

# Towards one union for education?

**Howard Stevenson** *looks at the likely NUT/ATL merger, including its possible implications for NASUWT and UCU.*

**I**n the Autumn of 2016 the National Union of Teachers (NUT) and the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) held special delegate conferences to decide whether to wind up their current organisations and form a new, single union, provisionally titled the National Education Union (NEU). The proposal was endorsed by 90+ per cent majorities in both unions and so the next step is for a full ballot of each organisation's membership in the Spring, with a view to forming the new union in the months following.

The delegate conference was a major step forward for the project, and it seems inconceivable that the rank and file membership of the two unions won't endorse the decision of their activists. This is therefore a very significant moment. Union mergers, and the formation of so-called 'super-unions' has been a strong trend in trade unionism globally. Much of this has been driven by changes in the wider economy, including deindustrialisation and the challenges of highly competitive and deregulated labour markets. Education sector unions have not been immune to some of these pressures, but they have not experienced them in the same way. Hence, membership has often remained high, with individual unions not experiencing the pressures that have driven many unions into mergers. Of course, these phenomena are experienced differently in different sectors, with school sector unions enjoying much higher density levels than those in further and higher education.

The proposed new union, therefore, is highly significant. The goal of what is often referred to as 'professional unity' has been the objective of many, and the official position of the NUT, for decades. However, it has proven extremely difficult to make progress in the area. Within the sector the obvious

exception was the merger of AUT and NATFHE to form the University and College Union (UCU), working across the further and higher education sectors. However, progress towards unity in the much larger schools sector has been much more difficult to achieve.

There are no doubt myriad reasons why NUT and ATL have decided to move forward in the way that they have. However, perhaps the key reason is the realisation that in a deeply fragmented and marketised environment (which is what school education now looks like) the existence of divided unions simply compounds the problems of division that the system deliberately encourages. The school system in England, with pay and conditions determined at institution level, is now much closer to the FE model than it has ever been. Within this environment, and with both sectors haunted by the spectre of Ofsted, hard-nosed managerialism is more and more evident. However, whilst school unions generally enjoy higher levels of union density than in the FE sector, this density is divided (and dissipated) across multiple unions. Schools are also much smaller workplaces, which is another widely accepted factor in making workplace organisation difficult. The formation of the NEU goes some way to mitigating these problems, as the unions seek to strengthen their workplace-based organisation.

If the union proceeds it will face considerable challenges. Many people have characterised the new union as the unlikely outcome of a marriage between the schools sector's most militant union (NUT) and the sector's moderate union (ATL). This is a factor, and it will be interesting to see how these issues are resolved. There is no doubt that the NUT has shifted to the left under Christine Blower's, and Kevin Courtney's, leadership with the union

developing a particularly innovative model of social movement unionism grounded in a strong commitment to workplace organising. However, the ATL has also been developing in interesting ways. The union has long had what might be called progressive policies on wider education issues and, for example, has been involved in some excellent policy work relating to privatisation. Moreover, it has been increasingly willing to engage in industrial action, initially at a national level during the pensions campaign in 2011, but since then in a number of workplace-based disputes. Most recently ATL members have been involved in strike action as part of the inspirational Durham Teaching Assistants' dispute over cuts to pay and conditions. All of this suggests that the difference in political orientation in the two unions makes for an interesting issue but not an insurmountable problem.

The same may be said about other issues that represent significant differences in the cultures and traditions of the two unions. ATL has the vast majority of independent school teachers who are union members, recruits teaching assistants, recruits in Scotland, and, as readers of this journal will be aware, organises in the FE sector. All of these issues will need to be 'worked through', and no doubt some will be easier to resolve than others. There can be no doubt that creating the new union will be difficult, and at times there may emerge significant tensions, which is all the more reason why those who have grasped the nettle on this issue should be commended. The easy option would have been to retain the status quo. But this is a situation which has allowed the state to turn the English education system into the world's laboratory for neo-liberal restructuring of public education - privatisation, deprofessionalisation, individualised pay. Teacher unions have allowed themselves to be divided, not least when they have adopted different positions in relation to the abolition of national collective bargaining as far back as 1987. These divisions have been encouraged and exploited by successive governments, with calamitous consequences. The formation of the NEU makes it possible to think about turning back the tide, and to reassert the hugely powerful voice of organised educators.

What about the wider prospects of trade unionism across the education sector? Within the school sector the obvious issue becomes the relationship between the new union and the NASUWT. NASUWT, particularly under the leadership of Chris Keates, has adopted a policy of minimal co-operation with other unions, preferring to mark out distinctive NASUWT policies as a way of 'positioning' the union. THE NASUWT has always

been set against any type of merger activity and it will be interesting to see how the union seeks to locate itself in the new landscape. Certainly it cannot ignore the development, as NEU will be far and away the largest union. The situation in England will have some similarities to Scotland, where the NASUWT recruits but where the EIS is by far the largest union. NASUWT strategy in Scotland may give some clue as to its future strategy in England.

More widely, ATL's history of recruiting both teaching assistants/support staff and in the FE sector open up new and interesting possibilities for the development of a National Education Union that organises across all sectors and recruits from amongst all employees. Clearly Unison is well represented amongst support staff, and it will be important for the new union to be respectful of Unison's position. However, the formation of a new super union in education that recruits from amongst TAs etc might be a powerful membership draw, and, over time, union membership profiles amongst non-teaching staff may shift.

The implications for the FE sector are perhaps least clear of all. The coming together of the NUT and ATL has been a long and slow process, and the formation of the new organisation is not being rushed (there will be a period of parallel 'co-existence' before the new union is formed fully). There is almost certainly little appetite, at this stage, to add further complication by introducing UCU into the mix. For anyone hoping that UCU might soon be part of a national education union, disappointment, in the medium term at least, is inevitable. But for those who hope that a national education union recruiting all staff, across sectors, is in the best interests of education workers, seeing this objective as a long term project is essential. Such a union would have considerable advantages. All the global policy trends are towards more and more fragmentation and individualisation of the type England has trail-blazed in the FE and school sectors. The best chance of resisting these developments is powerful and united worker organisations that the state and employers cannot ignore, circumvent or marginalise. This does point, ultimately, to the development of a genuine National Education Union. However, in the short term the aim must be to make the formation of the NUT-ATL-based union a success - to welcome it, work with it, and help it become the powerful national voice that a divided and increasingly atomised teaching profession in schools desperately needs. In doing this, and in a way that builds mutually respectful relationships between NEU and existing unions such as UCU and Unison, the longer term objective of an industry-wide union becomes a real possibility.