

NEU National conference, Liverpool, April 2019

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First, a bit of background:

This was my second conference. My first was in Cardiff two years ago and that represented my first foray into union activity. Theresa May's announcement of a general election just before Kevin's closing speech made sure that I was thrust in at the deep end, instantly being involved in stewarding the march for education and activism on the committee level. Since then, I have become the Young Teacher Officer and attended the Union's YTO training weekend. This gave me the confidence to run YT events in Bristol, build a network of Young Teachers and encourage more to get involved in union events and eventually, come to conference. This has paid off somewhat: between Bristol and South Glos combined, we gathered four Young Educator first time delegates. Combined with other newbies it meant that the combined wider Bristol showing was pretty strong. The idea is that attending conference will have given these relatively new activists the confidence that it gave me, and they will be more sure of taking up roles and responsibilities going forward by joining committees and becoming reps.

In terms of conference business, there are a couple of motions which are worth mentioning here as they build on what we have been doing at Young Teacher events.

1. Student Strikers and Climate Change

A motion was brought forward on climate change. Conference accepted the threats facing humanity from climate change and that big business and government inaction have been largely responsible. Conference also recognised the efforts of the student strikers and that their response is wholly justified: they stand to lose the most from the effects of climate catastrophe, they have contributed the least to the damage and they are also unable to vote.

The Friday before conference, some of the Bristol and South Glos Young Teachers went down to College Green to show our support for the rally. It felt like the kids that we teach appreciated us being there and it was amazing to be able to watch them take control of the situation with their energy and enthusiasm. As seasoned activists, we were happy to help with any questions they had but we were keen to allow them to do their own thing, while we merely provided support. It was a proper student-led teaching and learning activity.

Now that the union has officially passed these motions and amendments, the union can call on schools to not reprimand students for striking. It can also, therefore, defend teachers who oppose these reprisals. In South Glos, we will be working with student representatives to help them with organisational support where we can.

At the moment, in schools, it feels like all relationships are tested to breaking point. Management and parents put pressure on teachers, teachers struggle to have meaningful and positive relationships with students and students struggle to get on with each other. Let's hope that this is something that everyone can get behind and move forward on together.

2. SATs boycott

The second important motion is on the SATs boycott. This debate was very close. All involved agreed on how terrible SATs are for Primary students and teachers. The disagreement was on how best to challenge them. Eventually, conference voted to pursue a ballot on a boycott of SATs for the next school year. With the government's harsh anti-trade union laws, getting the required turnout on a ballot is an uphill climb, especially considering the organisational difficulties in primary schools.

Although there might be many members in primary, there are comparatively few reps, they are under-represented on the committee and any active reps can seem overly visible to management. However, I see this ballot as an opportunity to recruit more active reps and members. Some teachers are solely motivated by protecting their pay and conditions but very few teachers get into the profession for these. Much more inspiring are the campaigns about things that really matter and that really affect the students that we teach: school funding (or lack of), the perils of academisation and just what should be on the curriculum. Starting a meaningful conversation on what Primary schools could and should be like is an opportunity to bring people in to understand what the NEU is really all about.

The other way primary differs in terms of union organisation is that support staff make up a far higher percentage of the total workforce. Previously, TAs and office staff have been restricted to other unions but since the merger we can all now work together. These new members combined with the comparative ease of engaging parents in primary school campaigns could provide the perfect tools for an inclusive and powerful campaign to rid tiny little children of completely pointless exams.

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