

INTERVIEW FOR BRITAIN AT WORK – YOUNG WORKERS PROJECT 2020

KARAM BALES 14th May 2020 interviewed by TUC Librarian Jeff Howarth

Karam was an ATL union rep in his school in Berkshire for several years. He is currently an Executive Member for the National Education Union (NEU) and lead member and Chair of NEU New Professionals and Young Workers National Council. He is an officer of the inter union organisation Unify which seeks to unite all education unions under a single banner. Before that he was an Executive Member for ATL and so was involved in the creation of the National Education Union and the writing of its constitution, rulebook and structure. He provides an overview of the national picture and influence on the unions response to the ongoing Covid19 crisis.

Jeff Howarth: Okay. Okay, good. We're recording. So it is the 14th of May, 2020. And if you could just tell me your name and then yeah. Tell me sort of about when you first left education and got your first job and then sort of take it from there.

Karam Bales: Okay. Karam Bales, for the first job I had after leaving education was actually working, working as a kitchen helper. And I was sacked after two months. And I tried to pursue for wrong-full dismissal. I was fobbed off repeatedly during that time, until the time period of which you could claim constructive dismissal was over. So in the end, I ended up with a black mark against my name, for something I hadn't done. So right from the very start that I've been into work, I realized if I didn't have a union. I didn't have any support and I got stitched over massively. So right from the outset I did have a slight, I did feel the need of additional support. I then ended up, doing various different agency and temp jobs for a while and then the old secondary school, where I had been a pupil, offered me a teaching assistant job.

So I duly took that teaching assistant job. At that particular time, mid two thousands or so, it wasn't... it was just before the banking crisis and to be honest working conditions were reasonable then. Around that time, it was just after the Tory government got in, in 2010, when our current rep at the school decided to leave. By this point, I'd changed position to a class supervisor, which was a job with very little training and a lot of responsibility and very low wages. I needed my union rep several times, and as quite important for things like being asked to work outside the contract, being asked to cover for teaching staff over a long term period, being put into situations where I didn't have the correct health and safety certification for.

And my union rep had helped me out quite a lot. He changed jobs, around 2010, I think it was? 2011? He decided to change jobs. Actually, it was a little bit after it was 2012. I remember now, so it was 2012, the union rep left. And I was asked by all the members to become the union rep. Being quite young and not a member of teaching staff. The head teacher did actually try and block me from coming. The school was in special measures at the time and he'd just taken over the school and he'd had resistance from the unions for a lot of members of staff that he'd pushed out for various reasons. Some of which were down to capability. Others, I think were more personality clashes between him and other people. So he did need to make some changes in the school, but rather than a pruning and he did a whole hack back and we lost some really, really experienced, valuable staff.

He was not very happy with me doing that. My rep, the rep that was outgoing, wrote a letter to the head and explained that the union organizes itself. And members choose who represents them and there was nothing he could do about it. It did mean that we got off to quite a frosty start at that particular point. This was also the time of academisation. So there was a lot of, a lot of kickback against academisation in our school. Initially schools were

given the option of becoming academies for an increase of money. The decision was made amongst the schools in West Berkshire, that none of the schools would go into an academy, and they would continue in the state sector. However, after that, the Department for Education not liking the fact that not many schools took up the incentive to become an academy then decided to change the funding arrangements.

And what the funding arrangements meant was the moment a school changed from being a local authority to being an Academy, they'd remove a certain amount of funding from the central pot the school's are paid from. But the amount of money taken out the pot was more than the amount of money that each school had been getting from the central pot. So the moment one school decided to become an academy, it meant a budget cut for all the other schools in the local authority. This quite quickly meant that to preserve staff numbers, everybody in the area it meant that to keep their budget they decided they had to become academies. The only secondary school in the area that didn't were the two ones with the largest people numbers. And that's because of the funding arrangements and the formula, and then for those larger schools, cause that's how they maintained their staffing numbers.

Despite that, after we became an academy, the amount of additional money that you got for being an academy was then cut, which meant that about a year into my time as a rep, not as a member teaching staff, I then had to be involved in redundancy processes, with the Head who was quite resistant to me in the first place. And with a load of governors that, that didn't really understand the importance of keeping our more valued staff. And so I was, I was representing members of staff that were double my age, and fighting for their careers. In the end, I ended up sitting down with the Head and looking through the budget for the school, looking at various different options. A couple of members of staff decided to leave to new positions for promotions.

And we actually managed to refigure the school's budget without a single redundancy taking place, which was quite a good success. We did end up with a slight reduction in staff numbers. Class sizes went up. But at the end of the day the members were happy with the final results, from the initial decision which was just we're gonna cut jobs. If I hadn't of stood my ground under quite difficult circumstances, I think that we'd have ended up in a worse position. The other thing was I managed to protect the teaching assistants at the time as well. because there were, attached on their terms and conditions some expectations. So around that time one of the first things I did when become a rep, was I started attending the local district committee meetings.

The main reason for this being...being young, inexperienced, and not really not really having a clue on what I should be doing. I kind of felt that, and I still do that, every rep should always attend their district meetings because you have a wealth of experience there. My particular district, West Berkshire in ATL, was quite a unique district. One of our retired members was a former member of the national executive and, one of the current members in the independent sector was also a member of the national executive. We also had our president, our district secretary at the time, Theresa Dawes, is a well known educator who has an OBE for services to education as well. So, out of the districts that put forward motions to, to the annual conference.

West Berkshire would normally submit.... you had a maximum of five submissions, and I would submit five every year, and all five would be passed every year. So they were a real driving force in it. The other point was that the retired former Exec' Jenny Ingliss, she was the one that first formed the support staff section of ATL. And that was the main reason I joined ATL in the first place, because ATL were the only teaching union that would accept support staff and had a support staff specific section. The NUT wouldn't allow me to join,

cause I would originally have wanted to join NUT just because the idea that it was the biggest union in the workplace and the more people you have in a collective action, the stronger it is.

So that was originally why, but I wasn't allowed into the NUT and NASWUT still don't have the support staff section, and continue to advertise themselves as the "teacher's union", rather than the National Education Union, which is about all educators. Because of that, there was a governing body within ATL, called the support staff members advisory group, and the support staff members advisory groups, directly advises the executive with several members of the executive on the board and its own team of staff on, on how to develop the union's response to issues for support staff.

As we're now into like 2013/2014 that was around the same time as the budget cuts and austerity really started to hit. And although we didn't have redundancies in our school and in the schools in our area, as budgets got tighter as support staff left, they weren't replaced.

So we went from a very large team of support staff in our school, lots of TA's. And we were the local authority centre for hearing impairment. The person that used to manage that was the original rep at my school who originally, when he left, put me forward. So it was quite a difficult time for us as support staff, where we're losing our members. And, a space came up on the support staff member's advisory group. So Jenny Ingliss, the former executive asked me if I'd like to put my name forward. So I did and I was accepted. So I was invited to the first next available meeting, which was on the day before the ATL annual conference in Liverpool. I hadn't been to an annual conference before either, having only been a rep for, coming up to two years of being a rep. So it was quite an astounding journey to get on a train to Liverpool on my own, the day before the rest of my district.

And I'm getting on the train up to Liverpool after a four or five hour journey, getting there, walking into the Echo Arena into a big posh room, with a load of people that I don't know. And I literally got off the train and walked straight into the meeting with my luggage still attached and to see this big long table, looking like a big corporate boardroom, cause it's very fancy in the echo arena. A massive board room with q loads of executive members, who I've seen their photographs and I've heard their names and I've seen them interviewed on television. And these are the people that you consider, like the big wigs of the union, highly professional people. Also nearly everybody in the room being twice my age as well.

Because my train was delayed, I walked in five minutes late when the meeting had already started as well. Was to be honest quite awe-inspiring and was really quite scary at the same time because I didn't want to put my foot in it. the chairman of the committee at the time, Debbie Polwarth had been in the position for quite a long time. She's a proper Gateshead lass, born and bred. And I was just amazed because she was so friendly and so welcoming right at the start. Within a couple of minutes, I really did feel welcome and at home, and that was fascinating. And she looked after me throughout the whole of that first conference.

And I've got to say it did open my eyes to a lot of things. Cause when you're only working within your school within your local area, I only really understood what is going on in secondary schools within my region. Which in the home counties and Berkshire, we're one of the wealthier areas. So although we do have some issues. It's not the same as what she was dealing with in Gateshead which is one of the most deprived areas of the country. Or what organizing the union is like for members who are in Northern rural Wales or the friends I got to meet there who come from Londonderry and their experiences of working as a trade unionist and as an educator in Londonderry during the troubles. And all of a sudden you get like so much of a better picture of what's going on around the country because the advisory

groups have a representative from every region of the country. So all of a sudden you're getting stories from different education sectors - you've got people in further education, you've got people from special needs settings. You've got nursery nurses, you've got librarians, you've got one person in particular assignment on there, who's an IT tech manager in a secondary school, [it] really gives you completely different perspective on all the different jobs and roles that make education.

And you realize that it's a lot more than just teaching and teaching assistance. And I can just remember sitting there in Liverpool. I wasn't willing to stand up on stage or make a speech during that first conference. I just sat there with my book, with my big book of motions, talking to lots of people and just basically learning a hell of a lot about education. I think it was probably the steepest learning curve I've ever had. But probably the most rewarding as well, because at the same point, when you hear of all the different struggles people are facing, it really does fire you up. Particularly the way that at a conference, everybody seems to know each other. Because ATL had about 150,000 members, its activist base was a smaller percentage of its number, say compared to the NUT

The NUT has a far larger organizing base. You've got a lot more members of NUT were involved in on the ground activism. So with the ATL the conference was quite a small, almost like a little family unit with a lot of similar faces and all of that. And so it felt quite welcoming. And even on the first one when someone like Mary Bousted comes along and just stops to have a chat with you in the lunch queue and things like that. And you're right. this is a general secretary I'm talking to! I see her on television all the time. And let's be honest, Mary's a pretty fierce individual when you see her being interviewed. [LAUGHS] having got to know her very well in recent years, that first assertion was even more valid. [LAUGHS]

I really wouldn't recommend annoying her at any point! She's got one of the best tempers I've ever seen. When she gets angry, she doesn't lose her temper, she becomes really sharp, really acute and really focused on plucking apart the points really, really carefully. And I think, right, for me, that's kind of been a role model as I've moved on, has been Mary and the way that maybe she deals with things, cause it's really hard to break down her arguments, because they are based in logic and evidence and she reads up on the facts. So after that, after having spent some time on the support staff members advisory group. It got to the point where there was space on the executives board became available. So they'd just had their normal election period.

So then somebody had to drop out for various reasons. And so there was an open space outside, so they had decided to have a by-election just for our region of the country. Once again Jenny Angliss the retired executive member on my district and Helen Porter who is currently member of the executive in that independent sector. Both of them nudge me along and said I should put my name forward for it. Which I did kind of feel was a bit of a massive jump. Having only been involved in the union for like three or four years as a rep, to all of a sudden be putting my name forward.

By this point I'd had a second conference and I had seconded and spoken on several different motions that had gone through, in particular one on mental health and suicide rate for men particularly in education. That was reported on in the national media. It was Helen Porter's motion. And I was also asked to second a speaker on a motion on SEND students that were being let down by the changes to education system and the impacts of student marketisation.

So by this point I'd done two conferences , one where I'd sat in silence and learnt, and one where I started getting involved in two successful motions and so I decided you know what what's the worst that can happen . So I threw my nae into the hat. And after people heard I was standing nobody stood against me and I ended up running unopposed, which was an absolute shock to me. I still haven't worked out to this day if it was a sign of immense trust or nobody wanting the additional workload. I guess I'll never know the truth about that [LAUGHS]. From that point onwards I was a member of the ATL national executive and going to their meetings and TUC annual conferences every six weeks or so. And mixing with all sorts of people such as Mary and Kim Knappett (Joint President National Education Union) who I think was just starting the presidency at the time. And getting to meet someone like Hank Roberts. Hank Roberts had been president of the ATL.

He also ran for general secretary of the NUT because he was a member of both executives at the time. He lost out on the general secretary election by 104 votes I think it was previously? And he was the one that had originally proposed in the year 2000 the creation of the National Education Union, merging and dismantling the old unions and building a single union of professional unity. He's the founder of the Unify movement, which contains mainly presidents of a lot of different education unions. The whole creation of the UCU. Some of the presidents that were involved in the development of UCU from the component parts have been on Unify project as well. Just trying to bring lots of separate unions together. So at this point when I joined the executive, they'd just started the preliminary talks about the possibility of having discussions about the creation of the national education union. [AUDIBLE SMILE]

They were at the very first stages at that point. I'd initially found out about it from the support staff members advisory group, because when the very first rumblings started, there was a lot of concern amongst the support staff members. And I was one of them, but after the NUT had not allowed support staff members to join and have their own section, we were worried that in the creation of a new union the support staff members may be side-lined. And so we'd already started having those discussions in the advisory group when I'd joined the executive. Now we had three members off support staff on the executive. And a lot was done very early on to alleviate our concerns in the creation or integration. So at this point we'd just started to draft the rule book. And there was talks between us. A committee had been set up with the senior members of both executives, and were having semi informal meetings. And they would just starting to have a draft suggestions and draft rule books on what the ethos and what the structure of the National Education Union would be like. So that was a very intense period, cause we had to do all of the normal running of the union whilst dealing with the final days of Michael Gove and Dominic Cummings in the Department of Education, which made life incredibly difficult. And at the same point trying to write a rule book for a brand new union. Because we weren't willing to just mash the two unions together as a merger. The actual term we use is.... it wasn't "amalgamation" because we didn't keep any of the old structures.

We basically... They did literally start with a blank piece of paper and said "how are we going to put this union together?" What should the ethos be? What does a union need to look like for the 21st century? Because let's be honest in 2010, Gove and Cummings and the Coalition Government got their way. And personally being at the bottom as a support staff member fighting redundancies. Then seeing staff being lost, then seeing the impact of academisation and further issues to the actual [unknown word?] of the educational system, it was quite clear that the current state of the education union wasn't really good enough to accomplish its aim. I really feel that although individual members were being protected by reps in schools. The ability to actually fight the juggernaut of the Tory narrative development

with the right wing press. With people like Cummings and “enemies of promise” and “the blob” [THESE WERE TERMS COINED BY GOVE AND CUMMINGS] that kind of targeted messaging, they steam-rolled all of us completely. And so idea of weight in numbers and create something new. We can't just repeat the NUT we can't just repeat the ATL. We actually need something far more nuanced. And there are two really big differences between ATL and the NUT. The ATL was a bottom down structure. So, although members could write policy from the bottom, it had an organizational structure where information was fed down from the top to the bottom, and then the bottom feeds up to the top as well. But a lot of money and funding is centrally held. So, a district could do what they wanted but if they wanted to run a training event they would write to central office and central office supplies the funding. It's a job for treasurers, which was a lot simpler and easier to manage. Whereas the NUT was a federation. So, it was grown up with lots of small individual unions that kind of created a federation. So, every single district within the NUT, I think they call them associations, they had a lot more autonomy. They could write motions, they could create policies, just for their area. They could engage in strike action as they chose. The majority of the money was held by the individual associations, which meant that you had quite a lot of power to rapidly organize a protest and action at local level. But actually when it comes to a joint cohesive message from the top, which everybody follows, the structures weren't the same. So, ATL could put out a strong national message, which was echoed throughout every single part of the union. Where the NUT had very strong ground-based operations to deal with local issues. But when it comes to a national approach, they would sometimes get mixed messaging, and mixed signals and not the same level of coordination across the whole country.

So when we put together the NEU, we were trying to find a way to get the best of both. Trying to get a way where we do have a centralized core. So it's no longer a federation, it is centralised union. But then giving each individual district a good amount of funding and enough autonomy to be organized at the ground level. Which was kind of the challenge we set. it was also the fact that the NUT was quite a passionate organizing system, whereas ATL was very far more evidence-based, we're quite bookish, we'd read the scientific reports. And then telling reps how to do it. It took quite a lot of time and effort but I think what we ended up with, a couple of years later, was ..it's been about two and a half years now, when we have the final rule book in and an idea of how all of these are going to come together before we can then go to a vote of members.

So having put together our rule book, having thought about all these different structures, we've then had to go out and persuade our members. The NUT members.

Well, we're quite positive about the idea of having a bigger union. Some of them I feel were less inclined for a change of perspective and the change of the way of doing things. Within ATL there was fear that we'd be subsumed by the larger numbers of NUT. And that was a lot of concern. So within ATL the majority of members probably didn't want the NEU when we started doing the early stages of the talks. But we've support staff learned when I was, when the schools, the executive listened and they made concessions for various groups. For each of the different groups and sections within ATL slowly got what they want until everybody was happy with it. And when we took it to a vote, there was very, very little.... I can't remember the exact vote that we had. First of all, we had a special conference where we put out the arguments and the special conference was to have a vote on putting a ballot out to all members. And at the end the special vote had an NUT vote and an ATL vote, and both of them had to have a qualitative majority. They both ended up 90% and both unions agreed to go to ballot. And when the final ballot went out, we got a similar kind of response to that. So everything that we've done for for the last couple of years to listen to members and to give

them what they wanted, we ended up with the majority being happy with what happened. You're never going to be happy with everything cause there's always matters of compromise and some of the initial structures and rule books that we started off with about two years ago when the NEU name first became a real entity about two years ago now, when we officially became the NEU. Although for the first year we still had the separate NEU ATL conference and then NEU NUT conference, just so that each of the members would still have an opportunity to have their say individually until the final separation walls came down.

Part of that was also to do with the way that we were having to funnel lots of different bank accounts into one central bank account as well. So we had to keep our sections in place until all of the membership databases, the IT systems, everything had been integrated into one anyway. So the official day off the separate walls coming down and having only one single entity with nothing left of ATL and the NUT was January last year [2019]. So in fact, what [PAUSE TO COUNT] so the finalized version of the NEU is 17 months.

I personally think that we've done a hell of a lot in that 17 months to establish ourselves as a different type of union. One of the other things was building a new union from scratch designed for the 21st century. A lot of the old systems and procedures, which may have been more appropriate in a different age. We could get rid of. We could build everything around modern technology. So everything is based on everybody having IT systems and centralized databases, about mass communication emails, which has proven really useful in the last couple of months, because the moment Coronavirus hit and we had to section off our... and we could no longer hold meetings in person, we'd already put in place the idea of conference-calling into meetings anyway.

So we've already had meetings before, like last year onwards we were having meetings where people who couldn't attend to meet in person because they've got a parents evening. So they finished their working day, they've got a two hour window and then they've got parents evenings. So they can't leave to physically be in the building, they could phone in. And so we were having people conference calling in to meetings to take part, and so increased member participation. And so it has really has been a lot of work and hard effort that's been put in and everything coming together over that time period. But it has been really rewarding.

Jeff Howarth: Yeah. That's fantastic. No, I mean, you should be very proud of yourself as that. So I mean, it's a fascinating story and, and you know, really sort of yeah. Admirable, your, your, I don't know. Okay. I'll, I'll start gushing anyway. So questions, I guess going back to maybe sort of, your, your earlier years, your vulnerabilities as a young worker, and how the trade union helped and how you helped in the trade union. I mean, if you maybe talk about that.

Karam Bales: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So, so particularly, and that has been an issue I still do encounter sometimes with people is when you're dealing with people who are considerably older or more experienced than you, there is a tendency for them to, give less weight to your opinion. That was initially with my head teacher, initially, there was a lot of resistance from him. And also from various governor's or old members of management. And when I made a sensible stance I did sometimes feel like they would try and side-line my opinion. What helped with the union was having people of more age and more experience, cause at the end of the day, people still have a tendency to defer to age don't they. I think we all do to a certain extent. Having access to people who had more age and more experience than the people who were trying to denigrate my opinion, and getting not just advice but them to step in, not in a way of overstepping their mark and pushing down on my authority, but they were very good at providing the backup.

So there was a couple of times when I had an issue with, trying to get my opinion across, in an internal union meeting, as well as, as another time when I was having an issue with getting the governors to listen to an issue. Just having somebody who has a bigger reputation, and has that age and experience saying "I really respect Karam's opinion, because of this, it's founded on these reasons. So it validated my opinion rather than overriding it or saying, "Oh, you should listen to him because of that". It's quite difficult to describe exactly the levels of attacks used by these people. It had been quite a long time ago. I can just remember the way that the more experienced people could provide me with support I needed, but while still making it feel like I was still in control, I was still in charge and I was still taking ownership of the situation.

I was just being supported rather than running off to get somebody else to do my job for me. But it still does happen sometimes when I've had to deal in the workplace with new members of management. I'm now onto my fourth head in that school. So I've had several changes of head teacher. And so each time it's been a very different relationship. [redacted text] The next one basically played the tough man.

And he did make a lot of changes, but it was very difficult at first because he did not listen very well. And he always wanted to do things his own way. What changed for my relationship with him was around the same time as I was getting involved in the union, my mum became terminally ill, and collapsed a couple of days before Christmas. She was rushed into hospital. And then we had tests and on New Year's Eve, they found that it was two brain tumours and a lung tumour. Which were inoperable. And they estimated should have had about three months to live. I went into the head and asked about time off, and I turned around and said, look they don't really have the resources to care for her properly. She's now in adult nappies. She was regressing. It was like watching somebody turn into a small child over an accelerated time period. So over time there was communication confusion, but there were also things like anxiety, paranoia, and after about a month the painkillers stopped working. There's only so much morphine people can take for it. So the decision was made with the idea of the NHS and the doctors that it would actually be better for them to set up a bed in my parents' living room, where I was still living at the time. We were careful. So I was trained as a palliative nurse and went to him and asked if he could have the next eight weeks off to care for her.

He was a little bit shocked at first. and when he asked how old she was, she was 49 and he had just turned 50. That had a big impact on him. anyway, he thought that could happen to me. And the union was very, very good. They put me on full pay. They kept me off. And then after she died, she did, the doctors were very accurate, she did die after three months, when they gave her three months. A couple of days before her 50th birthday. And she died during the Easter holidays. My line manager... I then got a contact from my line manager saying, well, you've been off for eight weeks and she's dead now. It's time to go back to work, full time.

And I did at this point go, well actually, I did have eight weeks off, but that was for caring duties. Considering I've just had... she's literally just died, I am entitled to my compassionate leave now. They're two different things. And the manager at the time was, the deputy head at the time was fairly young as well. She's only a couple of years older than me and from quite a privileged background. And I don't think she's ever at that point in her life. I don't think she'd ever known hardship and a shock like that can happen to anybody of any class, but she'd never really had to go through anything that traumatic.

Karam Bales: So, I don't think she understood. This was just about the time as I was about to become a rep. So, I still have my old rep in school because we did conduct a joint rep up

until the summer holidays when he left. And so, with the out-going rep we went to the head and we explained that because of how she was under palliative. I put a mattress in the living room. And so I was sleeping on the mattress in the living room each night, cause I'm better at dealing with these kind of things than my dad or my brother that lived in the house. So I took on a lot of the principal caring, Particularly overnight as well cause none of them are any good at doing things during the night anyway. So, I was sleeping for a couple of hours and when she'd wake up shouting or screaming, I'd settle her and then get another couple of hours sleep.

Karam Bales: It might happen again. And then at that point, uh, one of my other family members would be up and then I'd go up to my room for a couple of hours catch up asleep before going down again. So I'd had considerable sleep deprivation at that time. And the rep going with me to the head and explaining. That's the thing, it's quite uncomfortable, particularly when it's quite raw. It's difficult talking to a head that's quite hostile and you haven't really got to know them and to have to talk about these things that are that intimate and raw. And my rep and other people from my district as well, were really good in helping me navigate the conversations that I had with my head. And to be honest, when you explain things with the support...I don't think I'd have had the confidence to have those conversations if it hadn't been for having a union rep who I'd known for a long time anyway. He'd actually been a member of staff in the secondary school when I was a pupil there as well. I can still remember him. I first encountered him when I was like 13 as well. He never taught me, but he was one of those nice people that would always talk to you in the corridor or lunchtime or occasionally come to a lesson or that kind of thing. Really nice. A very theatrical guy, he's a bit of a Stephen Fry type character speaking that way. Very eloquent, very flamboyant as well. And so he put me instantly at ease, he's very good at that. He's quite involved in the church groups as well. So once he gave me the confidence and the support to go and speak to the head, the head was actually really understanding. And I was given two weeks off to gather myself together. I then we drew up a very, very gentle phased return. And that phased return... once again you're making sure you've got everything down on paper, both employer and employee, so that you both can understand what's going on. What was really good was the phased return also had options. Because a real problem was a lack of sleep. So, I would start after the morning session at school, so I would come in slightly later. This is still a school with massive behavioural issues in special measures. Quite a lot of that intake of children have been in and out of prison. As well.

It was a rough time to be feeling vulnerable, particularly as a support staff worker who children feel they can target more as well. Once again with union support as well, making sure that when an incident did happen with what could be quite violent, unpleasant children. I did get the support from management in dealing with those children. The head clamped down on them very quickly. Because when you're working in a school and your in your twenties, and your dealing with some very brash 16 and 17 year olds, it can be hard to earn the respect of children, because you're too close to their age group. And also my general appearance, I'm not the tidiest person in the world. I have long hair, I'm a slightly interesting character anyway. So I'm likely to be targeted by children. Most of the time it's fine but at that particular point in my life I was feeling very fragile and very stressed. As I say with the phased return, having the ability to say "sorry I'm really not feeling up to it today, I will try again tomorrow" really did help. And so I worked myself up to a full time-table by about the last week before the summer holidays.

And after that I came back after the summer holidays, and I was working full time from then on. In fact I went the next two years without a day off from illness, as well. Because I had the right support. If I hadn't had the right support, if I hadn't been supported by the union helping

me talk to management, helping me go through it and briefing me in how to deal with this and also him just being a really good bloke, being my union rep who I had known for a really long time. He was just checking in on me as a friend to see if I'm alright and all of that kind of thing, if I hadn't had that I probably wouldn't have....who knows I might have suffered from more long term health issues, or more mental health issues, so to be honest some of the issues, that I had to deal with, I kind of think could have ended up as post-traumatic stress. Or where I would break down talking about this incident right now, to you. And I really do have to thank Michael Freeman for the way he helped me in the past. Rather than what could have been a permanently damaging and limiting experience, despite being horrific, it's now a foundation of strength. I don't think it would be very difficult for me to go through...there's not many things that could be more traumatic or horrific than the days I experienced of caring for my mum through that time.

Jeff Howarth: Thanks very much for sharing that. Have you been involved in any industrial disputes?

Karam Bales: We've had within our school, not individual industrial disputes. The ones we had the ones when we first started working were on teacher's pensions. But being a support staff member, it wasn't our pension, so we weren't allowed to. But I think it was 2013 when they had the teachers' pension dispute. The issue that arose then was being that I was cover so it was dealing with the head teacher when he decided that I would have to cover for striking colleagues, which isn't right. And I turned around and said look I've got my union guidance from head office, I've got my guidance from my district, and they say I should only be doing my job normally, so if someone has phoned in sick I can cover their lessons, but I'm not covering the lessons of members of staff who are striking. And this was with the head teacher, and despite having had that nice period of time where he'd supported me the year before with my mum. And he said that's not acceptable, you've got to cover. And I said no, I've got my guidance here.

And he wasn't backing down at all, and I didn't really want to do anything to undermine the national action. So I didn't know what else to do I'd been sent an email by Kim Knappett who was at the time ATL President, because I'd started to get to know her. And I was told that if necessary to phone her in an emergency. So I did. And I phoned Kim and had a chat with her and turned round and I said look what am I meant to do, and she said, look we have your back. If he continues to push you tell him this will have consequences for you and the union will answer back. You go off, you hold your ground and you go off and do your normal day job, and don't go into lessons which are covering striking balloters. And just let him know this. And that's exactly what I did. No way would I have I have turned around to him, cause he'd been hostile, and then he'd been really, really good to me the year before. And in some ways I didn't want to let him down, but you can't undermine the action. That destroys the whole purpose of the action if he knows I can step in. So in the end I did exactly what Kim said I went in and said I'd spoken to Kim, I'm going to follow what I've been told, and if you decide there's going to be any action. the union says its got my back. And I got a lot of GRRR-RAH-RAH-RAH [GROWLING NOISES] a lot of huffing and a lot of stamping but not saying anything else to me. So I just went off and did what I was planning on doing the normal lessons I was to cover for absent members and then to go off and support other groups, when I would have been covering absent teachers for striking. And despite some very cold looks and shrugging of the shoulders for the next couple of weeks, there was no kick-back, there was no repercussions to it. I think knowing that I had spoken to a union president, knowing that I had been able to phone a union president, and report to him and say if you've got an issue I'll be phoning the union president again, meant that although I got a lot of hot air and noise for a little while it didn't cause any consequences for me.

Jeff Howarth: Can you tell me of any experiences of recruitment you've had, successes or problems?

Karam Bales: Recruitment within the workplace? It was initially quite difficult, anyway. When I was in ATL recruitment in the workplace was difficult recruiting teachers because most people would just join the larger teaching unions. A large chunk of the ATL membership were in the independent sector. But then you can say, well, as a member of the support staff, I can go recruit support staff. However, there is a recognition agreement between ATL, which is now held by the NEU, with the rest of the TUC, where the general workers unions – Unison and GMB that also represent support staff workers have a TUC clause meaning that you are not allowed to actively recruit support staff members, unless you're one of those two unions. Which creates the interesting scenario of when a new member of support staff joins, you have to turn around and say, have you considered joining a union?

The ATL has a support staff section, but I'm not allowed to say you should join the union. The moment I say, you should join the union. Then that is active recruitment, which breaks the recognition, and Mary Bousted would get a personal letter or action from the TUC directly against her, if any of the reps were to do something like that. So the allowable wording and allowable action within the third iteration of that has changed. And that actually is an ongoing point of contention, and that includes Unite as well in that, between the three big general workers unions and the NEU support staff. It's an internal squabble that goes on, and will go on for quite a while until support staff members within the NEU are larger. But to be honest, you know, our membership isn't as large as those other unions. Navigating that tricky support staff issue of recruitment in particular has been something I've focused on since I joined the union and support staff members section and it's something that comes up every conference, because over the last few years, as a member of the executive and as a support staff member, at annual conference and at the support staff members annual conference, as they have their own separate conference, and the regional conferences, I'm normally one of the people that gets sent down to sit on the panel, and take questions at the end of the day.

And they normally have about 45 minute Q and A with the executive. And I will always be one of the people on that panel. And you get some prickly questions. You have some very prickly questions about why haven't we got recognition agreement, why can't we do that? But at the same point, there are some things that are said about the recognition agreement, that are misunderstood. So the recognition agreement means you can't actively recruit, active recruitment doesn't mean you can't recruit. It doesn't mean you can't leave flyers lying around. You can't put sign up forms in the pigeon holes. It's just there are a handful of set-phrases you can't use, as long as you don't use those set phrases. And this also only applies to elected members. So a rep can't turn around and say you should join our union. A lay member who doesn't hold a position is entitled to recommend any union they want without recourse. So, also what they mean by recognition, so we're not allowed to represent support staff members with negotiating bodies, now that means as a collective issue. So when it comes to a negotiation with a council over a change in terms and conditions over a whole region, or negotiating directly with Government on behalf of support staff, the mechanism for which no longer exists. There used to be a support staff members negotiating body with Government but that was terminated earlier on in the coalition days. So what your actual recognition agreement, what you can actually negotiate under the recognition agreement - there's not many mechanisms left. There are councils where we don't have recognition agreements, we have good relationships particularly with Unison who are the

main negotiators. We have a very good relationship with Unison in a lot of areas, including my area.

So most of the time we're invited along to the negotiations anyway, because they want our opinion. We can't officially negotiate and represent on these bodies, most of the time we are present and making our voices felt. When it comes to the workplace though, and it's dealing with representing individual members issues with an employer, that isn't covered under the recognition agreement, you are allowed to do it. And that's one of the things that has been difficult in recruiting in particular support staff and getting them to understand that we don't have a negotiating/recognition agreement on behalf of support staff isn't as much of a hinderance to our ability to help them in day to day life. As much as they may believe. Once again though you've got to try and explain that without accidentally saying they should be joining our union, otherwise you do breach it.

So, it becomes a matter of very, very choice terminology and approaching each issue in a separate way. Cause there's always going to be a Unison or GMB member nearby in the staff room, so if you say the wrong thing, they'll have to report you.

On recruitment though, the Corona crisis has offered up... before, I use Twitter a lot . My account is very, very busy on Twitter, but Twitter has always been aware of reaching out to allies and organizing support from the greater community and helping get your message out to reps and things but it's never really been much of a recruitment tool. Twitter. Until lock-down. And in lock-down you've got thousands and thousands of teachers that are all signing up to Twitter mainly so they can share resources and advice, and tools. Because what would normally happen within the school or the fact that all of a sudden we've got to get our heads around remote learning. and everybody's helping each other. And basically everybody's stealing everyone good ideas which are being offered. Which everybody's happy with. All of a sudden Twitter, recruitment-wise, has become massive. It's become really, really easy for people contacting me asking about the union and can I pass them the link to membership. I don't understand why because membership is always going to be on the first page on the website on Google anyways, isn't it?

More importantly, there has been rep recruitment. We've been setting out a recruitment strategy for the last couple of years on how to get a rep into every school because there are times when something goes wrong in a school, but if there isn't a rep you don't get the information till it's too late. And the changes have already been made and no members are willing to speak up and they just get steam-rolled. And that causes a problem, particularly with academization, we have all these different schools not attached to the local authorities. And so one school with a low union presence and without a rep may have steam-rolled through some awful terms and conditions, the next thing you know, your school with a strong union membership and a rep, all of a sudden their management have gone and seen what the school down the road has done. And they're trying to impose it on you. And you've got to fight it.

Whereas if you've got a rep in every school and we're organizing. Rather than fighting one big battle against government, academization means you're fighting thousands of small battles. And losing those small battles, without even knowing that there's a battle going on. Then adds momentum for the changes that you're trying to stop as it progresses.

But rep-recruitment on Twitter has been immense. My accounts got a lot more attention and a lot more people are looking at my account. I've gained a thousand members in the last couple of weeks. And I'm getting around a quarter of a million people looking at my tweets a day at the moment.

Jeff Howarth: Wow.

Karam Bales: Yeah, I know. I'm quite surprised, I hit the activity button the other day and for one tweet in 24 hours...220,000 people had read this one tweet in the last 24 hours, I was like, wow! That's pretty impressive. Because everybody is out looking for help. And because Mary and Kevin are quite high profile and lots of people will message them. But they're busy. And I know I'm busy, but Mary and Kevin are really busy. So, they can't reply to every single request there. So now people will put a message out to Kevin and Mary but then they also put it out to me because they know that I spend more time on Twitter than is probably healthy. So, then I will respond to their problem or what's your problem? They go I don't have a rep. I've got an issue, And then you say, what are your problems there. They may step out, they may go into a DM [DIRECT MESSAGE] but I prefer to keep it out in public so people can actually see the union providing simple, basic advice. A lot of the time if that's your problem then here's the union advice website, here's the link to that specific bit of advice. How are we going to stop this? Well what you really need is getting someone to organise the staff, and see if everybody else agrees and then go for a collective action there. Well, who's going to do that then? We've set up a special position called a Corona-Rep. So the idea of a Corona-rep is because we've got loads of unique problems ..different schools that have maybe been having issues with remote learning, there maybe rota issues, there maybe safety issues, there's a hundred new problems to deal with that nobody has ever considered before. And some of these are just management haven't thought through these before properly. And all they need is a little nudge and to go this doesn't work very well but here is the model the union's recommended. Look, this is easier, it just saves you time and effort. We're making your jobs easier. And to be honest now. Probably most of the schools now are running off the joint union guidance we put together as well.

Local authorities are now handing out the NEU's guidance to safety and saying we know that we're not going to get in trouble. We can't afford to have a fight with union right now. And to be honest, as a union, National Education Union, I have discussed, I think we've been really, really strong on behalf of our members. just looking at today's headlines, we've certainly created waves. So we've got this Corona-rep file. you can just be a rep for the next couple of months You won't be expected to do redundancies, you won't be expected to do all of that. Because most of the normal things that you'd be dealing with have been suspended anyway.

But we just need somebody to tell us what's going on in the school and then to distribute information, to be a focal point for members, cause also staffrooms are shut. We've got remote learning. And when people are coming in they're still not using staffrooms because the problem with people congregating in one area is infection transmission. It's not safe to use your staff room. We're actually recommending people to stay in individual rooms and not mix as much and have limited numbers in. So to have somebody, a rep in that school, who can email everybody just for that limited period of time. We've had, I think at the last count it's between six and seven hundred new reps in the last few weeks all signed up as Corona reps. So I was in our local district. My Berkshire's got six small districts and amongst those six small districts in Berkshire I'm the executive that tries to attend all six meetings.

And so at the local branch meeting at Reading yesterday, we had one of our best attendances ever via a zoom meeting. And we had about six or seven brand new Corona reps. But then it's useful, cause then I can log-in and that was just after the new joint union statement with NEU, NAHT, Unison, GMB, and NASUWT as well. All on a single joint statement from all the TUC affiliated education unions. Which is only the second time that's happened. And the last time was last week. Being able for them, from their perspective to basically just look at their phone and to have a member of the executive, who I've taken

quite a senior position in developing our strategy and our evidence base in negotiating with the prime minister and secretary of state regarding this. To then have me there going literally this statement has been published in the last half an hour.

Here's what it is. Here's a run down of the general secretary's phone call to the prime minister at the start this week. This is yesterday, he was in a conference call with Gavin Williamson. And this is how that meeting went. This is the strategy we're doing, and this is what it's doing. Do you have any questions and answers? To have that for somebody who's just stepped into a rep-role, an emergency rep-role, who's a little bit nervous about having enough support and then have access to that and then to have the town hall ["TOWN HALL" MEANS A TOWN HALL TYPE MEETING] and then to have the meeting tonight at half past three of all union reps across the whole country, have been invited to a zoom call, hosted by Mary, Kevin and the president as well, so they will be able to directly ask questions via the chat [FUNCTION OF ZOOM SOFTWARE]. To be able to, to basically become a rep and the next day to be talking to the executive and the general secretaries about your personal concerns and to get an answer back in real time, I think has been an amazing recruitment tool.

Like the pickup for Corona. I think a lot of people are quite nervous, but as more and more people are signing up and then going back on Twitter and saying, I've just signed up to be a Corona-rep. I've just been on a conference call with Mary and Kevin. They answered my questions, links to information were posted to me. I can't believe I'm getting this much support. But other people go, Oh really? Cause I've got a problem and we've got no rep. Maybe I should. So at the moment. It seems that recruitment's accelerating. Our website crashed on Sunday, half an hour after Johnson finished his statement from the sheer number of people that were signed on. I think it was nearly 2000 members. New members we gained on Sunday night. Our memberships has increased by several percent. Now I don't know exactly what it is, but we could be looking at three or 4% increase in membership in the last month or so, when you're looking at a base of something like 450,000 to start with, that's a considerable surge in union membership and then say, which goes completely against the grain of what's been happening. But that started from when we created the National Education Union. We're one of the only unions to have seen a constant increase in membership.

Jeff Howarth: Impressive.

Karam Bales: We think it is, yeah, I think it's exciting having something new for once isn't it? We changed its name several times, but it's basically the same, very similar to what it was in like 1880 when it was founded and the same with NUT, isn't it. So combined together it's like 250 years of trade unions, which really look very, very similar in structure and strategy as they did a hundred years ago. Whereas now we've got something completely different. We're just trying to be as innovative as possible.

Jeff Howarth: Cool. That's fantastic. I'm tempted to end it there really, because that's a really good point to end on. Was there anything else you wanted to say?

Karam Bales: No, that's, that's fine. I just thought it was.... when I first saw that you were going to... so I got sent a link from inter-union, cause I'm on.. because I was going to be attending this year, but I did last year on behalf of the executive to the TUC Young Workers Conference that they do. I thought really I'd take the delegation there. And so we set up a WhatsApp group last year of all the young delegates and they're still in contact. They slowly add extras in. So it's about a hundred different union reps from across all the different unions and all the different workplaces, all just sharing ideas about organizing and support and

whenever they've got a petition or a motion, they all post it up to there. So we can boost each other's numbers and provide this support. If we can do joint action, then we can organize joint action on the local levels. Or then you do get things like, Oh, I've just found this person. I've been talking to somebody on the bus, they've got this job, which union can they join? And that kind of thing. As I say, there's a lot of young union members that aren't concerned about just protecting their union. They're more concerned with getting their unions to work more collectively together. And to kind of push-it? They're quite socialist tendencies. A lot of them are..... I wouldn't call all of them Corbynista types but you are looking more like a progressive socialism. You're looking at like a Scandinavian kind of attitude to the structure of the way the world should be. Or they're looking at German unions and they're looking at, but looking at the way they operate in Germany and how they actually have protected their manufacturing base as well. That kind of thing. And so they're learning from more modern unions rather than looking back towards the seventies. And that's where, that's where I saw it, somebody posted it up and said, Oh, I've seen this thing about interviews. And I thought, well, actually, it'll be good to get like how the NEU was created and now that the NEU is something new. It would be quite nice to have that written down right now. Even if I could listen back to this and see if my predictions or whatever I said turned out to be a total disaster or not. I thought it would be interesting, and nice to get forward all the hard work that everybody's put together.

Jeff Howarth: Yeah. That's great. So it's on record now. yeah, but I said, okay, I'm going to stop recording now.