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Spring 1998

New Labour's determination to think the unthinkable goes on unchecked. Having eagerly embraced the Tory education reform they so bitterly opposed in opposition, it now seems the Government are prepared to go much further than the Tories ever dared. It is now emerging that Labour is toying with the idea of introducing the privatising of state run schools.

The Labour government plans to set up 25 "education action zones", each with about 20 schools, in areas where pupils do "badly". A committee made up of parents, teachers, councillors and businesses will control each zone. Schools in the action zones may be allowed to drop the national curriculum and teachers' unions national agreed pay and conditions.

If these proposals were not bad enough, it was announced at this year's North of England Education Conference in Bradford, that Labour is considering allowing private firms to take over the complete running of schools in action zones. It was later disclosed that Labour has been holding behind-the-scenes discussions with a number of private companies. Those firms expressing an interest in taking over the running of schools include Nord Anglia, a stockmarket listed education conglomerate, which owns a chain of

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private schools; CfBT, a firm that runs careers advice services and carries out school inspections; and Capita, a management service firm.

Like much of Labour's thinking, the idea of privatising schools was developed in the USA. The private company, Education Alternative, recently won contracts to operate 12 schools in Arizona. At the same time, an increasing number of the new "charter schools", which are publicly funded but are run independently of local school boards, have been handed over to the private sector – two of which were a firm making soap and a management services firm. Given that the Democrats' aim is to create 3,000 charter schools, the scope for school privatisation is massive.

The growing threat of privatisation in the USA has resulted in the merger of the two biggest teaching unions, the moderate National Education Association, with 2.3m members and the more militant American Federation of Teachers, with a membership of 950,000. The result is the largest trade union by far in the USA. However, as we have found in Britain, creating bigger unions does not in itself lead to greater power. Let us hope that in this case it does, and that the new teachers' union is able to prevent the handing over the minds of children to big business.