

**Mary Bousted, General Secretary**

**Independent School Conference**

**14 November 2009**



I am very pleased to be able to join you for ATL's annual Independent Schools Conference.

You have a stimulating day ahead with some very interesting and topical seminars on ATL's Pay & Conditions Survey, Working Time, and Bullying.

And this year's keynote address, on the new Vetting and Barring Scheme, could not be more topical....I am pleased to welcome the chairman of the Independent Safeguarding Authority, Sir Roger Singleton. We are pleased that members have the opportunity to ask questions directly to Sir Roger.

But, let's not forget that the conference also provides the important function of networking! I know that the competitive nature of independent schools can inhibit members from different schools talking to each other.

So now's your chance! Talk to colleagues and find out about policy and practice in their schools. Talk to members of the ATL Independent & Private Sector Advisory Group about policy issues you would like ATL to address. Talk to members of the professional staff about legal advice, how to organise members, and how to take issues forward in your school.

Today I am going to say a few words about:

- the issues addressed in the seminar groups
- the effect of the recession on the independent sector
- an exciting new ATL training partnership in the sector
- how you can help ATL to be effective in your school

There will be an opportunity for you to ask questions at the end.

This year, once again, we have had a terrific response from members to the annual ATL Pay & Conditions Survey. With over 1,500 members taking part, the survey is an authoritative snapshot of current conditions in the independent sector.

And the survey reveals a number of interesting findings! You will hear about these in more detail in the first **seminar group** but, I would like to highlight a couple of points.

Before addressing the current recession, I would like to make a comment on one thing that never goes away, workload! Once again, the survey revealed the excessively long hours worked in the sector. 65% of respondents report that they work more than the 48 hours per week, recommended by the European Union as the maximum that any employee should be obliged to work.

We all know that the culture of excessive working hours is a problem in the independent sector and, in particular boarding schools. Following on from ATL's legal victory at Malvern College for breaching the National Minimum Wage for house parents, ATL have successfully challenged a number of schools winning reduced hours and compensation.

So what can you do about excessive working hours in your school? The second seminar on Working Time will look at these issues in more detail.

The third seminar is on Bullying. Unfortunately, bullying in the workplace is a subject that is far too often brushed under the carpet. All employees have the right to be treated respectfully and ATL will challenge employers where this does not happen.

So what does the survey tell us about **the effect of the economic recession on the independent sector?**

Firstly, let me say, ATL are in a unique position to comment on the recession. ATL are we the largest trade union and professional association in the independent sector, with 20,000 members.

With members in 1,700 independent schools, ATL have significantly wider representation, than any other representative body – be it staff, management or employer.

The big picture is that the recession is adversely affecting a significant minority of independent schools, in some cases severely. But, we need to keep things in perspective. Many schools are unaffected and there are even schools who are prospering. The independent sector is robust and will emerge the current turbulence with little collateral damage.

But, of course, it may not feel like that if you are at the sharp end!

I know that, right now, ATL branch and regional officials are representing members faced with the threat of redundancy up and down the country.

I know from our ATL school reps that so far in 2009, 12 independent schools have closed, or are due to close, and a further 12 have merged or are due to merge before the end of the year.

One recently announced closure is Arundale School, West Sussex. Five ATL members will lose their jobs. For one unfortunate member this will be his second redundancy in this economic recession!

I know from the 1,500 members who recently took the trouble to complete the ATL Pay and Conditions Survey that a significant minority have seen pay freezes and in a small number of cases, even pay cuts.

Let me give you an example of one of the higher pay cuts we have seen. At Bolitho School, in Cornwall, staff, including ATL members, recently agreed to take a pay cut of 15% to keep the school open.

While ATL strongly opposes salary cuts, we are a member-led organisation, and it is for our members to make such decisions. But, such personal sacrifice should only be made where there has been full financial transparency. Because beware! There are some unscrupulous employers out there....

....think about how our members must feel at, Mowden Hall, Northumberland. In September, staff reluctantly agreed to a pay freeze on account of the financial circumstances of the school. Imagine how they felt when it emerged that the school had written to the parents to inform them that the school fees were going up 2.8% to pay for the staff's pay rise!

Let me reassure you: whenever they are under threat, ATL will vigorously defend your job, your career prospects, and your terms and conditions.

ATL will strenuously campaign for higher standards of employment in the sector. Where necessary, this has included publicising the names of some well-known, wealthy, independent school employers, who believe that it is reasonable to pay loyal, hard-working staff no more than the basic statutory redundancy payments, that even the corner shop is legally obliged to pay.

ATL will continue to doggedly lobby the government for a more rigorous test of ownership and management to prevent the undignified demise that has seen a number of independent schools close overnight, without notice to pupils, parents and staff.

But as my final words on the recession, I want to come back to my opening comments, we need to keep perspective.

The vast majority of independent schools remain financially successful. So ATL says to these school owners, the staff who have played a major role in creating that success, should share in it.

Now I want to talk to you about a very **exciting initiative that ATL is pioneering in the independent sector.**

ATL is a trade union and professional association. We put great emphasis on supporting our member's careers through professional development.

As many of you know, ATL led the way with our unique partnership with Edge Hill University.

This arrangement allows members to obtain qualifications ranging from foundation to masters degrees, whilst working, at greatly reduced rates. Courses are based on a flexible model of accreditation, including scope for research projects based on school practice to form part of the portfolio.

ATL negotiated a significant reduction in the cost of the courses for ATL members. For example, the standard cost of a masters degree is £3,960. The cost for an ATL member is £1,320.

ATL have now gone one step further by setting up a tri-partite partnership with Edge Hill University and the Girls Day School Trust, one of the leading independent sector employers, with 29 schools and two academies.

From September 2009, training days provided by the employer, GDST, can be accredited towards professional qualifications. GDST staff will be able to use the training days as part of a portfolio of work that can be submitted for accreditation by Edge Hill University towards postgraduate and undergraduate qualifications.

This is an exciting and innovative partnership and one which demonstrates ATL's commitment to furthering our members' careers and to working with independent school employers.

Finally, I would like to leave you with two thoughts on **what can you do to help make ATL more effective in your school.**

Firstly, hopefully, the conference programme will stimulate you to continue the conversation in your school or college.

You could start, as I know many of you already do, by reporting back to colleagues the various discussion had here today.

The next step is to identify and take forward the issues which are most important to colleagues. Use the ATL resources and networks of support to begin to address the issue.

Is workload excessive? You and your fellow ATL members might decide to use ATL's *Worklife Balance Toolkit* to survey members on workload.

How about putting on a learning event? You can find out more today by talking to one of ATL's Organisers. You might want to use ATL's Learning Needs Survey to look at professional development.

Is bullying a problem for staff in your school? Well, ATL can help you tackle it either head on or by perhaps raising general awareness of the issue on a general context through promoting a policy on bullying.

Secondly, talk to non-members. New members are the life blood of the organisation. And what is the main reason that non-members give as to why they are not in a union? – They have never been asked!

You don't need to know all the answers to know that in the present litigious and, difficult economic climate, school staff cannot afford to be without the protection of a union.

Talk to your colleagues at school and, if they are not in a union, suggest that they join ATL. And remember that *all staff* working in an independent school are eligible to join ATL.

For those of you who read *the Guardian*, you will know that their literary critic John Crace does a *digested read* and a *digested digested read* of newly published books.

So here is the *digested read* on why non-members should join ATL in the independent sector:

ATL is the only union to provide all of the following solely for members in the independent sector:

- Staff solely dedicated to the independent sector
- An elected member group advising the ATL Executive, IPSAG
- Newsletters, such as *Independent Schools*
- Publications, such as *ATL's Guide To Working in the Independent Sector*
- Conferences, such as the ATL Independent School Conference
- Training, such as Being Our Independent School Rep

And the *digested digested read*:

- ATL is the biggest, best resourced, and most effective union in the independent sector