

**NASUWT Annual Conference 2023**

General Secretary's Address

9 April 2023

---

President. Conference.

Our guests, colleagues and dear friends from right around the world.

There are so many reasons for us to be united.

United as teachers, educators, trade unionists.

United in our knowledge that great teachers are union made!

United in our conviction that education is the most powerful weapon we can use to change the world.

**As the old adage goes: "No one forgets a good teacher."**

They just forget to pay them well!

And, not only that - they forget to treat them well, too!

In spite of the public praise from Ministers at its peak during the pandemic - teaching today ranks in the relegation zone when it comes to graduate pay, according to evidence from Incomes Data Research.

Indeed, Ministers' words of praise belie the Government's real contempt for the profession.

The leaked WhatsApp messages between Gavin Williamson and Matt Hancock confirmed that contempt.

As they said teachers were looking "for an excuse to avoid having to teach."

Gavin and Matt – to paraphrase from your colourful exchanges – what an absolute bunch of... WASTERS... you and your colleagues really are!

Conference - how can any Government claim to value teachers when they have presided over a system that has seen teachers' pay fall by more than 25% in real terms in the last decade.

Teacher morale is so low, the Government refuses to collect the statistical data to track the extent of the problem. But, we do.

And, it confirms that 73% are seriously considering quitting and won't recommend teaching as a career to others.

Teachers in the UK work the longest hours in Europe.

With employers paying lip-service to teachers' contractual working time rights.

And, no wonder, when the government gives permission to employers to overload teachers and school leaders and to disregard their right to a life outside work.

A pay and conditions framework that is a license for the institutional abuse of teachers and headteachers.

A pay and conditions framework, Conference, that we will campaign to change with our [Time for a Limit Campaign 2.0](#).

Time for a maximum limit on working hours.

Time for a 35-hour week.

And, we will not stop our campaigning until we secure a Better Deal for our members.

Our members shouldn't have to take industrial action simply to benefit from the working conditions to which they are contractually entitled.

But, we will always support them whenever their rights at work are being denied them.

**Conference - we need an end to the 13 years of failure.**

13 years where:

- Schools and colleges have been defunded.
- Children's services - decimated.
- And where the rate of child poverty rates has been rising, whilst services to support children and families have been axed.

4.2 million children in the UK are living in poverty.

Nearly half (48%) of children from Black and minority ethnic groups live in poverty.

Here in Glasgow, nearly a third of children live in poverty.

We know that poverty blights childhoods.

Growing up in poverty means a child waking up cold and going to bed cold; going to school hungry; missing school; and achieving fewer qualifications than their peers.

And, teachers working in the most socially and economically disadvantaged areas tell us they face some of the biggest challenges – with the least support.

Our members - teachers and headteachers - want the very best for every child but they are struggling to hold together a system that is already broken.

And it is the poorest children who are suffering the most.

**Conference – we are here today because we are all passionate about children's education. We care, and don't let anyone tell you any different.**

That's why we are taking our own action on poverty again this year by sponsoring the Pollokshields Community Food Point here at Conference.

**Conference – it's right that we demand a system that is much more ambitious for all children.**

Not a system where 3 in 4 teachers report how vulnerable children are left waiting months, if not years, to access vital mental health assessments and support.

Not a system that fails to respond when schools raise safeguarding concerns to keep children safe, because other agencies are so over-stretched and so under-resourced.

We want an education system built on high investment, not a system built for failure and which is educating children on the cheap.

And, in the world's 6<sup>th</sup> largest economy, there is simply no excuse – no reason why governments cannot invest the resources needed to deliver the very best and ensure that no child is left behind.

**The Government is fond of telling us that inflation caused by the costs of the pandemic and the war in Ukraine is the reason they cannot pay teachers more.**

But the truth is, the rot started a long time ago.

And, we demand better.

**By a margin of two to one - teachers say that their workplace is having a negative impact on their wellbeing, according to the charity Education Support.**

For Black teachers, women, disabled teachers and LGBTI teachers the problems are made worse as a result of unchecked discrimination, sexism, and racial abuse at work.

13% of teachers report they have been physically assaulted by a pupil in the last year.

Teachers daily being pushed, shoved, kicked, punched, spat at, or threatened with physical violence, racially abused, sexually abused, or trolled on social media.

Employers failing to carry out safety risk assessments.

Teachers deterred from reporting violent assaults because their schools don't want anything on record that could undermine their reputation.

**Here in Glasgow, our members were directed to put up with violent behaviour at one school or face action by their employer.**

Instead of backing teachers, Glasgow City Council locked them out.

They told our members that if they refused to teach a violent pupil, they – the teachers – shouldn't turn up for work and they would be sent home with no pay.

Outrageous.

Is it any wonder that some pupils feel that they can push their teachers around and get away with it, if employers are doing the same?



So, I want to pay tribute today to our members at the Bannerman High School and William Reynolds, their Rep.

Conference - we applaud their courage and their professionalism throughout - members who were left with no other choice than to take the ultimate step of strike action which won commitments from their employer to stop the violence and to keep teachers and other pupils safe.

No teacher should have to take industrial action to have a safe place to work.

Safety at work is a right, not a privilege.

And, no employer should force any teacher to be in a workplace where they can expect to suffer physical assault from a pupil.

And, let me say this - we will always step up to protect our members - by any means necessary.

Over the last 12 months, we gave notice of more than 197 days of strike action – which meant that our members were protected from abuse and injustice at work.

And, in the last year, we also won more than £15 million in compensation for NASUWT members following successful claims of bullying, health and safety breaches, and personal injury at work.

We take no comfort from those legal victories, Conference.

Because those compensation awards are a further demonstration of a system that is broken and that is failing teachers.

Negligence and failures that resulted in one of our members suffering life-changing injuries after being viciously assaulted by a pupil in her classroom.

Where we secured £350,000 in compensation for our member.

But, she was left with permanent brain injury, loss of sight and hearing, bleeding kidneys, a damaged bladder and psychological injuries.

In another shocking example, one of our members who was pregnant at the time was jumped on by a male teenage pupil.

These are not isolated examples and they are not behaviours that merely merit a restorative conversation.

But, had it not been for the NASUWT, those teachers would have received no support.

In no other walk of life – except boxing or martial arts – would a worker enter their workplace in the knowledge that today will be another day when they will be physically attacked.

Teachers cannot continue to work in a system that permits workplace abuse, violence and negligence on an industrial scale.

**No amount of compensation can ever make up for the devastating impact of physical and mental injury at work.**

We need governments to act:

- to give an unequivocal message of zero tolerance of violence towards education staff;

- to back any headteacher who excludes a pupil who physically assaults a teacher;
- and to introduce a positive duty on education employers to carry out health and safety risk assessments to protect teachers from violence and assault at work.

**Actions speak louder than words.**

**But, of course, words do matter.**

Remember the infamous words of the former Ofsted Chief Inspector, Michael Wilshaw, who bragged that:

“If anyone says to you that ‘staff morale is at an all-time low’, you know you are doing something right.”

Failing our teachers and setting them up to fail.

Is it any surprise that the inspection system is now being credited with inflicting untold misery on teachers and headteachers alike?

Such inflammatory and careless talk is literally costing lives.

Conference – an effective inspection system should genuinely support the work of teachers and headteachers, not denigrate them.

And, more importantly, an effective regulator should also hold government to account for the what they are willing to invest to secure quality education in our schools and colleges.

It's time for Minister and the inspectorate to stop blaming teachers and to take responsibility for their actions.

But, we have a broken system, rigged against teachers, with teachers and headteachers paying the price.

We demand change and we demand better, Conference.

I'm pleased that some parties have adopted our view that a high-stakes accountability system is damaging to the profession, damaging to students, and misleading parents and the public, and it has to change.

I asked the Education Secretary, Gillian Keegan, to consider her position!!

But, perhaps she has misunderstood my question – hardly surprising given the high turnover of Education Secretaries since our Conference last year – five averaging 2.4 months in office.

Conference, for the avoidance of doubt, I am not necessarily saying that Gillian Keegan has overstayed her welcome...but she certainly hasn't yet passed her probation!

And, she won't unless she pulls her finger out and gives teachers a proper pay rise – fully funded!

And, on inspection, Gillian Keegan should establish the independently led inquiry we have asked for into the impact of inspection on teacher and headteacher workload and wellbeing and report the findings immediately.

The Education Secretary, if she cared enough – she could take action now to end the toxic climate of fear that is failing our education system and which is damaging the wellbeing and careers of so many dedicated teachers and headteachers today.

**And, whilst she's at it, she should also take a look at the work of the Teacher Regulation Agency which is vying to hold the mantle of *Bully in Chief*.**

Its new online reporting system encourages anyone to complain about a teacher – with total disregard for any notion of natural justice or respect for teachers' employment rights.

Private legal firms are gaming the system, dragging out speculative cases, and profiting from the misery of teachers unfortunate enough to get caught in the TRA's crosshairs.

The TRA's target is for cases to be heard within 52 weeks of referral. But cases are taking an average of 113 weeks.

Meanwhile, teachers are being denied information - presumed guilty whenever referrals are made.

Teachers subject to vague and incoherent charges.

Evidence disclosures denied.

Specious complaints clogging the system.

Teachers left in limbo. Careers on hold and teachers blacklisted, with complaints remaining on file for years even when they are not going to be progressed.

Untold damage is being caused to teachers' personal and family lives.

Another example of a failed system that is also setting teachers up to fail.

**I can think of no other worker today who is subject to such legal jeopardy, injustice and lack of due process.**

Of course, we support a proper system of teacher regulation.

But, this is not it.

The TRA's actions are simply an abuse of power by a body that is dysfunctional and wasting public money.

And, given the current situation, Conference, it's high time for the TRA to reform or go.



**Conference - we take seriously what our members tell us and Ministers need to do likewise.**

Governments in Wales, Scotland and the Isle of Man need to invest more in teachers and in children's education; but the truth is they have exposed the lack of ambition by the Westminster Government for teachers in England.

Only in Northern Ireland where there is no functioning Executive can teachers claim the award for the least favourable treatment.

If MLAs won't act, our members will. And, that's why our members are poised to take further strike action on 26<sup>th</sup> of this month.

And, I know that Conference will applaud their courage and their resilience.

On the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, isn't it about time that teachers in Northern Ireland were treated with dignity, respect and equality, and given the rewards they deserve?

**In England, Gillian Keegan said she wanted our members to tell them what they thought of her offer.**

They did.

And, they have delivered their end of term report on Gillian Keegan – try harder, because your offer is simply not good enough.

86% of members rejected her pay offer and that's why we are now moving to ballot members.

And, I have written to the Education Secretary to ask her to now return to the negotiating table. And I have also given her formal notice that we will be balloting our members for action.

Her haste to strike a deal in just 6 days has unravelled.

It resulted in a contemptuous offer that received the response it deserved.

And, I have been clear to the Education Secretary - you started the negotiations and now you have to see the process through.

And we are saying to Gillian Keegan, she cannot leave unfinished the job of settling this dispute.

Neither should she abrogate her responsibility to fix the problems created by her predecessors.

And, I also say this to Gillian Keegan: if you think that you can rely on the pay review body in England to do your bidding and recommend yet another below inflation pay award for our members for September, then you are mistaken.

Get back around the table while there's still time.

Negotiate a proper deal or deal with the consequences.

**But, instead of working with the profession, the Government wants to rely on singling out teachers with its egregious Strikes Bill – allowing employers to sack striking workers.**

This from a Government that already allows unscrupulous employers to use the immoral tactic of [fire and rehire](#) to worsen workers' contractual rights.

Although employment law may be set by the Westminster Government, we're asking Ministers in Scotland and Wales to show us what they're made of.

And today, I am calling on Humza Yousaf to use his new position as Scotland's First Minister to fix this broken system - intervene to stop the use of these bully-boy tactics and tell his alma mater, Hutchesons Grammar School, here in Glasgow, to desist from bullying our members and withdraw immediately their threat to fire and rehire dedicated and committed teaching staff.

Otherwise, our members will have no other option than to take strike action to defend their jobs and their livelihoods.

Our members have a mandate for industrial action, and they will use it if they have to - and they will have our fullest support for as long as it takes.

**This Conference says it is time to end the hostility – to recognise, reward and support teachers who do the most important job in the world.**

And, we want political leaders at home and abroad to demonstrate ambition for children and young people – by investing in teachers and committing to eradicate child poverty.

And, if politicians at the next General Election want the votes of our members, they will need to fix our broken education system.

End the culture of hostility to teachers.

Declare that:

- Time's up on teachers working till they drop – and guaranteeing a limit on teachers' working time.
- Time's up on workplace bullying and abuse of our teachers.
- Time's up on violence and assaults in the classroom.

And, if Ministers will not pay teachers well and treat them well, then we demand a government that will.

That's what it takes to repair the damage.

Always putting teachers first.

And, that's why we're proud to be *the* Teachers' Union.