

How will the Browne Review into university funding affect you?

IN OCTOBER the review into university funding will be published. This report, initiated by the previous New Labour government with the backing of the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, is focusing on the question of university fees.

Ben Robinson

In recent months though, differences seem to be emerging between the two ministers with responsibility for universities. Liberal Democrat business minister (who has overall responsibility for universities) Vince Cable, has publicly stated he is in favour of a tax on graduates.

On the other hand, David Willetts, Conservative minister for universities, has made it clear that he opposes the idea of a direct graduate tax because it may encourage more students to study abroad rather than in the UK.

This reflects the Liberal Democrats' long-standing opposition to university fees which was a big contributing factor in them obtaining 50% of the student vote in the general election.

In the coalition agreement, the Conservatives granted the Lib Dems the right to abstain on a vote which proposed fee increases. But if the other parties are left to vote with no opposition, university fees will almost certainly be increased, possibly to more than twice the current level.

Many possible problems have been raised with a graduate tax.



The only 'fair' way to fund education is through full grants for all students.

photo Rob Emery

Most importantly, a report by the lecturers' union, UCU, showed that this system would mean the lowest paid public sector workers would end up paying more for their degrees than they already do.

Many details of how the scheme would work are unknown. In most models a graduate tax would be a debt that you never pay off, affecting graduates throughout the entire course of their working lives. Even if it is introduced at a relatively low rate, as with any other tax it could be increased by the chancellor at any stage.

The Socialist Party opposes any charges for education, whether up

front, loaned or taxed. This is to guarantee access to university for all, regardless of their ability to pay.

One of Labour's arguments for introducing fees 12 years ago was that it would mean workers did not have to pay for the education of the rich. But slashing corporation tax means that the contribution from the rich has been massively reduced.

A graduate tax is opposed by the Conservative Party and the heads of the most prestigious universities because it conflicts with their vision for higher education. Funding education through taxation would tie universities into public ownership and state funding.

The government review is clearly skewed towards big increases in fees and further privatisation. The board is made up of bankers, former advisors to Tony Blair and of course is chaired by Lord Browne, the ex-chief executive of BP.

Leaked reports indicate that the review panel is going to recommend fees of £7,000 a year. This, or some variant, is undoubtedly going to be the Tories' preferred option.

However, the issue of university fees has proved to be one of the most publicly contentious issues of this weak coalition government. Under the pressure of a movement of workers and young people, as well

as the discontent of Liberal Democrat members, they could be forced into a u-turn.

A recent report for the Scottish Parliament recommended introducing fees. This will correctly be seen as a huge attack on Scottish youth and could provoke a mass response. If this develops parallel to a movement in England and Wales, the two could reinforce each other.

A growing tide of protest in the universities has been seen over the last two years. Increases in fees, on top of cuts to places and funding, could give a big impetus to these movements.

However, it does not currently seem like these movements will be led by the National Union of Students (NUS).

Their alternative to higher university fees is to call for a graduate tax! The model that they propose is better than many others but would still mean that the average graduate would end up paying more than they do at present.

Aaron Porter was the first ever NUS president to address the universities vice-chancellors' conference this year and 'outlined the importance of meaningful collaboration' between students and management.

Under pressure, NUS has called a national demonstration on 10 November. But it will be up to genuine activists on the demonstration and in local anti-cuts campaigns to formulate a strategy to defeat the government and to fight for free education.

Student strikes can win results

YOUNG PEOPLE face increasing attacks on their future. For the first time in decades a whole generation will be worse off than their parents - a damning indictment of a system that has failed to provide for working and middle class young people in one of the wealthiest countries in the world.

Suzanne Beishon

The onslaught of cuts to university courses and staff and increasing fees coupled with growing youth unemployment, cuts to benefits and cuts to training schemes will undoubtedly see an increase in young people looking for ways to fight back.

As young people search for the most effective tool to channel their anger, many different methods of struggle will be explored including occupations, protests, days of actions and strikes.

Historically student strikes have been one of the most effective ways for young people to fight back. Two of the most notable examples in the UK were when hundreds of thousands walked out internationally in the 2003 school students' strikes against the Iraq war and the successful 1985 student strikes against Thatcher's Youth Training Schemes (YTS).

The 1985 student strikes against the threat of conscription to the YTS, which involved 250,000 young people, won a massive victory against the government.

The YTS was essentially legalised slave labour with young people be-



One group of school students on strike in 2003.

ing used by employers to work for a low wage, then thrown back onto the scrapheap when the scheme ended. When the scheme was cancelled, a whole new generation learnt that if you fight, you can win!

Similarly in 2003 the Iraq war aroused a huge wave of anger across the country.

Young people were being told that there was not enough money for education, jobs and training - yet the government could afford to blow millions of pounds on the war in Iraq.

Mass action

International Socialist Resistance (ISR), a youth organisation, distributed 60,000 leaflets on the two million strong 15 February demonstration in London, calling for school student strikes. Up and down the country young people organised and walked out of schools against the war.

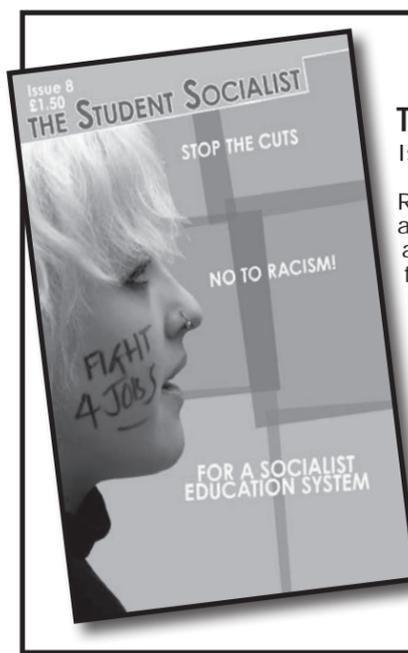
Student strikes can take on a different character to other forms of action. They have to involve a mass of students to be successful.

Other useful methods, like occupations, are important but can sometimes involve a small number of experienced activists who, whilst attempting to further the campaign, can isolate themselves from the majority of students and staff.

Student strikes will need to be a vital tool used in anti-cuts campaigning in schools, colleges and universities.

Campaigns need to coordinate action that focuses on patiently building the confidence of students that struggle can be effective. They also need to propose demands that will take the movement forward.

Just as students can take inspiration from workers in struggle, mass student strikes could also play a role in inspiring the older generation of the trade union movement nationally.



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Read about last year's anti-cuts campaigns and how to take them forwards, what the English Defence League (EDL) is and how to defeat it, international reports and what a socialist education system would look like.

Order from Socialist Books (details on p.7).

This December, Youth Fight for Jobs and Socialist Students will meet to discuss strategies to defeat the cuts. There will be an opportunity at these conferences to vote on policies and elect people to national positions.

Join us, and help organise to fight cuts and fees and for a decent future for young people.

4 December - Youth Fight for Jobs conference.

5 December - Socialist Students conference.

Both at UCL, London (near Euston station).

See www.socialiststudents.org.uk for details.

On 20 October, the Chancellor, George Osborne, will announce the results of the spending review.

There is little doubt that he will announce even more cuts, including to education, jobs and young people's services.

Youth Fight for Jobs and Socialist Students are organising a day of action in protest at these attacks.

- **Strike**
- **Demonstrate**
- **Protest**

Get in touch to find out how to get involved in your area:

Call - 020 8558 7947
Email - youthfightforjobs@gmail.com