

TEACHERS WHO WILL NEVER STRIKE

By

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There are still men of principle about and Colin Leicester is one of them. A wartime Petty Officer, he now leads in the fight for professionalism among teachers. Before his war service he was an apprentice with Metropolitan Vickers in Manchester, where he discovered that he disliked strikes. Not merely disliked them, but felt his whole system rejecting such a coercive, battering-ram of a weapon. Now, as one of the founders, he is honorary treasurer of the Professional Association of Teachers, whose cardinal rule is that no member shall go on strike under any pretext whatever.

The strike is a potent means of securing higher pay. The National Union of Teachers, after spending most of its existence disdaining this weapon as unprofessional, now eagerly embrace it. Like all unions they are driven by their extremists, and are worried by fears of breakaway organisations being set up by those who think militancy is all. If the majority of their members believe salary levels to be the most important thing in life, it is hard to blame the N.U.T. for abandoning the old standards and chasing the rainbow. Like all such organisations they have to do what their members want or go out of business.

Not all the N.U.T. members do want this however. Many feel strongly enough to stand out and refuse to strike at the Union's call. Colin Leicester did this recently, and so did his colleague and fellow founder of P.A.T. Ray Bryant, now the honorary secretary. Both teach at an Essex comprehensive school, King Edmund's Rochford, where Bryant is Deputy Head. Bryant believes he is not merely fighting strikes, but is upholding all but the old, honourable values. It revolts his soul to see teachers in sloppy clothes lounging about in class, smoking in front of the children, even swearing at them. One of his old friends, an art teacher, unwittingly demonstrated these modern standards in a television documentary recently and Bryant felt that decadence could go no further.

Bryant got into hot water with his colleagues a year ago when in a letter published in the *Daily Telegraph* he called on the 'honest' members of his profession to join in forming a new organisation pledged to uphold professional standards.

'Everyone talked', he said 'about making teaching a profession, but we weren't acting professionally'. In his view this involves putting the children first, and their parents a close second. If the teachers have a dispute with their employers over pay they shouldn't hit at people who have nothing to do with the dispute. For the teacher to strike spoils discipline and breaks down their image of the teacher as the boss. Leicester stoutly adds: 'If the teacher loses his image, who can the child look to? Certainly not the parents these days.'

I got to know these two men when they supported a campaign I ran in early 1970 to save the GCE examination from the teachers' boycott. The uncivilised nature of such a weapon was very evident – especially since I had a child of my own preparing to take the examinations. She hid her worry very well, but it was there all the same. A war of nerves with children as

the victims is intolerable. A few years ago it would have been unthinkable. I was glad in turn to join Bryant and Leicester in setting up their new association even though we all saw plenty of difficulties ahead.

Colin Leicester is the last man to be deterred by difficulties. From the time when he aroused the wrath of his fellow-apprentices at Manchester for refusing to join in a wartime strike he has been in hot water as a militant anti-striker. He accepts that there was a case for strikes in the last century – the days of hard-fisted employers like the Crowthers of Bankdam. Trade unions have done a magnificent job in rescuing the worker from cruel exploitation, but this job is done. Nowadays the idea of management versus unions is divisive and outmoded and the moral basis of the strike weapon has gone. It is, says Leicester, almost a religion with him – and like a religious fanatic he is prepared to be martyred. His fellow teachers sent him to Coventry when he refused to join the N.U.T. strike. ‘You’re bloody mad’, one of them said. No discussion was allowed about striking, they were just ordered out. ‘If you don’t strike’ the local N.U.T. representative told Leicester ‘you’re out of the union’. He promptly resigned before they could expel him.

It is this refreshing willingness to carry one’s principles to the point where they involve personal hardship which marks out the Professional Association of Teachers. They believe in the flaming torch which is the ancient badge of education. They will hold it aloft and brandish it vigorously; and when the time comes they will hand it on. How many teachers are prepared to join them? The founders know that they have to take their job seriously. This must not become a crackpot organisation running on a shoestring. It already provides insurance cover – a vital need for teachers – on a scale as effective as any of the larger bodies; and other services are being added. The Association will be militant in pushing for better conditions, but will not countenance one hour’s interruption in the work of teaching and examining the young. Even an hour lost may never be regained – a piece of knowledge may be missed that turns out to be vital.

P.A.T. hopes, though, to put new meaning into professionalism in the teacher’s world. The N.U.T. thinks of it in selfish terms only. It is, by their book, ‘unprofessional’ for one teacher to criticise another publicly or to make him work excessively hard, or for a teacher to disregard the instructions of the Union. What would happen if an N.U.T. member brought a complaint before the Union’s Professional Conduct Committee alleging misconduct in depriving children of tuition or in upsetting their peace of mind by threatening an examination boycott? These things will be professional misconduct for P.A.T. members, and surely this is right. Professionalism is too much thought of nowadays as a cosy club for the ‘in’ people, a closed shop cluttered up with restrictive practices. True professionalism is much more concerned about the public interest than its own selfish ends, and the ethical rules of the learned professionals demonstrate this.

Those militant teachers who recently made life hell for another P.A.T. founder, Myfanwy Edwards, a Birmingham headmistress, might reflect that they were breaking N.U.T. rules, limited though these are. If manning picket lines and forcing schoolmistresses to run a gauntlet of insults and abuse several times a day is not criticising them in public what is?

Miss Edwards’ only offence was that she was trying to keep her school open on grounds of conscience and conviction. She did so, supported by the loyal staff, through days of shame and misery. Next time, if there has to be a next time, she will have the active support of a strong professional association, P.A.T. This means much to those fighting, often quite alone, to uphold their standards in the face of hostile colleagues. The N.U.T. call such people ‘free-loaders’ who are profiting from the Union’s efforts without doing anything. Dismissed by this giant union, with over a quarter of a million members, as an ‘insignificant irritation’, P.A.T. may yet show that it has something of a permanent value to contribute to the educational life

of Britain. Many who scoff at the old values do not understand them. P.A.T. will perhaps succeed in educating the educators.

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