Teacher unionism in changing times: is this the real "new unionism"?

Howard Stevenson, University of Nottingham.

howard.stevenson@nottingham.ac.uk

Abstract

This article provides a case study of union change in an environment in which radical school restructuring is taking place, and active strategies to weaken and marginalise organized teachers are being pursued by the state. The case study union is the National Union of Teachers in England. The article explores a number of different strategies open to teacher unions, utilising a framework provided by Turner (2004).

Drawing on data collected at national level, and in three local authority areas, I argue that the NUT's response to the erosion of collective bargaining is best presented as an amalgam of strategies focused on workplace organising, political campaigning and coalition building. The data demonstrates considerable congruence between national and local strategies, although local data reveals considerable challenges in implementation and consequently considerable unevenness in local experiences.

Keywords: teacher unions, social movement unionism, union change, union organizing.

Introduction

Collective bargaining is often seen as central to labor relations and the defining feature of a working environment in which unions have a key role. However, in the context of labor relations in the English school system it is possible to identify a highly unionised working environment (97% density according to a recent study, NFER 2012), but where collective bargaining in its formal sense is largely conspicuous by its absence.

National collective bargaining for teachers was suspended in 1987, and has never been re-instated. More recently, the importance of local authority (LA) level bargaining has been significantly diminished following government policies that have aggressively promoted a commitment for all local authority maintained schools to convert into "academy schools" (state schools independent of the local authority) (DfE, 2010). This process of conversion has become known as "academisation".

These policies have been promoted most vigorously by governments of the political Right (Conservative and the 2010-2015 Conservative-led coalition) and can be seen as a deliberate attempt to undermine and weaken teacher union influence, which has long been seen as antithetical to a more market-driven school system in which private providers would have a much more significant role to play (Guardian online, 2010). Such an approach is not without its risks because although critics argue collective bargaining is grounded in adversarialism, and provides a base for union activism, the reality is often more complex. Rather than being a source of conflict it can be argued that collective bargaining, and wider industrial relations machinery, are the means by which conflict is absorbed and managed (Kelly, 1988). Shortly after the abolition of negotiating rights Seifert (1990) argued that a vacuum was emerging in which employee relations conflicts had no adequate means of being addressed and this was likely to develop into increasingly complex disputes.

Seifert's prognosis was largely accurate although his assessment of timescales was not. The dismantling of the labor relations system Seifert described took very much longer than he predicted and traditional structures such as bargaining committees, particularly at local authority level, proved remarkably resilient (Carter, Stevenson and Passy, 2010). However, changes in government policy since 2010 have now had a considerable impact on collective bargaining arrangements at local authority level given that more than half of all secondary schools in England now sit outside of local authority control and are funded directly by central government.

In this article I explore how one union, the National Union of Teachers (NUT), has responded to this new environment. English teacher unionism is characterised by a complex competitive multi-unionism (Stevenson and Bascia, 2013) in which several unions operate in the same sectors of the school system and seek to recruit the same potential members (Gospel and Palmer, 2003). Differences between unions reflect complex historical traditions, and differing attitudes regarding how a teachers' organization should reconcile and advance teachers' industrial and professional interests. The NUT is the oldest, and the largest teachers' union in England and the third largest affiliate to Education International, the international teacher union federation. The union has historically campaigned for national collective bargaining for teachers and is often considered militant on industrial issues and politically progressive on professional issues.

I argue the NUT is repositioning itself in the context of a much changed employee relations environment in which union influence in relation to both industrial and professional issues is being challenged. In some union circles there are increasing references to the NUT as a 'social movement union' (Weiner, 2012), developing in ways similar to, and indeed directly influenced by, the Chicago

Teachers' Union (Uetricht, 2014). My argument is that the NUT is a union in transition, and that the strategies it is adopting cannot be easily labelled with any single descriptor. Rather it is best to see the union's response as an amalgam of a number of different approaches to union revitalization (Turner, 2004), which taken together represent a logical, but radical stage in the union's historical development. However, given the scale of these changes, it may be appropriate to refer to this developing phenomenon as a genuine "new unionism".

The article begins with an overview of the policy context in England, and an analysis of developments in collective bargaining covering a period dating back to the mid-1980s. It then discusses how teacher unions have responded to these developments and the strategies that have emerged. The research presented here explores union developments at both a national and local level. The national data are presented, and the key shifts in union positioning are identified. This is followed by data from three local authority districts. The data reveal a clear alignment between national and local strategies, although data from local sources highlight the challenge for the union in developing its strategies for member mobilisation and the consequent unevenness across localities that flow from this.

Understanding the context: collective bargaining in retreat

For some years state strategy in relation to organized teachers has been to undermine and progressively dismantle teachers' opportunities for collective bargaining (Cater, Stevenson & Passy, 2010). Conservative administrations in particular have consistently adopted explicit anti-union policies, most obviously in the form of the suspension of national collective bargaining machinery in 1987 (Ironside and Seifert, 1995), followed by its permanent replacement by an independent pay

review body. In the following year the 1988 Education Reform Act established an advanced form of site-based management that had as one of its aims the weakening of local authority power (where teacher unions were well established and involved in negotiating local collective agreements) by delegating significant powers (including personnel responsibilities) to school level (Simon, 1988).

Although the 1988 Act had the potential to bring about rapid and radical change evidence suggests practical change was more incremental. Carter *et al* (2010) report that in many cases schools, local authorities and teacher unions voluntarily re-created the local negotiating structures that the 1988 Education Reform Act was designed to dismantle. This study into school sector labor relations in the mid-2000's highlighted that local authority based negotiating and consultative committees largely remained intact, and that a key feature of the system was the role of the union local association secretary who was often supported by 'facilities time' (whereby school-based employees received an employer-funded 'buy-out' in order to perform their labor relations function). Moreover, although national collective bargaining has never been re-established, during the period 2003 to 2010 there did exist a national 'Social Partnership' in which government, local authority employers and most teacher unions engaged in a form of 'interest-based bargaining' that did generate a number of national collective agreements (Stevenson and Carter, 2009). Significantly, the NUT did not join the Social Partnership (NUT, 2003; Bangs, 2006).

The election of a Conservative-led coalition government in 2010 marked a clear 'stepping up' of a more explicitly anti-union strategy. One clear manifestation of this was the immediate abolition of the Social Partnership, however perhaps more significant was the aggressive promotion of academy schools with the ability to opt out of national terms and conditions that apply to teachers in local authority

maintained schools. Moreover, each school that opted out of local government control took with it a share of the funding that had previously gone to the local authority. This inevitably reduced the funding base to support authority wide provision and hence, at this point, there emerged the first real signs that the local authority base for collective bargaining was being seriously dismantled (Stevenson and Mercer, 2012).

This process of fragmentation was compounded when, at the government's behest, the School Teachers' Review Body proposed the abolition of national pay scales and the introduction of a national pay system for teachers with no agreed spine points and no automatic progression based on service (DfE, 2013). Rather schools were to determine their own pay scales (within a broad framework) and all pay progression was to be performance-related. The introduction of this model effectively abolished national pay scales (both for academy and local authority maintained schools) and pay policy became a school level issue.

What this brief overview of policy highlights is the almost total transformation of a system over a period of three decades. Until the mid-1980s teachers had been central to the policy process, and national collective bargaining, underpinned by parallel arrangements at local authority level, was pivotal to the notion of what was often called a 'national system, locally administered' (Gillard, 2011). Collective bargaining was the recognised means for both promoting teacher professionalism, and managing disputes at times of conflict. In the period since the mid-1980s the school system has been transformed, with local authorities' role substantially reduced and key issues such as pay the basis of school level decision-making.

Teachers and unions: responses to reform

There is much interest in identifying strategies whereby organized labor might resume its forward march. Ever since Eric Hobsbawm (1978) questioned the inevitability of organized labor's progress there has been an interest in how labor unions might rediscover their influence in much changed times. There is a recognition that serious organizational change may be necessary and Turner (2004) identified a number of different strategies that unions may adopt. Specifically he identified organizing, labor-management partnerships, political action, reform of union structures, coalition-building and international solidarity. Such a framework is helpful in identifying potential approaches to union revlitalization but does not necessarily capture some of the peculiarities of labor unions that represent teachers.

Analyses of teacher unions, in many jurisdictions, have often focused on the ways they seek to combine a focus on both 'industrial' and 'professional' issues. In some senses the tension between these two dimensions of teacher unionism can highlight the complex class location and professional identity of the teacher with competing demands to present the teacher as proletarian and/or professional (Ozga and Lawn, 1981). These differing identities are evident in the histories of different teacher unions with some unions located, albeit ambiguously, within the wider labor movement (such as the NUT), whereas other have their histories in professional associations (such as the NEA in the USA, Cameron, 2005). In the many contexts where teacher unionism is characterised by multi-unionism then it is common for this industrial-professional divide to serve as an important signifier for union difference and distinction.

As the post-war welfarist consensus started to crumble, and the fiscal crises of western states became more transparent, a more militant teacher unionism emerged in both the USA (Murphy, 1992) and in England when the first national strike of

teachers took place in 1969 (Seifert, 1987). In England what followed was an extended period of tension and conflict in which wider debates about the form and future of the welfare state played out in numerous industrial disputes, exemplified in England by the sustained teachers' action of 1984-86 (Ball, 1988).

This shift to a more traditional labor union militancy was in turn challenged by a counter- argument that teacher unions should resist such conflicts and be prepared to engage more constructively with debates about school improvement and teacher quality. This was most clearly articulated by Kerchner and Mitchell (1988) who argued that teacher unions should act as custodians of education quality and that teacher unions should actively engage with reforms on professional issues – what Kerchner, Koppich and Weeres (1997 and 1998) referred to as "the other half of teaching". Central to the argument presented by advocates of this approach was that teacher unions should find new ways to promote their interests and that traditional (and adversarial) collective bargaining should be replaced new types of bargaining based on dialogue and mutual problem-solving (Klingel, 2003). As such the case was being made for a fundamental shift in union priorities in relation to both the content and process of teacher-employer relations.

Variously referred to as 'new unionism' (Chase, 1997), 'reform unionism' (Koppich, 2006) or 'professional unionism' (Kerchner and Caufman,1995) this approach to teacher unionism retains a purchase in some academic circles, but has gained relatively little traction outside a small number of union Locals in the USA.

Both the approaches identified (collective bargaining and partnership models) can be seen as specific responses to the onset of state fiscal crisis in the late 1960s when public education expansion went into reverse, and when the state sought to assert much greater control over the costs and 'output' of education (the former by

controlling teachers' pay and the latter by curbing teacher professional autonomy).

However, both responses can be identified as fundamentally conservative in so far as

both represented attempts to manage state-teacher relations within the constraints of

the existing economic and social system.

The limitations of both these approaches have been challenged by those within

the teacher union movement who have argued for a more radical approach to

unionism in which teacher unions were urged to mobilise around social justice issues,

and to build alliances with community based organizations acting as social justice

advocates (see NCEA, 1994 and the case for "social justice unionism"). In England

the term social justice unionism has never had the same purchase as it has in North

America, although the spirit of the approach has long been evident in the strategy of

Left caucuses in the NUT such as the *Socialist Teachers' Alliance* (and its

predecessor *Rank and File Teacher*) (Seifert, 1984).

This approach to teacher unionism, with its emphasis on combining economic

and political objectives together with a commitment to developing community-based

alliances, resonates with debates in parts of the wider labor movement about building

new forms of "social movement unionism" (Waterman, 1993; Moody 1997). Several

different elements of social movement unionism can be identified, but in essence

there is a recognition that if labor unionism is going to be "transformational" (rather

than focusing on securing incremental gains within current structures) then unions

need to develop broader alliances beyond their own membership. They also need to

develop a more critical analysis of current structures and to advance more radical

demands for change – hence the development of demands that eschew an artificial

division between the narrowly economic and the wider political but rather sought to

connect the two.

Such a strategy in part reflects a frustration with traditional unionism that was seen as too accommodating towards accepted management-employee relations. However, it was also presented as a pragmatic and necessary response to changes in the nature of the employment relationship whereby the intensification of competition, and the growth of a new managerialism threatened traditional bases of worker solidarity. Such developments clearly represented a challenge to union organization, however there are those who have argued that the same developments present organizing opportunities for unions (Heery, Delbridge and Simms, 1999). This emerges most cogently in the union renewal thesis (Fairbrother, 1996 and 2000) whereby it is argued that decentralised and more aggressive forms of management are likely to generate workplace based tensions that in turn offer opportunities for labor unions to exploit, not least because the collective bargaining mechanisms that would previously have absorbed such conflicts no longer exist as they did before. Rather the contradictions and conflicts inherent in the labor process are laid bare. However, the challenge for unions is to move beyond a bureaucratic adjustment of priorities whereby union organizing is shifted to more school-based issues and rather transform the union itself so that its form and structures reflect this new decentralised context. This process of union renewal is likely to come about when union members who are drawn into local disputes with their management also begin to ask questions about the democratic structures of their union.

Data collection and analysis

Data in this study focus on the NUT at a national and local level, with different approaches to data collection adopted in each of these two areas of focus. National data were gathered from a detailed analysis of secondary sources including

NUT publications, its online presence (including its website and social media content) and from an analysis of speeches and articles presented by leading national union officials. Some of this material was also supplemented by an analysis of publications and online content published by caucus groups within the NUT. The NUT has always been a union with significant within-union factional activity (Seifert, 1984) and this offers an important insight into internal debates and divisions in the union.

Data collection focused on a local level was conducted in three local authority areas (identified as LA1, LA2 and LA3). These local authorities in the Midlands area included one city authority (urban), and two shire counties (predominantly rural, but with a mix of declining industrial towns and edge of city suburbanism). In all three authorities there had been a significant shift towards academisation with the primary sector in LA2 being the only instance where academisation was below the national average. In all other instances, the level of academisation was significantly above the national average. These cases are therefore not presented as typical, but rather their interest is in their status as what might be considered vanguard cases, if, as seems likely, the drive to academisation continues.

Table 1: Academy conversion rates nationally and across three case study local authorities

	Primary		Secondary	
	Academy	Local Authority maintained	Academy	Local Authority maintained
National	13%	87%	63%	37%

Local Authority 1	36%	64%	83%	17%
Local Authority 2	10%	90%	88%	12%
Local Authority 3	38%	62%	82%	18%

Various sources

In these three areas 26 interviews were conducted with a range of participants. Interviews were conducted with two union officials (union employees) one of whom had a regional role in relation to the case study local authority, and one of whom was responsible for the developing the union's campaigns against academisation and privatisation. Interviews were conducted with 16 union activists, defined as lay members involved in representing the union in some official capacity. Several interviewees had multiple roles, for example acting as the union representative in their school, but also involved in the union at local association level. A small number of school principals (four) and community activists (four) were also interviewed, to provide some perspective on these issues from a non-union perspective. Community activists were involved in a local campaign group challenging academisation that represented a significant union-community coalition (Tattersall, 2013).

Data analysis (of all material) used a common process in which collection and analysis were not treated as discrete activities but were conducted simultaneously and iteratively. Data was analysed through a process of thematic codes and analytical memos (Miles & Huberman, 1994) from which the key themes presented in following sections were identified and developed.

Collective bargaining in retreat

As argued earlier in this article national collective bargaining has not existed in any meaningful sense in England since 1987. However, more recent studies had demonstrated that formal collective arrangements, including bargaining, had proved much more resilient at LA level and continued to be an important element of school sector labor relations (Carter, Passy & Stevenson, 2010). This changed considerably during the 2010-2015 Coalition government with clear signs that local authority structures relating to schools were being transformed, and often dismantled. This was almost certainly attributable to the accelerated drive to academisation and compounded by austerity driven reductions in local authority funding. However, it is important to note that across the three cases the situation is complex and uneven.

Different ways of assessing the extent of local authority level bargaining are to consider the status of negotiating committees, the prevalence of facilities agreements (detailing the support provided by the employer to the union to help it perform its industrial relations function) and the 'reach' of such arrangements within a local authority area. Across the three local authorities in this study these three dimensions of local bargaining changed dramatically. Changes were most dramatic in LA1 where the local authority was keenly committed to the academisation of all its schools. In this instance support for the facilities agreement was withdrawn completely and the local negotiating committee (and a linked consultative committee) were disbanded. In this extreme example there was no longer any discernible labor relations machinery provided by the local authority at all. In this LA the NUT association secretary commented:

I have gone from dealing with one employer [the local authority]

and having 100% facilities time to dealing with nearly 150

separate employers and no facilities time – in 12 months.

(NUT association secretary, LA1).

In LA2 and LA3 the situation was more complex. In both cases facilities

agreements were retained (providing release time for union officers). This was

achieved through 'buy back' agreements whereby schools, both local authority and

academy, could choose to contribute funding to the LA to maintain the financing of

release time. The problem for the union was that not all schools chose to 'buy back',

and hence the available funding diminished. There was also evidence of an emerging

free-rider problem whereby schools chose not to buy-back, but still expected union

officers to be on hand if disputes arose. In both LA2 and LA3 local union officers

acknowledged that the 'reach' of negotiating committees was diminished as these

now only applied to LA maintained schools. Covering fewer schools, and with

correspondingly fewer resources to support them, the view that LA negotiating

committees were much reduced in influence was not contested by any interviewee.

One union officer in LA2 commented that their negotiating committee was no longer

properly serviced by the LA (as a result of inadequate resources) and consequently

was sometimes cancelled by the employer due to lack of business. However, set

against the decline of LA structures was evidence of new structures developing in the

increasingly important multi-academy trusts and academy chains (these terms refer to

groups of academy schools being managed by a single over-arching body). These

arrangements varied considerably in style, from the highly informal through to more

traditional structures that mirrored those in the LA. It is not possible to provide a

comprehensive overview of these as they varied so much in structure, and were also fast evolving. However, what is clear is that a complex and diverse picture is emerging in relation to labor relations and collective bargaining structures in the new schools landscape in England. At one level there appears to be a vacuum emerging, of the type predicted by Seifert (1990) and referred to previously. However, as the new and rapidly evolving school system takes shape it appears that new collective bargaining structures are being created, within some school groupings at least. What is clear at this stage is that the position is evolving and fast moving. The future is uncertain, but might reasonably be expected to reflect considerable diversity of arrangements once it has stabilised.

New times: new union?

The scale of the changes in negotiating machinery at national and local level has presented considerable challenges for teacher unions in England. I have argued elsewhere that for many years English teacher unions were reluctant to face up to the increasingly decentralised system in which their members functioned (Stevenson, 2012). This may have been tenable as a strategy as long as unions retained significant influence at local authority level but there can be little doubt that the drive to academisation has rendered the centralised, local authority based structures of all the teacher unions as out of kilter with the new more fragmented school system.

Within the NUT there has emerged a clear sense of the union re-orienting its strategy and tactics in an environment in which formal collective bargaining channels have been largely removed and in which system fragmentation is a defining feature. This is evident in many forms, but perhaps most obviously by the convening of a high level working party in 2010 to assess union strategy in light of the drive to

academisation. The strategy that has emerged is manifest in many forms but was articulated with particular clarity by Christine Blower, the union's General Secretary (most senior paid official), in a series of three highly significant articles published in the *Morning Star* newspaper in 2014. The articles were published to coincide with the union's 2014 national conference and the timing and placing of the articles clearly directs them to the union's activist base, rather than the broader membership. The articles represent an important statement of position and are quoted here in some detail. In these articles Blower sets out the nature of the problem facing the union:

> . . . each academy is a "bargaining unit." So in a very short space of time the NUT has moved from having to deal with 153 employers in England (local authorities) to something approaching 4,000, where, on average, each NUT division (branch) has to deal with 26 separate employers.

> In reality, and depending on the geographical area, the number may be many times higher.

> Further, with the devolution of pay scales and pay progression to individual schools — maintained schools as well as academies — we are arguably witnessing . . . school-level bargaining on a wider basis. . . .

> This is a major issue for a union that is primarily structured around mirroring the traditional bargaining unit of the local authority.

> (Blower, 2014a)

In such an environment Blower goes on to argue the union must shift its focus from one that has been grounded in a centralised model of collective bargaining to one based on organizing in workplaces. She argues:

Implicit within the organizing model is recognition of the fundamentally antagonistic relationship between employer and employee.

The turn towards an organizing model . . . [is] a movement away from "partnership" and "servicing" models that developed as a result of defeats inflicted upon some unions in the early 1980s.

(Blower, 2014b)

Blower's analysis is significant as it positions the union quite explicitly in terms of traditional labor relations. Specifically there is a repudiation of "partnership" models of labor relations (consistent with the NUT's rejection of the Social Partnership between 2003 and 2010) that are seen as an inadequate compromise to earlier attacks on collective bargaining. Rather Blower argues for a more active grassroots and participatory unionism that builds on the "fundamentally antagonistic relationship" at the workplace. In the same article she acknowledges that such an approach is driven by the new educational landscape facing organized teachers –

the structural change inflicted upon the education service, in particular the thrust towards the break-up of local authorities and the emergence of academy chains, has made this organizing approach a

burning necessity for the NUT if it is to remain and progress as a

lay-led campaigning union.

(Blower, 2014b)

This re-orientation of the union's focus towards workplace organizing is increasingly reflected in references to the role of the school union representative. For many years this position had occupied an ambiguous location in the union's structures – formally acknowledged as important, the reality often reflected a different experience whereby school representatives were encouraged to take on only limited duties (such as distributing union literature) (Stevenson, 2003) and were often actively discouraged from getting involved in school level bargaining (Carter, Stevenson & Passy, 2010).

It is important at this stage to recognise that the emphasis on workplace organizing has not resulted in a retreat into a narrow economistic form of unionism in which the focus is purely on "industrial" issues, but has been accompanied by what might be termed a strategy of political organizing on key professional issues and wider questions of education policy. This was clearly articulated in an article written by Kevin Courtney (Deputy General Secretary) and Gawain Little (national executive member) in which they explicitly, and significantly, draw on the ideas of the twentieth century Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci both to analyse the current challenge facing the union and to set out the union's strategy of opposition (Courtney and Little, 2014).

What emerges strongly from the analysis presented by Courtney and Little is a critique of current policies grounded in globalisation, neoliberalism and the forward march of the global education reform movement or "GERM" (Sahlberg, 2010)

presented as a hegemonic movement formed around the interests of global capital. Education reform is cast as a project of privatisation diametrically opposed to the notion of education as a public good, publicly provided (Blower, 2015). Such analyses have emerged particularly strongly in union publications (use of the "GERM" phrase features with increasing frequency on the union's website and in its house journal *The Teacher*), at conferences (for example the conference organized in May 2015 entitled "*Education at what price? Politics, power and privatisation*") and in the training of union lay officers (such as the presentation by the NUT's head of organizing to leading activists entitled "*What can we really learn from Antonio Gramsci?*" (Wilson and Baisley, 2013).).

Underlining the importance of Gramsci's analysis to the NUT's strategy Courtney and Little argue the union needs to develop a "counter-hegemonic strategy" that combines political campaigning with industrial militancy as the basis of a twin-track strategy that will challenge the trajectory of privatisation. In particular they argue that "trade unions need to broaden their sectional interests to become community wide ones and to increasingly politicise their activities in the face of the neoliberal assault" (Courtney and Little, 2014, p. 311). In this context it becomes possible to identify a range of different coalitions that the NUT has actively sought to develop as part of its wider strategy of industrial and political campaigning, most notably parents and community groups, other teacher unions and wider labour movement and in particular other left leaning public sector unions.

Alliances with parents were identified as central to the union's national "Stand Up for Education" campaign and were presented as part of a broader strategy to mobilise public opinion around the union's wider alternative agenda. At the same

time the union has continued to try to develop collective action with other teacher unions. This has met with mixed results. In May 2012 the NUT and National Association of Schoolmasters/Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) announced a "historic agreement" (NASUWT, 2012) around shared objectives and in the period that followed there was some joint strike action. However, this was a fragile alliance and in March 2014 the coalition formally fractured when the NUT announced it would be taking further strike action whilst the NASUWT announced it would not. The incident highlights the complexity of English teachers' multi-unionism in which approaches to professional unity are also strongly informed by calculations of individual union advantage. What might have looked less promising as a union alliance, but potentially more productive, has been a developing relationship between the NUT and Association of Teachers and Lecturers with on-going meetings and conferences intended to explore the potential for a new teachers' union (Exley, 2015). As a precursor to this possible development the two unions are exploring joint working around a number of campaigns such as workload, pay and the curriculum.

The final type of coalition that can be identified is in relation to the wider labor movement, and in particular a group of left-leaning public sector unions. The NUT has been a member of the Trade Union Congress since 1970, and has long considered itself a part of the wider trade union movement. However, what is noticeable more recently is the extent to which the NUT has allied itself with campaigns and coalitions associated with particular labor unions. There has been limited co-ordinated strike action in relation to public sector cuts, although the NUT has played a role in trying to develop such action. It is also the only school teachers' union to affiliate to the People's Assembly Against Austerity – a broad umbrella organization formed in 2013 that has acted as a non-party political pole for anti-austerity campaigning.

Based on the evidence presented above I argue it is possible to identify a clear strategic shift in the orientation of the NUT as it adapts to a much changed environment in which its traditional spheres of influence have been challenged. State strategies have been focused on marginalising the teacher unions, and in particular closing down the spaces in which collective bargaining may take place. Faced with such developments the union has refocused its work around three strands of action – each of these is interdependent with the other. First is a commitment to lay member activism, and in particular a focus on developing workplace organization. Second is a more explicit focus on political organizing in which the case for public education is set against a neoliberal narrative of privatisation. In both these instances, the concept of "antagonistic relationships" is often implicit, and increasingly explicit. The third element of the strategy, and which might be argued to underscore each of the other elements, is a commitment to coalition building whereby the union has sought to build alliances with parents and community groups, other teacher unions and the labor unions more widely.

National strategy and local experience

The focus on workplace organizing has been reflected in the national union's commitment to building workplace representation, and the NUT claims that since its organizing agenda was implemented there has been a 60% increase in the number of workplace representatives and a 250% increase in the number of trained school representatives (Blower, 2014a). The union has already started to organise training specifically for school representatives in academy chains (rather than being exclusively based on local authority based boundaries).

Such training emerged as essential when school representatives described how increased responsibilities as academisation brought with it an increased workplace role and a growing complexity in issues. School representatives reported they did not feel they necessarily had the skills and expertise to deal with these issues, whilst they also reported a tension between union commitments and increased demands on their time and rising expectations about work commitments. The tensions were summarised by one school union representative as follows:

> Up until now there have been a few bits and pieces and I can cope with a few bits and pieces - here and there. But I feel that the last, well probably the last year, there has just been so much and I teach a core subject. I teach a core subject with the most marking and I run interventions. I run the A-level in Literature and I don't know where I have time anymore - especially if we continue down that line of things going through myself and the [NASUWT] rep. It eats into a lot of my time and a lot of that time I do not have. And its not an easy position to be in. It is a stressful position to be in when you are trying to placate people's concerns.

This representative concluded that "*I don't know if I want to do this much longer*", highlighting the growing tensions between a commitment to the union and a commitment to professional responsibilities in the context of high performativity cultures that emphasis individual accountability (Ball, 2003). In some cases (although not this one) these problems were compounded by a perceived anti-unionism on the part of school management making school representatives feel exposed and vulnerable. One local union officer commented – "*we know of schools where teachers*

are actively discouraged from engaging with the union". In another case it was reported by local union officers that union members at one school would only meet together off-site as they feared management reprisals if they were seen to be organizing in the workplace.

There are clearly challenges for a strategy based on workplace organizing, not least in terms of building and maintaining union capacity, but it was also clear that the decentralisation of issues resulted in "organizing opportunities" as school-based decisions created a new locus of bargaining around which organizing opportunities developed. One such example was provided by a school considering academy status. In this instance a teacher described how she took on the role of the school union representative as she was so incensed by the decision to academise, which she saw as both a threat to pay and conditions, but also about privatisation – "*I just thought that I didn't really have any other choice*". In this case the school union representative led a campaign against academisation that involved eight days of strike action and placed the union representative under enormous pressure. She was presented as the dispute "ring-leader" by the school principal and described how she experienced considerable intimidation during the dispute. Over time the intensity of pressure experienced within the school meant that the union group began to fracture.

> We had had those eight day and I suppose you just lose the momentum
> of it .. because you just can't sustain it. It became awful going back into
> school and school was just crazy and it was just so disrupted. Relations
> between the NUT and the NASUWT membership were starting to
> break down and we also had some NUT members who had probably
> voted "Yes" [to strike] and then not come out. Then people were

starting to wane a bit and that last weekend, before the last three days of

strike action I had people ringing me all weekend .. just saying .. "I

can't do this anymore [name]" .. "I have got to think about my family"

.. "I have got to think about my mortgage" . It was all getting to people

and it also felt like it was a lot on me. These were people who were

much older than me and I think I probably took a lot of that

responsibility on my shoulders. You hope that you are acting together

but I kind of wish that everyone has just gone back at the same point.

But once people started . . . . once the odd person started to go back in .

. . . it just made it much harder.

NUT School representative

Despite the way the dispute ended the school representative considered the

union campaign a partial victory arguing that the balance of power between principal

and teachers had shifted as a result of the dispute, and that the principal was

subsequently much more likely to consult staff about proposed policy changes. The

school representative concluded that "*If you can organise in my school you can*

organise anywhere. Every school can be organized".

This experience of union organizing around specific issues, and a focus on

workplace organization, was seen as central to a successful campaign challenging

plans for a radically revised school holiday pattern in LA3. In this case the local NUT

adopted a range of innovative methods to communicate and mobilise members

(including direct contact via SMS and social media) and to tap into "the potent anger

bubbling in the schools." (Wheatley, Artis and Unterrainer, 2014, online). This

campaign also culminated in several days of strike action and was successful in

securing substantial changes to the employer's proposals (*Nottingham Evening Post*, 2012), but it also resulted in a significant re-building of the local union. For example the union reported a 132% in the number of union representatives in schools between March and December 2012, and a 108% increase in the number of members with a union representative in their school during the same period.

The second element of the national strategy I have identified above relates to "political organizing" in the form of union campaigning on professional and policy issues, but framed within an increasingly explicit anti-neoliberal analysis. At a local level this emerged strongly in the form of locally organized "*Stand up for Education*" campaigns in which members were encouraged to organise meetings and street stalls to take the union's key policy messages to parent and community audiences (Unterraniner, 2014). In all of the three local authority areas in this report NUT branches organized such activities, and in some cases there was significant activity. Another feature of such work, and particularly in the run up to the 2015 general election was the holding of "*Education Question Times*" in which public meetings with a panel of experts were held, based on a format in which members of the public present questions for the panel to answer. Again, these were organized in all the local authority areas in this research, with one such event involving the Secretary of State for Education attracting an audience of 250 people. Such events appeared successful in drawing a wider range of people into engaging with the union's policy agenda although it was less clear to what extent these initiatives reached out to new constituencies of support, or generated longer term commitment to the union's aims. Whilst some were very well attended, inevitably attendance could be variable.

In relation to both the union's industrial and political organizing strategies it is possible to see how the development of coalitions was central to both strategies,

although this could often present as a particular challenge at a local level. In the campaign against changes to holiday patterns identified above parents were seen as crucial to the success of the dispute. In this instance a parents' action group was formed ("Parents Against the Five Term Year") and this group worked together with the union on the campaign (Wheatley, Artis & Unterrainer, 2014). This was clearly significant in the dispute, and was successful in mobilizing public opinion around the issue (and in opposition to the proposals for change) however, the union and parent campaigns benefitted from significant co-terminosity of membership, and this appeared to help develop this alliance. In other instances there was less evidence of coalitions forming. For example, an action group formed across two of the case study local authorities to challenge proposals for academy schools where these arose in the area. This group was formed from a loose coalition of union members and party political activists. Union activists were drawn entirely from the NUT and there was little evidence of coalitions with other teacher unions around these issues. In some cases, when specific issues emerged, then there were examples of unions working together, but what was striking was how fragile these alliances proved to be. In many of the local disputes and campaigns included in this study the involvement of other teacher unions was seen to "fall away" at key points, and this may have contributed to a weariness about working hard to involve other unions. One local NUT officer argued that in the dispute over holiday patterns the NASUWT did not take action because they believed they would be able to recruit from NUT members unwilling to strike.

They [NASUWT] said "No" [to striking]. I think what it came down to

was a fairly crass calculation based on the assumption that they would

recruit members of the NUT who would leave the union rather than go

on strike .. and I think that was basically it and they didn't like the fact

that NUT was taking a lead.

NUT local official

Whatever the merits of the accuracy of this analysis it points to the tensions

between unions and some of the difficulties experienced in trying to develop

coalitions across teaching unions on campaigning issues at the local level. Certainly

within the local action group focused on mobilising against academisations working

with "the union" meant working with the NUT, and campaign members made almost

no mentions of other teacher unions. Within schools there was more evidence of

different unions working together to represent staff views, although such alliances

appeared to come under almost immediate pressure when more active mobilisations

were developed. Moreover, many of the coalitions identified in this study might be

best described as what Frege, Heery and Turner (2004) refer to as "vanguard

coalitions" whereby the union seeks coalitions, but largely based on an agenda

determined by the union.

The NUT was often an active participant in Trades Councils (locally based

union federations) but there was little evidence of sustained collaboration around

common campaigning priorities.

This overview of union activity across the three local authorities points to a high

level of alignment between national and local strategy. This is not to suggest total

synchronicity, and there was certainly evidence, for example. of divergent views in

relation to the national union's decision to call off national strike action in the period

before the 2015 general election. What the data also illustrates is the difficulty of developing coordinated action in particular contexts and specifically in relation to forming sustainable coalitions for change.

Conclusion

State policy in relation to teacher unions in England has oscillated between confrontation and social partnership. Both approaches, in very different ways, have sought to close down spaces for traditional collective bargaining and have rejected traditional collective bargaining as a means of managing employee relations issues and attendant conflicts. At the time of writing the current government is continuing an approach based on minimal engagement with organized teachers. Central to this strategy is the development of a more decentralised and fragmented school system in which national, and even local, bargaining fails to gain traction. Such radical shifts in the bargaining context inevitably require teacher unions to respond. In this article I have focused on the NUT and its efforts to adjust to this new environment. Not only is the NUT the largest teachers' union in England, but it is also the union which arguably has made the most dramatic shifts in response to the new landscape.

What emerges from this analysis is a clear shift by the union towards a strategy, or strategies, grounded more explicitly in a conflict model of labor relations, based on what the union's General Secretary refers to as a "fundamentally antagonistic relationship" between the teachers and their employers. The corollary of this analysis is the development of a twin track strategy based on traditional grassroots organizing (and in particular a focus on workplace organization) combined with a more explicit form of political organizing in which the union champions professional issues, whilst locating government reforms within an explicit neoliberal

project. Key strategists in the union explicitly draw on the ideas of Antonio Gramsci as they frame their approach in terms of the development of a "counter-hegemonic movement" and it is the case that much of the union's approach can be seen as reflecting key elements of Gramscian thinking, in particular Gramsci's (1971) emphasis on alliance building (the third element of the union's strategy), and a line of attack grounded of "war of position" as the union seeks to shift the policy "common sense" away from current orthodoxies based on markets and competition. Many within the NUT have referred to this as a form of social movement unionism, including the general secretary (Blower, 2014c). Elsewhere Justine Mercer and myself have supported this claim (Stevenson and Mercer, 2015), at least arguing that a social movement unionism is identifiable in embryonic form. However, what may be more accurate to argue is that the changes in the NUT represents an amalgam of several strategies identified by Turner (2004) in which organizing, political action and coalition building represent the core pillars of a broader revitalization strategy. What does appear clear is that this more dynamic and combative approach to union strategy represents a direct repudiation of a partnership model – a decision made easier by the state's prior rejection of the same model.

Data in this study highlights the risks, and the challenges in the union's strategy. The emphasis on membership mobilisation for workplace organizing, political campaigning and coalition building requires considerable commitment from members – who already find themselves working under high pressure and in cultures that are less and less tolerant of challenges to managerial authority. Generating such mobilisations, and sustaining them, presents considerable challenges. However, as some of the cases in this study demonstrate, the growth of locally determined issues, and the shift of the locus of control to the workplace, opens up the possibility of many

more "flashpoint" issues in schools, and without any established mechanisms for dealing with the corresponding fallout. Given these developments it is far from clear that a state strategy focused on anti-unionism and the marginalisation of organized teachers will lead to a corresponding diminution in industrial conflicts. Rather it is likely conflicts will become apparent in new and less predictable forms. Such instances represent opportunities for union organizing and it may be that a strategy designed to defeat teacher unionism will in actuality renew it – and a new teacher unionism will emerge.

References:

Ball, S. J. (1988) "Staff relations during the teachers' industrial action: context, conflict and proletarianisation", British Journal of Sociology of Education, 9 (3) pp. 289-306.

Ball, S. J. (2003) The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity. *Journal of education policy* 18 (2), 215-228.

Bangs, J. (2006) Social Partnership: the wider context *Forum: for promoting 3-19 comprehensive education* 48 (2) 201-207.

Blower, C. (2014a). The NUT is rising to the academy challenge, *Morning Star*, 21st April. Retrieved from http://www.morningstaronline.co.uk/a-ae8f-The-NUT-is-rising-to-the-academy-challenge#.VbZ5PkWUc-c

Blower, C. (2014b). Empowering lay structures, *Morning Star*, 19th April. Retrieved from https://www.morningstaronline.co.uk/a-6e5a-Empowering-lay-structures

Blower, C. (2014c). Putting the union at the heart of our communities, *Morning Star*, 22nd April. Retrieved from http://www.morningstaronline.co.uk/a-b53c-Putting-the-union-at-the-heart-of-our-communities#.VbZ5nkWUc-c

Blower, C. (2015) Foreword: Education is a public good. G. Little (ed) *Global education 'reform': building resistance and solidarity*. London: Manifesto Press.

Cameron, D. (2005) *The inside story of the teacher revolution in America* ScarecrowEducation: Lanham Maryland.

Carter, B., Stevenson, H. and Passy, R. (2010) *Industrial Relations in Education: Transforming the School Workforce*, London, Routledge.

Chase, B. (1999) 'The new NEA: reinventing teacher unions' in B. Peterson and M. Charney *Transforming teacher unions: fighting for better schools and social justice* Milwaukee WI: Rethinking Schools.

Courtney, K. and Little, G. (2014). Standing Up for Education: building a national campaign, *FORUM*, 56(2), 299-317

http://dx.doi.org/10.2304/forum.2014.56.2.299

DfE (2010). *The importance of teaching: schools White Paper*. Retrieved from http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/toolsandinitiatives/schoolswhitepaper/b0068570/the-importance-of-teaching (accessed 20 December 2012).

DfE (2013). *School teachers' pay and conditions document 2013 and guidance on school teachers' pay and conditions*. Retrieved from http://media.education.gov.uk/assets/files/pdf/s/130806%202013%20stpcd%20master%20final.pdf (accessed 1st September 2013).

Exley, S. (2015). Could a NUT-ATL merger be on the cards? Times Educational Supplement 6th April. Retrieve from https://www.tes.co.uk/news/school-news/breaking-news/could-a-nut-atl-merger-be-cards

Fairbrother, P. (1996). Workplace trade unionism in the state sector, in P. Ackers., C. Smith., and P. Smith (eds) *The new workplace and trade unions* London: Routledge.

Fairbrother, P. (2000). British trade unions facing the future. *Capital & Class*, *24*(2), 11-42.

Frege, C., Heery, E. and Turner, L. (2004) The new solidarity? Trade union coalition-building in five countries. C. Frege & J. Kelly (Eds.), *Varieties of unionism: Strategies for union revitalization in a globalizing economy.* Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Gillard, D. (2011) *Education in England: A brief history*. Retrieved from: http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/speeches/1976ruskin.html

Gospel, H. and Palmer, G. (2003) *British industrial relations* London: Routledge.

Gramsci, A. (1971) Selections from the prison notebooks. London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Guardian (2010). *Geoffrey Canada warns Michael Gove teacher unions 'kill' innovation*. Retrieved from http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2010/oct/05/geoffrey-canada-education-unions

Hannaway, J. and Rotherham, A. (Eds.) (2006) *Collective bargaining in education: negotiating change in today's schools* (203-228). Cambridge MA: Harvard Education Press.

Heery, E., Delbridge, R. and Simms, M. (1999) Organise or fossilise? The revival of union organizing, London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ironside, M. and Seifert, R. (1995). Industrial relations in schools. London: Routledge.

Kelly, J. (1988). *Trade unions and socialist politics*, London: Verso.

Kerchner, C. and Mitchell, D. (1988). *The changing idea of a teachers' union.* London: Falmer Press.

Kerchner, C. and Caufman, K. (1995) Lurching toward professionalism: The saga of
teacher unionism *The Elementary School Journal* 96, (1), 107-122.

Kerchner, C., Koppich, J. and Weeres, J. (1997). *United mind workers: Unions and
teaching in the knowledge society*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Kerchner, C., Koppich, J. and Weeres, J. (1998). *Taking charge of quality: How
teachers and unions can revitalize schools*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Klingel, S. (2003) *Interest-based bargaining in education* Washington DC: NEA.

Koppich, J. (2006). The as-yet-unfulfilled promise of reform bargaining. In J.

Hannaway, and A. Rotherham, (Eds.) *Collective bargaining in education:
negotiating change in today's schools* (203-228). Cambridge MA: Harvard
Education Press.

Miles, M. & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis.* (2nd edition).
London: Sage.

Moody, K. (1997). Towards an international social movement unionism. New Left
Review I/225. Retrieved from http://newleftreview.org/I/225/kim-moody-
towards-an-international-social-movement-unionism

Murphy, M. (1992). Blackboard unions: the AFT and the NEA 1900-1980, Cornell
University Press.

NCEA (1994) *Social justice unionism: a call to activists*. Retrieved from
http://www.rethinkingschools.org/special_reports/union/sjun.shtml

NFER (2012). NFER Teacher Voice Omnibus: November 2012 – survey:

understanding union membership and activity. Retrieved from

https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/nfer-teacher-voice-omnibus-

november-2012-survey-understanding-union-membership-and-activity

NUT (2003). *A Price Too High* London: NUT.

Ozga, J. and Lawn, M. (1981). Teachers, professionalism ands class: Study of

organized teachers, Brighton: Falmer Press.

NASUWT (2012). *NASUWT and NUT: Joint declaration of intent*. Retrieved from

http://www.nasuwt.org.uk/consum/groups/public/@journalist/documents/nas_

download/nasuwt_009403.pdf

Sahlberg, P. (2010) *Finnish Lessons: What Can the World Learn from Educational Change in*

Finland? New York: Teachers' College Press.

Seifert, R. (1984). Some aspects of factional opposition: Rank and File and the

National Union of Teachers 1967-82, British Journal of Industrial Relations,

22 (3) 372-390.

Seifert, R. (1987). Teacher militancy: A history of teacher strikes 1896-1987. London:

Falmer Press.

Seifert, R. (1990). Prognosis for local bargaining in health and education, *Personnel*

Management, June. 54-7.

Simon, B. (1988). *Bending the rules: The Baker reform of education*. London:

Lawrence and Wishart.

Stevenson, H (2003) On the Shopfloor: exploring the impact of teacher trade unions on

school-based industrial relations, in *School Leadership and Management*, 23 (3)

341-356.

Stevenson, H. and Carter, B. (2009) 'Teachers and the State: forming and re-forming

'partnership'', Journal of Educational Administration and History, 41: 4, 311 —

326.

Stevenson, H. (2012). New unionism? teacher unions and school governance in

England and Wales, *Local Government Studies* (published online -

DOI:10.1080/03003930.2012.726142).

Stevenson, H. and Bascia, N. (2013). *Teacher unions and multi-unionism: identifying*

issues of gender and militancy in Ontario and England, paper presented at

AERA annual meeting, San Francisco CA, 27 April-1st May.

Stevenson, H. and Mercer, J. (2012). *School sector industrial relations in transition: assessing the impact of academies*, British Educational Leadership Management and Administration Society. Retrieved from https://www.belmas.org.uk/write/MediaUploads/Stevenson_Mercer_Final_Report.pdf

Stevenson, H. and Mercer, J. (2015). Education reform in England and the emergence of social movement unionism: the National Union of Teachers in England. N. Bascia (ed) *Teacher unions in public education*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Tattersall, A. (2013) *Power in coalition: strategies for strong unions and social change*, Ithaca, NY: ILR Press.

Turner, L. (2004). Why revitalize? Labour's urgent mission in a contested global economy. In C. Frege & J. Kelly (Eds.), *Varieties of unionism: Strategies for union revitalization in a globalizing economy.* Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Uetricht, M. (2014). Strike for America: Chicago teachers against austerity. London: Verso.

Unterrainer, T. (2014). Standing Up for Education: organizing at the local level, *FORUM*, 56(2), 293-298. http://dx.doi.org/10.2304/forum.2014.56.2.293

Waterman, P. (1993) Social movement unionism: a new union model for a new world order *Review* Vol. 16, No. 3 (Summer, 1993), pp. 245-278.

Weiner, L. (2012) *The Future of our schools: teachers unions and social justice,* Chicago: Haymarket Books.

Wheatley, S., Artis, S. and Unterrainer, T. (2013) *Organizing to win: how Nottingham teachers defeated the 'five term year' and organized to win*. Retrieved from https://vote4sheena.files.wordpress.com/2014/03/organizingtowin.pdf

Wilson, D. and Baisley, A. (2013) *What can we really learn from Antonio Gramsci?* Divisional Secretaries' Briefing. Retrieved from http://www.teachers.org.uk/files/dsb13-wk-what-can-we-learn-from-antonio-gramsci_ntp.pdf