

The ‘troubulous question of the married women teachers’: The Aberdare dismissals of 1908

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ABSTRACT

In February 1908, the Aberdare Education Committee resolved to dismiss all married women teachers in its Council schools. This article analyses the protest campaign which followed and its impact on the National Union of Teachers, the local labour movement and the women teachers involved. It was a ‘fight’ which divided the local community, the socialist movement and the teachers themselves at a time of social and political change, and one which reverberated beyond Aberdare and beyond that summer of strife. It is argued that the tensions which came to the fore are significant in understanding teacher and gender politics in Wales and Britain in the early twentieth century.

Key words: women teachers, marriage, dismissal, NUT, unionism, labour, gender

The context

In May 1909, the Aberdare Valley Teachers’ Association (AVTA), a branch of the National Union of Teachers (NUT), presented their retiring secretary with a purse of gold. The honorarium was a mark of the association’s ‘high appreciation’ of the extra services provided by Mr Jack Thomas during the ‘abnormal year’ of 1908 when the branch had met fourteen times and had consulted the NUT Executive on five occasions. Referring

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to the 'fight' they had fought against the dismissal of married women teachers by the Local Education Authority (LEA), Miss Sarah George, the vice-president, said that Mr Thomas 'had conducted himself admirably ... displaying tact, patience and confidence'.¹ These qualities were certainly needed in dealing with the 'troublesome question'.² This article will analyse the events of that 'abnormal year' and the debates which surrounded them. It will argue that the Aberdare experience exposed dilemmas which reverberated more widely and which are significant in the history of teacher and socialist politics and gender relations in Wales.

The Aberdare Education Committee was not alone in taking action against married women. An internal, confidential memorandum issued in 1909 by the Board of Education observed, '... the number of authorities which object to the employment of married women teachers is increasing, and the question generally has attracted considerable attention in the present year'.³ No specific mention is made of Aberdare, probably because the case did not reach the law courts, but the document refers to the difficulties which that dispute brought to the fore. Its summary of the dilemmas and arguments surrounding what was termed a 'thorny issue' reveals a complex picture, including a lack of clarity on a point of law as to the power of LEAs over Voluntary school staffing and the 'difficulty' as to whether marriage constituted 'an educational reason for dismissal'. There were also local differences relating to certification and salary which further complicated the matter. The Board declined to express an opinion, and placed the responsibility locally, but felt it to be an increasingly problematic and sensitive issue.⁴

Aberdare was a well-established industrial town where, by this period, the coal industry was dominant. Politically, the struggle between Liberalism and socialism was becoming more intense with the latter (arguably) starting to gain the upper hand. In the 1906 parliamentary election, the coalowner and Liberal, D. A. Thomas, still topped the poll in the dual constituency seat of Merthyr Tydfil and Aberdare, but the socialist, Keir Hardie, had increased his share of the vote (Barclay, 1985; Masson, 2005). The local Trades and Labour Council, formed in 1902 to coordinate socialist and union activity and to secure greater labour representation on the council and other public bodies, was 'becoming arrogant and militant in its new found strength' and was determined to get rid of those who were 'clinging on to liberalism'.⁵ In 1908, the South Wales Miners' Federation affiliated to Labour, and the Aberdare Socialist Society or Independent Labour Party (ILP), established a women's branch.⁶ The labour movement

was improving its organisation and increasing its influence in local politics.

Since the formation of the Aberdare Women's Liberal Association (AWLA) in 1891–2, townswomen had been formally active in local politics. Schoolteachers (and teachers' wives) were prominent in both the AWLA and the newly established ILP women's branch (Masson, 2005: 51–79). The question of women's suffrage was also to the fore in 1908, and several pro-suffrage supporters, both Liberal and socialist, were members of the NUT in Aberdare. Nationally, the period 1906–9 was one of increased activity for NUT women. The feminist teachers of the Equal Pay League formed the National Federation of Women Teachers (NFWT), with the aim of securing 'equal pay for equal work' and to persuade their union formally to adopt a pro-women's suffrage agenda. Issues of class and gender were, therefore, never far from the surface in teacher politics in Aberdare, and it was against this increasingly politicised atmosphere that the Education Committee of the Aberdare Urban District Council passed the resolution to act against the continued employment of married women teachers in February 1908.⁷

The resolution and its aftermath

A marriage bar already operated in Aberdare's Council's schools. Under existing regulations women teachers had to resign their posts on the day of their marriage. Now, according to the new resolution, married women appointed prior to the introduction of the bar were also to be forced to resign; the date was set for 31 July, at the end of the summer term. Significantly, this was in contrast to decisions taken by several other LEAs in both England and Wales, around the same time and later, to shed their married female workforce gradually by recruiting single women to replace their married colleagues as they reached retirement age. In Aberdare, experienced teachers were to be dismissed without being allowed to serve their time and thus, would lose the right to claim their superannuation payments. Depending on their circumstances, the loss of a pension meant that they would face varying levels of financial hardship. The NUT reported that twenty-two teachers were affected of whom eight were union members, although numbers quoted in local sources vary. Of the eight, five applied to the union for support to oppose the decision. Their names and schools are known, but it has not been possible ascertain the

names and grades of the others. Those dismissed included headmistresses and certificated teachers, as well as uncertificated teachers at the lower end of the pay scale, though the latter group was probably the majority.⁸

The decision to remove married women was, in part, due to a wider effort to professionalise the teaching workforce. In Aberdare, as elsewhere, local authorities were taking steps to urge their uncertificated teachers to gain certification as soon as possible in order to increase the proportion of qualified staff. In tandem with its decision to rid the authority of married women, the committee had also ruled that all uncertificated teachers in Council schools under thirty-five years of age were required to attend compulsory evening and week-end classes in order to obtain their certificates by examination, or receive a month's notice. This was a cause of friction, because although the local NUT branch agreed in principle that all teachers should be certificated, it disagreed with the 'forceful methods' adopted by the committee. The uncertificated teachers were overwhelmingly women, some of whom were married, and it was argued that women with family responsibilities could not be expected to attend classes at evenings and week-ends.⁹ So the question of marriage was complicated by the debate over qualifications and standards. The timing of the resolution was due to a claim that the previous authority, the Aberdare School Board, had, in 1901, given married women teachers seven years' notice to resign their posts, though this was later contested.¹⁰ Another, more specifically local, reason to take action in 1908 was that Aberdare was in competition with Barry as the location for the proposed new Glamorgan Training College for women teachers, and comparisons were being made.¹¹

The resolution was proposed by D. Jackson Thomas, a prominent member of the Education Committee's Labour group, and seconded by another socialist, Edmund Stonelake, then secretary of the Aberdare Trades and Labour Council. Stonelake, a member of the former School Board, argued that the principle of dismissal had already been agreed in 1901, while Jackson Thomas based his case on the rights of the male breadwinner, and declared that every husband ought to have the means to keep his wife who should not need to work outside the home. He also argued that the system of employing married women was unfair since it '... deprived younger and unmarried teachers of their bread and cheese'.¹² The notion of a living wage for the male breadwinner was central to the campaigns of the miners and other male unionists at the time and was a strong theme in the debates which followed.

The committee strongly supported the motion. Only one councillor, Mr D. P. Davies, dissented, and he opposed it on the basis of the economic distress it would cause. It was unjust, he said, particularly in the case of the headmistresses since 'many were within measurable distance to superannuation'. The only female member of the committee, Mrs Richards, a staunch Liberal, was in favour, though she moved an amendment to change the wording from, 'should be dismissed' to 'be asked to send in their resignations', and this was carried.¹³ However, reports in the press and in other sources invariably refer to the 'dismissed teachers', so the nuance of her intervention was not appreciated.

If the committee thought the resolution would end the matter, they were mistaken. It was the start of a protracted 'fight' with the LEA, though not without internal struggles. The AVTA responded immediately and Welsh members of the NUT's Central Executive were soon involved. However, at the first special meeting in March, it was by no means certain that the branch would support the five women who had applied to the union 'for advice'. In his appeal to members 'to join forces with the union ... to, if possible, get the objectionable motion rescinded', NUT Executive committee member Rhys Nicholas had to '[exhort] the meeting to sink all differences and prejudices and approach the question as a vital Union Principle.' The question of employing married women, he said, was 'a lively topic' and he was aware that 'the NUT had never declared any active policy' but 'these teachers had been invited, even cajoled into the Union to pay their subs'. 'Many opinions were voiced' before the meeting eventually agreed that the matter should be taken up and referred to the NUT's Tenure Committee.¹⁴

In contrast, members quickly voted unanimously to oppose the authority's effort to force uncertificated teachers to attend evening and week-end classes. Speakers in support of that issue included Mrs Margaret Williams, one of the women facing redundancy. Unfortunately, there is no record of her having spoken in the debate on married teachers and the content of the arguments put forward for and against are not given. What is clear, however, is that in order to persuade the branch to agree to support the married teachers, the issue was presented as a matter of security of tenure and union solidarity, and, to a lesser extent, teachers' right to receive their pension, rather than one of women's right to choose to work after marriage. In describing the dilemma posed to the NUT by the question of married women in teaching, the Board of Education commented,

The NUT is in a position of some difficulty. On the one hand, a number of unmarried women teachers are opposed to the retention of married women teachers ... On the other hand, the wholesale dismissal of married women teachers produces considerable hardship.¹⁵

Throughout the campaign both sides in the debate sought to avoid divisions over the marriage question and did not fully engage with the underlying issue of gender roles. When the Aberdare case eventually appeared in *The Schoolmaster* on 27 June, it was under the heading, 'The Tenure Problem in 1908: Drastic Action at Aberdare', and was presented as a continuation of the struggles over the legality of the powers held by LEAs over teachers' terms of employment which were contested following the Education Act of 1902.¹⁶

Notices that their contracts would terminate in three months had been issued to the married teachers on 29 April.¹⁷ The NUT deputation to the Education Committee which followed on 13 May focused on the personal situation of the five union members, and made clear that the aim in appealing to the committee to reconsider its decision was '...not to safeguard the principle of employing married women teachers, but seeking justice for old and faithful servants of the authority'. The union's lawyer 'said he did not propose to touch upon the legal position at all, though there was a legal difficulty. He wished to refer to the hardships suffered by those teachers who had been asked to resign'.¹⁸ AVTA representatives included members of both Liberal and socialist persuasion, and were led by a prominent Liberal, John Griffiths, head of the Park Schools and Matt Lewis, vice-chair of the ILP. It included two women, one unmarried, a Miss Morfudd Davies, who insisted, in response to a question, that she represented all teachers, not single women only, and Mrs Ann Nora Jenkins, an experienced certificated teacher and former president of the AVTA, who was due to be dismissed from her post at Park Schools.¹⁹

Their appeal was rejected but the decision divided the Labour group, much to the annoyance of the (Labour) chairman, T. Walter Williams.²⁰ Following the failure of the deputation, Rhys Nicholas suggested that the unmarried women members should petition the committee. This was quickly organised and forty-two signatures were gathered.²¹ Although the exact basis of their appeal is not evident, there is no evidence that they were arguing for the principle of women's right to work. The petition, branded as 'insincere', received short shrift from the chairman. Later, it was claimed that the women had been 'bullied' into signing it.²²

By June, the differences of opinion within the local labour movement and also within the NUT had become more evident. At a special NUT meeting when all Welsh members of the Executive were present, not everyone was fully supportive of the progress of the campaign. Rhys Nicholas 'detected signs of discontent in the ranks' while Tom John, Rhondda, former NUT national president and Aberdarian, spoke 'in conciliatory tone'. It was agreed that they would seek a 'round table conference' with the Labour members of the Education Committee and ask Keir Hardie to make an official statement, since, it was said, he had privately expressed his disapproval of Labour members who had voted for the dismissals. The proposed conference was immediately rejected by the Labour councillors and no official statement seems to have been forthcoming from the MP, though he was close to some of the labour teachers in the area.²³ The frustration of some members of the local branch with the tardiness of the NUT Executive were evident at another special meeting on 15 June when a motion was put forward calling for the severing of links with the NUT unless earnest steps were taken to obtain security of tenure for all teachers via a Parliamentary Bill before the end of December. This was opposed by Matt Lewis and others, and a more constructively worded resolution was passed inviting members of the Executive to yet another special meeting to discuss fixity of tenure.²⁴

By the time that meeting took place, the NUT's Tenure Committee and National Executive had placed the schools from which the married teachers were to be dismissed, together with those where several women teachers who had been promised promotions worked, on the 'Index Expurgatorus', a list of blacklisted schools.²⁵ Teachers who were union members were required to contact head office before accepting any posts or promotions offered to them at these schools. The union promised to pay the five union members the equivalent of their full salary for three months following their dismissal. At the meeting, it was confirmed in response to a question that the union had never before had to deal with a case of dismissal 'on the singular basis of marriage' and that no test case on that basis had ever been brought to court. The Executive, it was said, believed that the dismissal of these efficient teachers was 'a gross breach of contract, unprecedented in the history of LEAs'.²⁶

Throughout the summer a special committee of NUT officials, set up to investigate the matter and conduct the campaign, worked from a temporary branch office.²⁷ As the July deadline approached, tensions escalated, fuelled by a series of (bilingual) public meetings organised by the NUT.

The first, on 6 July, was 'packed to overcrowding with scores being able to obtain admission'. Following speeches by (male) NUT leaders and a 'very animated' discussion, a resolution appealing to members of the LEA to respect 'the principle of integrity of contract' and urging them to submit the question to arbitration was passed. The resolution was carefully worded so as not to express 'any opinion as to the advisability or otherwise of employing married women as teachers' while the poster advertising the meeting made no mention of either women or marriage.²⁸ However, one newspaper source (only) reports the words of Mr T. T. Jenkins of Merthyr, the proposer of the resolution, the only pro-equality argument which has been found during the research for this article. He stated,

You Socialists, of whom I am one, believe in the equality of the sexes, but where are you with regard to this question? ... Socialism tells you that the sexes should be equal, married or single. (Loud and prolonged cheering).²⁹

Although not generally recorded or reported, it is clear that the Labour camp *was* divided on the question of women's rights, and the loud and prolonged cheering in the overcrowded hall suggests a good deal of support for the principle of gender equality. Later, the Tenure Committee thanked this prominent Labour supporter for his willingness to oppose his own party.³⁰

The issue was billed in publicity for the meeting as a 'Grave Breach of Contract', but in his speech NUT President, W. A. Nicholls, made it clear that, in fact, the LEA did have the power to terminate teachers' employment. He termed it 'a breach of faith' and 'a moral rather than a legal question'.³¹ The opposition and local press ridiculed the NUT's change of stance and, a week later, the local branch again questioned members of the Executive who assured them that the union was still prepared to submit the dispute to arbitration and were taking advice as to the legality of the Council's decision. Although the meeting carried a motion expressing loyalty to the policies of the Executive, an undercurrent of dissent can be discerned. Members were urged 'to exercise extreme care in what they said and did in chance conversations. The least sign of wavering and disloyalty in the ranks would be fatal'.³² The legality of the Aberdare LEA's action was confirmed when a question was asked in Parliament in August. The Board of Education said it could not intervene.³³

Two further fiery public meetings, organised by the NUT on 14 and 15 July at Cwmaman and Cwmbach respectively, were followed by another at Trecynon on 22 July when Labour councillors and Trades and Labour

Council members constantly interrupted the NUT's speakers amid 'uproar' and 'turmoil'. At Cwmbach, the resolution condemning the action of the Education Committee was rejected.³⁴

By late July, with time running out, new efforts were made to seek either arbitration or a round-table conference of representatives. The proposal came from an inter-denominational group of twenty-three nonconformist chapel ministers who lobbied the Education Committee for a conciliatory conference in order to bring the 'strife' to an end. While purporting not to discuss or express an opinion on the points of the dispute, their appeal stated,

Quite apart from the dismissal or otherwise of the teachers directly involved, we feel special sympathy with those teachers who are now called upon to disobey either the call of the National Union, or that of their own Education Authority. Unless a peaceful settlement can be reached, these teachers and others with them are bound to suffer very considerably.³⁵

The NUT welcomed the intervention and declared its readiness to meet with representatives of the Education Committee. The (Liberal) *Aberdare Leader*, exploiting the divisions, pointed out the irony of labour supporters opposing a measure of compassion for poverty and hardship, and urged the Labour group which had 'associated itself with the dismissals' to take up the 'olive branch'.³⁶ Nevertheless, arbitration was overwhelmingly rejected at an 'uproarious' Trades and Labour Council meeting on 21 July, led by members of the Education Committee, where the ministers' efforts were mocked. The final speaker was Mr T. Walter Williams, its chairman, who declared, 'No woman should serve two masters, her husband and the Education Authority. She must neglect either the school or the household (cries of hear hear!)'. He went on:

The ... dismissed married teachers were mostly uncertificated but those appointed to succeed them, were trained and certificated teachers ... The married women teachers were hanging around the neck of the NUT like a millstone and until it got rid of them the teachers would never have fixity of tenure. Let them take a ballot ... and he believed that the majority would decide against the attitude of the NUT. (loud cries of no, no!)³⁷

The meeting had been organised for the eve of a decisive Education Committee meeting. The following day, two councillors denounced their own committee's 'cruel action' and regretted that 'bitter feelings that had been caused'. They moved an amendment to suspend the women temporarily until a conference could be set up. However, the chairman's casting

vote ensured that the original action was upheld and the amendment rejected.³⁸ The NUT continued to seek an agreement; the Special Committee prepared a statement, addressed to the ratepayers of Aberdare, setting out their case. In it they expressed regret that they could not represent non-union members, due to union rules, and made clear their willingness to meet with the committee.³⁹

At the same time, the National Executive organised a local ballot. Individual members were to be given a vote on whether or not to 'hand in their resignations' in protest at the LEA's action. At a special meeting of the branch on 28 July, Matt Lewis spoke in favour of the Executive's stance in opposition to a fellow member, Mr Nolton, who, it seems, wanted to take a collective branch decision. It was agreed to allow each individual a free vote, which took place the following day.

Table 1: Outcome of NUT ballot on strike action July 1908

	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Total</i>
For resignation	31 (54%)	32 (44%)	63 (48.5%)
Against	21 (37%)	34 (46.5%)	55 (42.3%)
Votes not recorded (neutral)	5 (9%)	7 (9.5%)	12 (9.2%)
Total	57	73	130

Almost all branch members took part in the ballot. As Table 1 shows, more women than men voted (probably reflecting the gender make-up of the branch), but only 44 per cent of women voters were ready to take action, compared with 54 per cent of the men. However, of the 63 members in favour 49.2 per cent were men and 50.8 were women, though this only represented a very small majority of one woman.⁴⁰

On the day of the dismissals, in a private meeting, unrecorded in the Minute Book, the branch agreed to leave matters in the hands of the Executive.⁴¹ The NUT's 'Appeal to the Ratepayers' appeared in the *Aberdare Leader* the following week, by which time the paper felt that the conflict was nearing its final phase.⁴² The paper again urged the Trades and Labour Council to support a roundtable conference, but, in an acrimonious meeting, its Executive committee voted by 8 to 6 to let a letter of appeal from the General Secretary of the NUT 'lie on the table'. On 11 August, the Aberdare UDC did likewise and refused to allow the matter to be referred back to the Education Committee.⁴³

Following this rejection and the outcome of the teachers' ballot which had resulted in an insufficient majority (8) in favour of strike action, and a relatively large number of abstentions, the NUT's Tenure Committee and Executive decided to 'withdraw from the fight'. They did, however, agree to 'take the unusual course of placing the five dismissed members on the Sustentation Fund'.⁴⁴ These decisions were reported to the local branch on 17 September. Members were asked to avoid 'mutual recrimination' and to 'close ranks ... for the good of the association'. Despite this, discontent was expressed regarding 'the dilatoriness of the NUT Executive in furthering the cause of Fixity of Tenure', the belief that 'the Executive appeared on the scene much too late to do any good', and 'the indiscretion of giving publicity to the association's matters which should have been left private'.⁴⁵

Women's views and experiences

As noted in the Board of Education memorandum, one of the arguments against the continued employment of married teachers was that their unmarried colleagues did not support it. In Aberdare in 1908, although support was not entirely solid, the women seem to have been united for the most part. The unmarried members who signed the petition opposing the dismissals, would have constituted approximately fifty-eight per cent of the women who took part in the ballot.⁴⁶ Local women teachers' responses to the redeployments are also an indication of NUT women's views. Throughout the spring and summer, the Education Committee was planning ahead to fill the posts to be vacated by the dismissals. At least four assistant teachers, refused offers of posts at the affected schools, in line with their union's directive.⁴⁷ In the case of headships (which meant the chance of promotion), of the seven mentioned in the Tenure Committee minutes, only one, a Miss Jennie Richards, accepted. This was a post at the highly regarded Park Schools, as a replacement for Mrs Jenkins which initially had been offered to Morfudd Davies. Miss Richards was interviewed by Rhys Nicholas on 14 July. He reported, 'She will not withdraw from the appointment. She expressed her entire sympathy with the Education Authority and maintained that the married women had already had seven years notice'. The question asked in Parliament claimed that some of the appointments had been filled by teachers related to a member of the Education Committee; this is the only reference to this accusation discovered to date.⁴⁸

Inevitably, local and personal factors played a part in the Aberdare case, and because the official campaign was fought on the basis of seeking security of tenure for all teachers rather than on the question of employing married women, it is difficult to discern women's views on married women's right to work. Their attitude to unionism also complicates the picture. While most of the teachers involved declined promotions, fifty-five women members were unwilling to strike on behalf of their dismissed colleagues. With the exception of Hannah Williams, a member of the NUT Executive who put forward the union's stance, and Mrs Richards of the Education Committee who supported the dismissals, very few women took part in the public meetings, though the proprietor of *Y Gwladgarwr*, Liberal, Mrs Mary S. (Walter) Lloyd, spoke at the Trecynon meeting. She claimed to represent 'the womanhood of Aberdare' and said that the married teachers were 'entitled to continuity of tenure'.⁴⁹

With regard to personal circumstances and responses, the sources only shed light on the stories of the five members who had appealed the decision via the union. Hardly anything is known of the other seventeen women involved, but one Labour member of the Education Committee claimed that they were more likely to suffer hardship than the five claimants.⁵⁰ Of the five, it was said that Mrs M. A. Elizabeth Keast would be most affected by the loss of pension. Married to the treasurer of the local NUT branch and originally appointed jointly with her husband as part of a married team, she sent several letters to the Tenure Committee, later published in *The Schoolmaster*, which reflect her dismay and anger.⁵¹ Referring to the termination notice, she wrote, '... after a lifetime spent in the service of the children and the people, this the thanks-offering of the people's representatives'.⁵² The women had been advised by the union to seek work outside of Aberdare; if unable to obtain posts outside the district within three months they could apply for a further three months' grant. However, at the end of the three months Mrs Keast wrote, '... as I shall be 65 next, it would be perfectly useless applying for another situation. Please accept my sincere thanks for the action taken on my behalf and the other four who have been so unjustly treated.' The committee agreed to send a letter of sympathy, but no further grant.⁵³

The impact of the dismissals on women and families becomes apparent after October. Sustainment payments to Mrs E. Griffiths and Mrs Margaret Williams were also stopped at that time. Mrs Griffiths stated that she 'could not see her way to make applications for the present' while Mrs Williams pointed out the difficulty of obtaining a post in Aberdare and asked (in

vain) for time to consider matter. In February 1909 this well-respected Infant headmistress was honoured at a reception at Cwmaman school. It was stated that she had left in August, but no mention was made that she had been forced to resign without her pension. She was highly praised for her contribution to the community and urged to return to her previous role as a Poor Law Guardian. Although she did not promise to do so, she acknowledged that she would now have more to time 'to assist her husband in his public work'.⁵⁴

Mrs A. N. Jenkins secured a post at Ystradfellte, Breconshire, commencing in October, at a lower salary than she had earned at Aberdare. The NUT made up the difference for the three months ending 31 January 1909. Later, the post came to an end and she was still applying for work in June. In July, she abandoned her search and her payments ended.⁵⁵ Mrs Jenkins remained active in public life and, in 1920, as a local councillor, was awarded an OBE for her contribution to the war effort.⁵⁶

Mrs M. A. Jones appealed to the Tenure Committee for continued payments in order to keep her son at Goldsmiths college, where he was training to be a teacher. She wrote that, 'notwithstanding many applications', she had failed to obtain another teaching position and had '... accepted a post as caretaker of the Bute Dock offices of the Cardiff Railway Co.'. She continued,

... For this I am paid a weekly wage of £1. Under these circumstances I write to enquire whether the Union can continue to see their way to continue their sustentation at a reduced figure having regard to present earnings. I am deeply grateful for the assistance which I have already received from the Union, without which I dread to think what I could have done to enable me to maintain my son at college. My youngest son ... has been accepted as a Normal student at Aberystwyth, and he will enter in September provided I can make the necessary arrangements for the maintenance of the two boys at college.

The committee decided, on the casting vote of the chairman, that it could not make further grants to Mrs Jones, thus ending the involvement of the NUT with the Aberdare case.⁵⁷

A report in the *Aberdare Leader* reveals that the two women teachers, 'installed as assistants' by the Education Committee on 9 September, A. Lewis, Aberaman and Jane Evans, Amman Mixed School, were married teachers whose services were being retained. Mrs Lewis's husband had died in July and Mrs Evans' husband, it was said, 'had deserted her'. Interestingly, Jackson Thomas was influential in moving the motion to (re)employ them, and received support from Mr W. Thomas and Mrs Richards in

gaining the agreement of the committee.⁵⁸ So some degree of sympathy was eventually shown; however, it could be argued that they were, in effect, single women.

Conclusion

In so far as is known, Aberdare was the first case dealt with by the NUT in which married women were dismissed by an LEA on 'the singular condition of their being married' and the first instance in Wales relating to Council schools where married women teachers in service were dismissed wholesale without being allowed to work until their pension date.⁵⁹ During the years which followed, other cases of dismissal or threatened dismissal were brought to the NUT's attention by individual married teachers, including in Wales. Several LEAs passed resolutions which, over time, enabled them to dispense with the services of married women, purportedly on 'educational grounds', and the issue again became a matter of debate when married women were needed to fill vacancies caused by the outbreak of war in 1914.⁶⁰ By 1909, possibly influenced by its experience in the Aberdare case, the NUT's stance was that it would not be able to interfere in the operation of the marriage bar in Council schools.⁶¹ Married women continued to be employed in Voluntary schools, including in Aberdare, and it was not until the 1920s that LEAs had the powers to dismiss married women from these schools.

The Aberdare case is significant in that it illustrates how easily gender issues could result in friction in education. Mindful of the antipathy of most men and the ambivalence of some women towards married women as wage earners, the NUT approached the case as one of teachers' security of tenure, the extent of their employers' powers and of union solidarity, and sought to avoid the divisive question of married women's right to work. Every speech, motion, appeal and resolution relating to the matter included a disclaimer regarding the question of employing married teachers. At no time in the campaign was women's right to work argued for collectively (at least this argument is not recorded as having been put forward), though the occasional individual voiced the view that women enjoyed their work, were good at it and through it made a valuable contribution to the community. Focusing on hardship, the NUT portrayed the women as 'our distressed sisters' rather than as capable professionals who had a right to choose to earn an independent wage after marriage.⁶²

The debate in Aberdare engaged only partly with the question of whether the dismissals were valid 'on educational grounds', but the issue of certification complicated that of gender and the LEA's action was seen by its supporters as part of its reforming agenda. It was generally accepted that the teachers concerned had fulfilled their duties well. Some were highly praised and their experience valued, but the prevailing argument was that employing young, college trained teachers, who needed jobs, would raise educational standards.

The arguments put forward by labour spokesmen were consistently framed in the context of the male breadwinner. Indeed, there was no challenge by male speakers or commentators on either side of the divide to the traditional view that a woman's place was in the 'natural' sphere of her home, despite the fact that several of the women involved had worked alongside them in schools and organisations. As the Welsh Liberal weekly, *Tarian y Gweithiwr*, published in Aberdare, declared on the eve of the dismissals, 'Mae y ferch sydd yn cadw tŷ yn bwysicach merch i'r gymdeithas na'r ferch sydd yn cadw ysgol'⁶³ ('The woman who keeps a house is more valuable to society than the woman who keeps a school'). This assumption underlay the debate and confirms Oram's (1996) view that the prevailing ideology about women's proper sphere was a key factor in the application of the marriage bar in education. In the course of the debates, derisive comments about the personal finances of double income households, laughter and innuendo regarding the age, marital situation and conduct of individual women reveal the negative attitudes of men towards women earners. Some derogatory language was reported; in one instance, the Education Committee chairman, T. Walter Williams, was forced to apologise for referring to one of the teachers as a 'grass widow'.⁶⁴

On both sides of debate, constant comparisons were drawn between teachers and other workers. For socialist participants in particular, the focus was on unionism. The strength and unity of the Miners' Federation was regularly contrasted with the perceived weakness of the NUT, illustrated by its failure to include uncertificated teachers in the union, while the NUT attacked the councillors for their willingness to employ 'blackleg' labour in the affected schools.⁶⁵ In this climate, teachers' leaders, such as Matt Lewis, were in a difficult position; in working with the NUT's Executive, they had to oppose their own party locally. The culture within the socialist movement in Aberdare was changing (Wright, 2016: 122–30), and it is probable that the issue exacerbated tensions between 'white collar' unionists and the miners and manual workers, though efforts were made

to emphasise solidarity by drawing parallels with other workers' campaigns.⁶⁶ Local NUT members were themselves not entirely united on the marriage issue nor on their union's handling of the campaign, but, despite some disagreements, overall, socialist and Liberal teachers, men and women, co-operated with the union and put up an united front.

It is difficult to find evidence of the Labour women's stance as a group. At this time, Aberdare's socialist women were not yet fully asserting themselves within the male dominated culture (Wright, 2016: 123–7). But given that the formation of a women's ILP branch coincided with the LEA's resolution, it is tempting to speculate that the matter would have been on their agenda. Matt Lewis' wife was a member, and the secretary was Florence Rose Rees, a local teacher, labour activist and suffrage supporter who, on 5 August 1908 married another teacher, Ted Davies. Rose Davies, as she became known, had to leave teaching at the same time as her married colleagues were dismissed. She was co-opted on to the Education Committee the following year and later became first woman chair of the council. Referring to her early career, she made it clear that working in a gendered profession where women were not equal was a formative political experience (Masson, 2003; 2005: 77). Although feminist voices do not appear prominently in the historical record of the events of the summer of 1908, it can be argued that the 'furore' contributed to the growth of a feminist consciousness on the part of Aberdare NUT women, both socialist and Liberal. During the war they became more visible as a group and, in 1916, after their male colleagues refused to support their call for strike action over more equal pay, formed a branch of the NFWT.⁶⁷

The divisions which came to the fore in Aberdare in 1908 highlighted the tensions of a changing society in which education and work were of central importance. The debate over the dismissals reverberated well beyond the classroom and tested the unity of the NUT, the labour movement and women's solidarity with each other. Involving gender roles, trade unionism and educational standards, it foresaw the struggles of the inter-war years over the employment of married women in teaching. One of the best known examples in the history of education took place in south Wales; the high profile court case fought and lost by a group of dismissed married women teachers who challenged the Rhondda Urban District Council in 1923. Many of the arguments which surrounded it had been rehearsed years earlier in Aberdare and several features of the Aberdare case are evident in Rhondda in 1922–4, not least the growing power of the alliance of industrial trade unionism with local Labour politicians in

influencing education policy and the dilemma the issue caused for the NUT. Attacks on married women continued, but by the time that other 'fight' took place, women's voices were more clearly heard and at least some participants in that drama argued for married women's right to work.⁶⁸

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Notes

- 1 Glamorgan Archives D/D 1/ 2, AVTA Minute Book, 14 May, 1909.
- 2 AVTA Minute Book, 15 June, 1908.
- 3 National Archives ED24/ 418, Board of Education Memorandum No. 16, 30 November 1909, p. 36.
- 4 As above.
- 5 Aberdare Public Library W.W. Price Collection, TU 1/4 *Aberdare Trades and Labour Council Jubilee Souvenir 1900–1950* by Arthur E. Stonelake.
- 6 Glamorgan Archives DXH J/2, Aberdare Socialist Society Papers, Aberdare Valley ILP.
- 7 Glamorgan Archives, Aberdare Education Committee Minute Book 2, 1906–10, 12 February, 1908.
- 8 Warwick Modern Records Centre NUT Tenure Committee Minutes, MSS 179, Volume 3, 20 March; Volume 4, 19 June 1908; *The Schoolmaster*, 27 June 1908. On 15 February the *Aberdare Leader* quoted 21 while discussions in the Education Committee reported on 16 May and a letter to the editor on 23 May put the total at 17.
- 9 AVTA Minute Book, Special Meeting 16 March 1908.
- 10 *Aberdare Leader*, 18 July 1908.
- 11 As above. Also, Aberdare Education Committee Minute Book 2, 1906–10, 11 March and 25 March; *Aberdare Leader*, 25 March; 11 April 1908.

20 Sian Rhiannon Williams

- 12 Aberdare Education Committee Minute Book 2, 1906–10, 12 February, 1908.
- 13 As above.
- 14 AVTA Minute Book, Special Meeting 16 March 1908.
- 15 Board of Education Memorandum, p. 41.
- 16 *The Schoolmaster*, 27 June 1908. The extent of LEA powers were in doubt following court rulings relating to Swansea and the West Riding in 1908. Board of Education Memorandum, 1909.
- 17 *The Schoolmaster*, 27 June 1908.
- 18 *Aberdare Leader*, 16 May 1908.
- 19 Aberdare Education Committee Minute Book 2, 1906–10, 13 May 1908; *Aberdare Leader*, 16 May 1908. Mrs AN Jenkins was president in 1907. AVTA Minute Book 18 January 1908; *The Schoolmaster*, 15 February 1908.
- 20 *Aberdare Leader*, 23 May 1908.
- 21 42 is quoted by the AVTA but some reports state 41. AVTA Minute Book, 15 May 1908.
- 22 AVTA Minute Book, 1 June 1908; *Aberdare Leader*, 25 July 1908.
- 23 AVTA Minute Book, 1 June 1908; *Weekly Mail*, 11 July 1908.
- 24 AVTA Minute Book, 15 June 1908.
- 25 The list appeared on the front page *The Schoolmaster* on 27 June and remained there until September. The schools affected were Abernant, Blaengwawr, Cwmaman, Cwmbach and Park.
- 26 AVTA Minute Book, 26 June 1908.
- 27 *Aberdare Leader*, 12 September 1908.
- 28 *Aberdare Leader*, 11 July 1908; Glamorgan Archives, D NUT 1, Aberdare NUT Notice of Meeting.
- 29 *Weekly Mail*, 11 July 1908.
- 30 NUT Tenure Committee Minutes, Volume 4, 17 July 1908.
- 31 *Aberdare Leader*, 11 July 1908.
- 32 AVTA Minute Book, 13 July 1908.
- 33 *Weekly Mail*, 1 August 1908. James Yoxall MP (NUT) to Walter Runciman, President of the Board of Education.
- 34 *Aberdare Leader*, 18, 25 July 1908.
- 35 *Aberdare Leader*, 25 July 1908 (advertisement column).
- 36 Based on reports and editorials, *Aberdare Leader* 11, 18, 25 July 1908.
- 37 *Aberdare Leader*, 25 July 1908.
- 38 Aberdare Education Committee Minute Book 2, 1906–10, 22 July 1908; *Aberdare Leader*, 25 July 1908.
- 39 *Aberdare Leader*, 8 August 1908 (statement dated 27 July).
- 40 According to the chairman of the Education Committee the branch had 140 members. See *Aberdare Leader*, 25 July 1908. The AVTA minute book states that there were 127 members in 1907 and 149 (including 25 new members in February 1909). Supposing the loss of the 8 married women by that time,

- membership in 1908 would have been 132. For result of ballot see NUT Tenure Committee Minutes, Volume 4, 4 September 1908 and AVTA Minute Book, 17 September 1908.
- 41 *Aberdare Leader*, 1 August 1908.
 - 42 *Aberdare Leader*, 8 August 1908.
 - 43 *Aberdare Leader*, 15 August 1908. NUT Tenure Committee Minutes, Volume 4, 4 September 1908.
 - 44 As above and AVTA Minute Book, 17 September 1908.
 - 45 AVTA Minute Book, 17 September 1908.
 - 46 The proportion of women to men is not known; 73 women of a total membership of approximately 140 voted.
 - 47 Glamorgan Archives, Aberdare UDC Education Committee, Minute Book 1, Individual Committees. School Management Committee, 29 May 1908: NUT Tenure Committee Minutes, Volume 4, 17 July 1908.
 - 48 NUT Tenure Committee Minutes, Volume 4, 17 July 1908; *Weekly Mail*, 1 August 1908.
 - 49 *Aberdare Leader*, 25 July 1908; Masson, op cit., p. 51.
 - 50 Letter by 'Peturbed', *Aberdare Leader*, 23 May 1908.
 - 51 *Aberdare Leader*, 16 May 1908. For original appointment see Glamorgan Archives E/SB/2/1 Aberdare School Board Minute Book, 1871–7, 2 May 1874.
 - 52 *The Schoolmaster*, 27 June, 1908
 - 53 NUT Tenure Committee Minutes, Volume 4, 16 October 1908.
 - 54 *Aberdare Leader*, 13 February 1909. Also known as Mrs J. A. Williams (her husband's initials), she was a long-term member of the AWLA. Masson, op. cit., p. 41.
 - 55 NUT Tenure Committee Minutes, Volumes 4 and 5, 16 October 1908–16 July 1909.
 - 56 Glamorgan Archives, D/D NUT 1/3 AVTA General Meeting Minute Book Volume 3, 31 January 1920.
 - 57 NUT Tenure Committee Minutes, Volume 4, 18 June and 17 September 1908.
 - 58 Aberdare Education Committee Minute Book 2, 9 September 1908; *Aberdare Leader*, 12 September 1908.
 - 59 Aberdare Education Committee Minute Book 2, 26 June 1908.
 - 60 Examples of appeals and debates include the case of Mrs Raffan of Monmouthshire, Warwick Modern Records Centre, NUT Welsh Committee Minutes Volume 1, MSS 179, EDU/1/40/1, 28 December 1911–17 February 1912; Mrs James of Newport, NUT Tenure Committee Minutes, Volume 8, 19 January 1912; For Glamorgan LEA, see *Weekly Mail*, 23 April 1910.
 - 61 Board of Education Memorandum 1909, p. 40.
 - 62 NUT Tenure Committee, Volume 4, 17 July 1908.
 - 63 *Tarian y Gweithiwr*, 30 Gorffennaf (July) 1908.
- 22 *Sian Rhiannon Williams*

The 'troublesome question of the married women teachers'

- 64 *Aberdare Leader*, 25 July 1908.
- 65 In its statement to ratepayers, the NUT's Special Committee expressed regret at not being able to support non-unionised teachers, due to union rules. *Aberdare Leader*, 8 August 1908.
- 66 *Aberdare Leader*, 18 July 1908.
- 67 Glamorgan Archives, D/D NUT 1/3, AVTA Minute Book 3, 20 October 1916–23 February 1917; D/D1/13, Thomas, S. J. and Davies, D. R. (eds), *1870–1970: Aberdare NUT Association Centenary*, Mountain Ash, Pryse Printers; Warwick Modern Records Centre, NUT Tenure Committee, Volume 66, 4 November 1916–17 March 1917.
- 68 Elizabeth Price and others vs. Rhondda Urban District Council, May 1924.