



NATIONAL UNION OF TEACHERS

REDBRIDGE RETIRED MEMBERS

WINTER NEWSLETTER 2012



BURSTON SCHOOL STRIKE CELEBRATED

A mile long march of Trades Unionists, banners waving in the breeze, meandering through the lanes of South Norfolk, celebrated the longest strike in history. The Burston strike by school children in support of their unfairly sacked teachers, Tom and Annie Higdon, began in 1914 and continued until the death of Tom Higdon in 1939.

Following their dismissal the Higdons had continued to educate the striking children on the village green and later in a carpenter's shop. Eventually a new one room school house was built, using funds raised by Trades Unions.

On Sunday 2nd September a group of NUT members, including Bob Archer and Bill Harrison, joined several hundred other Trades Unionists in a "secular pilgrimage" to the Strike School, undertaking a re-creation of the striking children's march around the village.

It was a joyful day on the Green, surrounded by stalls from many Trades Unions and other progressive organisations, enjoying entertainment from local bands and singers and listening to uplifting speeches from Bob Crowe and other Union representatives. 2014 will be the centenary of the strike's beginning when a major celebration is being planned, which I hope we will all support.

Bill Harrison

Redbridge Retired Teachers' Association
Invites retired teachers to their
Annual Christmas Social
12pm – 2pm, Thursday 6th December,
Gants Hill Methodist Church, Gants Hill Crescent, IG2 6TU
Speaker: Dominic Byrne (NUT National Executive)

IT Tutoring with Age UK

I volunteered to become an IT tutor with Age UK after seeing the opportunity on the volunteering website www.do-it.org.uk. The small weekly group sessions are two hours (with a break).

Age UK students are lifelong learners who don't want to become excluded as information becomes increasingly digital. Some are starting from scratch; some have been given a laptop and want to develop their skills further.

I have used computers for over 25 years. Coming to them for the first time in your later years is a great challenge. PC programs are now so sophisticated, so ignoring what you don't need and reversing what you did inadvertently are key learning points.

Age UK (www.ageuk.org.uk/redbridge/) is a very professional organisation and provides a lot of support online and practically. I was fortunate to observe an experienced tutor before I started. Working with older adults is different - still teaching and learning - but some strategies are more pronounced. This is what I've noticed so far:

- Independence: I've learned to stand back so the student does everything for him/herself.
- Comprehensible input: It's best to teach only what makes sense for the student's immediate learning needs. 'Too much information' is a very relevant phrase.
- Learning styles: With a young learner on a computer, showing once is enough; with an older person demonstration can be more confusing than narrative guidance. I try a mix of telling, showing and getting them to think aloud what might be best to do.
- Consolidation: I find that in my 60s my learning capability fluctuates - sometimes I can grasp new things easily, sometimes not. I need to revisit learning promptly if I am not to lose it.
- The rewards are great – helping students learn things that will enhance their life and the opportunity to talk with interesting people. I really enjoy my IT tutoring with Age UK.

Lorraine Dawes

Defending Real Learning

In his address to the AGM, John Yandell (lecturer in English at the London University Institute of Education) argued that there are four central myths propagated by the current Ofsted-sanctioned view of education today: what children learn is *only* what teachers teach, learning is linear, learning is easily measurable and learning happens in individuals.

John Yandell told us of his concern that this overview (hammered home repeatedly by Sir Michael Wilshaw, head of Ofsted) not only traduced the magnificent achievements of teachers in inner city areas, in particular in London, but was also a misuse of history. He proceeded to demolish each of these myths in turn by exposing the extent to which they ignore (or reject) the complexity of learning and teaching and by emphasising the following: that learning can't always be measured, the importance of social interaction in learning (and teaching) and the significance of teachers' bringing their wider understanding of the children they teach to guide their practice.

The onus, John Yandell suggested, was now on teachers and unions, acting concertedly as professionals and "public intellectuals", to provide a fuller, more nuanced picture of children's learning. He pointed to considerations which should inform the development of a relevant curriculum, particularly for less advantaged inner-city children. These include the fact that mass youth unemployment leaves the promise that results lead to jobs "in tatters" and makes it imperative to find intrinsic reasons for children to take learning seriously. He condemned outright the premise that meaningful learning can ever take place in a context of organisational regimentation and rigid and punitive testing.

In the discussion which followed John Yandell stressed that there should be professional judgement about an appropriate curriculum. Since qualifications no longer lead automatically to jobs, children must be able to perceive some intrinsic benefit from their learning.

Liz Dolan

Working After Retirement

In 2008 I was part of the Summer term cull of staff at the local high school where I had taught English for the previous eight years. Some of those leaving were escaping to promoted posts elsewhere. Some, drained of ambition, were taking early retirement. Youngish female teachers were seeking respite from the pressures of the classroom via maternity leave. Older, expensive teachers, now past their sell-by dates, but with a depth of experience and expertise and possessed of a finely honed bullshit detector, had counted down the exact number of days to their release from the increasingly Kafkaesque world of the contemporary education system.

For me, retirement was not as fulfilling as I hoped, and I was soon doing supply work for a teaching agency. Daily supply teaching, with its early morning telephone summons to work (I won't call it teaching) in a strange school, with staff, pupils, buildings and procedures you do not know is stressful, unpredictable and requires an ability to disconnect with whatever mayhem is going on around you. In my experience senior management have an internal sat-nav which ensures they are routed well away from classrooms where supply staff are trying to kettle recalcitrant students. Moreover, the agency extorts a third of what you earn. I soon concluded I did not have the qualities required.

I needed to provide supply cover in a school where I knew the staff, buildings and procedures, and where the students knew me or of me. Thus, in 2010, I offered my services to my old school. Supply work was intermittent initially but by being flexible I was offered a one year short-term contract.

Apart from the top up to my pension, what satisfaction do I derive from my two days' teaching each week? First and foremost is the shared camaraderie of the staffroom, although this aspect of the job is seriously under threat from the energy-sapping demands of an Ofsted-conscious management, leaving many staff with little time to do much except try to get on top of their ever increasing daily workload. But the staff room soap-opera continues, with its varied narratives – the rivalry and tensions between individual teachers (I enjoy observing the body language), the burgeoning romantic relationships (where do they find the time and energy these days?), the competition for internal promotion, the various subgroups (allied for strategic or ideological reasons), the individual triumphs and personal tragedies. But unlike the T.V. soap opera, the staffroom is full of banter and humour, although I could name staff-rooms where the baleful influence of a driven headteacher, with few social skills ,has managed to drain most of the joy out of the job.

For the part-time, short-term contract teacher the bonus is not being on the relentless treadmill of meetings, departmental reviews, meetings, paperwork, meetings, working parties, meetings, administrative tasks – which can eventually deaden the soul. Of course, some of the above is unavoidable and to be honest, certain innovations and changes, although demanding of energy and time, are beneficial to the students and stimulating for me – it's the pointless ones that sap staff morale. I am in awe of those full time teachers on 90% timetables who manage somehow to comply with the demands of better paid, middle and senior managers who are in far less classroom contact with the students.

I have not mentioned the most satisfying part of my job. Freed from at least 60% of non-teaching obligations, I can expend my energy educating my students without the danger of being stressed out, semi-permanently exhausted, with one eye on what task I have not completed, and irritated by the prospect of the next after-school meeting. There probably never was a golden age of teaching but when I first started in the profession teachers had the energy to teach and the time to recharge their batteries. Teaching after retirement can provide something approaching that previous job-satisfaction.

Ron Oldham

GCSE EXAMS SCANDAL

The fall in GCSE grades in English Language is a scandalous piece of interference by the government. Many schools across the country saw their English Language grades plummet in August as exam boards altered their grade boundaries without informing teachers of the changes. Thousands of our students have suffered as a result.

Changes in AQA grade boundaries in English Language have meant that students had to get 16 marks more than in the January exams in order to secure a C grade. ASCL (Association of School and College Leaders) estimates that 10,000 students, who sat exams in January, were more likely to obtain a higher grade for the same marks than those who were assessed this Summer. Over 700 schools have registered complaints so far, nearly one third of secondary schools.

Whether Michael Gove did or did not directly pressure Ofqual and the exam boards, the grade deflation is the result of his constant rubbishing of GCSE, the yearly moaning about the supposed simplicity of the exams and his ideological intent to make it more difficult for working-class students to go on to higher education.

The result is that many students in Redbridge and across the country have had their hopes of going to college or sixth form wrecked. The students who have dropped to a D are those who have worked hard to get a C grade, often ESL or Special Needs students. This is tragic.

Some schools have therefore been pushed nearer to or below Gove's 40% A*- C benchmark for failure - possibly resulting in an OFSTED inspection and then the pressure to become an academy.

It has also meant that in English teachers cannot safely assess their own students with any certainty that their grades will be taken seriously.

The NUT is campaigning, alongside the ASCL, to demand a regrading of all the English Language scripts according to the boundaries used in January. This is the only fair solution. Otherwise the 2012 results will be remembered as the year inequality was firmly entrenched into the exam system.

Michael Dance

OUR FIRST YEAR

It has been an interesting year for education generally and, not least because of pension changes, a fitting one for the participation of retired teachers. The profession is not alone in feeling that the anticipated security of our old age is being steadily undermined by government measures; nor are we alone in determining to fight the accelerating erosion of the welfare state - a welfare state put in place by our parents and an older generation of our colleagues.

We have successfully launched a newsletter - thanks to the hard work of our Communications Officer, Mike Peters.. In March this year we held our first general meeting, at which Bernard Regan spoke eloquently about the then current situation regarding negotiations with the government and proposed union action.

What are our hopes for the future? We want to encourage the widest possible involvement in our activities, ensuring also that teachers who have just retired, or are about to retire, know what is going on both locally and nationally. We need to become a visible presence wherever support, expertise, pressure or action might have an effect. Included in this mailing is a questionnaire asking for your views about the sort of activities which would interest you.

This first year has been quite a challenge for the Committee: we are all gratified to have been given another year to hone our skills! However, some functions could definitely be performed more efficiently with more people. Perhaps you would like to join us?

On a more personal note, I believe fundamentally in the power of the individual teacher to make a difference. But it is our professional and intellectual integrity, used collectively, that will enable us to resist the ineptitudes of this government and to continue to provide a high standard of education for all our children. As retired teachers, our responsibility is to support our younger colleagues in every way we can.

Liz Dolan

Contributions to Mike Peters, 76 Rous Road, Buckhurst Hill, Essex, IG96BT or mikepeters1@ntlworld.com