

## Teaching Unions – Splits, Mergers, Alliances and Community Identity

### 1. Purpose

The traditional divisions in Northern Ireland pervade the education system and have been observed in the enrolment profile of schools, the patterns of teacher employment and the composition of governing authorities. This paper examines how the history of structural separation in education has affected the development, culture and membership profile of the teaching unions here. By reflecting on the origins and current manifestation of these divisions, it is envisaged that this paper will aid understanding of the rationale behind the policy positions adopted by each union.

### 2. Background

#### 2.1 History

The interests of teachers in NI are represented by several unions – the membership profile of each differs, as do the positions that they take on key elements of policy that affect their members. These differences can, in part, be traced to each union's roots in the historical divisions of class and community in both education and wider society.

National Schools were introduced throughout Ireland in 1831. The new system aimed to “unite in one system children of different creeds” and “to look with particular [financial] favour” on those schools jointly managed by Catholics and Protestants. In spite of this vision for National Schools, they never managed to effectively challenge the pre-existing denominational division of education.<sup>1</sup> One outworking of the new system was, however, that groups of teachers were able to organise themselves to advance their professional interests. These ‘Improvement Societies’ eventually came together and, in August 1868, the first congress of the Irish National Teachers Association (later renamed as the Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO)) took place. A fundamental rule of INTO at its foundation was that “no political or sectarian topics shall be introduced at meetings”; teachers would work together to achieve reforms that reflected their common interest, whilst, as far as possible, keeping clear of divisive issues.<sup>2</sup>

Teachers were however far from exempted from the gathering tension around Home Rule in the early 20th Century. INTO's affiliation with the Irish Transport and General Workers Union (ITGWU) – which was closely connected with the 1916 Easter Rising – their backing for Sinn Féin candidates in the 1918 election and their support for a proposed national strike in opposition to the prospect of military conscription in Ireland proved to be too much for the union's Protestant members in the north-east of the island. Four branches (Coleraine, Lisburn, Londonderry and Newtownards) severed their connections with INTO and in July 1919 the Ulster Teachers' Union (UTU) was formed.<sup>3</sup>

INTO was not the only teaching union to have originated in the Victorian era. The Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) had traced its history in NI through a line that led back to a minute book of the Association of Intermediate and University Teachers dating to 5th September 1898. The union experienced numerous subsequent mergers and name changes in the 20th century. On 1st September 2017, following a long period of negotiation and speculation, ATL finally joined with the National Union of Teachers (NUT) to create the National Education Union (NEU), although they retained a degree of autonomy during transition to the new union structures prior to the completion of the merger in January 2019. The NUT (the largest teachers' union in England) had never organised in NI. It had opted instead to develop an operational partnership arrangement with INTO and UTU (and also with the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS) – the largest teachers' union in Scotland).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Akenson, D. (1970) *The Irish education experiment: the national system in the nineteenth century*

<sup>2</sup>Puirseáil, N. (2017) *Kindling the Flame: 150 years of INTO* Gill Books, Dublin

<sup>3</sup>Milliken, M. (2019) *How the Easter Rising split Ireland's largest teachers' union* [www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2019/10/09/1082134-how-the-easter-rising-split-irelands-largest-teachers-union/](http://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2019/10/09/1082134-how-the-easter-rising-split-irelands-largest-teachers-union/)

<sup>4</sup>[www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/teachers-unions-form-partnership-28661957.html](http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/teachers-unions-form-partnership-28661957.html)

When NI was created in 1922 the interests of teachers in three distinct school types were represented by three different unions: teachers in the state-Controlled sector by UTU, teachers in Catholic (Maintained) schools by INTO, and teachers in voluntary grammar schools by the forerunners of ATL/NEU. In 1947 a new type of school was created: secondary modern. The National Association of Schoolmasters (NAS) and the National Union of Women Teachers (NUWT) moved to fill that gap.

The founding meeting of the NAS in NI did not take place until 1961 even though both NAS and UWT had broken away from the NUT in the 1920s. At this meeting, the union declared that it would seek members “irrespective of religion, political affinity or school type”.<sup>5</sup> NAS and UWT amalgamated as National Association of Schoolmasters/Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) in 1976. Today, NASUWT is the largest teaching union by membership numbers in NI.

Just as rank-and-file teachers had felt the need to organise in collective societies so Head Teachers moved to set up an organisation that protected their particular professional interests. The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) whose membership in NI is comprised predominantly of principals in voluntary grammar schools can trace its roots back to 1874 and the first of the forerunners to the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) was established in 1897, although the organisation only became established in NI in the late 1960s.

The onset of the Troubles heightened simmering tensions between the unions. The UTU shared many of the same principles as the NI government, in particular “the prevailing Unionist<sup>6</sup> orthodoxy that labour movements were nationalist in sympathy and existed as a threat to the Unionist position”.<sup>7</sup> They consequently had the ear of government in Belfast and “made no attempt to cut the sectarian divide within which it was spawned”.<sup>8</sup> INTO, in marked contrast, represented teachers in both jurisdictions on the island of Ireland. The union had Irish nationalistic aspirations and represented the concerns of a predominantly Catholic membership at a time of a heightened awareness of civil rights inequality.

NAS on the other hand had established a reputation for leftism and militancy on behalf of their members, they had a UK-wide brief and drew both Catholic and Protestant teachers to their fold. The Association of Assistant Masters (AAM) (an earlier incarnation of ATL/NEU) also recruited from both sides; they sought to prioritise their role as a teachers’ professional association and endeavoured to distance themselves from the overtly political.

Inevitably teachers and their unions got tangled up on the margins (and occasionally in the middle) of the conflict. UTU and INTO struggled to maintain cordial relations across the sectarian divide, and NAS faced internal wrangles to retain unity among their politically/religiously mixed membership, adopting an approach of “neither condone nor condemn”.<sup>9</sup> A number of issues aggravated the divisions between the UTU and INTO, and tested the neutrality of AAM and NAS/UWT. These included - the internment of several teachers (and union members); the occupation of some schools in Nationalist areas by the British Army; the sectarian imbalance in the schools’ inspectorate; a dispute relating to the Oath of Allegiance to the British monarch that all teachers in publicly funded schools were obliged to take (until its removal in 1979); the Queen’s Jubilee in 1977 and the visit of the Pope to Ireland in 1979 – a school holiday was granted for the Jubilee but not the Papal visit.

The Belfast Agreement in 1998 did not remove the impact of community tensions on teachers and the teaching unions. In 2002, following Loyalist protests outside a Catholic school, the dissident loyalist paramilitary group Red Hand Defenders announced that they considered Catholic teachers to be ‘legitimate targets’ and the INTO offices in Belfast were attacked.<sup>10</sup>

## 2.2 Current Profile

In 2018 there were 26,732 full and part-time teachers registered in NI<sup>11</sup> yet the combined membership of ASCL, ATL/NEU, INTO, NAHT, NASUWT, UTU exceeded 31,000.<sup>12</sup> This discrepancy may be the product of membership duplication across different unions (teaching students can join any of the four rank and file unions for free during their studies, membership is often incentivised and many students sign up to more than one union), unions having members teaching in further education technical colleges or inaccurate record keeping.

In an era of declining union membership,<sup>13</sup> teaching is undoubtedly a heavily unionised profession. This density has been explained as the product of distrust in the bodies in charge of education, and teachers’ sense of vulnerability should allegations of misconduct be made against them. Research conducted by Ulster University in 2017 recorded that more than 98% of teachers were members of teaching unions. The data gathered also indicated that there was a strong correlation between teachers’ professional and community identities and the union that they choose to join.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>5</sup>DeGruchy, N. (2013) *History of the NASUWT 1919/2002: The Story of a Battling Minority* Abramis, Bury St Edmunds

<sup>6</sup>A small case ‘u’ is used for trades unionism and a capital ‘U’ for references to Unionism in the political context of NI’s constitutional status in order to ensure that the two movements are distinguishable.

<sup>7</sup>Mapstone, R. (1986) *The Ulster Teachers Union: An Historical Perspective* University of Ulster, Coleraine

<sup>8</sup>Mapstone, R. (1986) *The Ulster Teachers Union: An Historical Perspective* University of Ulster, Coleraine

<sup>9</sup>Puirseil, N. (2017) *Kindling the Flame: 150 years of the Irish National Teachers’ Organisation*. Gill Books, Dublin

<sup>10</sup>McDonald, H. & Cusack, J. (2004) *UDA – Inside the Heart of Loyalist Terror*, Dublin: Penguin Ireland

<sup>11</sup><https://gtcni.org.uk/cmsfiles/Resource365/Publications/digest-of-statistics/2018.pdf>

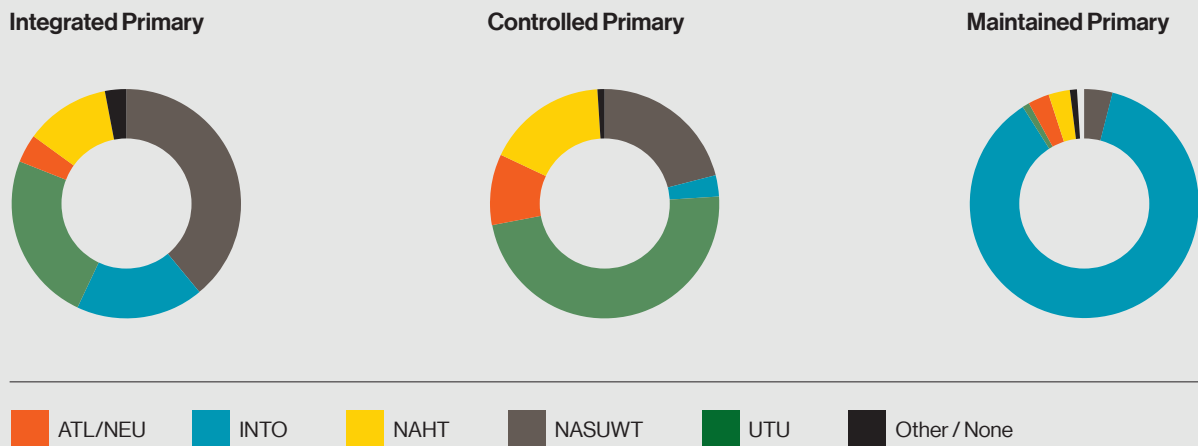
<sup>12</sup><https://www.nicertoffice.org.uk/sites/nico/files/documents/Certification%20Officer%20for%20NI%20AR%202017-18%20web%20PDF.pdf>

<sup>13</sup>Topping, A. (2017) Union membership has plunged to an all-time low, says DBEIS, *The Guardian* 1st June 2017 <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/jun/01/union-membership-has-plunged-to-an-all-time-low-says-ons>

<sup>14</sup>Milliken, M., Bates, J., & Smith, A. (2019) Education policies and teacher deployment in NI: ethnic separation, cultural encapsulation and community cross-over. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 1-22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2019.1666083>

## 2.2.1 Primary Schools

Figure 1: Union Density in Primary School Sectors

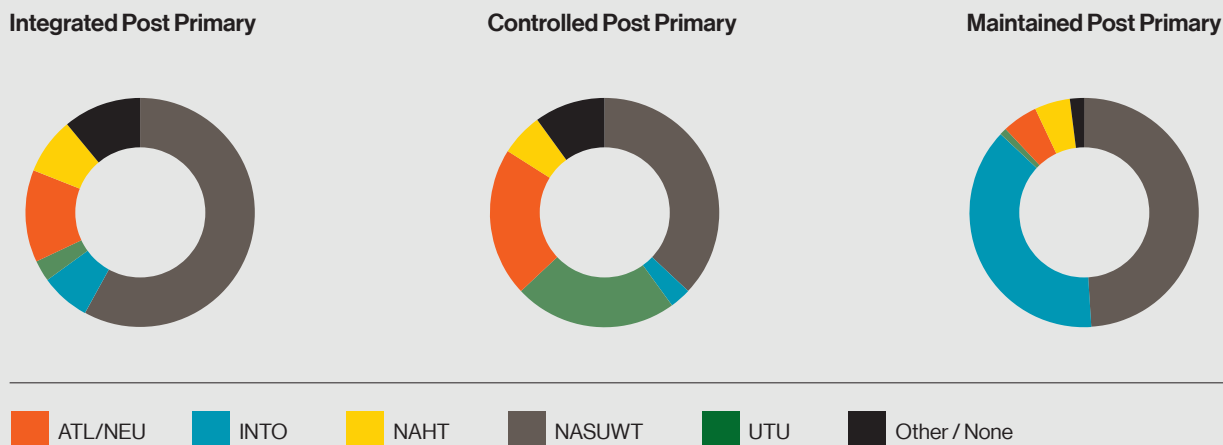


INTO was by far and away the largest union in Maintained primary schools (87%) but accounted for only 3% of teachers in Controlled<sup>15</sup> primaries. The pattern of UTU membership presented something of a mirror image; dominant in Controlled primaries (48%) but with very limited reach into Maintained schools (1%). NASUWT membership among primary teachers was strongest in Integrated schools, where it was the largest union (39%). It had a significant presence in Controlled primaries (21%) but much less in Maintained schools (4%). There were ATL/NEU members in all three primary school sectors with more in Controlled schools (10%) than in Integrated (4%) or Maintained (3%)

NAHT was popular among leaders in Controlled (17%) and Integrated (12%) primaries; the union had only a very small representation in Maintained schools (3%). There were no ASCL members recorded in any type of primary school.

## 2.2.2 Post Primary Schools

Figure 2: Union Density in Post Primary School Sectors



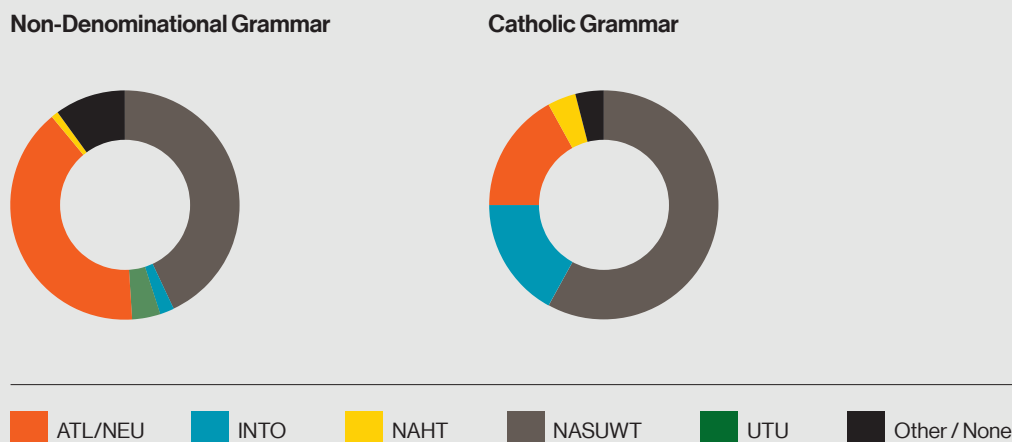
Around 3% of post primary teachers had elected not to join a union. Among those who were unionised, NASUWT was the most popular choice across all sectors (Maintained 49%, Integrated 58%, Controlled 38%). As had been observed in primary sectors, UTU membership was strongest in Controlled schools (23%) but negligible in their Maintained counterparts (1%). INTO represented 38% of teachers in Maintained post primaries but only 3% of those on the Controlled side. ATL/NEU was more popular among post primary teachers in all school types than had been observed in primary schools – more so in Controlled schools (21%) than in Integrated (13%) or Maintained (5%).

Membership of the school leadership unions in Controlled and Integrated secondary level schools was relatively evenly split between NAHT and ASCL (6–8%). Five percent of respondents employed in Maintained post primaries were identified as being NAHT members. The research did not identify any ASCL members in these schools.

<sup>15</sup>In Sections 2.2.1, 2.2.2 and 2.2.3 figures for 'Controlled' schools exclude Controlled Integrated; figures for Controlled Integrated schools have been combined with those for Grant Maintained Integrated under the collective title 'Integrated'. Responses by teachers in Irish Medium and Preparatory schools were too small to ensure statistical significance.

## 2.2.3 Voluntary Grammar Schools

Figure 3: Union Density in Voluntary Grammar Schools



The dominance of NASUWT in post primary schools was also a feature in voluntary grammars – 58% of those teaching in Catholic voluntary grammars and 43% in non-denominational voluntary grammars were members. This position was rivalled only by ATL/NEU who were much more strongly represented in non-denominational voluntary grammars (40%) than in any other sector; 17% of those teaching in Catholic voluntary grammars were also ATL/NEU members. UTU members were found in small numbers in non-denominational grammars (4%), but the union was absent in Catholic grammar schools. INTO had a lower proportion of members in Catholic voluntary grammars (17%) than had been observed in Maintained primaries and post primaries. Only 2% of teachers in non-denominational voluntary grammars were INTO members. For school leaders, NAHT had a slightly greater presence in Catholic voluntary grammars than in their non-denominational counterparts (4%:1%) – this pattern was reversed for ASCL membership (2%:7%).

## 3. Discussion

### 3.1 Union Positions On Issues Affecting Teacher Separation

Three distinctive elements of the NI system have been identified as contributing to the community consistent patterns of teacher deployment:

- **The structure of Teacher Education.**
- **The Certificate in Religious Education**
- **The exception of teachers from the Fair Employment and Treatment Order (1998).**<sup>16</sup>

These elements provided the framework for the questions posed in interviews that were conducted to inform this paper in early 2020 with the NI secretaries of each of the five largest unions.

#### 3.1.1 Structure of Teacher Education

Four institutions provide teacher education in NI: Stranmillis University College, St Mary's University College, Queens University Belfast and Ulster University. Whilst QUB and Ulster are essentially secular institutions, St Mary's has a Catholic ethos and Stranmillis has been historically associated with providing teachers for Controlled schools. These latter two institutions supply the majority of primary school teachers. INTO and UTU acknowledged that they had close connections with these respective colleges.

***[INTO has] a very strong affiliation as a trade union with one college in particular – St Mary's. St Mary's has an exemplary reputation for providing a quality education. The colleges across the board supply great teachers but St Mary's is exceptional.***

***Many of our [UTU] members are Stranmillis educated and are "Stranmillis Mad!" – there's great loyalty to the college.***

The separation of initial teacher education (ITE) for prospective primary school teachers was highlighted by NASUWT as having a potentially detrimental impact on their capacity to engage across the community divide.

***It is not a good thing to be educating teachers separately – it does nothing to help them to prepare pupils for living in an integrated society after school.***

<sup>16</sup>Smith, A. & Hansson, U. (2015). *A Review of Policy Areas Affecting Integration of the Education System in Northern Ireland*. Integrated Education Fund. <http://www.ief.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/Integrated-Education-Scoping-Paper.pdf>

The NAHT representative illustrated how she had observed “subliminal separation” first-hand whilst participating on an interview panel for students applying to Stranmillis.

***One exceptional Catholic student was not offered a place because the interviewer was confident that he would get a place ‘in his own college’.***

There was consensus that the current configuration of colleges was in need of rationalisation and could potentially be contributing to a surfeit of teachers entering the career.

***[INTO] accept that we are training too many teachers... having so many providers in a place the size of the North of Ireland is frankly totally ridiculous.***

***[NASUWT] are open to a review of teacher training... demand and supply aren’t meeting.***

***[The NEU] position is dead simple. There are four providers – it’s too many.***

***[UTU] are supportive of bringing all teachers together... that would be our ethos at all times, to unite rather than cause divisions.***

***[NAHT] believes that the profession needs unity in ITE – the colleges shouldn’t be separated.***

### 3.1.2 The Certificate

Those teachers wishing to teach in primary schools in the Maintained sector are required to demonstrate that they can do so in line with Catholic principles. This takes the form of the Certificate in Religious Education. The Certificate is provided routinely for all students at St Mary’s and to those students endeavouring to become primary school teachers at Ulster - QUB only prepares post primary teachers. Prior to September 2019 the Certificate had only been available to students at Stranmillis as a correspondence course. New entrants to the college are now able to complete the award in-house; endorsed by St Mary’s. There is no equivalent occupational requirement for teachers in Controlled schools. The NEU secretary saw this as an equality issue.

***Having schools of ethos is one thing but does it require 100% of the teachers to be signed up to that? We say ‘No’. Teachers with a faith certificate have an unfair advantage... [those without it] are deprived of half the opportunities.***

UTU echoed this view.

***We believe that there should be equality for teachers.***

INTO felt that there had been a relaxation in the relevance and impact of the Certificate:

***[It] doesn’t appear to have the currency it once had.***

The NASUWT critique was particularly forceful.

***It is a blatant relic of sectarian separation.***

As was that from NAHT.

***The Certificate requirement is a load of nonsense there should be no discrimination and no barriers to the movement of professionals between sectors.***

### 3.1.3 Teacher Exception from Fair Employment and Treatment Order (FETO) 1998

Teachers are specifically excluded from Fair Employment legislation (FETO, 1998). It is wholly lawful for schools to discriminate between candidates on the grounds of religion when appointing or promoting teachers. In February 2016 the NI Assembly debated a proposal to repeal this exception. A Petition of Concern was raised by Sinn Fein and the SDLP and the proposed amendment fell.

NEU were adamant in their stance:

***We’ve always been against [it].***

For INTO it was something of a non-issue:

***The FETO exception has passed its sell-by date – it has no longer any relevance and, if anything, is likely to restrict INTO members from moving to jobs in another sector.***

In March 2019, at their annual NI conference, NASUWT passed a motion calling for the repeal of the exception and committing the union to lobby to achieve that outcome. The NASUWT official was unequivocal:

***We are opposed to it... get rid of it.***

NAHT had a similarly clear position.

***Teachers should be able to teach in any school; the removal of the exception should be top of the agenda.***

In contrast, UTU felt that the exception could operate as a counterbalance to the way in which the Certificate affected employment opportunities for those Protestant teachers who may wish to apply for posts in the Maintained primary sector. Their position was consequently nuanced.

***The union believes that there should be equality for teachers, but it also needs to protect members’ interests.***

### 3.2 Co-operation, Collaboration, Mergers and Rivalry

All five secretaries recognised that fragmentation between teaching unions is not in the best interests of the members that they represent. The capacity of the five unions to lobby effectively and act collectively in the interests of teachers is constrained by difficulties in coming together with one voice. All five unions sit on the NI Teachers' Council (NITC) and four (INTO, NAHT, NASUWT and UTU) are affiliated to the Irish Congress of Trades Unions (ICTU).<sup>17</sup> Between 2017 and 2019, in response to an on-going pay dispute, INTO, NASUWT, NEU and UTU forged an unprecedented alliance to take action short of strike action before progressing to co-ordinate a series of half-day and one-day strikes. The banners of these four unions were visible together on many picket lines.

In December 2019 NAHT members in NI voted to follow suit in reaction to “inadequate funding, insufficient support services and growing workloads”<sup>18</sup> and threatened that this could be escalated to full strike action for the first time in their 104 year history.

In March 2020, following the closure of schools in the Republic of Ireland in response to the Covid-19 crisis, NITC penned a common letter to the NI Assembly requesting that they take similar action.

Behind the scenes a deeper and closer working relationship has been developing between three of the unions. Since 2009, UTU and INTO have been working to a common partnership board. Just as there is limited competition for intake between the Controlled and Maintained sectors so INTO and UTU are serving different communities and are not competing for the same pool of teachers. In 2011 these two unions forged a pact with NUT and the EIS to facilitate members that relocate between jurisdictions. Since the ATL/NUT merger in 2017 NEU, UTU and INTO have been operating with a common partnership board.

While the unions based in GB (NAHT, NASUWT and NEU) have allies in the Labour party and INTO have strong political connections (particularly with Sinn Féin) the question of party-political support is problematic for UTU. As has been observed above Unionism has traditionally been suspicious of trades unions and left-leaning, progressive politics. UTU has traditionally been aligned with Unionism and the evidence above documents that the union has no significant presence in Catholic schools. The UTU leadership recognises that many of their members would be unhappy if they thought that their union was working too closely with Nationalist parties. UTU is therefore unable to access the same level of support from political parties that INTO, NEU or NASUWT can.

It is not uncommon for teachers to change their union during their career – around a third of teachers who took part in the research indicated that they had done so. Such a change is often precipitated when a teacher moves to a school where a different union is dominant. There is, however, evidence of teacher reluctance to transfer from UTU to INTO and vice versa - where there are UTU members in Maintained schools and INTO members in Controlled schools, this aligns with the location of Protestant and Catholic teachers who have crossed out of their own community to teach on the other side. It would appear that even those teachers who teach across the divide may be reluctant to join the union associated with the other community.

<sup>17</sup>In 2015, following accusations of attempting to recruit members from other unions, ATL withdrew from ICTU.

<sup>18</sup><https://www.naht.org.uk/members-home/naht-northern-ireland/northern-ireland-industrial-action-latest/>



## 4. Summary & Considerations

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Each of the teaching unions has produced records of their own history. These generally only mention other unions in passing. This is the first research paper that has attempted to examine the complexity of relations and tensions between all of the unions that serve those employed in the teaching profession in NI. It has drawn on a review of documentation published on and by each of the unions, quantitative research conducted with over 1,000 teachers and interviews conducted with the principal officers of each union.

From the evidence available it would appear that political stability in NI and the need for economic pragmatism have created a climate within which a degree of détente has been achieved between unions that had previously been in fundamental opposition to one another. Thus, from the four unions that serve chalk-face teachers (INTO, NASUWT, NEU and UTU) two blocs have emerged. NEU – which has formalised alliances with INTO and UTU – and NASUWT. Just as is the case in England.

Union mergers that lack support from their rank and file members will inevitably fail, and they can be particularly difficult when each side has their own specific and distinct political identity. There are indications that, in spite of an ever-closer working relationship at management level, the community affiliation of their membership remains central to the identity of UTU and INTO and their members may still harbour grave reservations about their sister unions.<sup>19</sup> In addition, INTO's all-Ireland remit makes a formal, cross-border merger with a British union (such as the NEU) unthinkable – particularly in the context of UK's withdrawal from the EU.

Nevertheless, it seems probable that the teacher unions in NI are moving towards a future less defined and dictated by the parameters of sectarian division to one where teachers' shared interests are represented and their welfare promoted by organisations characterised less by antagonistic opposition and more by co-operative rivalry. Such a future is in the interests of all teachers and not just those who share the same community identity.

By acting to protect the interests of teachers against powerful employing organisations the teaching unions undoubtedly foster a sense of unity amongst their members – this internal solidarity could, at the same time, contribute to the construction and retention of barriers between colleagues who are members of other, rival unions. In NI, where community division is endemic within education, the nature of the relationship between the teaching unions is vital in either widening or bridging that divide.

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2019/1009/1082134-how-the-easter-rising-split-irelands-largest-teachers-union/>



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