



# **UNIFY Inaugural Annual Lecture**



Gawain Little, seconding the motion to amalgamate with ATL, at the NUT Special Conference in Westminster Hall.

**Given by Gawain Little,  
NEU Executive, on 19th June 2021**



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**A CROSS UNION BODY CAMPAIGNING FOR ONE UNION FOR ALL EDUCATION PROFESSIONALS**

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**Introduction by Brian Williams,**  
**UNIFY Honorary President NASUWT**

**I welcome Gawain Little's contribution at the inaugural UNIFY lecture, as an important step towards our objective.**

**It's difficult to recall** now that sunny September day when I began teaching in 1970. Coming from a family where both my father and grandfather were trade union officers, I naturally joined a union – what was then the NAS. I was amazed to discover that including 'associations' for headteachers, there were nine organisations a teacher could join. When I began to ask questions at union meetings concerning this multiplicity of unions, I was treated with scorn and repeatedly told that my youthful fantasy would dissipate as I understood the 'real world'.

**Five years later** the NAS, the bastion of male supremacy, joined the UWT to form a new union. AMMA was later formed from two constituent single sex organisations. Following the successful industrial action of 1985, my conviction that one teaching union was a goal that could be achieved was strengthened. Sadly the following decade saw the unions retreat into their respective bunkers.

**A number of colleagues** and myself remained determined to further our vision and severely challenge the hierarchy of the NASUWT in union Conferences. Senior Na-

tional Executive members admitted in private that one union would ultimately and inevitably be a reality.

**After addressing a fringe meeting** of the NUT conference in Cardiff, I joined PU 2000 and spoke at many meetings to prosecute our ideas. Although at times, the chances of progress seemed bleak, we soldiered on in an attempt to achieve what we considered an honourable and necessary goal. PU 2000 morphed into UNIFY and hopes were heightened with the amalgamation of the FE and HE unions. A significant landmark was achieved with the formation of a new union – NEU – formed by an amalgamation of NUT and ATL.

**It is now only a matter of time** before NASUWT members see the benefit of there being one union. I know that the majority of members see this as the best way forward. Time is running out for the old guard whose dream of a unique organisation is falling apart. I remember being told by a member of a political party, young people have visions, old people have dreams. We have had our vision, is our dream about to come true? I believe it is.

*Brian Williams*

*Gawain Little is a primary school teacher. He is the previous Chair of the NUT Professional Unity Committee and currently Chair of the NEU International Committee. Gawain is also on the NEU Officers Steering Group.*



Thanks very much. I want to start by saying what an honour it is to be asked to give this first annual Professional Unity lecture. As a long-time member, I have always been in awe of the work that Unify has done, campaigning on professional unity, which we know is one of the most important steps to building a strong education union movement and a strong education system. Therefore, it is an immense privilege to be invited today to give this address.

I am going to say something about the history of our movement, something about the challenges we face today and something about what I believe are some of the lessons we can learn from that history. Looking around the room, I am also going to leave a lot of areas where the blanks can be filled in by others with expertise. I believe it is together, collectively that we truly shape our ideas about how we fight to defend, to extend and to build our education system. I want to start back in 1870

### **Start at the beginning**

On 25th June 1870, the National Union of Elementary Teachers was formed, through the amalgamation of a number of local, regional and sectional associations. It was formed in the context of the fight against performance-related pay and the controversy surrounding the 1870 Education Act.

The principles that brought educators together were the demand for a single pay scale and the need for the profession to have a united voice to influence education reform.

What made the NUET, or the NUT as it became, unique was that it organised all elementary teachers without regard for rank, qualification or seniority. Unlike the craft unions that were predominant at the time, the union organised everyone, from assistant and trainee teachers to head teachers, in a single union.

As Roger Seifert and Mike Ironside put it in their book *Industrial Relations in Schools*, "The important thing about the NUT is that its practices and its structures developed on the basis of a broad membership base, bringing together qualified and unqualified, women and men... The holding together of a national union in such circumstances reflects an impressive determination to secure improved conditions through a united policy".

Underpinning this were two principles:

A commitment to unity - if you worked in the classroom, you were welcome in the union, and

A commitment to democracy - the policies of the union were decided through democratic debate at the annual conference.

In 1884, 180 women met to form the Association of Assistant Mistresses. They worked in secondary schools for girls and primarily came together to promote the interests of their students. The union later merged with the Assistant Masters' Association and eventually re-named itself as the Association of Teachers and Lecturers.

Throughout its history, the commitment to the needs of students, and to promoting girls' education was retained.

Both unions joined the Burnham Committee, the NUT on its establishment in 1919 and the AAM two years later in 1921. For almost 70 years, this committee formed the basis for collective bargaining between teachers and their employers – over pay, terms and conditions – until it was removed by the Thatcher government with the Teachers' Pay and Conditions Act of 1987.

### **Action for our negotiating rights**

The Burnham Committee, and collective bargaining rights for teachers, were established following an unprecedented wave of workplace militancy right across the trade union movement, led by the shop stewards' movement – a national co-ordination of workplace representatives, who used unofficial action and mass campaigns to win on pay, workload and a range of other issues. Faced with militant workplace organising driving up terms and conditions for working people, employers agreed to national collective bargaining arrangements in a range of industries (including education) in an attempt to reassert some control over wages.

Our collective bargaining rights were won by mass action at workplace and employer level, made possible by a movement that prioritised building power in the workplace.

Over the years that these arrangements were in place, key decisions were taken at national, and local authority, level – through the School Teachers Pay and Conditions Document, the Green Book terms and conditions for support staff, the Burgundy Book of collective agreements for teachers and local agreements that supplemented these. Very little was determined at workplace level and workplace structures were allowed to atrophy. Teacher unions had representatives in individual schools, but their role was a restricted one and they had almost no formal status. Union organisation was based on employer organisation and individual members were part of their geographical Local Association or District (coterminous with their employing local authority). The local association or district was the basic democratic unit of the union where motions might be passed, and officers elected. In contrast, workplace organisation had almost no formality. Members of the union in the same school



may have considered themselves part of a 'school group' but this had no formal status.

Workplace reps were referred to as 'school correspondents' in the NUT and their role limited to being a point of contact for the union at the school, distributing the union newsletter and maintaining the union noticeboard. In spite of the many rank and file activists who built beyond this formal base and, throughout the 1970s, led combative action at local level, formal union structures worked to limit, not strengthen, their power.

Then, from 1976, the year of Callaghan's Ruskin speech and the IMF intervention in the British economy, official attitudes towards education began to change. Teachers were increasingly thought of as a 'delivery mechanism' for a curriculum to be determined at Whitehall, particularly by the Thatcher Government elected 3 years later.

This government set about promulgating a comprehensive set of educational reforms and the conclusion of a 2-year dispute over teachers' pay in 1986, in what was widely regarded as a major defeat for education unions, provided the ideal opportunity to launch what was to become the 1988 Education Reform Act.

The purpose of this Act, in the words of Educational Historian Brian Simon, was to establish 'a subtle set of linked measures are to be relied on to have the desired effect – that is to push the whole system towards a degree at least, of privatisation, establishing a base which could be further exploited later'.

Its advocates were no less explicit about its aims with Margaret Thatcher declaring in 1987 that the purpose of the legislation was that "money will flow to the good schools and the good headmasters" – explicitly establishing the basis for a market in education.

### **It gets worse—privatisation**

Since 2010, we have seen the realisation of this '1988 Project' as Howard Stevenson describes it, with the evangelical commitment of various shades of Conservative-led governments to full fragmentation of the education system, complete control over curriculum and pedagogy, and a revolution in initial teacher education which will see an end to the role of universities and a redefining of the profession by the academy chains which are increasingly responsible for teacher development.

This has, of course, gone hand in hand with attacks on pay and conditions, such as the reintroduction of performance-related pay and deregulation of teacher pay.

Once again, we face a situation where national pay scales are being dismantled and performance-related pay has become the norm. We work in a fragmented system where the academy and 'free' school programme is dismantling the state education sector. And we face a government that is unwilling to listen to the voices of teachers, or parents, or students, because of its blind adherence to the dogma of neoliberal free market privatisation.

These ideas have dominated education since the early 1980s and educators have been on the back foot. We have faced a coherent and co-ordinated education reform movement with divided forces. As a result, we have seen the imposition of a curriculum which is not fit for purpose, excessive testing which is educationally and psychologically damaging to our children, and a level of workload which is driving teachers out of the profession.

In 2017, the two unions I referred to at the beginning – the NUT and the ATL – took an historic step and voted in ballots of their respective memberships to do what working people have done throughout history when their interests are threatened by the rich and powerful. We voted to unite to defend our members, our students and our communities.



ATL and NUT members at their first joint inset event.

The question for us now, then, is how is that best done – what kind of a union do we need to fight and win the battles of the 21st Century? I believe it is in the history of our movement that we will find the key to how we face the challenges of the future.

## The Future

I want to raise six areas that I think are useful for us discussing the future of our movement.

**The first** that I think comes out so strongly from that history is the importance of unity. We are still, in education, split between too many different unions - different unions representing teachers, representing lecturers, representing support staff - and that division is a clear weakness. It is clear that since the early 1980s we have faced a sustained and coordinated attack not ranged against us by a series of clearly united governments. They may have had their disagreements on a number of areas, but the thrust of education policy has remained consistent while we continue to be divided.

This is our greatest weakness and so the first point, and I am sure it is not controversial in this room, is the importance of professional unity. But how do we develop that unity in practice? How do we make it a reality, not just a high-sounding phrase but something we work on concretely in our workplaces and in our relations with other unions? The power of this collective work was shown during joint union responses during the pandemic.

This has to be an absolute priority for us, and I believe that means seeking out opportunities to coordinate action with other education unions - working with them positively but not shying away from raising the fact that we would be stronger if we had a single union to unite all educators. I also believe it means pushing that point at workplace level because we know that in our workplaces, we are not divided based on which unions we are members of. We are united in the roles that we carry out in the workplace, we are united as a staff, and so we must build the sense that we can win the unity of our organisations on the same basis.

**The second** point that is also clear throughout our history, and it was very clear in the foundation in particular of the National Union of Elementary Teachers, was that policy would be decided on a democratic and inclusive basis by the annual conference of the union. The organisation was to be run by its members. When we created the National Education Union, we were very clear that the rules had to be based on that fundamental principle of democracy and the right of members to run their own union.

But we need to challenge ourselves. When we look at the trade union movement now, to what extent is that member control a reality? How engaged does the average member feel in the democracy of their union? How engaged do they feel in what happens in their local district or branch meeting? What opportunity do they feel to make their voice heard through their annual conference and to what extent do we really reach out to our diverse membership?

I think in many ways, this aspect has improved during the pandemic. I think that many members have come to our unions with concerns during the pandemic and have been engaged in resolving those concerns collectively, together. However, I do feel that there is more that we can do to ensure that the voice of every member is heard throughout all of our structures. Not just some of our members. Not just the most engaged. Not just the most confident. All of our members.

I was at an event this morning in Wales (the power of online meetings!). The event was about building power in the workplace and there were some amazing speakers - the recent winners of the Annie Higdon awards within the NEU – Sarah Kilpatrick, Amy Kilpatrick and Clare Cheverall. They were talking about how they changed the Northern region of the union through a concerted effort by a group of people to reform structures that they felt excluded from. That is a process I think we need to roll out across all of our unions in all of our regions because I believe that we are weaker until we're listening to the voices of all members and engaging them proactively.

### **What is our vision of the future?**

**Thirdly**, I think we need to organize around a clear vision for the future of education. It is not enough to have a critique of the existing system. We need to know what we would put in its place. I believe we should be putting forward a vision of a National Education Service which provides education from cradle to grave, in which every phase of education from early years to post 16 is properly funded and where there's a national contract for all educators,



including supply staff, which puts an end to the workload crisis and an end to term time only pay for support staff.

That is the kind of vision around which we can mobilize people - a vision of a joined-up education system. Yes, the National Education Service was a policy put forward by a previous Labour leadership, but I believe that it is an idea which should not be left to die because it speaks to the aspirations both of those who work in education and of those who benefit from education. We should maintain that clear vision for united National Education Service and develop it concretely as we campaign for it.

**Fourthly**, I believe our vision needs to extend beyond education. I believe that we need to build our unions into true social movement unions, which tackle issues like racism and sexism, issues which face our members outside of the workplace as well as within the workplace. We need to fight for issues that matter in the wider community - fighting for decent public services to build our communities - and in doing that we need to build links with parents, with governors, with the wider community. We need to be part of our local communities so that we're organising not just those who are members of our union, not just those who work in education, but organising on a class basis. We need to help organise all of those within our communities not just because it strengthens us but also because it ensures that breadth of vision for our work as trade unionists.

### **Focus on the workplace**

**Fifthly**, and absolutely essential to all of this, is a relentless focus on workplace organising. The need for this is shown particularly in how we won collective bargaining in the first place - off the back of a wave of militant workplace struggle. The entire history of our movement shows that we win when we put workers into struggle, we win when we're organized in our workplaces and when we use that as the basis to build power and change our daily lives.

We can't build this kind of power and deliver this level of change from national pronouncements, and we can't build this kind of power and deliver these kind of changes when we are only half organized. We need to be fully organized in every workplace, in every community. If we look at the pandemic period and some of the successes education unions have achieved during that period, it definitely speaks to that question of workplace organization.

In March 2020 the government was not intending to close schools and colleges, although it had banned all other mass gatherings of similar size. That was until the unions said they were advising members to take their own decisions at a local level, with or without government support. This action rested on our workplace groups in order to deliver change, and of course the government was forced into a U-turn, deciding that it was going to have limited opening only in schools and colleges.

Similarly in June 2020 when the government tried to force through an early return on the first of June members at workplace level signed letters to their headteacher saying that they wouldn't return to schools and colleges until their union said it was safe to do so. This was

followed up with workplace checklists and in the majority of places we pushed back wider opening by two weeks, reducing the spread of the virus, hospitalisations and deaths.

Most recently in January 2021 the NEU advised members on the use of section 44 when it became clear that schools and colleges were unsafe to reopen. Once again the government were forced into a U-turn within 24 hours of reopening.

All of these victories relied on workplace organisation because it is through the mass of our members in the workplace that we can deliver real change

Finally, we need to invest in leadership at all levels in our unions. Why? Because none of what I have described above, from an alternative vision for the future of education, to the kind of workplace organizing we need to build our movement strong, to the unity that we so desperately need, none of that can be built simply on the basis of national leadership. It requires strong leadership at the workplace level, at the local level, at the regional level, right across our unions. We will only develop that leadership by investing in leadership development and by seeking out and supporting those workplace, local and regional leaders to take forward the struggles of the future.

Just as the shop stewards of 1919 built a national movement of workplace organizers across the country, not through the intervention of national union leaderships but by building from the shop floor, so we must build a movement which is willing to take on employers and the government and win.

**This is our challenge: together we must build the movement that shapes the future of education and of our society.**

*Gawain Little*



**UNIFY INAUGURAL ANNUAL LECTURE**  
**Saturday 19<sup>th</sup> June 2021 1:00pm to 3:00pm**

**Where next for our movement?  
The past, present and future of  
education trade unionism**

**Given by Gawain Little, NEU Executive**

*What are the roots of our movement and how far have we come from them? How can we build power through unity?  
The next unification - how will we achieve it? What kind of trades unionism do we need for the 21st century?*

FOLLOWED BY QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION  
**ALL WELCOME**

UNIFY AGM to be taken at 2.30 at the latest  
1) Work of UNIFY over past year – Organising Secretary    2) Accounts    3) Election of Officers  
4) Future plans    5) AOB – Honorary ATL President

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/89466051632?pwd=ZUZGdEJQMG1Oa2dlam1tVVFGenVMdz09>  
Meeting ID: 894 6605 1632    Passcode: 115096

Please **RSVP** to Jean on [hankr@hotmail.com](mailto:hankr@hotmail.com)

## Comments from Hank Roberts, UNIFY

### Organising Secretary

#### (based on his contribution at the UNIFY lecture)

The thing about Gawain is he puts his money where his mouth is. He was the previous Chair of the NUT Professional Unity committee and was also on the body that actually met to discuss how the ATL and the NUT should come together and in on the negotiations. So he is well qualified in this area.



Hank speaking at the NUT special conference. He also spoke at the ATL special conference.

Personally I don't think there is a more important task than building and uniting your army. I regard us as being an army that are fighting an enemy. The enemy are those that are trying to destroy state education in our country and destroy decent working conditions for all workers in education.

The bigger your army, all things being equal, the stronger you are. That's why the trade unions have the mantra 'unity is strength'. More correctly, it gives strength. Disunity gives nothing apart from disaster. That's the key.

In 1996 a small group of likeminded teachers from Brent ATL, NUT and NASUWT, met in my classroom. We agreed to form an organisation called Professional Unity 2000 (later renamed UNIFY) to unite the education unions. Because we thought it was such an obviously good idea, we were confident we could get the job done in four years! In the event it took us many more. A group of PU 2000 Officers met with NATFHE and AUT Officers explaining what we were trying to do in the school sector and suggesting that perhaps they might like to try that in the further and higher education sector. They picked the ball up and ran with it and achieved unity between the two unions, becoming UCU in 2006 i.e. ten years after we formed.

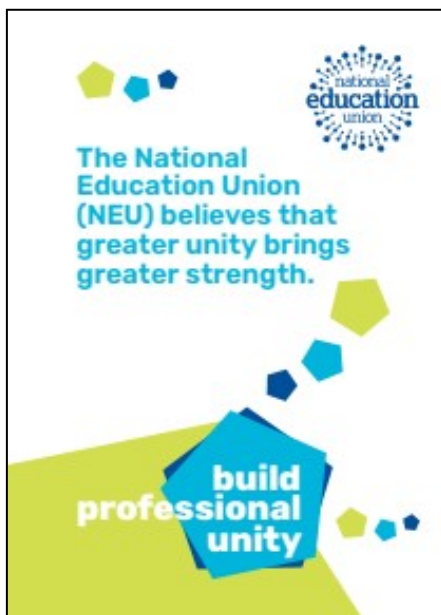
It took another eleven years after UCU was created for the next one - the ATL and NUT amalgamation. The total number of years was twenty-one years from our first meeting. So we cannot afford the luxury of waiting for another ten years, let alone twenty-one before our next move for progress. Never mind even longer for the achievement of our ultimate goal – one union for education. Our education system is being destroyed before our very eyes. We urgently need more rapid progress.

Gavin Williamson was rightly ultimately sacked. Not because he was utterly useless, incompetent and inept but because the education unions, parents and educational pressure



groups had unitedly demanded he go. Will his successor(s) do better? I doubt it, but I find it hard to conceive at the moment how they could do worse. However, the most important thing about shaping the future is not what they say or do, but what WE do.

We are divided and that's clearly a danger. To any enemy it's an opportunity. That's why we need to work to unite our forces. Not just us, by the way, all of the unions. Also it makes sense not to have union members spread all over the place in small numbers as some small unions have. We have to change not just our own structure, but we need to give an example to all the other unions in the country of how you organise on a sector basis, and that you best organise basically by saying, *In the building, In the union.*



This leaflet was produced. It was a struggle to get it, with reluctance from some to go further than just working together. It was passed unanimously by the Executive. Now the official line of the Union is, *'We invite all those who work in education to come together to propose joint working and to discuss lasting professional unity'*.

It's OK having the line but we need to ensure that it's implemented. You have to make the approaches to the other unions, to start talking. First talking about how we can work better together, but then talking directly, talking turkey, on how are we going to have unity. My personal line is offer them whatever they want. Because greater unity carries on into the future and all the things that maybe problematic, we will work that out over a period of time.

**So it's a great opportunity. We've arrived at a fantastic time. The ATL and NUT amalgamation was fantastically successful at taking on the government over COVID-19. It could have been so much more successful. Imagine if we'd united with the NASUWT, the NAHT, the UCU. We would have been a million strong. We look at tactics and strategy. Most are too obsessed with the day-to-day problems. We have to see further than that. I'm sure we will.**

*Hank Roberts*



UNIFY Fringe in April 2017 held in Cardiff