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Prepare to build the fight against all cuts in 2011

EVEN AS term draws to a close, the student protests are continuing. Hundreds of thousands of students and school students understand that the struggle to defend their right to an education has only just begun.

The students and school students have been the first into battle. They have terrified the government and inspired millions of working class people. Despite the vitriol heaped on the students by the capitalist media they still have the support of the majority in society. After the demonstration on 9 December even an opinion poll commissioned by the poisonous Daily Mail showed that 77% of people still supported the students.

The forces of the state – the police and the courts – have been used to try to frighten students and school students in order to prevent them demonstrating. The tactic has backfired – despite being kettled for many hours in the freezing cold, despite being charged, batoned and brutalised, despite over 200 young people being arrested – the students have continued to struggle in defence of their future. Many are drawing far-reaching conclusions about the role of the police and the nature of capitalist society. Many students have decided, as a result of their experiences, that they are socialists.

How to win

CAMPAIGNING TO defend all students facing charges for the 'crime' of demonstrating to protect their future will be crucial in the coming months. However, the key issue which is now being debated in schools, colleges and campuses is how the students can win. How can we defeat this vicious millionaires' government?

It is understood by most student activists that the fees bill passing through parliament only marks the end of the first stage of the struggle, not the end of the struggle itself. The fees increase will not be implemented until autumn 2012. There is time to build the next stage of the campaign. The poll tax, for example, was defeated in 1991, three years after it first became law.

The leadership of the National Union of Students (NUS) abandoned the field of battle from day one. Their strategy, as explicitly revealed in the Daily Telegraph, has not been to campaign to defeat the fees increase but to take the road of concession bargaining and plead with the government to cut grants and loans instead of raising fees. The response of the student movement has been to sweep their supposed leaders aside and to get on with building a movement.

This does not mean that there is no point to campaigning within the structures of NUS. Youth Fight for Education and Socialist Students are campaigning for student union general meetings to pass motions of no confidence in the national full-time officers of NUS and to demand immediate NUS NEC elections. Nonetheless, the more important task at this stage is the building of democratic structures to coordinate the movement that has erupted.

National education shutdown

THE SOCIALIST Party calls for a huge national shutdown of education in the New Year. This will take organisation in every school, college and university. Students will need their own meetings, to discuss what they are doing and why, to learn lessons from previous struggles, to elect their own committees, and plan serious action.

Where there are no existing anti-cuts campaigns or Socialist Students groups Youth Fight for Education groups need to be set up. Student groups can then be linked up on a city-wide, regional and national level.

However, organising the student struggle is not the only task. To defeat the Con-Dem government on the issue of education and the whole cuts agenda it is also necessary to link the student movement to the broader campaigns against cuts. The cuts this govern-



photo Paul Mattsson

ment is proposing are the most vicious for 80 years. If they are carried out the whole of the working class, and large sections of the middle class, will suffer a dramatic fall in their standard of living. We need a united movement that stands clearly in opposition to ALL cuts in jobs, services and education.

Such a movement could bring together the students with the community campaigns against cuts to local services and in defence of social housing, with benefit claimants' campaigns, and, in particular, with the potentially enormously powerful force of the organised working class in the trade unions.

The TUC

SO FAR, the response of the leadership of the trade union movement – the TUC – to the cuts has been completely inadequate. The TUC said that it had 'been given heart' by the student movement and wanted to unite with it, but its only concrete proposal was to call on students to join the national TUC demo on 26 March 2011 – four months after the students first took to the streets!

It would be understandable, faced with such inertia at the top of the movement, if some students drew the wrong conclusion that they would be better off fighting alone. Flowing from this there is a danger that, for a layer of radical students, the idea can develop that they, as a minority, can take on and defeat the government alone using militant 'direct action'.

This would be a mistake and could potentially lead to the isolation and demoralisation of some of the most radical elements of the student movement. The demonstration on 9 December was marked by the number of trade union banners and delegations – from education unions but also the RMT, PCS and others, showing that the fighting elements in the trade union movement want united action with the students.

No struggle is identical to those that went before, but there are lessons that can be learnt from the defeat of the Thatcher government. Contrary to the mythology of the capitalist media, and unfortunately some on the left, Thatcher's poll tax was not defeated primarily by the massive March 1990 demonstrations, impressive as they were, or by the riot which resulted from the police's attack on the London demonstration. It was the 18 million strong mass movement of non-payment that defeated the poll tax and brought down Thatcher.

That is not to suggest that 'direct action' played no role. 'Direct action' was organised via the democratic structures of the anti-poll tax unions – whether it was mass turnouts at the magistrates' courts completely blocking up the legal system, or demonstrations outside peoples' homes to prevent the bailiffs taking away non-payers' possessions. However, the 'direct action' was an adjunct to building a mass movement based in working class communities. It assisted in so far as it helped

to build support for that movement.

This week it will not only be students who are urgently discussing how to stop the axe men and women. Local government is literally facing decimation. The cuts to core local authority funding – of an average of 10% – will mean communities and workforces being faced with devastating cuts in jobs and services; unless local councils are prepared to defy the government and refuse to wield the Con-Dem axe. Unfortunately, there is so far no council that has declared it is willing to defy the cuts.

The sword of Damocles is hanging over local government workers. For local government trade unions it is now extremely urgent to plan strike action to stop the cuts, and as far as possible to coordinate it – both within councils, across local government nationally, and if possible with the other public sector trade unions, including those in the education sector.

As the student movement erupted it left the NUS leadership marginalised. The situation in the trade unions is more complicated – but many trade unionists – with the heavy weight of the trade union bureaucracy on their shoulders – will be wishing they could do the same as the students. Faced with the destruction of their livelihoods public sector trade unionists need to organise an almighty campaign to force their leaderships to act and, if they refuse to, to organise action from below.

Those trade unions with left leaderships have a key role to play in developing the movement. If the left trade unions can coor-

dinate their ballots for strike action and appeal to local government workers to strike on the same day, an unstoppable movement towards a one-day public sector general strike, supported by a school, college and education strike, could quickly develop. The students have shown what is possible and, by continuing to develop their own struggle whilst building links with the most militant sections of the workers' movement, can play an important role in building a movement capable of defeating the government.

The welcome decisions by the London Student Assembly to support both the National Shop Stewards Network anti-cuts conference on 22 January and the PCS young members' network march in Manchester on 29 January show the potential to build unity between the student movement and fighting trade unionists.

Join the Socialist Party

THE RULING class in Britain is determined to make sure that it is not them, but the working class and young people, who pay for the crisis in their system. They have declared war on our education, our public services, our wages and conditions. The students – along with the firefighters, tube workers and some other trade unionists – have fired the first shots in our counter-offensive.

In 2011 the working class and young people must urgently prepare to escalate the struggle. If we organise around a clear strategy we can defeat this government. However a New Labour government, as Ed Miliband has made clear, would also carry out cuts, albeit at a slower pace.

We live in a world where the modest aspirations of ordinary working class and young people, such as a job, a home, an education and enough food and healthcare to live, are increasingly unattainable. What has been revealed for millions across the planet is that we live in a society which is run in the interests of the super-rich. But experience of struggle reveals the urgent need and potential for an alternative way of running society.

The Socialist Party stands for the building of a democratic socialist society, both in Britain and internationally. A socialist society would mean democratic planning of the economy to meet the needs of all and to protect the environment. Capitalism is organised on a global basis so we are part of a world socialist organisation, the Committee for a Workers' International (www.socialistworld.net).

If you agree with what you read in The Socialist – then you should join us!

Socialism Today

The Socialist Party's magazine
December 2010 issue includes:

Just the beginning

Peter Taaffe assesses the significance of the 50,000-strong student demonstration and the potential to build an all-Britain movement against the government's cuts plans.

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The Socialist printing schedule

THIS IS the last 2010 issue of The Socialist, allowing the paper's and distribution staff some time for planning and administration

work as well as a well-earned rest. The first Socialist for 2011, issue 652, will be out on 6 January.