

**Teacher challenges unfair dismissal** - Threatened strike action in March from teachers in an east London school resulted in a teacher winning a significant pay-off after challenging unfair dismissal. Adrian Swain, sacked for wearing trainers and tracksuit bottoms to school, worked at St Paul's Way Community School in Tower Hamlets. Fired for persistently failing to follow the head's instructions to dress more professionally Swain, a teacher of 35 years, was believed to have been victimised for his union activity.

Members of the National Union of Teachers (NUT) in the school overwhelmingly voted in favour of a solidarity walkout that would have closed the school. Prior to the walkout, Swain was awarded about a year's salary, tax free, in compensation which he accepted as he was about two years from retirement.

**Possible Sats Boycott** - NUT and National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) are expected to get overwhelming 'yes' votes when they push for a boycott of the primary level version of the Sats tests. Sats are used for 11 year olds at the end of primary school, and until 2008, were used for 4 year olds at the end of the secondary Key Stage 3 phase. Scrapped at Key Stage 3 in 2008 after the shoddy handling of marking by ETS Europe, a private firm, resulted in prolonged stress for pupils through delaying of marks. Many teachers feel that 'teaching to the test' places unreasonable amounts of pressure on children and teachers, and that prescriptive testing leaves even less room in an already crowded curriculum to do practical, interactive or hands-on work across a variety of subjects. The National Association of Schoolmasters and Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) however, have threatened to strike if primary Sats *are* abolished as they fear it will result in an increased workload through in-house assessment.

**Pupils protest over Non-Uniform Day ban** - School pupils in Hounslow, London, staged a protest in March over the removal of one of their annual 'Non-Uniform Day' events. On March 13th hundreds of school students at Hounslow Manor School protested and police were called to break up disturbances. Two students were reported to have been arrested, and a teacher was injured in a scuffle.

**Parents occupy threatened schools** - Parents at several primary schools in Glasgow have been staging occupations as part of the Save Our Schools Campaign. Wyndford Primary and St. Gregory's Primary Wyndford, in the Maryhill area of Glasgow, are threatened with closure by Glasgow City Council. As we go to press two more schools have been occupied.

**Swedish pupils strike over staff cuts** - 400 pupils at a school in a suburb of Gothenburg, Sweden went on strike in March after angry parents got the message that half the school staff were to be sacked due to the economic crisis and estimates of falling pupil numbers.

# The Recession: What It Means For Education

The recession is everywhere we look, in this very paper there are many articles reporting on, and discussing, the widespread and varied effects of the 'economic downturn' across all sectors. Education is feeling this sharply – whether you're a school pupil, a university student, a teacher, a lecturer, a researcher, a library worker, an admin clerk, a canteen worker, or whatever, you have probably been confronted with the real effects of the current economic situation. This brief analysis of the effects of recession on education also includes the views of some students and former students about the recession, and what it means for education.

## STUDENT FEES – PAYING FOR THE 'PRIVILEGE'

If you're a university boss in a recession what's the first thing you do when you're short of money? As well as attacks on workers' pay and conditions, and department closures, you can always bleed more money from students. A survey of university vice chancellors this year found that more than half want a minimum annual tuition fee of £5,000.

Managing the recession ideologically is proving difficult for the government and bosses; it's hard for them to hide just how bad this crisis is. With some universities on the brink of financial ruin prior to the recession, and many more under even more economic stress now, they're telling us the money has to come from somewhere. On one hand, they're blaming the economic crisis on silly people borrowing 'beyond their means' and crazy bankers lending recklessly, on the other they're telling students, who make up almost half of 17-30 year olds, to embrace even higher debts!

But hey, it's a recession; we all have to make sacrifices, right? Well, this is the position of the useless National Union of Students. They recently abandoned a long-standing basic demand for free higher education. With growing economic pressure on university students, the significance of the fees issue is that in the current economic climate and with the precarity facing all of us, the most basic demands that a student's union, however useless, should make, should be one of free education.

Free education isn't even a radical demand – we *had* free university education until a decade ago when it was taken from us, and we shouldn't forget that many of the people who brought in fees, and who make decisions about our

lives without our say, every day, benefited from a free university education. It's not clear what the NUS actually envisages a graduate tax looking like, or whether it would amount to the same as current fees, or proposed fees increases - their position currently is just an objection to paying at 'point of entry'.

The notion that student fees are an issue only for the 'middle class' is nonsense. At a time when the government is close to its 50% university attendance goal, university is no longer the pursuit of an elite. With regards the perceived exclusivity of higher education in the UK, former student John makes the point that increasing fees can only serve to further widen the gap between rich and poor in access to university - 'if you're upset about a small number of people having access to uni, making people pay to go isn't going to increase access to it is it? Especially as it's just the thin end of the wedge. First no grants, then low fees, means tested, then higher fees, means tested, and eventually astronomical fees, with no means testing, like the US.'

Alex, a student teacher in Oxford says 'education for its own sake is something that is seriously under attack here', although a cynic would say education for education's sake was already a thing of the past!

Year on year there is a steady rise in the number of hours students are working part-time to support themselves financially while studying. The situation for working class students is getting worse. A degree was never a guarantee of a stable job anyway, but given the proposed extortionate rises in fees, rises in costs of living, and general attacks on living conditions all round it seems the prospects for anyone in HE are as grim as ever.

Between 1996 and 2006, the number of students undertaking paid work to support their studies increased by 54% and the number of students studying full-time *and* working full-time rose by 86%. It has been shown that students working 15hrs a week are about a third less-likely to get a 2.1 or better degree than those who work less or not at all. So, as you would expect, those who can afford not to work, often end up with a better degree.

In the late 90s, when tuition fees were first introduced, about 41% of 17-30 year-olds (that's 'higher education age') went into higher education. Student

enrolments shot up between 1998 and 2001 and have stagnated since, at around 46%. Numbers of part time students have also increased over that period – of the 1.15 million people undertaking first degrees in the UK in 2006-7, close to one-fifth were studying part-time.

While it is true that in real numbers university admissions are UP (this of course means nothing really as many graduates find their degrees worthless and are either unemployed after graduating, or find themselves in employment in sectors that do not require a degree), students entering higher education from poorest backgrounds have stagnated, thus in percentage terms, they now represent a smaller proportion of the actual student body despite a very slight percentage increase 'low socio-economic group' teenagers accepting university places.

With the average annual bursary students receive at around £1700, it's no wonder so many work to support themselves, and why they often leave university with debt in excess of £10,000.

Those dismissing the fees issue shouldn't do so too readily. University has opened up, largely because loans were introduced. Not because loans in themselves are a good thing, but simply because they allowed people who could not live off the grant to have the money to go. Of course, the government deliberately reduced the value of the grant over a number of years, especially in the 90s.

In our own back yard, Queens University has the highest term-time part-time work on average per student for any UK higher education institution, and it's in the 'UK Ivy League'! Belfast students are more likely to have part-time work, for less money, and are more likely to live at home than the UK average. The average student working in Belfast part-time earns £91 per week compared to the £98 UK average. Almost two-thirds of university students in Belfast have part-time jobs compared to the UK average of 41%, whilst 29% of students studying in Belfast live at home compared to the UK average of 18% . That figure is also rising across the UK, with a growing number of students opting to stay at home with the recession putting an ever greater pressure on student finance. This is an important aspect of the impact of tuition fees on the poorest students - their choice of university has become even more limited, with more electing to



stay at home for university because their families can't afford to support them studying elsewhere, and most expressing concern about the prospect of earning a living when they graduate.

## UNIVERSITY WORKERS

Higher Education (HE) is facing increasing attacks on a variety of fronts, with up to 100 HE institutions planning job cuts in the next year, as well as moves towards 'efficiency' (that's 'cuts' again to me and you) and recruitment freezes. No doubt the proposed cutbacks will be justified in the light of the recession, with workers again paying for a crisis of capitalism's making. Locally, at Queens University for example, a few issues are particularly pressing:

- Discussion is afoot to increase student fees to £10,000 per year!
- Many departments have been closed in the last few years, because it's not immediately obvious to the bosses how money can be made from their respective disciplines – the departments of Geology, Classics, and the History of Science have all faced the axe of a 'rational' business model.
- Other departments, such as Politics, and Philosophy, disciplines broad enough to warrant their own departments at many universities, have been amalgamated, in the name of 'efficiency'.
- While in 2008, other departments had been seeking compulsory staff redundancies for the first time in the university's history. This plan was shelved after union members threatened action, but could still remain a possibility, and were a precedent to be set, could see the imposition of such measures across the university by bosses.
- Staff are facing increasingly excessive probationary targets.

In the face of proposed job cuts at 100 HE institutions, workers in the sector, including lecturers, cleaners, security

staff and library workers, are also campaigning for a 6% pay rise, and a minimum of £2,000 per year pay rise for the lowest paid in the sector. The bosses are threatening workers that it's either pay rises or jobs, and that these two issues will be 'traded off' against each other.

## SCHOOLS

The issues facing schools now are by no means new, as with those facing other sectors, they are simply more acute and pressing in times of recession. Teaching unions are currently considering industrial action over numerous issues:

- Class sizes
- Compulsory testing for primary school pupils
- 10% wage increase
- Job cuts in 6<sup>th</sup> form and FE
- School closures

Last year, a quarter of a million teachers walked out on strike against below-inflation pay-rises, disrupting nearly 10,000 schools and inspiring other workers in their fight against the government's 2% pay cap. This, at a time when inflation was running at around 5%, constituted a real terms pay cut.

In April this year, parents in Glasgow, as part of the Save Our Schools Campaign, were occupying local primary schools scheduled to be closed.

In London, pupils at a Hounslow school organised a protest over the removal of one of their annual 'non-uniform days' – this might not seem significant, but such days, and indeed anything fun in schools is often first to go when teachers are under pressure to cram in more and more content into an already overloaded teaching term. This was an example of pupils taking a stand, to have a say in what happens in their school.

In terms of recruitment, for the first time in a decade, the UK government met its targets for new science and maths teachers. Why? Because aspirational financiers and bankers, ironically people from the sector largely responsible for

creating the recession are abandoning money-making for the less-precarious, though we should hesitate to say 'secure' about any job these days, world of teaching.

What will this mean? With the government no longer as 'desperate' for teachers, it's likely that they will cut funding of trainee teachers in England and Wales, and in the long term, it would not be surprising if the 'golden hellos' for shortage-subjects at least, were retracted or at least slashed.

This would mean that student-teachers would find it much harder to live during the intense PGCE year, as is the case in Northern Ireland, where students get NO bursary at all. This results in trainee teachers, many of whom have families to support, either breaking the bank with loans or coming from only a small proportion of graduates who can afford to be a student again for another year (possibly with rich parents or some independent source of income). Either way the landscape for the next generation of teachers is changing as much as it has for undergraduates.

## WHAT IS EDUCATION FOR?

Amongst all this of course, is the oft-ignored question of what is education for at all? With teachers complaining about the restrictive curriculum and seemingly never-ending battery of tests, and pupils resenting them even more, it's clear that education as it exists doesn't serve the interests of the working class. School is a chore, resented by both the staff and the students in many cases. Education for education's sake is something most of us will never have experienced. The bosses need to keep producing generations of workers they can exploit, and education is twisted within this system – so we've schools adopting prescriptive courses, or universities producing graduates with extremely generic skills that leave malleable enough to be good paper pushers but often wondering why they had bothered at all, having simply followed what amounted to nothing more than a glorified box-ticking exercise.

All this needs measured of course – so we have Sats and league tables in schools, and Ofsted inspections - schools competing to be deemed 'satisfactory' and avoid 'special measures'. While at university we have the Research and Assessment Exercise (RAE), almost universally despised by university teaching and research staff.

For those who don't know, university departments have to justify their existence, and individuals their jobs, by raising their 'research profiles' – this usually means individuals being highly pressured to produce as many articles as they can between RAE periods, in order to keep their jobs. Of course, this means they have less time to do that other important part of their jobs: Teaching. Many complain they've less time to develop their courses and incorporate

developments in their subjects into their classes. The constant pressure to publish, publish, publish, means they've less time to mark, prepare lectures, read essays. What does this mean? In effect, many work long hours, often taking work home, just to stay on top of their reading, writing, marking etc. Since many in academia, especially those new to it, are on fixed-term contracts, often of 1-3 years, there is the constant fear that 'if I don't do this work, they'll find someone else who will'.

Education workers under capitalism will always face this competition, and pupils and students will always feel strangled by a system that pigeon-holes them and measures them, labels them and categorises them. Education should be a liberating and fulfilling activity that equips us not only with the skills and knowledge that we need to live, but also allow us to pursue goals and interests that we *want* to pursue. This won't happen under capitalism, where education is co-opted to meet the needs of bosses.

## FIGHTING BACK

The seeds of a fight-back are there. In the last month alone, teachers are on the verge of a number of strikes and boycotts, while we've also seen pupil protests, and school occupations, and we could see higher education workers across the sector take industrial action against job cuts this year, so while it's early days, this could be the tip of the iceberg.

It is clear that the effects of the recession are widespread, affecting all aspects of education; primary, secondary, and tertiary; students, teachers, and lecturers. However, we shouldn't lose site of the fact that the recession is being used to mask attacks on the working class that bosses and the government have always wanted to implement. Whether we're being told we're 'lucky' to have a job, or 'fortunate' to able to go to school at all, it is expected of us that we'll make sacrifices in order to get us out of a crisis that was not of our making. When the systemic and structural apparatus of capitalism results in the abject failure to meet most people's basic needs, which has manifested itself beyond doubt in the current economic climate, we're told to tighten our belts. When we're experiencing increasing attacks on our living and working conditions, we're told that our sacrifices are necessary to bandage up the festering wounds of capitalism.

Never are we told that there's another way of running society, or that it's the fundamental nature of capitalism that has resulted in this collapse. To anarchists, it's clear that not only should the working class not be footing the bill to revive capitalism from a catastrophe of its own doing, but that it isn't worth reviving.