

The bitter, bitter strike of 1969



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COLUMNIST



> Ted Short, second from right, at the Durham Miners' Gala in the 1960s. Short, a Newcastle MP, eventually had to intervene in the teachers' dispute

IN 1969, the National Association of Schoolmasters (NAS) was involved in an industrial action in Durham which, to say the least, was widespread and incredibly acrimonious. This was also supported by the recently formed Union of Women Teachers (UWT). The original cause of the action was disaffection over pay. However, the cause was lost in the bitterness of the dispute.

I was 24, in my third year of teaching, and a member of the NAS.

The action, primarily involving withdrawal from lunchtime supervision, began in Milton Hall and Acre Rigg schools. The councillors then ordered their officials to visit the schools personally to discipline NAS members. The members were issued letters of suspension and ordered off the premises. Members were then visited in their homes by Local Education Authority (LEA) officials and then suspended.

All Durham members, excluding probationary staff, were called out on a half-day strike on the February 20. All 800 then met in the Palladium Cinema in Durham. Following breakdown in negotiations, the Durham NAS then instructed members from February 24 to refuse to handle any school dinner money for a period of two weeks. There had been a High Court judgment in 1956 which secured the right of teachers to decline such voluntary duties. The Director of Education and senior staff then toured schools attempting to collect dinner money between lessons.

On March 5, the LEA clamped down on all leave for teachers to attend in-service courses. Two more schools were included in the action, Clegwell in Hebburn and Hermitage in Chester-le-Street.

On April 15, I attended the NAS conference in Eastbourne. The 'Durham Delegates' were given a heroes' reception.

The dispute was then beginning to impact on the preparation for public examinations, the GSE and the Northern County CSE. The Director of Education then made a distinction between 'suspension' and 'exclusion' saying that excluded teachers could return to work.

Following a further breakdown in talks four more secondary schools joined the action. The 32 members at Murton, Whickham, Heworth and Sedgfield were immediately suspended.

Four more headteachers were suspended for obstructing staff in the collection of school meals money. Teachers from other unions were sent to replace those who were suspended. One NAS deputy head and three NAS teachers were suspended for refusing to work with these black-legs. Durham sent a teacher to take charge of the class of a NAS teacher at Chopwell School. The acting headteacher refused to allow the teacher into the school and was immediately suspended.

The Journal of April 29 reported that 'attitudes had hardened on both sides'. Sixty-three of the suspended NAS members were given notice of dismissal to take effect from May 6, unless they returned to normal work. The majority of the National Union of Teachers then announced they were prepared to strike in the schools with the suspended NAS members.

A national levy of £2 per member was then raised, which ensured the excluded men received full reimbursement of their net pay. Following a series of meetings between the NAS and Durham CC, it seemed some progress was being made to resolve the dispute. One of the key questions of restitution of salary for reinstated teachers remained unresolved. The Secretary of State, Ted Short, refused to intervene unless the service was threatened with disruption. The NAS then decided to escalate the action. Over 10,000 schoolchildren would have their education seriously disrupted.

At the beginning of June, The Journal headlined: 'County Schools on brink of breakdown'. On June 18 and 19, 35 members in the four voluntary Roman Catholic schools recently introduced into the action were suspended. That brought the number to nearly 200 including some UWT members.

By July, with just three weeks of

term left, Barbara Castle and Ted Short, Secretaries of State for Employment and Education, announced they would jointly sponsor an inquiry into the dispute. The NAS issued a press statement saying they welcomed the inquiry. The NAS then instructed suspended members in four primary and four voluntary secondary schools engaged in action to resume normal working. They also said they were prepared to instruct their members at the 14 secondary schools to return to duty if the LEA reinstated them without penalty. The LEA turned down this offer, the Roman Catholic authorities accepted it.

The Court of Inquiry was published on August 22, 1969. It concluded the central nub of the dispute lay in the question of payment for the period of suspension. It was unequivocal in its judgment. The decision to suspend the teachers had been unjustified. They should be paid for their period of exclusion. Both sides were then criticised on other points and offered advice on how to improve relations.

Eventually the NAS agreed to accept the report. The NAS accepted the Inquiry's judgment that the work to rule tactics 'are not suited to the advancement of stable joint relationships in the teaching profession'. Durham accepted the 'excluded' teachers should be reinstated under the terms of the Agreement and paid for the period of exclusion.

The Chairman of the Education Committee was later to issue a statement saying: "We have not been looking for success or defeat. We are glad it is all over. Both sides have had to make concessions and this was the only way that the decision would be reached."

After the final discussion between the NAS and Durham LEA in Durham County Hall everyone, on all sides, asked "Is this the end? Is it finished?" The answer came back - 'Yes'.

The events have left an indelible memory on all those who were involved, on all sides. Could we ever return to such an industrial climate again? Personally I hope not.

■ Les Walton is chair of the Northern Education Trust.

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