

Presidential Address by Kiri Tunks (NUT-section of NEU)

Brighton

I am very proud to stand here as your President and to do so in the presence of my family:

My mum, Wendy, a teacher and NUT member all her life;

My dad, Hugh, an immigrant and a builder;

My sister, Ruth, a midwife and a fighter.

They are the roots that have nourished me, held me up, inspired me. They have provided the structure in my life and for my speech today.

I want to talk about teaching and building and fighting which for me is what this union is all about.

But I'm going to start with teaching – and with my mum.

My mum was a single mother in the 50s; the first in her family to enter tertiary education; a teacher in primary and secondary schools; a drama specialist. When my mum started teaching, women couldn't wear trousers to work, only got their maternity pay once they had returned to work and couldn't get a loan without their husband's permission.

My mum was an NUT rep and a strong believer in the union. She was involved in many campaigns – in particular, milestone struggles like the one at Highbury Quadrant in Islington over oppressive management and the notorious William Tyndale dispute.

Her acts of solidarity undoubtedly had an impact as people attempted to obstruct her career or bad mouth her as payback, but she never questioned whether standing with her colleagues in struggle was the right thing to do.

Above all, my mum has an overwhelming belief in the power of the arts. She was an inspiring drama teacher who staged full scale productions of classics with all-girl casts and empowered them to believe

they could do and be what they wanted to. She transformed the lives of many of her pupils and is still in touch with many of them. Some are here today.

As a child, my after-school days were spent at the back of a school hall soaking up the brilliance of a committed teacher who knew the Arts wasn't an add-on but an essential component of everyone's lives.

On the wall in her drama office hung the brilliant quote from Lilian Baylis, legendary manager of the Old Vic Theatre, who said

'The theatre isn't an excuse for wonderful evening gowns and jewels; it isn't a fad of people with long hair and sandals or boys and girls swotting for Oxford or Cambridge exams; it is a crying need of men and women to see beyond the four walls of their offices, workshops and homes into a world of awe and wonder.'

'All art is a bond between rich and poor, it allows of no class distinctions; more than that it is a bond between nation and nation.'

Never has that quote been truer or mattered more than now when we see the arts being wiped off our curriculum in favour of ever higher targets in a decreasing number of subjects.

There are many 'crying needs' that our young people have that our education system should be addressing: mental health, relationships & sex education, cultural capital, critical thinking and pastoral care to name a few.

I have heard these elements of education dismissed as ‘fluffy learning’ and as ‘not measurable,’ as though we should only teach the things we can quantify.

How ridiculous.

How can we ensure our young people are prepared to navigate an endlessly changing world if we do not teach them to be creative, innovative, to take risks and to make mistakes; if we tell them that there is always a right answer and anything that cannot be marked right or wrong is not worth knowing?

Our education system is falling very short and we are failing our young people.

The kind of education system our young people need costs money. Yet, our schools are being stripped of the cash they need whilst millions are being squandered on free schools and academies. We are not going to let them get away with it.

Nor are we going to keep putting up with year on year real-terms pay cuts. This is the sixth richest country in the world. We can afford to pay school staff properly.

I came to teaching after several years working in the publishing industry as a personal assistant to a Literary Agent. It was a high pressured job but ultimately I realised that I wanted to spend my time in a career that had a bigger collective input and wider impact. It was a wonderful experience working for an incredible female boss who nurtured and encouraged me, who was generous with her time and her mentoring, and set a pretty high standard for any boss I’ve encountered since. I want to thank you, Vivien Green, for your kindness, your generosity and your empathy; and for teaching me that being a boss doesn’t mean you have to be a tyrant.

I trained as an English & drama teacher. If I’m honest, my first love was English but coming into teaching as the SATs boycott came to an end, I could see where English teaching was going and I couldn’t bear to be a part of it. So I decided to be a drama teacher instead – even though a member of SLT warned me against it, saying I would be in a backwater all my career.

Well, he was right to a degree but the good thing about backwaters is that you get to paddle along in the shadows, charting your own course and making a few waves now and again.

I soon discovered what my mum knew – that drama is a radical and revolutionary discipline. Those who think it is not a proper subject have failed to understand the immense challenge and opportunity

that drama presents to its students and its teachers. Teaching drama in two secondary schools was both empowering and eye-opening and drove home two very important truths – we are all learners and we all have something to give.

In the end, my knees were complaining too much and when I was presented with the chance to initiate a skills-based competency curriculum for Year 7, I leapt at the chance. I want to thank Mike Kimber for recognising the power and potential that a project-based curriculum had for the development of our young people and for making sure I had the time, the resources and the staff to make it work.

We had the most fabulous eight years of this project which brought learning to life for our students and gave them skills to transfer to other subjects and to their lives outside of school.

Each project drew on the skills and interests of the staff and we worked together as a team to pool our ideas and knowledge and produce exciting and engaging lessons. It was the most profound experience of my teaching career. We were constantly looking for ways to improve and adjust what we did and this energy transferred to our students. We were our harshest critics and consequently our teaching improved as did the learning of our students.

But much of what we taught didn't fit in a box. It wasn't easily quantifiable. Of course, being ambitious for it, we jumped every hoop that was held for us and hit every target that was set. But it was never enough and one day a new regime arrived and declared that it was 'fluffy' and that, because it could not be measured according to the boxes the school had created, it clearly had no impact. And, like the witch in *Room on the Broom*, 'Whoosh! It was gone!'

Ironic, then, that soon after in Finland they began rolling out similar interdisciplinary skills-based learning across the country.

Which brings me to what we learn from our international family and why the international solidarity work this union does is so important. It was something our previous General Secretary, Steve Sinnott knew and the work he started continues through the Steve Sinnott Foundation.

Now our international work has broadened to international solidarity and brought another dimension to our work at home. I want to pay tribute to Mary Compton, Past-President, who has just recently passed away, for all her work on building teacher solidarity and to the work of Bernard Regan, a stalwart campaigner for international justice across the trade union movement.

Internationalism isn't just a fluffy add-on but a powerful teacher in the campaign against inequality and injustice. Look to our colleagues in New Zealand where the government has introduced a bill to end national standards and charter schools. Let that inspire us to win the same here.

Our regular delegations of lay and Executive members to places such as Palestine, Cuba Nicaragua and Srebrenica are opening up another rich seam in our union. Taking part in these delegations is transformative, as anyone who has been part of one will confirm. Yes, we go out to show solidarity to our colleagues and comrades in struggle but the traffic is never one-way. Time and time again, delegates return to the UK talking of having had their life changed by the experience; of having learnt so much from our counterparts in the host countries; this is knowledge and energy that they bring back into the Union.

This global understanding is something my school has attempted to bring to our students with a subject called Global Perspectives. It's a popular, challenging subject but it too has been dropped because it does not fit with Progress 8. Such decisions are being replicated all over the country and are impoverishing our young people despite the best efforts of staff and schools.

I want to thank all the teachers and support staff in my life. You have made my life richer and I cannot imagine wanting to work any place but in a school. The camaraderie and kindness cannot be bettered anywhere, I think.

I want to thank all my colleagues whose commitment to the kids and to education is unswerving and who subvert, challenge and fight every day to try to make sure our students are getting what they need and not just what is prescribed – Mandy O'Connor, Janis Fuller, Judith Caldeira – you are unsung heroes.

I want to thank the school library staff who always give above and beyond what should reasonably expected of anyone and whose imagination and drive to get everyone reading has taken us to places we possibly should not have gone – like getting a horse into school for our book club on *War Horse* or the (mildish) re-enactment of *The Hunger Games* in the school library. I'm so pleased a motion on libraries has made it on to the Final Agenda this year.

I want to thank all my NUT reps whose stalwart defence of our working conditions has created a workplace in which it has been possible to stay, and teach, and have enough energy to give to the kids: Rodney, Phil, Caroline, Ash and Natasha – you rock. I have learnt so much from all of you.

I want to thank my own teachers at Islington Green School where they tried to give us a proper comprehensive education – anti-racist, anti-sexist – with a creative, radical music department and Design & Technology carousels where everybody did metal work, wood work, textiles and cooking. But I confess my favourite was our Textiles teacher, Kay Stables, who taught us about inequality and oppression through, among other things, the rise and fall of the hemline.

I want to thank all the young people whose paths I have crossed. You have taught me so much about coping and managing and listening. On a daily basis, in spite of all the obstacles so many of you face, you come to school and you try hard and you trust us that we will help you make something of your life and we do our best not to let you down.

Young people are resilient and they are brave. We did a project connecting with some young people in a refugee camp in Damascus. The kids talked to each other and asked questions but the most poignant moment was when these 14 year olds in a shattered class room in Syria, sang Adele's 'Hello' to the kids in a school in Bethnal Green.

The resilience and devotion to their education shown by the Syrian students made a bigger impact on my students than any lesson I could have delivered.

And it changed the way they felt about their own lives and their responsibility to act on behalf of others.

I want to take this opportunity to promote the films the Union has made with young refugee children on their experiences of arriving at school in the UK. It is part of our work on providing guidance and resources (sourced from our members). These films remind us that refugee children come to us with experiences, knowledge and understanding that can enrich our lives and we should do everything we can to welcome and support them.

###SHOW FILM###

I'm proud that the NEU is partnering Refugee Week in June and I salute the work done by so many of our members up and down the country in supporting refugees and the camps in Calais.

On a recent delegation to Mexico we saw how, in the face of a brutal and oppressive government, teachers and other workers are organising to build a better world. Over 30,000 people have disappeared since 2006 and these are just the ones that are documented. We met with the widow whose husband

was one of six people tortured and murdered the same night that 43 teaching students from Ayotzinapa disappeared. The NEU has been pressing for a full inquiry into what happened and for the rights of all Mexican citizens to be respected and we will be asking you to take up this campaign in the coming months.

This kind of learning can be very emotional and we cannot help the very personal response we have to suffering and tragedy. But the words of Bassem Tamimi stay with me. We were in his sitting room in Nabi Saleh in Palestine, many of us in tears at the suffering they had endured. He said:

‘Thank you for your tears. We are very grateful. But they are not enough. Now you must do something.’

This should be the overriding principle of our international work and I think we are getting there.

One campaign that needs all our attention is the treatment of Palestinian children by the Israeli authorities. Wherever you stand on Israel and Palestine, no-one can defend the imprisonment, abuse and denial of human rights experienced by 800 Palestinian children every year. And I’m proud of the stand we have taken on this.

So how do we build something better?

We reach out to every single member in every single school, college and workplace. We make sure our Union is representative of its membership. We put equality and justice at the heart of all our work. We make sure our members have a voice and that we take actions that give them power.

Our Education and Equalities department and organising teams have done brilliant work. We have increased the reach of our equality strands with increasing numbers of members attending the conferences for Black, disabled and LGBT+ teachers. We’ve set up lay networks and National Organising Fora. We’ve changed structures to ensure that women members are more properly represented at Annual Conference and on future Executives. We have produced resources and guidance by using the experiences and knowledge of our diverse members. We must keep this work at the centre of the new union.

We have been fighting for years for inclusive, statutory, well-funded and properly resourced relationships and sex education. Last year we were promised it. We are still waiting. Meanwhile,

thousands of young people are leaving school without the understanding or strategies to navigate their way to healthy relationships. Surveys show worrying levels of sexual harassment and domestic violence.

This is a shocking failure of our society and I'm proud that the National Education Union is taking this on with the *It's Just Everywhere* research and initiatives like the Challenging Sexism Conference that took place last week.

Likewise, there is also so much more to be done to tackle discrimination against disabled people who are suffering from serious cuts to services and outrageous attacks on the benefits that enable them to live and to do so independently. How shameful that the UN has issued a public condemnation of this Government's failure to uphold the rights of its disabled citizens.

We know that LGBT+ people are still suffering from high levels of discrimination, harassment and hate, nationally and internationally.

We know, too, that racism is still a problem with a huge rise in hate crime; the underachievement and alienation of young Black students; and the discrimination faced by Black and Minority Ethnic staff.

These fights are ones that the Union takes seriously and has made huge progress. But the price of progress is vigilance. This is work that we must take forward.

So, I really hope that we can take the Blair Peach Award into the new Union, an award which recognises the outstanding equality work being done by our members. I was 12 when Blair was killed by the police on an anti-racist demo in Southall. As a Kiwi, his death had extra resonance in our house and my dad went to his funeral, to honour a man he had never met but with whom we felt a connection; a connection that continued when I joined East London NUT and followed in Blair's footsteps in becoming association president. Blair fought – and died – for a better world and I like to think we carry the spirit of Blair with us.

Now to my Dad.

My dad came to this country at the age of 24. He had a dream of driving a double-decker London bus so he applied for the job. But they turned him down because he had a beard.

True.

So he went to the union.

The union got him a driving test.

Which he failed for driving too quickly.

So they got him a second one.

Which he failed for driving too slowly.

Always pragmatic, he cut his losses and became a builder. And a problem solver.

If we want to build something strong, we have to look honestly at the task we face and approach it creatively. Trade unionism for me is about principles and pragmatism.

What we do we want – and how do we win it?

First, we need to raise consciousness that this union and its members have a better vision for education.

And then we need builders to build it.

But we are not starting from scratch. We have a legacy of over 125 years of union organising. We are standing on the shoulders of giants and our vision is great.

Two giants in my life are two previous NUT Presidents who also came from East London, Carole Regan and Baljeet Ghale, both of whom work tirelessly to create a better world and to make demands of existent structures – to flex and bend and to do better.

They taught me that we need everyone working at every level of the union, that we need diverse voices and different perspectives. We cannot build the kind of union we want if it's left to a few people working in silos. Our house needs to be strong. Otherwise our enemies will blow it down.

We are now the fourth biggest union in the country and remain the largest education union in Europe. We have the potential to become a driving force for change in education and society itself.

We must share our vision as widely as we can.

We want a society where our children do not live in poverty or fear. We want a society where people are treated fairly and paid a decent wage. We want a society where diversity is celebrated and embraced.

We want schools based on positive values that centre the needs of the child. We want our schools to be properly funded and our staff to be valued and paid what they are worth. We want our schools to be accountable to their communities, not to Trusts or private companies seeking to profit from education.

We will campaign with all of those who share our values.

And there is hope on the horizon.

For the first time in a generation, we have a major political party, which might just form the next government, talking about tackling many of these things; and talking about a new vision for education and a National Education Service. This is the best opportunity we have had to effect real change and we have to make sure we are in the best possible position to shape it.

Now I'm going to say something that may make me unpopular.

I like the new logo. I voted for the new logo. And I want you to embrace the new logo too.

I think it represents the best of what we can be – people working in different phases and different spheres, feeding in to the Union at different levels and in different, flexible ways; the Union reaching out, becoming enriched by the knowledge and experience of our members and activists. This will make us vibrant, energised and strong.

We have to find ways to engage all our members in the union. Many of our members have unhealthy, some might say abusive, relationships with their job. How many times have you heard a member of staff justify the ridiculous level of work they are doing with 'It's for the kids'?

And actually, many of our members need a much healthier relationship with the Union – not seeing it as peripheral or an insurance measure when things go wrong.

A great union is a living, breathing body given life by its active members, without whom its strength is sorely tested. We need to develop a relationship with our members that is active, responsive, representative.

We can do this in our own way, in our own regions. We can build our reps and activists, help them build in their workplaces, help them build in their communities. If people are keen to be involved but there is an obstacle blocking their way, it is our job to take that obstacle down or find a way around it. That might mean that we change the way we do things or find a flexible way for them to be involved. It might mean we have to challenge our employers or build for action to bring about change. It means reaching out to diverse and underrepresented groups and individuals; it means engaging with young teachers.

In short, we need to build this house on rock. That requires honest reflection and hard discussions. It requires us not to be afraid of, or resistant to, change or challenge.

I have a reputation as a feminist and I want to say a heartfelt thanks to all the women in my life who have supported me. You know who you are. I'd particularly like to thank my fellow officers, Anne Swift, Louise Regan and Philipa Harvey for your solidarity and good counsel over the last few years.

But I also want to recognise and thank some of the brothers who have pushed me forward. Like Dave Harvey who nominated me for the NUT Women's Committee in February 2002 on the day I gave birth to my daughter. It wasn't something that I thanked him for at the time but it was the right thing to do. Recognising that it is at just that point, when women become carers, that we opt out of union activity, he sent me a strong signal that I was valued and that having a baby shouldn't stop me being active in the Union. I am very grateful for that, Dave.

I also want to salute Alex Kenny, my branch secretary in East London, who has worked tirelessly to take down barriers for members in our division – building up personal relationships with members and reps in schools and encouraging and empowering people to take on union roles and actions.

On a personal note, I want to thank Alex for living his life according to his principles, and being a partner in the true sense of the word, which has enabled me to build my career and take on so many roles in the Union.

I want to thank my daughter Jess who has always made it easy for me to take up the opportunities that have come my way; who has suggested brilliant ideas for my lessons; who has not let me use her as an

excuse. When I asked her if she minded me going to Mexico she said, 'I'm not being funny mum but you're getting on. You should take any offers you get.' Thanks Jess. You're a star.

Firm foundations mean broad roots. One of the things we have had some success with in East London is bringing the community together on many occasions. So, when the English Defence League have tried to march through Tower Hamlets, we have been part of United East End and worked with key organisations and individuals across the borough to stop them.

This relationship with our community enables us to work with people on things like the funding campaign. Last year, it helped us build a 1,500 strong 'Big School Assembly' in Mile End Park. We worked closely with schools, reps, head teachers, parents, students and the council to hold meetings in schools and leaflet the community. Schools held banner-making sessions and marched *en masse* to the Assembly – some walking for over 30 minutes to get there, some marching in the middle of the road; all wanting to do it again...

And this is why we have to reach out beyond our schools – because schools are not islands. We are connected to our communities and what affects them affects us. We need to be at the centre of other popular movements that will challenge the big inequalities in our society. They will help us win our vision too.

Such fights come out of a burning need to challenge injustice which was something I learnt from my older sister at a very early age.

My sister was schooled in a streamed system where some students' learning was prioritised over that of others (her home economics lessons consisted of preparing the resources for the top set that would come in after them).

It didn't stop her from being determined to achieve her ambition to be a nurse, and my sister went on to become a fully qualified nurse, and then a midwife – a job she has done for nearly 40 years.

More recently, as a parent of primary age children, she ran a brilliant anti-SATs campaign in Norwich. My sister is a fighter and a leader – despite what she was told at school.

We should congratulate everyone who's been involved in the fight against the wrecking ball that is the testing regime in our schools but I want to give a particular shout out to Sara Tomlinson who has been relentless in her campaigning against it.

We are building a mighty force of opposition through our More Than a Score alliance and we'll be debating next steps this weekend. However we decide to proceed, this is a battle we mean to win.

Schools must not be places where we cut people's ambition, where we try to fit them in boxes. Schools must be places where we help people out of those boxes and then throw those boxes away.

Colleagues, we need to pick some fights.

But we need to pick them carefully.

Choose the ground, think strategically.

Last year we got a dog, Lola. Lola has taught me quite a lot of things – the importance of down time; the importance of a an affectionate greeting; the importance of feeling the wind in your hair at the end of a long day.

The importance of not biting when a growl will do.

But biting if you have to.

Like we have in...

- Newham and Brent over academies;
- Sussex, Southend and Waltham Forest over pay;
- Barnsley over oppressive management; and
- Sheffield over terms and conditions.

Like we are doing on

- Funding
- Assessment
- Workload
- Pay

I look forward to a full weekend of debates about how best to take these campaigns forward.

Even little victories can bring people to the cause and to the movement, involving them at every level such as the now legendary story of Brent rep, Jean Roberts, winning soft toilet paper in her school, to the primary teachers at Thomas Buxton who won 20% PPA time, or the teachers at Mulberry who now have Wednesday afternoons free for planning.

We need more people to start saying ‘No’ and that means taking the fight to them. Ask them:

- What do you feel strongly about?
- What do you feel deeply about?
- What are you prepared to say ‘no’ to?
- Is it something you can win?

Sometimes saying ‘no’ can be done politely.

Sometimes ‘no’ needs to be heard a little louder.

But it must be said.

Working in schools is a tough gig. I’ve done it for 24 years now. The only reason I have survived this long is because of the Union. But many more do not survive and are leaving the profession in high numbers. Surveys suggest around 53% of serving teachers are considering leaving in the next two years.

We are losing too many dedicated teachers because of ridiculous levels of workload which successive governments have failed to tackle. Initiatives like the workload charters in Nottingham and Coventry are a brilliant example of lay-led initiatives supported by regional offices and organisers. Let’s roll them out.

The Union taught me how to fight and it taught me how to survive. Every time I attended a union event, it was an evening I wasn’t stuck late at school planning and marking; every union event I attended I learnt more about my rights (knowledge I took back in to work and used to improve working conditions there); every union event I attended I met amazing people who modelled better ways of working and clever ways of saying ‘no’. I became a better teacher. I asserted myself. I took back control of my life.

We need to do this individually and collectively. We are the experts. We know what our young people need; we have the training and the knowledge to be able to deliver it and yet our expertise is dismissed and derided at every turn.

Enough.

This government needs to listen to education workers because our Union isn't an organisation which just complains. We do our research and we suggest alternatives. We are part of a great tradition.

Trade union history is full of fantastic stories where groups of working people stood together and said, 'No'.

The Match Women of 1888, a group of largely teenage girls who led 1,400 workers out on strike to demand better pay and working conditions. They did this in the face of huge and powerful opposition, and won.

And in doing so, inspired their brothers and fathers, the Dockers, to take action themselves in the Great Dock Strike of 1889. These two strikes are now seen as the start of the new unionism which led to the formation of the Labour Party.

These poor, badly treated workers, the children of immigrants, took on the might of the British establishment and won. We should take heart from their struggle and not be cowed.

The suffragettes – thousands of women from different classes – stepped up in the face of abuse, threat and harassment for what they knew to be right. They weren't deterred by the brutal opposition they faced. Their courage should be a something for us all to emulate

We saw it at Grunwick; at Dagenham. We see it today in the fights of groups like the WASPI women, Disabled People Against the Cuts and many others.

We see it in global fights such as the Cuban people against the US Blockade.

A small Caribbean island, hamstrung by economic sanctions with literacy rates and healthcare provision that match or better much of Western Europe. A country that ranks highly for gender equality globally, which has innovated and enervated for decades. A country that trains doctors from poorer countries for free and which is often the first to send rescue workers to international disasters.

Every time I feel like giving up I remember my friends around the world engaged in struggle and know that, like them, we have no choice.

The Palestinians have a word for it:

Sumud

Steadfastness

If we want to fight for what's right, we must keep going.

If we want to build a better world, we cannot give up.

The fight may be long and gruelling but there are little victories along the way and the building of friendships and camaraderie will make the journey easier.

We are an education union.

We have a duty to teach by example.

Being a trade unionist and standing up for justice is the best role model I can think of to give to our young people.

If we don't fight, we teach our young people to tolerate injustice and inequality and then we are no role-models at all.

I want a better world than this.

I believe another world is possible.

We are teachers.

We are builders.

We are fighters.

Let's teach.

Let's build.

Let's fight.

ENDS