

Britain: Union leader warns of “nightmare prospect” for education under Labour government

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“The school of the future will be franchised, branded and sponsored. To you it is a nightmare prospect. To New Labour it represents progress, modernisation and the future.”

This was the warning made by Doug McAvoy, general secretary of the National Union of Teachers (NUT), Britain’s largest teaching union, in his final speech to its recent annual conference.

McAvoy explained that this nightmare prospect amounted to the most radical upheaval since the 1944 Education Act, which established universal secondary education.

Outlining the rush to privatisation by Prime Minister Tony Blair’s government, he continued, “The prime minister wants schools to be run like Tesco stores. We’ll have special offers. Two chemistry lessons for the price of one... League tables of teachers, grading them through performance management, will enable schools to charge more for some teachers than for others. Schools will be able to offer air miles. This is no longer a fantasy; it is the logical consequence of the government’s ‘joined-up’ thinking...”

“The same logic that the government applies to variable top-up fees for university places will be applied to parental contributions to the education of their children. The taxpayer will provide the funding necessary for the base level of education provision. Sufficient, shall we say, for the bog standard comprehensive. Extras will come on top of that... feeding the soul—music, art, drama, poetry—anything related to free expression [will be] extra.”

McAvoy’s remarks underscore how the trade union bureaucracy is fully aware of the implications of government policy and what a retrograde agenda it has imposed on its members. It is only now, just before he is due to retire in June, that McAvoy feels free to tell the truth about Blair’s strategy and vision for education and to vent his frustration and fears regarding its consequences.

His speech was all the more remarkable because during his 15-year stint as NUT leader, and 15 years before that as its deputy, McAvoy has been firmly associated with the right wing. When he first stood for general secretary in 1989, it was on a “modernisation” ticket. Politically allied with Neil

Kinnock, former Labour leader in the early 1990s, McAvoy sought to rid the union of its militant image, arguing that this put off potential recruits. In the past he has consistently opposed conference votes to take strike action against the assault on its member’s conditions and wages and has ensured they did not take place.

The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) dismissed McAvoy’s comments as “hot air” and a ploy to gain “cheap headlines”. But whatever McAvoy’s motives, his remarks paint a deadly accurate picture of the systematic dismantling of the comprehensive (non-selective) state education system that has proceeded under Labour since 1997.

League tables based on the results of tests carried out at ages 11 and 14 in core subjects and end of school exams at 16 years, along with the creation of so-called “specialist schools”, have ensured that the principle of selection is now firmly embedded in the education system in England and Wales. House prices in Britain—which are rising at the extraordinary rate of £1,000 a month—are linked to whether they are in the catchment area of the most desirable state schools which can offer the best facilities and education.

Services to schools such as building maintenance, language support, educational psychology, training, supply teaching etc., are increasingly provided by private companies and consortiums. Virtually all the new building projects are financed by the Private Finance Initiative (PFI) so that schools do not own the building and services within them, but lease them from the private sector instead.

The funding streams to schools almost always include an element of finance to be raised from the private sector, which is then “match-funded” by the government. With the introduction of performance-related pay and management, the role of head teachers in school resembles that of accountants and corporate salesman rather than educators. No area of school life is untouched by the ravages of the market. Due to cuts in social provision, teachers, parents or private benefactors provide most extra-curricula activity.

McAvoy correctly described the “tentative experiments in education action zones”, where private finance, goods in kind

from local companies and flexible working practices were legitimised in the 1998 Education Act, as the beginnings of “complete deregulation, privatisation, commodification and globalisation [of education]. Deregulation is proceeding apace with a virtual abolition of controls over who can teach.”

This final point goes to the heart of the latest attack on education. All areas of education, including the national curriculum, have been honed to fit into the government’s privatisation schema. The only remaining area to be challenged is the right of children to be taught by qualified teachers.

In the past 12 years this right has been gradually eroded by the increasing use of educational support workers—teaching assistants/classroom assistants. Whilst these workers can play a useful role in assisting the classroom teacher, they are not teachers.

But under the School Workforce Reforms, whose first phase came into operation last September, teachers are no longer required to carry out administrative tasks. The next phase from September 2004 clearly states that it will limit the duties of cover when a teacher is absent by other teachers to 38 hours a year. Cover supervisors or the new post of Higher Teaching and Learning Assistant (HTLA) will be expected to carry out the remaining cover time. These supervisors/HTLAs will be given between 3 and 50 days training (as opposed to the three to four year degree-level course required for teachers) and then expected to take classes unsupervised on their own.

All the teaching unions except the NUT, including those covering the support workers affected, have signed up to the agreement—arguing that it will relieve teachers from many of the additional tasks they are expected to carry out and introduce a career structure for support workers.

Once it is accepted that non-teaching staff can take classes, there is little to prevent the government and cash-strapped schools from replacing qualified teachers with more HTLAs. The national curriculum has been refined to such a degree that the core subjects can be taught in bite sized chunks, which the government believes could then be presented by someone with little or no knowledge of the subject.

The pedagogical and social effects of this method of teaching, coupled with the practice of teaching to tests, stultifies and restricts the intellectual development of children—especially those where little support is given in other areas of their life. Though the immediate result may be a rise in the league tables, which head teachers are under great pressure to achieve, ultimately the pupils become alienated from the learning process as a whole.

The move to introduce cover supervisors/HTLAs into schools is therefore not only an attack on teachers but on the rights of children as well.

Prime Minister Tony Blair’s so-called “modernisation” programme for education will create nothing more than holding pens for thousands of working class children in the state education system, whilst the more able and privileged will

increasingly access the private or semi-private system based on selection. Proposals are already under way to increase the provision to allow 14-16 year-olds to pursue non-academic subjects, with more days spent out of school than in.

With the number of specialist schools (who can select 10 percent of their intake) expected to rise to one in five, the growth of religious schools and the continued existence of grammar schools within the state sector, a wholesale reversion to selective education is imminent.

Mass meetings of educational support workers in Sheffield and Birmingham have voted overwhelmingly to reject the remodelling proposals and the NUT has voted to ballot for industrial action in opposition.

However, the NUT has established a record over the last 15 years of conference voting to support industrial action, only for it to be overturned by the leadership. More fundamentally, all the teaching unions have accepted successive government reforms that McAvoy now admits threaten the provision of universal and decent education.

The Workforce Agreement, for example, was outlined in a November 2001 speech by then Education Secretary Estelle Morris to the Social Market Foundation, a pro-Labour think-tank.

The *World Socialist Web Site* analysed the implications of the proposals, explaining that it would be used to reduce teaching staff and deskill education. But the trade unions have been in negotiation for some time over the extent of the proposals and have all broadly accepted the Workforce measures. Whilst the NUT may have not signed the document, the union bureaucracy covering teachers and support workers have consistently claimed that the Blair government’s measures were of honourable intent, thereby disarming all those working in education.

Moves are afoot in the NUT to try and end resistance to the reforms. Education Secretary Charles Clarke has refused to attend NUT conferences for the past two years because of its refusal to sign the agreement, and has also banned his ministers from negotiating or speaking to the union except when legally obligated to do so.

Opposition to the onslaught on jobs and conditions cannot be left in the hands of the trade unions who will strangle it at the first opportunity. McAvoy’s statements are, if anything, a verbal last hurrah, which will only herald a further lurch to the right by the union bureaucracy. Steve Sinnott, the favoured candidate to replace him, has argued explicitly for merger talks with the other teacher unions, which would then ensure a more compliant stance to the government plans.



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