

Chapter 5: Education Reform, Management Approaches and Teacher Unions

MICHAEL BARBER

University of Keele

INTRODUCTION

Unions exist to protect and promote the interests of their members. This is true as much for teacher unions as for others. Given the nature of teachers' work, with its degree of autonomy and professional nature, teacher unions have found throughout history and across the globe that this central purpose involves a great deal more than focusing on the traditional labour issues of pay, conditions, tenure and pensions. They find themselves drawn into, or driven by their members into, professional issues involving both the nature of teachers' work and education policy as a whole. If they are successfully to represent their members they have no alternative.

Sometimes teacher union leaders and members draw a clear distinction between the 'trade union' function and the 'professional' function, seeing the former as the bread-and-butter basis of their work, while perceiving the latter to be something akin to the icing on the cake. In reality this is a false dichotomy. The evidence indicates that the two aspects are integrally related, with success in the one, depending on success in the other. The more difficult dilemma for unions, though they articulate it less often, is what course of action to take when the long term interests of members are not compatible with their short term interests, or more precisely with what they perceive to be their short-term interests.

These broad strategic issues are highlighted at the outset because they underlie most teacher union policy debates and decisions throughout history. The rise of human resource management in the 1980s, with its emphasis on staff development, devolution of decision-making and empowerment poses for all teacher unions a set of dilemmas in which the tensions between narrow trade unionism and professionalism, and between long-term and short-term interests are brought into sharp focus.

While these dilemmas, to a greater or lesser extent, affect teacher unions across the English-speaking world, there are of course stark contrasts in the nature of their impact, and in the tactical and strategic responses of teacher unions in different countries.

This is partly because each country has a different education system, with a different history of relations between teachers and the state, and partly because human resource management is only one factor among many affecting teacher unions during the 1980s and 1990s. Since the activities of teacher unions are strongly influenced by the specific context in which they find themselves, their responses have depended in recent years on the specific combination of the various elements of the education reform which have been implemented in any given country. For example, in England and Wales the National Curriculum and its testing arrangements have been the highest priority in 1991-4, whereas other aspects of restructuring have dominated the concerns of American or Canadian teachers.

This chapter is intended to provide insights into the problems of, and prospects for, teacher unionism in the next decade. It begins by examining the general contextual factors which influence the nature of teacher union tactics and strategy. It then looks at the various developments of the 1980s and 1990s - including the rise of human resource management - which have affected teacher unions and radically altered the context in which they work.

In the third section the nature of teacher union responses to the crisis of the 1980s is examined. An attempt is made to draw some general conclusions from the experience of the last decade, and the debate about 'professional unionism', 'strategic' unionism and 'polite' unionism which was set in motion by the important work of Charles Kerchner and Douglas Mitchell, 'The Changing Idea of a Teachers' Union', (Falmer 1988) is explored.

The concluding section of the chapter examines the important question of whether teacher unions have the creative potential to lead educational reform. It makes the assumption that continuing education reform will be necessary if western education systems are to meet the demands of the 21st century and argues that teacher unions will either have to play a constructive leading role in the reform process or find themselves increasingly marginalised.

GENERAL CONTEXT

To a large extent teacher union organisation, tactics and strategy reflect the education system within which they are situated. Changes in the structure of the education system inevitably cause teacher unions to reorganise themselves. Thus the National Union of Teachers in England and Wales established ten regional offices in 1989 in anticipation of an increase in school level case work following the 1988 Education Reform Act's provisions for devolving power from local education authorities to school-level governing bodies. At the opposite end of the spectrum, European teacher unions find themselves increasingly drawn into European Union level activities. Similarly the organisational differences between the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) can be partly explained by the nature of the districts they represent. The NEA, with its predominance in small rural school districts places the organisational emphasis at state level, while the AFT's dominance in the large cities leads it to give much greater influence to the city level locals.

Often the distribution of power through a national education system is, from the point of view of teacher unions, beyond their control. They are only rarely and to a limited degree able to influence the educational constitution within which they work. For example, the NUT's opposition to the devolution of power to school level through LMS proved almost completely ineffective. On the other hand, given the devolution, it has proved remarkable successful in exploiting it to defend members. Similarly in New Zealand the teacher union was unable to prevent the radical restructuring of education following the Picot Report, but it has proved capable of finding means to promote its members' interests in the new order.

There are of course exceptions, particularly at the level of local/school relations as opposed to national/school relations. Thus in a number of American school districts, unions have been fully involved in the promotion of site-based management initiatives.

If the structure of the education system tends to be a 'given', so too is the ideology of the government at any given time. Once a government is elected, unions have to find means of promoting their members interests in the context of the government's favoured ideology.

In the days of post-war corporatism this was largely unproblematic, at least until the 1970s. Although the process of teacher union development varied from one country to another, there were by the end of the 1970s working relationships between teacher unions and all levels of

government. In England and Wales at national level there were a formal pay bargaining committee, (the Burnham Committee) a separate national committee for negotiating conditions of service and a Schools Council, on which national government, local government and union representatives discussed curriculum and assessment. These national patterns were reflected at local level, where local education authorities and unions negotiated extensions of the national agreements and discussed local education policy development.

In the United States, the bulk of school districts had accepted collective bargaining by the late 1970s, and while the city or the district formed the chief focus for the teacher unions, both the NEA and AFT had highly developed state and federal level organisations which used lobbying techniques as well as formal and informal relations with government to promote teachers' interests. The patterns in New Zealand, Australia and Canada varied in degree from the experience of the UK and USA but not in kind.

The election of right wing, market-orientated governments in the 1980s, especially in Britain and the United States, threatened the relatively stable patterns that had evolved in the previous decade. The right had most impact in Britain where the Thatcherite ideology was combined with a centralised form of democracy which provides the party in government with tremendous power. Thus by the late 1980s the traditional structured relationship between teacher unions and government had been dismantled. The Schools Council was abolished in 1984 and national collective bargaining in 1987. At the same time a series of laws were enacted restricting the power of unions in general and reducing the discretion and influence of the local tier of government. The results were a long-running pay dispute in the mid-80s which saw the teacher unions overwhelmingly defeated and the enactment shortly afterwards of the market-orientated Education Reform Act, which won overwhelming parliamentary support in spite of the hostility to it of the teaching profession.

In the United States, the Reagan and Bush administrations 'talked' market reform, but found in practice that their ability to implement was severely restricted by the constitution. Thus with the exception of some isolated districts, teacher unions retained their influence. On the other hand, the continuing public concern about standards in American schools left their longer term influence in question.

Overall, therefore, teacher unions have found that they have to live with the 'givens' of a government ideology, and are rarely able to change it through direct lobbying. For this reason teacher unions across

the English-speaking world give high priority to influencing the democratic process. If direct lobbying of government does not change government ideology, then changing the government at the next election becomes an obvious option.

In the United States in the 1980s and 1990s, the National Education Association (NEA) has supported the Democratic candidate at each Presidential election. At state level the Massachusetts Teachers Association (MTA) is closely aligned to the Democrats, and repeatedly found itself opposing the policies of Republican governor Weld.

In England and Wales the unions are in theory independent of political parties. However, the National Union of Teachers' leadership has been consistently sympathetic to the Labour Party, and in 1987 and 1992 invested a great deal of (forlorn) hope in a Labour victory. Under the reform onslaught overall teacher opinion swung towards the Labour Party in the late 1980s and early 1990s with the result that the other teacher unions generally also found themselves more sympathetic to the Labour Party than to the Conservative Party, with the possible exception of the small no-strike union, the Professional Association of Teachers (PAT). Australia's recent experience appears to be similar.

'Teachers' unions (in Australia), although affiliates of the trade union peak councils, are different from most traditional unions in that they will not affiliate with the Labour Party. However, between 1975 and 1988 individual unions displayed strong leanings towards this party. In Victoria on three occasions (1945, 1982 and 1985) the teachers' unions intervened directly in the election process by supporting the Labour Party.....'

(Spaull, A. in Cooper, B. (ed).

However, as Spaull goes on to point out, the election of a Labour government at either Federal or State level is no guarantee of policies sympathetic to teacher unions, and their official independence is important to them, both in practical and in public relations terms. The NUT in England and Wales has, for example, suffered in the 1980s and 1990s because the Conservative government associated it with the political opposition, and has therefore been reluctant to take its comments on government policy seriously. The Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) by contrast maintained a studious independence. In general,

International Handbook of Educational Leadership and
Administration

Leithwood, K.A.; Chapman, J.D.; Corson, P.; Hallinger, P.;
Hart, A. (Eds.)

1996, XLIV, 1176 p. 3 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-0-7923-3530-6