

UK: Education unions sabotage struggle against academisation and low pay

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While schools struggle to balance budgets, the Conservative government has released plans to push ahead with the promotion of grammar schools by offering £50 million to create thousands of new grammar school places.

Following the loss of their majority in the 2016 election, the Tories were forced to scrap their flagship education policy of expanding grammar schools, which are selective. However, this cash boost will be used by some schools to covertly expand and create annexes on separate sites, therefore developing the plans by stealth.

Despite rhetoric from Kevin Courtney, joint general secretary of the National Education Union (NEU) and other union representatives, no fight is being waged against the ongoing privatisation of education. Instead, the right to a free, state-provided education is being shackled to the hopes of the Labour Party winning the 2022 general election.

At the recent National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) conference, the Labour shadow health secretary, Angela Rayner, launched the consultation on Labour's National Education Service (NES). The NES is an umbrella term for reforms which include increases in schools funding, free adult education and the return of the Education Maintenance Allowance for 16- to 19-year-olds.

Rayner was applauded by head teachers for criticizing Conservative education policy saying, "They (the Tories) wouldn't survive their own Ofsted [official schools] inspection. In fact, they would be forced to convert to a Labour government."

This was a tongue in cheek reference to the ongoing forced academisation of schools, which has become the mainstay of Theresa May's government. Rayner is fully aware that Labour were the architects of the conversion of schools to academies. Academies are

state-funded, but privately run.

Whitewashing her own party's legacy, she said, "For the last eight years, you have had a government that has ignored you, and they've pursued their ideological chaos and failed to pay attention to the fallout." She focused criticism on teacher recruitment and retention and promised to "ensure again that under Labour, every child matters." This was a direct reference to the flagship education strategy created by New Labour in 1997 under the government of Tony Blair.

It was no surprise that Rayner did not mention academies directly. This issue was hotly contested during the UK snap election last June, with Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn criticising the academies programme during prime minister's questions. However, prior to last year's Labour annual conference, Rayner told *Schools Week* she "no longer wants to get 'bogged down' in debates on the merits of certain types of school, and will instead pursue the government on the use of public money."

This was confirmation that under a Labour government, there will be no change to the policy on academies and demonstrates that Labour are no longer advocates of local authorities running schools. Rayner said she is not "fixated on local authorities" as the solution to education. She summarised, "Most parents, including me, are interested in a good school that their kids can go to. They don't care what it's called, quite frankly."

The legacy of Labour's pioneering role in the privatization of education through academy conversion is laid bare by the findings of a *Schools Week* report. It found at "92 academy trusts there are multiple staff that are taking home in excess of £100,000 to £150,000 a year." The data obtained by *Schools Week* shows that the majority of trusts are small, ranging from 10

schools to just one in their trust. But the largest academy chains—for example, Academies Enterprise trust, Reach2, United learning, Oasis, Delta TKAT, Harris and Ark—are among 19 trusts who run 20 or more schools.

While teachers in England and Wales received a paltry 1 percent pay rise, executives who are running trusts are taking home massive pay packets. Moreover, some of the best-paid CEOs in England only run two or three schools. The CEO at the Brampton Manor Trust, which runs two schools, receives a £200,000 salary. Both schools are forking out £100,000 at a time for just one salary under conditions in which school budgets are in crisis!

The rules determining salaries are deliberately ambiguous. The academies' handbook says trustees must ensure their pay decisions “follow a robust evidence-based process, and are reflective of the individual's roles and responsibilities.” The Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) could possibly terminate funding or send a notice to the trusts to improve their finances, however they have chosen not to do this.

Rayner's comments are also aimed against campaigners who are trying to fight against the wave of academisation. A school in London, Avenue Primary School in Newham, has been prevented from converting due to sustained pressure from parents in an ongoing campaign since plans emerged to convert it into an academy and join the EKO Trust in November 2017.

Parents led a high-profile campaign and staff went on strike. The industrial action was led by the National Education Union (NEU), which included the usual tactic of limited, non-consecutive strike days—in this case totalling 19. The main concern of the NEU was changes to staff terms and conditions which would deplete their bargaining power and threaten the dues base paid to them by union members.

Due to their struggle, school employees and parents won permission to take the decision to judicial review. A council spokesperson said. “The governors' [who decided to convert] decision is one that they have taken in the best interests of their children and the council is committed to working with the school to ensure that they have the necessary support going forward to deliver improved attainment.” With Rayner's

comments on the role of local authorities, this conversion would gain a green light under Labour.

Some of the local campaigns against academisation have been able to temporarily halt the process, which is why schools like Brampton Primary and Keir Hardie Primary School have not yet been converted. But the wording by governors not to proceed “at this time” following three days of strike action doesn't stop the plans. *Schools Week* noted that other schools like the “Cumberland secondary school decided on April 30 to press ahead with plans to become an academy and join the Community Schools Trust, despite strike action”.

The teaching unions are responsible for the fact that the struggle against academisation is being conducted by isolated staff and parents, entirely on a local scale.

When the unions have allowed teachers a nationwide vote, they have worked to dissipate a united offensive by educators. In April, teachers voted overwhelmingly for strike action over pay and pensions at conferences of the National Education Union and the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT). This willingness to fight was immediately kicked into the long grass by the union bureaucracy, with a process that would not see any strike vote held for months, if ever, and industrial action postponed to autumn or even next year.

The unions have no intention of waging a struggle against the attacks on education. Most of all they fear a movement of teachers that is independent of the straitjacket of the trade union apparatus.

In the latest issue of *The Teacher*, published in May by the NEU and National Union of Teachers, there is a solitary sentence buried on page 26 noting that delegates to the NEU conference voted for a 5 percent pay rise and that members would be balloted for “strike action if this claim was not met.” There was no mention whatsoever of the ongoing teacher strikes in North America and in other countries, or of any campaign based on uniting the struggles of teachers, college and university staff against attacks on pay and conditions.



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