

Defending Education

London Bookfair report

As part of the series of discussions during this year's London Anarchist Bookfair, one discussion centred around issues facing workers in the education sector, particularly in light of the recession, and cuts being made left, right and centre.

The discussion "Defend Jobs and Services in Education - How should Education Workers respond?" was organised and hosted by the Education Workers' Network (EWN). The EWN is an industrial network of Solidarity Federation (SF), comprised of SF members who work in the education sector. The session was intended to provide an opportunity for education workers to speak out against the ongoing process of cuts and job losses in education, but also included a student activist talking about how students can support education workers in struggle. This was followed by an open debate on practical action.

Education Workers Network

A speaker from EWN opened the session by giving a brief run-down of the current attacks on the education sector. Against the backdrop of the recession, workers in all sectors, including education, are facing cuts in their standards of living. Often this is taking the form of below-inflation 'pay rises', effectively pay cuts in real terms. Recent struggles, such as the occupation of London Metropolitan University (London Met) and the strike of the Tower Hamlets College workers, highlight the need for vigilance from education workers, and underline the need to fight back against the aggressive attacks on workers' pay and conditions by bosses in the sector.

Earlier this year it was forecast that up to 100 higher education (HE) institutions in the UK would be expecting to make job cuts in the coming year – that's two-thirds of HE workplaces, a shocking statistic. Meanwhile, £65million has been cut from the HE budget, while at the same time, government wants 10,000 more students to take university places. This means more students, with less staff to teach them, and less money to pay for it – a grim state of affairs.

The EWN speaker made clear that education workers cannot place their confidence in the unions. The unions are often very happy to take the first offer in struggles and claim it as a victory eg. Tower Hamlets, where many workers thought they could hold out to save many of the English-language courses, but in the end

settled for 'no compulsory redundancies' (see Tower Hamlets interview pg 8).

Of course there are alternatives, even within the current system, to cuts. At a time when bankers receive record bonuses and failing banks are bailed out to the tune of billions of pounds, it is clear that a system that would run its public services into the ground, attacking education, health and transport workers, is rotten to the core.

EWN proposes a multi-faceted approach to fighting back. Workers should agitate for strike action in their workplaces where they can, not waiting for the unions to do it for them. Secondly, education workers should be producing propaganda, discussing the issues affecting workers in the sector, and highlighting ways of fighting back. Thirdly, workers in the sector should be forging links with workers taking action in other sectors, sharing ideas, providing solidarity and learning from the efforts of others.

The EWN speaker concluded by saying that it is essential that anarchists get involved in these fights in their workplace – this is a fight we must win.

Autonomous Students' Network

Next up was a representative from the Autonomous Students' Network (ASN). The primary thrust of this portion was on the ways in which student-staff solidarity can be built, in particular, the ways in which students can support staff in struggles. Clear examples of this exist in some of the aforementioned examples – in Tower Hamlets, students took part in the marches and rallies, and refused to cross picket lines; in London Met, it was students that occupied the building for several days in May over job cuts in teaching staff.

The ASN speaker spoke of difficulties he had in getting in touch with union activists, even just to get information about pickets, and ways in which students could lend support to staff in struggle. An essential point was made that students and staff clearly have shared interests in fighting back against cuts. Students want the best quality of teaching that they can get – education doesn't benefit from sacking staff, or forcing less staff to teach more pupils, diluting the quality of education for students, and increasing the workload for staff. The recession is also being used to bring into being the highest fees any of us have seen in HE. More than a half of

university vice-chancellors surveyed this year want a minimum £5,000 per-year fee for university study, with many wanting as much £20,000. In Belfast, Queens want to push it to £10,000 per year! It's worth bearing in mind that the people seeking to enact these attacks on education are people that benefited during times when HE was free!

Discussion

Discussion opened to the floor, picking up on issues that the speakers had raised, and raising some novel topics. A further education (FE) worker emphasised that the attacks were across all aspects of education; primary, secondary, FE, HE and adult-learning. The point was made that in fighting back against these cuts, many workers and students feel isolated or atomised. This reinforces the point made by EWN about getting effective propaganda out there, and actively building links with those of common-interest.

Several EWN members spoke about their personal experiences of organising in their workplaces. A common theme was the ineffective nature of the unions in many cases, with poor visibility in many workplaces and even simple things like union notice-boards for disseminating information being difficult to come by. While much of the conversation was regarding negative aspects of workplaces, there were some common elements that provide a way forward and a glimmer of hope.

People ARE becoming aware of the attacks being made across sectors. Education worker in particular, are conscious of the cuts coming their way, if not already experiencing them. The proposed tactics of increasing visibility and propaganda, combined with agitating for action in workplaces does suggest a way forward. The examples of link-building between workers and communities in struggle are an inspiration to all fighting to improve their lives – for example, the Lewisham School occupiers that visited the Visteon and Vestas occupations. While workers and communities taking action to fight back against cuts emphasise the need to keep fighting - the mothers of children in Glasgow and Greenwich taking action to fight against schools closure, and the Tower Hamlets College workers striking and improving their conditions, are just a few examples of people taking collective action to oppose the attacks on people during the current crisis.

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EDUCATION NEWS IN BRIEF

London College of Communication Occupied

As The Leveller goes to press, students from London College of Communication (LCC) had occupied their Main Lecture Theatre over changes implemented by senior management. Reports on Indymedia indicate that on the evening on 9 November, the group, 'Oppose' had occupied the building. Oppose were formed at the end of the academic year 08/09 in light of the 'efficiency programme' proposed by a newly-employed head. The programme presents 16 courses to be cut and approximately 180 staff to be made redundant.

The Student Union and the University and Colleges Union held a meeting on the campus and afterwards over 100 students furiously stormed the head of college's office on Tuesday 27th October, demanding answers. Oppose began to build momentum following this and after a successful meeting; with guest lectures from the Tower Hamlets College, the UCU and NUS representatives, students decided to take action by occupying the Main Lecture Theatre. Sleeping over night, management threatened to bring in Police to remove individuals from the campus unless they left. The students remained.

Morale is said to be high amongst the occupiers and they are welcoming of support locally and beyond. More information about the occupation can be found at

<http://lccoppose.blogspot.com/>

Messages of support can be sent to lccoppose@gmail.com

Unions ballot on end to primary SATS

Teaching unions are to ballot on ending SATs testing at primary level. The National Union of Teachers (NUT) and the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) are opposed to SATs testing at primary level, as they were to SATs at secondary level. Secondary SATs were abolished in 2008 after a fiasco surrounding the outsourcing of marking to a private company. The NUT's indicative ballot on SATs opened on 2 November and closes at midday on 30 November 2009.

The NUT is asking its members to vote for members to support a proposed boycott of primary SATs, citing three main reasons for opposing them:

1. They narrow the curriculum
2. They create the tyranny of league tables
3. They cause unnecessary stress to children, parents and teachers.