

Devon County Teachers' Association

NUT Conference Report 2007



Baljeet Ghale, NUT President

The historic installation of Baljeet Ghale, the first black President of the NUT was a moving and inspiring occasion. Baljeet, who spoke at the Devon NUT 2006 AGM, made a wide ranging and intensely political address in which she reflected on the journey she had made since her arrival from Kenya to this country, the role her parents had played in the trade union movement and her own 30 year membership of the NUT.

She referred to a number of landmarks this year, eg the 200th anniversary of the abolition of slavery, the 60th year since the liberation of India from 'the shackles of colonialism' and 40 years since the illegal Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

Baljeet critically reviewed the past 10 years of the Blair government. She showed that funding and the building programme were tied into privatisation eg Private Finance Initiatives (PFI) and Academies. She called on Gordon Brown carry out his promise to match the funding for private schools for all our schools. The nursery programme had failed to deliver properly she said, not least because fewer qualified nursery teachers were being employed. She called for 'a rich range of staff who work as a team.'

The President referred to the success of achieving the class size maximum of 30 in KS1, but then noted that it was at the expense of other Key stages.

On SATs Baljeet quoted author Phillip Pullman: 'SATs are like the deadly poisonous tree that sits in the middle spreading its deadly influence all over schools and education.' She attacked

the competition between schools and teachers generated by league tables and the categories of 'Gifted and Talented', 'Struggling' and 'Average' into which students are placed by this Government. She deplored the lack of **Ethnic Minority Achievement Grant** (EMAG) funding and the consequences for the achievement of black students.

Baljeet questioned Education Secretary Alan Johnson's notion of 'Britishness', something the press chose to misrepresent. 'To demand that people conform to an imposed view of Britishness only fuels racism.' She emphasised the need to embrace everyone regardless of colour or creed, as racism 'is not always overt but is multi-faceted, often subtle and sometimes without malicious intent.'

Baljeet also presented a view of what schools should be like, a view to which her own students contributed, eg a warm, comfortable building, qualified teachers, clean classrooms, good equipment, a safe school, no racism or bullying and teachers to be funny but controlling!

The RIG social partnership was described as a 'complete joke', with our working conditions deteriorating further. Baljeet said she was proud to be President of the NUT which has not signed away members' rights. She ended by saying that our professional opinions should be respected and that businesses should be removed from schools.

Mark Serwotka

General Secretary of the Public and Commercial Services union (PCS) was invited to address Conference. He called for support of the 250,000

members of his union taking national strike action on 1 May, International Workers' Day, against a total of 54,000 job cuts, low pay and privatisation. The PCS has launched the *Make Your Vote Count* campaign in the run-up to the elections on 3 May in Scotland, Wales and most of England by putting pressure on the candidates, asking them where they stand on issues that affect the civil service, such as pay and job losses.

Frontline workers have been critically injured by increasingly frustrated claimants. Workers in call centres have been subjected to hourly monitoring and even have to put their hand up to go to the toilet. Mark Serwotka described 'an orgy of privatisation' across the board with swingeing cuts in the Health and Safety Executive and in DEFRA for example. Meanwhile bonuses of nearly £9 billion were paid out in the City this winter. Mark recognised the problems of performance management, classroom observation and bullying managers within teaching and encouraged the NUT to support the PCS struggle.

Main Debates

An Executive motion supported by General Secretary, Steve Sinnott, calling for a one day strike across the public sector in response to Gordon Browns' pay freeze, 'as a first stage of any industrial action which is required to protect the pay of teachers and other public sector workers' was carried unanimously. Steve Sinnott called for solidarity over pay and encouraged NUT members to support PCS and other traditional May Day events to raise issues of pay and cuts. 'You can't value public servants if you cut their pay.'

In the debate on rising temperatures in schools it was agreed to press the Government to set the upper limit in classrooms at a maximum 24°C as advised by the World Health Organisation. It was also an

opportunity for the Devon Secretary to speak about the failure of the contractors to address the ongoing temperature and ventilation problems in PFI schools in Exeter.

Climate change and sustainable development was recognised by conference as one of the most serious issues confronting us all. It was agreed that the NUT should 'work with schools, local authorities and government to ensure that sustainable practices are embedded into all aspects of school life.' It was also recognised that wars such as those in Afghanistan and Iraq are having a devastating effect not only on the peoples of those countries but also on the environment in which we all live. Proposer Jo Lang asked how much domestic recycling would it take to offset the effects of one Harrier Jump Jet or a depleted uranium tipped missile, for example?

Conference resolved for the Executive to ballot the membership to set up a political fund with a recommendation for a 'Yes' vote. Without a political fund Jerry Glazier from the Executive said that the NUT could not by law call for a vote against fascist organisations such as the British National Party (BNP) for example.

In another historic moment Conference resolved to affiliate to the Stop the War Coalition. Devon delegate Amal Choueiri also became the first Palestinian to speak to conference in the debate on War.

In the debate on performance related pay Jan Neilsen from South London said that after two decades of target based education the experience of teachers was that performance related pay had nothing to do with better pay or better education. She said UNICEF reports showed that children in Britain are among the most unhappy and deprived in the Western world. 'At

some point you have to draw a line in the sand and be prepared to stand up for your principles.'

The section on young teachers' pay highlighted costs of housing, debt and the increased retirement age of 65. One delegate said that young people from a diversity of backgrounds were being priced out of teaching.

John Illingworth, a former Nottingham primary school headteacher forced out of teaching because of a nervous breakdown caused by the bullying demands of OFSTED, spoke in the debate about teachers' mental health about the research he had been helping to conduct into teacher stress. He said that the biggest issue is teachers not being able to admit to themselves that they have a problem. It was a sobering contribution.

In response to a question from Devon NUT President, Mike Gurney, during a Q&A session, General Secretary, Steve Sinnott suggested that the Devon campaign against trust schools was 'a model for good practice' around the country.

Fringe Meetings

There were many fringe meetings. Included among them was a packed **Anti- Academies Alliance** meeting, where Mike Gurney said 'the difference between a trust and an academy is the money – with a trust you don't get any. And there is no democracy. Teachers and parents have not been involved in the council's decision making.' Steve Sinnott was the key speaker. The **Socialist Teacher Alliance** (STA) meeting included speakers Mark Serwotka the PCS General Secretary, Kevin Courtney (STA) and Ian Allinson from the long running **Fujitsu** workers strike in Manchester. There were also meetings on the environment, **Unite Against Fascism, Stop the War** and Palestine. Steve Sinnott spoke at the

Tell it Like It Is meeting along with Birmingham Division Secretary Roger King and national organiser Kerri Park on the hurdles to educational achievement for black and minority students. There was also a **Respect Party** fringe meeting with Michael Lavalette, a **Respect** councillor in Preston.

The Devon Delegates were . . .

Dave Clinch, Mike Gurney, Jean Evans-Loude, Amal Choueiri, Liz Clinch, Mike Endacott, John Taverner, Rod Ruffle, Susannah Billeter and observers Lois Huggett and Jim Lowe.

Our delegation was a lively mix of youth and experience – first time attenders through to conference veterans. It's your union too. Why not stand for Conference in Manchester 2008 and help to shape NUT policy?

What Happens Now?

- NUT members are encouraged to attend picket lines and to send messages of support to the striking PCS workers on May Day.
- We need to discuss at school level industrial action across the public sector over the 3 year pay freeze .
- We need to resist the bullying, OFSTED induced management which forces our members into sickness through stress.
- We need to be aware of the immediate dangers of fascism with 13 BNP candidates standing in Devon at the local elections on 3 May. The NUT has a number of publications including **Do Not Tolerate Intolerance** – which gives guidance for teachers and schools on racism, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia.

In solidarity

Dave Clinch,
Secretary, Devon NUT