

STUDENTS ARE REVOLTING: EDUCATION CUTS AND RESISTANCE

Dave Hill

Students are Revolting

Students are revolting! And quite right too. From the 52,000 strong demo in Westminster on Nov. 10th (which went via the Millbank Tory Party HQ- not your average day at the office!) to disciplined and organized student occupations, sit-ins and teach-ins at Leeds, Manchester, Sussex, Middlesex and other Universities, through subsequent Days of Action, to student protests across Europe- Paris, Lisbon, Athens, Dublin. Saying, chanting, acting, demanding, 'No to Education Cuts', 'No to (increased) Charges for Education', 'Education should be Free!' The 10 Nov demo, organized by the National Union of Students and the college lecturers union, UCU, was the biggest student demonstration in a generation.

The next round was Weds 24 Nov, 'Day X'. Students at universities, further education colleges, Sixth Forms and secondary schools walked out, and demonstrating against cuts and tuition fees, in a national day of action. Some marched on their local Tory party offices, just as 300 students and trade unionists in Barnet marched earlier on the local Tory Party HQ in Finchley!

The next 'Day X' is the day of the vote in Parliament on 9 Dec 2010 over the fees increase. There'll be another massive demonstration. The Facebook group 'Tuition Fee Vote: March on Parliament' had 2,300 'attending' within 45 minutes of being set up! Students and Workers realize this is a common struggle- Day X is supported by the three main anti-cuts umbrella organisations, The NSSN (National Shop Stewards Network), the RtW (Right to Work campaign) and the CoR (Campaign of Resistance) whose 27 Nov London rally of 1300 brought together organizations, socialist/ Marxist parties and groups, national organizations, local anti-cuts groups, students and school students.

One of the most remarkable and inspiring speeches, by 15 year old Barnaby, on Youtube at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CrgzpPvJxmQ&feature=player_embedded#! Explicitly linked the student struggle to wider struggles and workers struggles.

This time round, students are saying much more than 'No Fees'. Saying and chanting 'Students and Workers Unite and Fight', 'We are Part of a Wider Struggle!' A recognition that our struggle is a common struggle for a better, a fairer, not a diminished and crueler, society. Facebook sites such as 'School and FE students Against the Cuts' have brilliant, basic, bold slogans- 'Education for the masses not just for the ruling classes!'

What the banker's crisis, the current crisis of neoliberal capitalism, 'making the workers pay for the crisis', the millionaire Con-Dem millionaire government is doing, is stoking raw anger. Not just among mainly middle class university students, but among working class students at Further Education colleges and Sixth Form colleges.

Raw Anger

There is raw anger at the withdrawal of Education Maintenance Allowances (EMAs) that are currently for low-income working class kids to stay on and study from the ages of 16-19, worth up to £30 per week. Now they are to be scrapped. Nationally 46% of Further Education students get EMAs. In poorer areas like Knowsley, Birmingham and Leicester the figure is 80%. Those affected are kids like members of my family. My grandson is one of hundreds of thousands of working class, low parental income kids, who could not have afforded to stay on to do A levels without the EMA. Millions of working class families will see their EMA support abolished. This is nearly 50 years on from when I received the staying on at school grant that I got as a working class kid staying on at Sixth Form in the 1960s. I couldn't have stayed on without that grant. Now, almost half a century on, neither will millions of others. This is part of cutting back the social democratic advances won by the trade unions and working class after the second world war. The fight is to save the last vestiges of our post-war social democratic settlement starts here! One benefit, one part of 'the social wage', is being taken away. This is the deliberate culling of educational opportunity.

So, too, is the trebling of fees for university students following the Con-Dem government's acceptance of the Browne Review. The cap of £3,000 a year tuition fees has been raised to a maximum of £9,000 a year fees! The most expensive state university fees in the world. Leaving students with a projected post-university degree debt of £38,000, that will, inevitably cut out poorer families. And so there is disgust among students at the bankers taking their millions in bonuses while other families agonise over the spiralling cost of what... getting educated!

The Class System and Education

Schooling, education, universities, even as early as nurseries, serve to sort people out- their futures, their minds. To reproduce the class system. It's not what the official rhetoric claims of course, and it's certainly not what teachers and lecturers want. But the actual intent of the ruling/capitalist class is for education to create and reproduce a hierarchically tiered and very differentially rewarded workforce. That's the economic aim. It's all about sifting and sorting and allocating- on a (raced and gendered) social class basis, 'education for the economy'. Little else is deemed important for the masses. Ah- and mind-control- education as an 'ideological state apparatus'. Yes, the social and political aim is a socially compliant citizenry. To teach us all our very different places. In the words of one senior civil servant, 'people must be educated once more to know their place'. And, to use The French Marxist Louis Althusser's distinction between the Ideological State Apparatuses (mainly nowadays, the mass media and the education system, formerly mainly organized religions) and the Repressive State Apparatuses (the Laws themselves, the Police, the Armed Forces, Surveillance and Control mechanisms, state force), where the Ideological State Apparatuses don't work- then the police kettle students and protesters, charge demonstrators on horses (I remember that from the Grunwick Strike in 1977), and use their batons. The smiley face of the police officer leading/ liaising with marchers, organizers, demos in Brighton over the last few years is replaced by visored, shield bearing and baton wielding riot police.

In the capitalist world, education is differentially funded on a class basis, with different expectations, life chances, and personality characteristics being encouraged and reproduced. In a nutshell, (most) upper class kids get to private schools and elite universities. There, they are trained for the Bullingdon Boy, Eton educated Cameron style of leadership, wealth and power. Born- and educated- to power.

Most 'middle class' kids go to schools that are in some way, formally or informally socially and academically selective, and are trained for lower professions and supervisory and managerial jobs. Around half of my grammar school Upper Sixth form in 1963 went on to become teachers. I don't think any of my twin brother's secondary school classmates who had left school at 15 went on to become teachers. Most went straight into the manual job market.

Most 'working class' kids go to the middle and bottom rungs of the ladder of educational schools, expectations and opportunity. Trained for skilled manual, semi and unskilled and routine jobs, earning (in most cases) a fraction of the ruling / upper/capitalist class. Some don't. Most do. There is some (ever-diminishing) social mobility of course, it legitimates the system and gives the illusion of meritocracy. And, for some, better funded lives.

Most, if not all, of the 'working class', live poorer, sometimes far, far poorer, more materially circumscribed lives, being educated not to expect too much, to obey, to accept life's inequalities, to accept mind-numbing 'celebrity culture' as a substitute for real news and critique. Cameron's millionaire cabinet (18 millionaires in the Cabinet) think £30,000 a year is poverty! Tell that to the millions on £15,000 or on minimum wage or on benefits! Who know what being hard-up means on a daily basis.

Some, especially in the Tory party, want to bring back grammar schools. Tell that to the millions who got a second-rate education, second-rate funding, second-rate libraries and less qualified teachers in secondary schools compared with the lucky 20% who got into grammar school.

Yes, I was lucky, passing the 11-plus and getting a first-rate education at a Grammar School, encouraged to reach for the stars, study until the age of 21, and set professional ambitions. I went on to become a university professor of education: not the lifestyle of a banker or billionaire, but very comfortable.

Not so for millions who were separated out for a second-rate education system – like my twin brother, who went to local Secondary Schools.

Most working class kids in the 1960s were ejected at age 15 into factory, shop and building site work. Nothing wrong with that work, but manual workers, then as now, get far less in pay, pensions and benefits than the more highly qualified. Of course, both sets of workers – manual and professional – then and now get paid a tiny fraction compared to the ruling class, "the masters of the universe", mostly educated at private schools, inheriting and passing on privilege.

That was when I was a teenager, half a century ago. But it's now, too. At school level, with the market in schools, a socially differentiated system where schools choose the kids rather than parents choosing schools for their kids. And class-based, too. With the abolition of EMAs, more so! With more and more working class kids dropping out of education because they can't afford to stay in it!

And so too at University. In addition to having a three tier higher education system (elite/ Russell Group universities; other old universities; and a third tier, much more working class, tier of ex-polytechnics). There will be less of them, there will be less working class kids going to universities when fees are raised. The culling of educational opportunity. So people will once again not only know their place, but will be less able to change places!

Resistance

But people resist! Students are rebelling! Some trade unions are resisting cuts! And many teachers, students, workers, retirees, have visions of different utopias, past, present and future. Some remember the hopes and visions of the welfare state, of a free education and health service, free at the point of delivery, available on the basis of need not ability to pay. And some of us want better than that! Not its destruction.

Divisive and divided education for conformity is resisted! Many resist! Many teachers/ lecturers/ `teacher trainers'/students/ families resist magnificently! (I've been involved in teacher education for forty years, I see it). Many try day in day out to raise expectations, refusing to label and stereotype and demean kids from particular class and ethnic backgrounds. The best teachers and lecturers, and other cultural/media workers, try, teach, show that we, and that kids' and students' futures, need not just be as compliant cogs in an economic machine.

Many- and it will become millions!- not only want but see the possibilities of a far better, far fairer, far more socially just, far more equal education system, society, politics and economy. Students- and anti-cuts campaigns and groups up and down the country- are prepared to struggle and demonstrate and organize. We've got to change this educational and social and economic system. And we can. But not with any of the current main parties!

All three of them want to/ accept slash and burn the welfare state, to reverse hard won historical rights and benefits. That's where socialist groups and parties and anti-cuts campaigns come in. For me, a way forward is TUSC, the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition, and local anti-cuts movements and coalitions- including the example of the students at Sussex University and other universities, sitting in, teaching-in, joining workers and trade unionists on our marches and demos.

One of the brilliant speeches at the CoR rally was by John McDonnell, one of the very few remaining socialist MPs left (available online at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nI0PMdUMOPw&feature=player_embedded). `This generation was meant to be apathetic, only interested in careers.... They've taught my generation, that we have been too long on our knees. And it's time to stand up and fight. You students (who were arrested during Millbank and the kettling) You are not the criminals... The real criminals are the ones attacking our education system... say this to the TUC, it is time to play your role! We want co-ordinated industrial action, co-ordinated strike action across the country. It is time for generalized strike action. We are posing an alternative.... When Parliament refuses to represent. When

politicians lie. When governments seek to ignore us... We have no other alternative but to take to the streets. And direct action to bring them down. Take to the streets’.

Local anti-cuts movements, occupations, sit-ins, demonstrations, and national coalitions such as TUSC, if they are organised democratically, can bring together workers, trade unionists, different socialist groups, students, teachers, OAPs- the people!- black, white, men, women, people of all religions and sexualities- in a common fight for equality. The struggle is wider than just over education!

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