

NEU Conference 2019 bulletin

ORGANISING IN MATS: An Oasis rep reports

I got a call from a London Oasis school rep last summer, the first contact from another Oasis activist in my 7 years in the chain. Out of those first conversations came the first moves to build a coordinated branch within Oasis – the UK's third largest chain.

We've had a reasonably strong school group over the past 7 years. We've agreed directed time, maintained 100% pay progression, got to a manageable marking policy and had a productive relationship with school management. While far from perfect we've been in a situation where our voice was usually heard and had some influence. Yet over the past year we'd increasingly found ourselves butting up against directives which were difficult to resolve at a school level – from our relationship to the police over knife arches to the (late) imposition of curriculum alignment.

Initial attempts to bring reps together met with limited success. An informal meeting drew three of us from the London area and a formal "reps training" brought only slightly more. Yet these early discussions helped set a framework from which to build. We agreed a focus on workload and shared insights from our schools and from the national negotiating team. Importantly it began to create an embryonic structure through which issues raised by school groups could be spread across the chain and brought to bear on national negotiations – in short an understandable structure for the union to organise members within Oasis.

With coordinated effort from NEU staff our most recent meeting had an exponential increase in numbers. The April meeting involved reps from across the country representing a respectable proportion of our 56 schools. A swathe of new reps participated and helped reveal the vastly uneven experiences of staff within the chain in terms of management impositions, work demands and the organisation of union members. Hitting a critical mass meant we were able to put flesh on a strategy for tackling workload across the group and begin to create a member-led branch to organise at a regional and



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national level – a structure that could eventually take over national negotiations.

The shift to a branch and district structure is not yet well understood across the NEU but for members in academy trusts it is a massive opportunity. Since academies started to spread in the 2000's there has been little thought about how our organising needed to change to counter the shift from centralisation in local authorities to employers spread across multiple union districts. There was no link between the negotiations with academies at a national level and our lay reps working in schools. Tragically there was also very little done by the union to coordinate its members across the big chains. I hope the drive to build a branch within Oasis will be only the first of our attempts to root member-led branches across the major trusts.

"We weren't even out of the train station and we could hear the rambunctious chants. The sun was shining. It was delightful. It was as though the weather knew that we were trying to save this planet."

**Laura Di Chiara (14 years old)
on #Youthstrike4climate**

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TRANSFORMING SCHOOLS

Young people's attitudes to gender politics are changing. Decades of LGBTQ+ struggles have contributed to a much more positive environment for LGBTQ+ children, particularly those that are transgender. I have been privileged to witness the support that peers and friends have offered to trans students, giving space and support to express themselves and explore new relationships.

There is a long way to go. Despite the efforts of teachers and staff to promote equality, homophobia and transphobia are still very present in school. 35% of children report that they have been called 'gay' or 'lesbian' as an insult, while 43% say that their friends regularly use homophobic language. Only recently, a trans girl was violently attacked by other students at her school, leaving her unable to leave the house for days.

On the other hand, many teachers might be finding that they know less about trans oppression and identities than their students. We need to discuss best practice for supporting and understanding trans pupils with our fellow teachers, and our Union should hold discussions and CPDs on the issues raised. We cannot wait for management to take a lead on this, which would allow cynicism to creep in.

Making schools a safe and welcoming environment for trans children will take more work than we might at first imagine. Schools regularly casually divide children up by gender



in ways that quickly become exclusionary to trans and non-binary pupils (for sports classes, sitting boy-girl-boy-girl, selecting head boys and head girls and so on). The introduction of gender-neutral loos is a massive step forward that lots of schools are moving towards.

Here we come against that old barrier: the cuts. Gender neutral toilets can be expensive to introduce, as they usually require the remodelling of school toilets into individual cubicles. This costs money and in the climate of cuts that we are dealing with, initiatives to make schools more inclusive are put on the backburner.

Trans issues are a live talking point in schools, and it is up to us, as teachers and NEU activists, to be taking the lead in tackling transphobia in our own practices and preventing transphobic bullying and harassment. We cannot allow trans children's lives and education to be harmed due to education cuts.

An NEU left

If the turnout of the pay and funding ballot was not on the scale now required by the Tory anti-union laws, at least the intention to baptise the new union in action was there. The unevenness of organisation that it has exposed should encourage us to be innovative in reaching wider layers of members. The proposed NEU left can potentially play a vital role in this. While it will of course look to organise to win policies at conference and

on the executive, we should also use it as a lever to deepen debates around pedagogy (as shown in the recent Celebrating Education conference); to build active solidarity for 6th form teachers and other groups on strike; to challenge Prevent and Ofsted and promote instead an anti-racist, anti-sexist LGBTQ+ inclusive education; to make 'student voice' more than an SLT buzzword when they take action over climate change or repressive management (as at St Aloysius College recently). We should aim to recruit to it en masse as part of waging the battles ahead.