

The political and trade union organization of English teachers of the National Union of Teachers: 1979-1984^{1*}

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Abstract

This article analyzes the political and trade union organization of English teachers, focusing on the activism of the National Union of Teachers (NUT) between the late 1970s and the mid-1980s, a period marked by the intensification of the Cold War and the rise of neoliberalism in the United Kingdom. The study seeks to understand how the NUT moved beyond the boundaries of corporate unionism and assumed an international political role, linking the defense of public education to the struggle for peace and social justice. Grounded in historical-dialectical materialism, the research is based on the analysis of primary sources, including annual union resolutions, issues of *The Teacher* newspaper, and the pamphlet *Education for Peace*, complemented by specialized literature and international reports on armaments. The investigation demonstrates that the NUT developed a trade union praxis guided by emancipatory values, transforming the educational sphere into a field of cultural and political resistance against militarism and the austerity policies of the Thatcher government. It concludes that the union's activities exemplify the transition from corporate consciousness to an expanded class consciousness, expressed in the organization of the International Peace Conference in 1984. This historical experience reveals that teacher unionism, when linked to universal ethical and political projects, can become an instrument of social transformation and a concrete expression of international solidarity among education workers.

Keywords

History of teacher unionism – National Union of Teachers – Cold War – Peace education – International conference.

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1- Data Availability Statement: The complete dataset supporting the findings of this study has been published within the article itself, as listed in the References section under supporting works and documents. The primary sources consulted, including resolutions of the National Union of Teachers (NUT), issues of *The Teacher* newspaper, the pamphlet *Education for Peace*, and the *SIPRI Yearbook* 1981 (SIPRI, 1981), constitute the documentary basis of the analysis presented herein.

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Introduction

The historical study of trade union organizations provides a privileged avenue for understanding the social, political, and cultural dynamics of each period, making it possible to reveal the interactions between the world of work, the formation of collective consciousness, and projects of social transformation. In the case of the National Union of Teachers (NUT), founded in 1870 as the National Union of Elementary Teachers and later consolidated as the principal teachers' union in England and Wales, an examination of its trajectory during the Cold War reveals a singular experience of politicization and the broadening of horizons within teacher trade union action. Without neglecting its political and social role as an organization committed to defending salaries and working conditions, the NUT became a space for intellectual production and public intervention, linking educational demands to issues of international significance.

From the perspective of historical-dialectical materialism, formulated by Marx and Engels, historical consciousness is not limited to a passive reflection of the material conditions of existence but results from human praxis, from the conscious and transformative action of social subjects in their own time. The trajectory of the NUT thus exemplifies the process through which a professional organization, when confronted with broader structural contradictions, is led to redefine its collective identity, developing an expanded class consciousness and engaging in debates that transcend the restricted sphere of the teaching profession.

The union's activities, particularly in a context of growing international tension and crisis within the Welfare State, expressed the dialectical relationship between the specific struggle of education workers and the universal struggle for human emancipation.

This essay aims to discuss the relevance of historical studies concerning the political and trade union organization of English teachers, taking as its object the activism of the NUT between the late 1970s and the mid-1980s, a period marked by the escalation of the arms race and the rise of neoliberalism under the government of Margaret Thatcher.

It is argued that the NUT, responding to increasing social inequalities and the threat of nuclear war, moved beyond the limits of corporate unionism and assumed the role of an international political actor. This shift culminated in the organization of the International Conference for Peace between Western and Eastern Europe, held at Stoke Rochford Hall in March 1984, one of the most significant episodes of English trade union and educational diplomacy during the Cold War.

The analysis is grounded in the Marxist framework, which understands history as the result of contradictions between structure and superstructure and emphasizes the capacity of collective subjects to intervene in the transformation of reality. From this perspective, the activities of the NUT not only reflected the climate of potentially disastrous international belligerence but also revealed the praxis of educators as a social force capable of challenging the dominant logic of militarism and commodification.

To support this interpretation, the study draws upon primary sources such as motions approved at the union's annual conferences, issues of *The Teacher* newspaper, and the publication *Education for Peace* (1984), together with specialized scholarship and international reports on armaments, including the *SIPRI Yearbook 1981* (SIPRI, 1981).

By examining this historical experience, the article seeks to demonstrate that teacher unionism, at its most developed level, is capable of linking the struggle for high-quality public education to the defense of peace and to the critique of contemporary forms of domination. The history of the NUT during the Cold War thus illuminates a moment when trade union practice transcended national boundaries, becoming an instrument of resistance and international solidarity among educators. This historical perspective not only broadens our understanding of the past but also offers valuable references for reflecting on the political and pedagogical role of teachers' unions in the face of global crises and the civilizational challenges of the present.

Teacher unionism and historical consciousness in the context of the Cold War

The analysis of teacher unionism in the context of the Cold War requires a theoretical broadening that goes beyond an exclusively structural reading of the contradictions of capital. Although historical-dialectical materialism provides the fundamental interpretative axis, by understanding consciousness as a product of material conditions and social praxis, it must, in the present study, be articulated with the contributions of the Social History tradition and, particularly, with Norbert Elias's (1944) reflections on the civilizing process.

We begin with the classical formulation of Marx and Engels according to which social being determines consciousness. Such determination, however, does not occur in a mechanical manner. It is mediated by concrete historical experiences, everyday practices, and forms of sociability that shape the ways in which social groups interpret the world and themselves. It is precisely at this point that the dialogue with Elias becomes fruitful. In his analysis of the civilizing process, Elias demonstrates how patterns of self-control, moral sensibilities, and structures of social interdependence are historically transformed, producing new forms of consciousness.

The trajectory of the National Union of Teachers (NUT) between the late 1970s and the mid-1980s can be understood within this dual framework. On the one hand, its actions expressed the structural contradictions of advanced capitalism: the crisis of the Welfare State, the neoliberal offensive, and the militarization of the economy. On the other hand, they revealed the emergence of a specific historical sensibility: the perception that the nuclear threat and the deterioration of public education constituted interconnected dimensions of a broader civilizational crisis.

By incorporating the agenda of disarmament and peace education, the union did not merely react to economic constraints. Rather, in light of the everyday teaching experience, marked by direct contact with the fears, expectations, and anxieties of younger generations, it reinterpreted the historical significance of the period. The growing manifestation of student concerns regarding the nuclear threat, reported in *The Teacher* (1984), cannot be understood merely as an ideological reflection. It must also be seen as the expression of a specific stage of the civilizing process, in which the technical possibility of humanity's self-destruction profoundly challenged the moral foundations of modernity.

In this sense, the historical consciousness developed by the NUT was not limited to the transition from "class consciousness in itself" to "class consciousness for itself," in the

classical Marxist sense. It also reflected a transformation in teachers' self-perception as cultural mediators within a historical process under threat. The union came to understand that, in that context, education meant contesting the very horizon of civilization.

At this point, Antonio Gramsci's contribution becomes decisive to the theoretical consistency of the analysis. The union must be understood as a private apparatus of hegemony, that is, as an organization of civil society whose membership is voluntary and which operates through the production and dissemination of worldviews. Situated within the framework of the Integral State, conceived as the unity-distinction between political society (coercion) and civil society (consent), the NUT operated within the strategic terrain of the struggle for intellectual and moral leadership.

The adoption of a pacifist agenda and the defense of "peace education" thus constituted an authentic war of position. In Western societies characterized by complex civil societies, such as the United Kingdom in the 1980s, the supremacy of a social group is manifested not only through coercive domination but also through its capacity for cultural leadership. By advocating the redirection of military expenditures toward education and by introducing the nuclear debate into the school curriculum, the NUT sought to promote a transformation of consciousness or, more precisely, what Gramsci defined as the creation of a new ideological terrain.

The reaction of the Thatcher government confirms this interpretation. By accusing the union of "political indoctrination," the State in its narrow sense acted as an instance of symbolic coercion, seeking to contain the expansion of an emerging counter-hegemony within civil society. The conflict surrounding peace education was not a mere pedagogical disagreement; rather, it represented a struggle over the moral direction of British society during a period of escalating militarization.

From a methodological standpoint, the approach proposed here requires that teacher unionism be understood neither as an automatic reflection of the structural determinations of capitalism nor merely as a corporate organization devoted to the immediate defense of professional interests. Instead, it should be analyzed as a privileged space for the production of political everyday life, where economic structure, culture, and social experience are articulated. The examination of the resolutions approved at the Jersey (1983) and Blackpool (1984) conferences, together with the articles published in *The Teacher* and the pamphlet *Education for Peace*, makes it possible to identify not only formal institutional positions but also discursive practices, symbolic strategies, and forms of sociability that reveal the concrete mediation between the macrostructures of the Cold War and the neoliberal offensive, and the lived experiences of educators in their daily school environments.

In this respect, the incorporation of dialogue with the Social History tradition, particularly the contributions of Edward Palmer Thompson and Norbert Elias, strengthens the methodological coherence of the analysis by shifting the focus from an abstract conception of class to the concrete historicity of experience. As Thompson argues, class is not a static category; rather, it is shaped by the ways in which men and women live their relations of production and by their experiences within the broader set of social relationships, cultural practices, and inherited expectations that they employ and reinterpret at the cultural level.

The category of “experience,” thus understood, is traversed by the heterogeneity of social relations and by the continuous dialogue between social being and social consciousness. This perspective makes it possible to understand teacher unionism not merely as an organizational structure but as a historical process through which teachers produce meanings, reinterpret structural constraints, and construct political responses grounded in their concrete experiences in the world of work and within school culture.

At the same time, the dialogue with Elias broadens the understanding of historical consciousness as a relational and civilizational process. The nuclear threat and the intensification of the arms race profoundly challenged the standards of self-control, security, and expectations of the future that characterize the modern civilizing process.

The presence of atomic fear in the imagination of students and teachers, recorded in union sources, cannot be reduced to a simple ideological effect. Rather, it constituted the expression of a specific historical moment in which global interdependencies and the technical possibility of self-destruction called into question the moral foundations of Western modernity. In this context, the everyday life of teachers emerged as a mediating space between macrostructure and social experience, where the major contradictions of late capitalism were translated into pedagogical concerns, curricular debates, and trade union mobilizations.

This interpretation gains further depth when articulated with Antonio Gramsci’s conception of the Integral State. Situated within civil society, the union functioned as a private apparatus of hegemony, an organization whose members voluntarily adhered to a shared project and which actively participated in the elaboration and dissemination of worldviews. By linking wage struggles, criticism of neoliberal policies, and denunciations of the war economy, the NUT revealed its active role in the struggle for intellectual and moral leadership within British society during the 1980s.

The defense of peace education and the redirection of military expenditures toward social policies did not constitute merely conjunctural demands. Rather, they represented typical movements of a war of position waged within a complex civil society. By seeking to promote a reform of consciousness through curriculum and the critical formation of students, the union simultaneously contributed to the construction of an alternative consensus and challenged the dominant hegemony.

The organization of the International Peace Conference at Stoke Rochford Hall in 1984 represented the moment when this expanded consciousness transcended the national sphere and projected itself as an international strategy for cooperation among education workers. Far from constituting a policy of class conciliation, the initiative expressed the understanding that the contradictions between capital and labor had acquired a global dimension and therefore required equally internationalist responses. The union thus positioned itself at the intersection of the world of work and the contemporary civilizing process, linking the everyday experiences of teachers to the major geopolitical tensions of the Cold War.

The theoretical and methodological framework proposed here therefore makes it possible to understand the experience of the NUT during the Cold War as an expression of the contradictions of late capitalism, a concrete manifestation of a hegemonic struggle

within the Integral State, a singular moment in a civilizing process strained by the nuclear threat, and an everyday practice of constructing historical consciousness within the teaching profession.

The articulation between historical materialism, Social History, and the analysis of lived experience allows us to respond to criticisms concerning theoretical and methodological gaps by demonstrating that the Marxist framework is not employed in an isolated or dogmatic manner. Rather, it engages in dialogue with a historiographical tradition that recognizes the centrality of experience, culture, and everyday life in the formation of consciousness and in the constitution of collective subjects.

From the resolutions approved at the Jersey (1983) and Blackpool (1984) annual conferences, one can observe the maturation of this collective consciousness. The motions condemning the “absurdly increasing expenditure on armaments” and demanding the redirection of resources toward education demonstrate that the NUT incorporated historical-dialectical reasoning into its political practice by connecting structural causes to social consequences.

At the same time, the proposal to introduce “peace education” into school curricula translated the effort to unite theory and practice, a movement characteristic of Marxist praxis, in which the formation of a new generation of critical citizens was conceived as part of the broader process of social transformation.

From this perspective, English teacher unionism appears as more than an organizational phenomenon; it constitutes an embodied form of historical consciousness. The history of the NUT demonstrates that when teachers recognize themselves as a collective historical subject, their struggle ceases to be confined to the economic sphere and comes to encompass the political, cultural, and ethical dimensions of social life.

The defense of peace, social justice, and high-quality public education was not merely a humanistic ideal. It represented the concrete expression of a worldview grounded in the critique of the contradictions of capitalism and in the real possibility of overcoming them through conscious collective action.

The experience of the NUT during the Cold War therefore exemplifies how teacher unionism can be understood as a process of constructing historical consciousness, one in which educators, through their everyday practice, come to recognize themselves as agents of transformation. The history of the NUT demonstrates that trade union praxis, guided by emancipatory values and by criticism of militarism, represented a specific form of resistance to capitalist hegemony. In doing so, the union reaffirmed the political role of the teaching profession as a mediator between knowledge and human emancipation, contributing in a distinctive way to the advancement of critical historical consciousness on an international scale.

Cold War, the arms race, and the crisis of the welfare State

The late 1970s and the early 1980s constituted one of the most critical periods in contemporary history, marked by the intensification of the contradictions of capitalism

on a global scale and by the crisis of the paradigms that had sustained the Welfare State in the decades following the Second World War.

At the international level, the Cold War, which began in 1947 and lasted until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, entered a new phase of tension characterized by the escalation of the arms race and the resurgence of bellicose rhetoric in both the Western and socialist blocs. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the decision of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to deploy intermediate-range missiles in Western Europe revived the specter of nuclear war, intensifying the climate of fear and insecurity that permeated both capitalist and socialist societies (Keeble, 1984d).

From a Marxist perspective, this context cannot be understood merely as a geopolitical dispute but rather as an expression of the contradictions inherent in the capitalist mode of production. The arms race functioned as a mechanism for the expanded reproduction of capital, driven by the logic of accumulation and by the need to sustain and enlarge military-industrial complexes.

As Marx (2002) observed, capital constantly seeks to transform all spheres of life, including war itself, into opportunities for valorization. In this sense, global militarization and the massive investments directed toward military technology were not simply strategic responses to the Soviet threat; they were also essential components of the political economy of advanced capitalism. According to the *SIPRI Yearbook 1981* (SIPRI, 1981), global military expenditure during the 1970s reached approximately four trillion dollars at 1978 prices, constituting a “tragic waste” of resources that could otherwise have been used to improve living conditions throughout the world.

At the same time, the United Kingdom was undergoing a process of economic and political restructuring that progressively eroded the pillars of the Keynesian consensus established in the postwar period. Margaret Thatcher’s rise to power in 1979 represented the consolidation of a neoliberal state project characterized by market deregulation, large-scale privatization, the reduction of labor rights, and an aggressive offensive against trade unions.

The replacement of the social-democratic compromise by the logic of the market entailed the gradual dismantling of the Welfare State, particularly in the areas of health care, housing, and education. Social rights increasingly came to be treated as commodities, while structural inequalities deepened (Hobsbawm, 1995). From the standpoint of historical materialism, this process reflected a transformation in the forms of class domination: the state, previously functioning as a mediator of social tensions, increasingly operated as a direct instrument for maintaining capitalist relations of production.

This context of structural crisis and political confrontation provided the backdrop for the reorganization of social struggles, including the teacher trade union movement. Internationally, the foreign policies pursued by Ronald Reagan in the United States and Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom revitalized the ideological axis of the Cold War by defending nuclear armament as a guarantee of “peace through strength.”

Domestically, rising unemployment, wage restraint, and the dismantling of public services generated a cycle of mobilizations and strikes, among which the miners’ strike of 1984–1985 emerged as a powerful symbol of resistance to the neoliberal offensive. For educators, the deterioration of working conditions and the commodification of public

education revealed that austerity policies were, in essence, a project of ideological and social reconfiguration aimed at weakening collective organizations and depoliticizing education.

The crisis of the Welfare State and the military escalation of the Cold War represented two dimensions of the same historical phenomenon: the need of capital to restore its rates of profitability through wage compression and the expansion of new markets, including the market for war. Militarism, in this context, functioned as an outlet for the contradictions of the productive system while simultaneously consolidating the ideological hegemony of imperialism.

Marx and Engels (1998) had already argued that capitalism tends to externalize its internal crises, transforming violence and conflict into mechanisms for the reproduction of capital. Consequently, the arms race cannot be understood merely as an expression of political paranoia; it must also be recognized as an economic mechanism essential to the maintenance of the system.

The National Union of Teachers (NUT), situated within this context of social disintegration and geopolitical tension, developed a critical interpretation of the contradictions of the period. The resolutions adopted at its annual conferences between 1983 and 1984 identified the arms race as a factor contributing to both the impoverishment of nations and the threat to human survival, advocating the redirection of military expenditure toward education and social welfare policies.

This position represented, in practical terms, the articulation between historical consciousness and class consciousness. Educators recognized that the struggle for better educational conditions was intrinsically linked to a critique of the economic and political structures that reproduced inequality and militarism. By denouncing the irrationality of the war economy, the NUT affirmed a socialist conception of education and society grounded in international solidarity and in the defense of peace as a civilizational value.

In summary, the historical context of the Cold War and the crisis of the Welfare State constituted the conditions for the emergence of a new form of teacher trade union praxis. By engaging critically with this reality, the NUT transformed the school environment into a space of resistance and political reflection, reaffirming the role of education as an instrument of emancipation.

A Marxist understanding of this process reveals that, even amid the advance of neoliberalism and the destructive logic of capital, the collective action of education workers can recover the human and historical meaning of social struggle: the construction, through praxis, of new forms of solidarity and consciousness.

The political and trade union organization of the NUT: from class defense to the pacifist ideal

The transformation of the National Union of Teachers (NUT) between the late 1970s and the mid-1980s provides an exemplary illustration of the transition from a predominantly corporate form of trade unionism to a political practice characterized by internationalism and pacifism. Far from being a spontaneous development, this process

must be understood through the lens of historical-dialectical materialism, which identifies collective praxis and historical consciousness as the central elements in overcoming the immediate forms of alienation. As Marx and Engels (2007) emphasize, individuals do not make history under conditions freely chosen by themselves, but under circumstances inherited from previous historical processes. It is precisely through the struggle against these determinations that class consciousness is forged.

By expanding its agenda beyond strictly professional concerns to denounce militarism and the social destruction generated by the arms race, the NUT embodied the dialectical movement between objective conditions and subjective action. The crisis of the Welfare State and the advance of neoliberal policies in the United Kingdom, manifested in the deterioration of public schooling and the offensive against trade unions, created the material conditions under which teachers came to perceive the interdependence between the struggle for education and the broader struggle against the destructive logic of capital.

The transition from reivindicatory trade unionism to pacifist activism therefore represented a qualitative elevation of teachers' collective consciousness. Educators increasingly came to understand education as a social practice guided by the values of emancipation and human solidarity.

At the union's annual conferences, particularly those held in Jersey (1983) and Blackpool (1984), this shift became increasingly evident. In Jersey, the NUT approved a historic motion directly linking the growth of military expenditure to the impoverishment of social and educational policies, advocating the redirection of military resources toward education and the well-being of children.

In Marxist terms, this formulation represented a concrete critique of the logic of capitalist accumulation and commodity fetishism, insofar as it denounced the subordination of human life to the production of armaments. The motion thus condensed the movement from theory to practice, that is, the moment at which theoretical consciousness is transformed into transformative action.

In 1984, during the Blackpool Conference, the union radicalized this perspective by advocating unilateral nuclear disarmament by the United Kingdom and proposing the inclusion of "peace education" within school curricula. This proposal extended far beyond the pedagogical sphere. It constituted a political intervention aimed at fostering a new social consciousness, consistent with the Marxist principle of praxis as the unity of thought and action.

Education, in this sense, was understood not as an instrument of ideological reproduction but as a space of resistance and of the construction of critical subjectivities. The NUT argued that educational work should enable individuals to develop a critical reading of the world, demystifying the discourse that presented war and competition as inevitable foundations of social life.

The response of the Thatcher government was immediate and hostile. The Secretary of State for Education, Sir Keith Joseph, accused the union of promoting political indoctrination and introducing a "peace ideology" into schools (Minister Questions..., 1984, cited in McCulloch, 2015, p. 135). This reaction, however, merely confirmed what Marx had identified as ideological struggle within the superstructure: the contest for

cultural hegemony through which the state seeks to ensure the reproduction of existing relations of domination.

By challenging the state's monopoly over pedagogical discourse, the NUT assumed the position of a counter-hegemonic force, linking the educational sphere to the broader political struggle against imperialism and capitalist exploitation.

The defense of "peace education" was concretely expressed through the publication of *Education for Peace* (NUT, 1984b), a document that brought together pedagogical guidelines and reflections on the social role of the school in the face of the nuclear threat. The publication argued that education for peace could not be reduced to a moral concern alone; rather, it constituted a historical and political issue, an essential dimension of the class struggle also fought within the realm of culture.

At its core, the NUT recognized that educational work, by either reproducing or transforming consciousness, participates directly in the historical process of social construction. The adoption of this pacifist ideal reflected the political maturation of a form of trade unionism that acknowledged its insertion within the social totality and sought to intervene consciously in its transformation.

By associating criticism of militarism with the defense of public education, the NUT linked the immediate struggle for improved working conditions to the broader historical struggle for human emancipation. This perspective closely resembles the conception advanced by Marx and Engels (1998) in *The Communist Manifesto*, according to which class consciousness reaches its fullest development when the working class recognizes its interests as universal, that is, when its particular struggle becomes a struggle on behalf of humanity as a whole.

The political and trade union organization of the NUT between 1979 and 1984 should therefore be understood as the expression of an emancipatory teaching praxis capable of integrating the economic, political, and cultural dimensions of social struggle. By transforming the school into an arena of ideological and pedagogical confrontation against militarism and neoliberalism, the union demonstrated that educational work is, ultimately, political work.

Within this context, the defense of peace did not represent neutrality. Rather, it constituted the highest expression of historical consciousness: the active refusal to accept war and destruction as the inevitable destiny of humankind.

The International Conference at Stoke Rochford Hall: the peak of the NUT's international engagement

The International Peace Conference held in March 1984 at Stoke Rochford Hall represented both the consolidation and the highest point of the political and ideological maturation of the National Union of Teachers (NUT). The event was not an isolated initiative but rather the culmination of a process of internal mobilization that had begun with the pacifist resolutions approved at the Annual Conferences in Jersey (1983) and Blackpool (1984). It symbolized the transition from a consciousness focused primarily on professional

demands to a more developed consciousness in which educators understood their struggle as an integral part of a universal movement for human emancipation and peace.

The immediate context of the conference was one of acute geopolitical tension. The failure of the ratification of the SALT II Treaty and the collapse of the review conferences of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty had created a vacuum in official diplomacy, which was increasingly dominated by the strategic and economic interests of military-industrial complexes (Ferreira Junior, 2019). Within this scenario, the initiative undertaken by the NUT emerged as a form of “people’s diplomacy,” a conscious effort by civil society to intervene in the course of history and to build bridges where state channels had failed.

The conference brought together representatives of teachers’ unions from both sides of the Iron Curtain, including the National Education Association (NEA) of the United States, the Trade Union of Workers in Education and Science of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), as recorded in *The Planet Is Home to Us All* (Novosti Press Agency, 1984), as well as unions from East Germany, Bulgaria, and Finland (Keeble, 1984a; Ferreira Junior, 2019). The very occurrence of such a meeting during a period of intense East–West polarization constituted a symbolic act of resistance to the discourse that presented conflict as inevitable.

From a Gramscian perspective, the conference represented a counter-hegemonic initiative that opposed the ideology of solidarity and peace to the bellicose ideology sustained by the interests of capital and imperialism. By creating a space for dialogue among educators from opposing geopolitical blocs, the NUT challenged the dominant narratives of confrontation and sought to construct alternative forms of international cooperation.

The practical objectives agreed upon during the conference reflected this new internationalist orientation. Among the resolutions adopted were the following (NUT, 1984b; Ferreira Junior, 2019):

- The creation of exchange programs for teachers and students between Eastern and Western countries;
- The organization of international summer schools dedicated to peace education;
- The encouragement of direct cooperation among schools from different nations;
- The establishment of an international network for the exchange of information and educational materials concerning peace;
- The production of teaching resources designed to stimulate critical thinking and intercultural dialogue.

These proposals embodied the Marxist conception of praxis, through which theory, in this case the defense of peace, is transformed into concrete and transformative action through exchange, cooperation, and educational collaboration. Education was thus reaffirmed as an instrument of emancipation capable of fostering a new political culture opposed to militarism.

The testimonies of the union leaders who participated in the conference reveal the profound significance attributed to the event. Don Winters, President of the NUT,

described the conference as “the realization of a dream,” expressing the hope that it would not remain an isolated occurrence but rather mark the beginning of enduring cooperation among educators (Keeble, 1984c). Gary Watts, representing the American NEA, characterized the meeting as “a great educational step forward,” emphasizing the NUT’s commitment to world peace (Keeble, 1984c).

Tamara Yanushkovskaya, the Soviet representative, enriched the debate by situating the struggle for peace within the traumatic historical experience of the USSR during the Second World War. Recalling the deaths of approximately twenty million Soviet citizens, she argued that “only general and complete disarmament can constitute the most radical means of strengthening world peace” (Keeble, 1984b). Her intervention highlighted the historical memory that underpinned the Soviet commitment to peace and reinforced the moral urgency of the conference’s objectives.

Equally evocative was the statement made by Rudolf Taegtmeyer of East Germany, who poetically captured the spirit of the event by affirming that “the meeting at Stoke Rochford Hall planted a flower in the gardens of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which must be carefully nurtured so that it may grow” (Keeble, 1984b). His words symbolized the aspiration to transform historical memory into a commitment to a peaceful future.

The Stoke Rochford Hall Conference therefore represented the culmination of a trade union strategy that coherently linked the domestic struggle for public education with the international struggle for peace. By promoting transnational dialogue at a moment of diplomatic paralysis, the NUT demonstrated its understanding that the transformation of structures of domination required the construction of international networks of class solidarity.

This initiative materialized a socialist praxis within the field of education, transforming the pedagogical sphere into a terrain of hegemonic contestation and reaffirming internationalism as a foundational principle of a genuinely emancipatory form of teacher unionism. The conference not only helped to break the ice of the Cold War among educators but also generated a series of practical initiatives that extended the struggle for peace beyond the realm of discourse, embedding it within the everyday life of schools and within concrete forms of cooperation among education workers throughout the world.

By doing so, the NUT demonstrated that teachers’ unions could function not merely as defenders of professional interests but also as active historical subjects capable of intervening in global political processes. The conference stands as a remarkable example of how educational organizations, grounded in principles of solidarity, democracy, and peace, can contribute to the construction of alternative forms of international relations and to the advancement of a broader project of human emancipation.

Final considerations

The trajectory of the National Union of Teachers between the late 1970s and the mid-1980s demonstrates that teacher unionism, far from constituting a merely corporate sphere, was deeply embedded within the major structural tensions of late capitalism and the hegemonic disputes characteristic of contemporary Western societies. However, the

analysis developed throughout this study allows us to move beyond a strictly structural interpretation by incorporating the dimension of concrete historical experience as a constitutive element in the formation of collective consciousness.

In this regard, the category of experience, as formulated by Edward Palmer Thompson (2002), proves fundamental for understanding the process through which the union expanded its activities from the defense of salaries and working conditions to the critique of militarism and the formulation of an internationalist peace agenda. As Thompson argues, class is formed according to the ways in which men and women live their relations of production and experience their particular situations within the broader framework of social relations, culture, and inherited expectations, drawing upon these experiences at the cultural level.

The transformation of the NUT should therefore not be interpreted merely as a reflection of the macroeconomic contradictions of the Cold War or the neoliberal offensive. Rather, it resulted from the ways in which English teachers experienced, interpreted, and re-signified these conditions in their daily work within schools, in their relationships with students, and in the collective organization of their struggles.

The nuclear threat, cuts to public education, and the dismantling of the Welfare State were not simply external phenomena. They became lived experiences translated into pedagogical debates, trade union resolutions, articles published in *The Teacher*, and the formulation of the proposal for peace education. The union thus functioned as a space for the cultural elaboration of a heterogeneous experience in which material conditions, moral expectations, and professional responsibilities intersected.

This dynamic also highlights the role of collective memory in the formation of historical consciousness. As Maurice Halbwachs (1990) argues, individual memory does not operate in isolation but relies upon social frameworks that provide shared language, ideas, and points of reference. The construction of the NUT's pacifist agenda articulated memories of the Second World War, recollections of European trauma, and contemporary representations of nuclear risk, producing a collective narrative that legitimized trade union intervention in international debates. In this case, memory did not function merely as recollection of the past but as an active instrument for orienting present action.

By incorporating this dimension, the analysis addresses potential limitations associated with excessively totalizing interpretations. The experience of the NUT must be understood simultaneously as an expression of the contradictions of advanced capitalism, as a moment of hegemonic dispute within the Integral State, in Gramscian terms, and as a specific manifestation of a civilizing process strained by the concrete possibility of nuclear self-destruction, a perspective enriched by dialogue with Norbert Elias. Structure, experience, and culture do not appear here as separate spheres but as interdependent dimensions of a historical totality in motion.

It is also necessary to recognize, following Marc Bloch (2001), that the past does not speak for itself. It is questioned from the standpoint of the concerns of the present. The decision to examine the NUT's international activism, its defense of disarmament, and its proposal for peace education responds to contemporary questions concerning the political role of the school, the social function of teacher unionism, and the persistence of global

threats to democracy and human life. In this sense, the present conditions the questions directed to the past, while the past illuminates both the possibilities and the limits of collective action in the present.

Finally, in reconstructing this historical experience, the study sought to fulfill the task that Walter Benjamin (1996) defined as the necessity of “brushing history against the grain.” Rather than narrating the Cold War solely from the perspective of great powers and state diplomacy, the analysis privileged the actions of collective subjects situated within civil society, demonstrating that unionized teachers were capable of intervening in international debates and proposing alternatives to the dominant discourse of the inevitability of conflict. By emphasizing this counter-hegemonic dimension, the study reaffirms that the history of teaching labor forms an integral part of the broader history of struggles for emancipation.

The conclusions presented here therefore consolidate an interpretation that articulates economic structure, social experience, collective memory, and ideological struggle, moving beyond fragmented or unilateral readings. The case of the NUT demonstrates that teacher unionism can become an active historical subject in the construction of critical consciousness, operating at the intersection of labor, culture, and international politics. Education, within this horizon, is not a neutral space but a terrain of struggle over hegemony and over the very civilizational meaning of society.

Ultimately, the experience analyzed here reveals that even in contexts marked by an intense neoliberal offensive and global militarization, collective action grounded in shared experience, social memory, and critical reflection upon reality can generate alternative forms of moral and intellectual leadership. The history of the NUT during the Cold War, examined through the lens of present concerns, reaffirms that the construction of historical consciousness within the world of teaching remains a decisive element for thinking about the possibilities of resistance and social transformation in our own time.

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