be listening to them and you must be organising and bargaining and negotiating and fighting for them as they feel the distress and the burnout and all the bureaucratic things this administration is putting on them. You need to be with them right now. “But we also need to be able to communicate to our members our analysis of what is happening. It is very easy and very dangerous, because of all the noise and all the Trump and all the other stuff that is out there for people to tune out.” Mr Edwards praised the NASUWT for its international work and its support and solidarity, in particular, for unions and civil and human rights organisations in its priority countries of Burma/Myanmar, Colombia, Iraq, Zimbabwe and Bahrain.

He said: “Part of what you have to do is get the rest of the world caring as much as you do. That is part of why we need you in EI, because you care so much.” He also stressed that in the current climate there were certain imperatives that unions, including the NASUWT, had to hold true to. He added: “We have to absolutely defend our core values, now more than ever. We have to defend our values.”

Mr Edwards said EI had fought and won a battle with multinational corporations who he claimed only saw education as a means of selling services to governments and setting up chains of low-fee schools which could charge the poorest in societies to access education.

He said: “The companies and corporations would very much like to privatise what we do. At the same time as EI was pushing for the right to a free, inclusive quality education for every child, which we got, they were pushing for something called learning, not education. “They wanted more testing. Instead of more kids having access to school, they wanted an indicator of words per minute. They believed that somehow the entire planet was going to agree that the indicator of our success is how fast a seven-year-old can read! “They also had the assessment system to track it – they had the tests to sell to governments and they also had the teacher training modules and protocols and a whole monitoring regime. “That was their vision. Their ideas were so bankrupt but their coffers were so full. But we won that one based on our values, based on our assertion of rights and based on our ideas.”

Mr Edwards referred to a recent meeting of the International Summit on the Teaching Profession. He said UK teachers work “far more hours than any of your colleagues in any of the other countries”. But he said that even in the face of “really compelling evidence”, the ideologies that underpinned an “anti-teacher, anti-union view of the world” were strong.

He added: “In order to lead, in order to make a difference in the world, we need to resist the urge to only look inwardly. We must understand that to make a world of difference in a different world, we must build local, national and global solidarity.” Mr Edwards concluded with an uplifting message to the delegates in the hall, telling them: “We must know what is happening in the broader world because we are out in the
Esmail ‘has committed no crime’

by Dr Patrick Roach

Esmail Abdi is an inspiration to teachers and trade unionists across the world, through his courage to stand up for trade union and human rights in the face of oppressive and harsh treatment.

Many people in the UK may not have heard of Esmail Abdi. Esmail is a teacher. He teaches mathematics. He is also a member of a trade union. Esmail believes in the importance of quality education for all children and young people and he has worked hard to achieve better working conditions for teachers.

Esmail is a leader of the Tehran branch of the Iran Teachers’ Trade Association. He is currently on hunger strike in the notorious Evin Prison whilst serving a six-year sentence.

But, Esmail has committed no crime. His imprisonment on so-called national security offences is widely recognised by international observers including Amnesty International as an attempt to silence him and to prevent him from highlighting concerns about poor wages, the inadequate education budget, and the unjustified imprisonment of teachers and other trade unionists.

Esmail has been denied communications with members of his family and his lawyer, and the brutal conditions of the prison are taking a toll on his health, even before his decision to go on hunger strike. However, despite his imprisonment, the Iranian authorities have not been able to silence him.

By presenting this award to Esmail, the NASUWT and our members are sending a clear message to the Iranian authorities about the need to respect teachers’ rights and to meet their obligations to protecting the rights of all children to quality education.

We stand with Esmail and his colleagues in Iran in their courageous struggle for quality education for all.

Working with Amnesty International UK, Education International and other partners, we will be intensifying our lobbying to persuade the Iranian authorities to release Esmail from prison and to respect the rights of teachers and other workers.

Esmail Abdi once asked this: ‘Is it a crime to be a member of a trade association and participate in peaceful demonstrations… Is it a crime to gather signatures petitioning the government to uphold the law?’

Well, we don’t think this is a crime. And, neither is it a crime for others to add their voices to Esmail’s, to sign a petition or write a letter calling on the Iranian authorities to respect human rights.

To find out more about Esmail’s story, please visit: www.nasuwt.org.uk/international

NASUWT INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY AWARD FOR JAILED TEACHER

Jailed Iranian teacher trade unionist Esmail Abdi, who is currently on hunger strike, was this year’s recipient of the NASUWT International Solidarity Award.

He received the award in recognition of his commitment to fighting for the rights of teachers and for quality education in Iran.

Mr Abdi is leader of the Tehran branch of the Iran Teachers’ Trade Association (ITTA) and he was convicted of national security offences in February 2016 merely for organising peaceful protests against the regime.

He was given a six-year prison sentence, and although recently he was allowed to leave the notorious Evin Prison, he was rearrested after only 11 days and taken back into custody. The NASUWT is continuing to work closely with Amnesty International UK and Education International to press for Mr Abdi’s unconditional release from prison and to call on the Iranian authorities to respect human and trade union rights.

The NASUWT is lobbying MPs, the Foreign Office and the Iranian Ambassador to the UK about his plight and that of other trade unionists and human rights advocates.

Announcing the 2018 Award, NASUWT President Dan McCarthy said: “We have been in contact with Esmail’s family and colleagues.

“Esmail’s wife has expressed her sincere happiness and thanks to the NASUWT for our support for Esmail.

“Conference – this Award signals the next stage in our work to campaign for freedom for Esmail Abdi and for all teachers in Iran.”

Chris Keates, General Secretary of the NASUWT, said: “Esmail Abdi is an inspiration to teachers and trade unionists across the world, through his courage to stand up for trade union and human rights in the face of oppressive and harsh treatment.

“Esmail’s courage and determination to continue to fight for quality education in Iran, despite the terrible personal cost he has had to endure, is truly humbling.

“The NASUWT is continuing to maintain solidarity with Esmail and with teachers in Iran, working with partners, including Amnesty International, to press for Esmail’s unconditional release.”

At the same time, the NASUWT paid a special tribute to Roberto Baradel of CTERA in Argentina.

Roberto has been a key advocate and campaigner for quality education for all children in Buenos Aires and throughout Argentina.

As a voice of teachers, he has been vilified in the Argentine press. Shortly after receiving one of numerous death threats, Argentina’s President Macri was quoted as saying, “Baradel does not need anyone to look after him”.

Dr Patrick Roach, Deputy General Secretary of the NASUWT, said: “Roberto – we in the NASUWT and the international trade union community are here to look after you. And we stand with our sisters and brothers in CTERA in your campaign for the right to free, quality public education for all.”

In presenting the NASUWT International Solidarity Award 2018, Dr Roach put the Award into the context of the NASUWT’s wider international programme:

“Over the past year, we have seen the escalating use of violence to deny teachers their rights at work and to prevent teachers from educating from the next generation. And we have witnessed attacks on trade union rights, too – attacks on fundamental human rights, including the right to freedom of association, and the right to form and organise democratic and free trade unions.

“Last year, we were honoured to be joined at Conference by our dear colleagues from the Bahrain Teachers’ Association – Mahdi Abu Dheeb and Jalila al Salman.

“But, on return last year from Conference, both Mahdi and Jalila were immediately detained by the Bahrain authorities. Both had severe restrictions imposed on them.

“In response, the NASUWT has and will continue our efforts to highlight what is happening to our colleagues in Bahrain and we have also raised our deep concerns with the UK Government.

“In Turkey, the teachers’ union Egitim Sen has continued to endure systematic targeting and repression by the authorities.

“But, in spite of this, and with the support of the international community, they have stood with them. And we will continue to stand with them.

“In Myanmar, we have been appalled by the treatment of Rohingya Muslims by the Burmese military, which has also triggered a major refugee and humanitarian crisis. Working with Burma Campaign UK, we will continue to do whatever we can to highlight and end the scourge of this ‘textbook ethnic cleansing’.

“And, in Zimbabwe, whilst Robert Mugabe has been deposed as President, we have reaffirmed our commitment to continue our work with our brothers and sisters in the PTUZ who have continued to live and breathe every day the true meaning of trade unionism.”

To find out more about Roberto Baradel, please visit: www.ctera.org/en/
UNIONS TOGETHER ON THE FIGHT FOR QUALITY EDUCATION

The NASUWT helped to shape the international education debate when it hosted a meeting of trade union leaders from around the world.

Trade unionists from countries including Bahrain, USA, Australia, Spain, Portugal, Cyprus, Iraq, Iraqi-Kurdistan, Zimbabwe, Ghana, Turkey, Trinidad and Tobago, Bermuda, the Netherlands and Germany shared their experiences and ideas at an international round-table event which took place at the Union’s Annual Conference in April.

Union leaders spoke about the challenges affecting the teaching profession and the provision of quality public education in the context of meeting the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG).

Key concerns raised included: the right to education for children and young people; the militarisation of schools; government investment in education; extremism and the threat to democracy; child refugees; and the denial of the right to education for children in prison.

Representatives agreed on the need for joint work in the face of attacks on the status of teachers, collective bargaining rights, and trade union rights. The meeting also confirmed the need for action in the face of the lack of investment in school places and the failure of governments to uphold the right to education for all children.

NASUWT Deputy General Secretary Dr Patrick Roach told the meeting:

“On the 25th anniversary of Education International and World Teachers’ Day, we believe there is no better opportunity to renew our work together on human and trade union rights, shining a light on injustice and standing together for democracy and to protect the right to quality public education for all children and young people.

“In the last 25 years, Education International is operating in a massively changed world, where democracy and democratic institutions, including trade unions, are under relentless attack from increasing authoritarianism and right-wing ideologies.

“Our trade union leaders are being harassed, intimidated and jailed whilst the rights of children are also being undermined.”

The meeting examined how unions could work together to respond to these challenges and to enhance the work of Education International.

Dr Roach said: “Education International has a key role to play in meeting these challenges, but our member organisations must also step up and find ways to work together in the face of these challenges.

“We must hold onto our solidarity and commit to continue our dialogue together for the benefit of our members.”
Argentinian teachers’ leader faces down threats

Roberto Baradel of the Argentinian teachers’ union CTERA spoke to International Solidarity about the situation facing teachers and trade unionists and what it means to him to be Highly Commended by the NASUWT for his work.

You have been subjected to anonymous threats of imprisonment and death due to your criticism of the Argentinian Government. Can you explain what impact this has had on you and your family and how this affected your life and work as a trade unionist?

Yes, since last year, although it started in December 2015 when this government took power. The threats were directed at my family, my four children and my two year old granddaughter, cowardly threats directed at my family. This has impacted very strongly on my family. They are not accustomed or indeed prepared for such threats. Last year, things became even more complicated, with the President publicly stating “Baradel needs no one to look after him”. I was humbled by the teachers’ reaction to this threat. At the next demonstration, they brought banners with the slogan “We will look after Baradel!” and from the next day teachers formed a guard outside my house. Never has this occurred before. It felt like a hug from them. Although this has been a hard time, it was also very comforting to have this support from the teachers and indeed from many international organisations in defence of human rights, and of course from yourselves the NASUWT. The support from members made me feel very emotional. It was a strong message from those teachers.

Can you explain more about what the conditions are like for teachers in Argentina? What are the biggest challenges facing the profession at the moment?

They have painted all of us, labour lawyers, labour rights judges, human rights organisations, unions, as a mafia. We have a government of the rich and business, so that, for them, those that raise their voices in defence of workers’ rights are an obstacle.

The government and much of the press label us as a mafia that goes around coercing their members and breaking the law, even though the right to strike is enshrined in the constitution. So today in Argentina, we are living in a situation where government and business is trying to de-legitimise our rights to defend the rights of workers and teachers. But, despite the attacks on us, the people support our position in defending public education and our right to protest.

Under the previous government, legislation established negotiations to take place to ensure pay parity between the regions irrespective of the regional education finances. Last year, central government eliminated this commitment. This now leaves regions to either ignore minimal pay parity or unable to fund it, as the national government would no longer provide the funds to deliver. This has led to longer and more complex discussions at a regional level and a move away from previous governments’ commitments to ensure parity of pay for teachers, which includes additional national funding.

What does being Highly Commended by the NASUWT for your work to fight for teachers mean to you?

It had a great impact in Argentina and the acknowledgement in your conference was a beautiful thing as it enabled me to tell my children what I do: fight for the rights of teachers. I felt the NASUWT were hugging me and hugging the fight of Argentinian teachers, and we felt this hug of protection that says to the government, “Hey, we are watching you, so be careful; he is not on his own, don’t do things you should not be doing”. I will be eternally grateful, and it is also a source of great pride for Argentina to have such recognition, from such an important organisation as the NASUWT, recognising our fight.

What makes you want to continue to represent the interests of teachers even after the threats that have been made against you?

I want my children and the children of Argentina to live in a better country, in a country where we are not threatened, where we can say what we want freely, where we can live in a free democracy that gives us social justice and freedom.

Many ask how I put up with these threats, and I say that when the rucksack is heavy I look behind me at those that have been killed, tortured, disappeared, had members of their family killed, their children kidnapped, and I look at what happened to them and my rucksack feels lighter and my convictions stronger and I feel that we have to keep fighting. It is an honour to have such a prestigious commendation.
Teachers and pupils continue to be victims of political violence in Zimbabwe, six months on from the removal of Robert Mugabe, an NASUWT fringe meeting at Conference heard.

The President of the Progressive Teachers Union of Zimbabwe (PTUZ), Takavafira Zhou, said pupils were being exploited for political ends and that little had changed since the military took over in a bloodless coup in November last year.

He said that Zimbabwe needed “political, social and economic hygiene” and he called on the international community to put pressure on the regime to hold free and fair elections.

Dr Zhou told the packed fringe: “There was so much hope that with the fall of Mugabe there could be a government of national unity. But the hope quickly evaporated like morning dew.

“Realistically, there is nothing that has changed except that a dictator has fallen.”

He likened the change from Robert Mugabe to the military-backed Emmerson Mnangagwa as “replacing the driver with the person who was the conductor”.

Zimbabwe was now a military state and the lives of ordinary people didn’t matter, he added.

Disturbingly, schools were still on the frontline of political violence. He told delegates: “We have seen school pupils being bussed to political rallies, schools closed for political rallies by the new military regime. Teachers are being assaulted by the youth militias in schools and the militias are not penalised.”

He pointed out that there had been a failure to restore any collective bargaining rights for teachers, something he referred to as being like “collective begging”.

Dr Zhou called for an end to “political manipulation” of the police, soldiers and traditional leaders which was a threat to democratic change.

He called on the international community to oversee elections and help Zimbabwe conduct them in a “free, fair and credible manner”. Election observers needed to visit rural areas more and stay for longer periods before and after the polls, he added.

Speaking for the NASUWT, Deputy General Secretary Dr Patrick Roach stressed the deep friendship the Union was “privileged” to enjoy with the PTUZ.

He said: “You can be absolutely assured of our continuing solidarity and support in the months and years ahead.”

Dr Roach said it hadn’t come as any surprise that the media had presented the replacement of Mugabe by Mnangagwa as Zimbabwe somehow crossing the Rubicon.

“But as we have heard, the situation frankly isn’t any different. Maybe one or two of the lead actors in this play have changed, but the plot remains the same. We have to be extremely concerned about that.

“The fall of Mugabe, whilst it might present an opportunity for the restoration of a true democratic process (we shouldn’t take that for granted)...it requires confidence among citizens that this is an election process, free and fair, but also confidence in the international community in the same way.”

He added: “We are very concerned about the plight of teachers in Zimbabwe as well, and that is why our relationship with PTUZ is so crucially important.

“The right to collective bargaining for teachers and other public sector workers was a ‘fundamental right’ which was being flouted.”

He emphasised: “We have got to be campaigning for the restoration of those rights.

“We have seen the attacks on education...the militarisation of schools, the ways they are being used in violent ways by the military, by the police and indeed by insurgents in Zimbabwean society. That is about attacking fundamental rights as well.

“It is behelden on us within the NASUWT; it is behelden on us in the international education trade union movement, to be standing up for those rights.”

Sunit Bagree, campaigns officer at Action for Southern Africa (ACTSA), said there had been a “further militarisation” of the state with the appointment of key generals into ministerial posts.

He said, while any upcoming elections were hugely important, there was a need to align Zimbabwe’s laws with its constitution. Human rights defenders had to be protected and there needed to be respect for the editorial independence of media organisations.

There was a need for proper investment in the Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission and the judiciary, he added.
Esmail Abdi – an Iranian maths teacher and trade unionist – was arrested on 27 June 2015 after voluntarily going to Evin Prison to ask why he had been banned from travel.

After an unfair trial, he was sentenced to six years. The conditions in the notoriously brutal Evin Prison – also known as Iran’s ‘torture factory’ – are taking a harsh toll on his health. He has already required medical leave once, but he is now being refused care.

Esmail has now been on hunger strike since 24 April of this year to protest his treatment and the criminalisation of trade unions.

Please stand with Esmail by demanding his release today.