

29 January demonstration in Manchester

Students and young workers unite

ON 29 January a demonstration will take place in Manchester, bringing together young workers and students to fight for our future. The rally and demonstration on the day involve the Trades Union Congress, the National Union of Students, the lecturer's union UCU, the civil servants union PCS and others.

Ben Robinson
Youth Fight for Jobs chair

The huge energy of the mass student protests linking up with young workers, who are often to the fore of industrial struggle, has the potential to terrify the government. This could be a big step forward in fighting against all this government's brutal cuts, with both parts of the movement inspiring each other.

A whole generation has been thrown into political activity through the student movement, questioning everything and looking for a strategy to fight back. There is an ongoing discussion about the role of trade unions and whether they will take action or whether students will have to fight alone.

This demonstration would not have been called without constant pressure, including from the student movement and from YFJ.

At the same time many workers and trade union members are fed up with half-hearted negotiations that lead nowhere and are campaigning for their unions to take up a more militant strategy. Fighting unions like the PCS have been to the fore of the struggle. The planned event on 29 January shows that it is possible for members in other unions to force their leaderships to act decisively.

At its annual conference in September the TUC passed a motion calling for a demonstration against youth unemployment. This, and subsequent campaigning, was led by young trade unionists from the PCS and Youth Fight for Jobs (YFJ) supporters.

When the TUC named the date of 29 January, we called on them to ensure there is a campaign for a big demonstration and that transport from around the country is organised.

This demonstration would not have been called without constant pressure, including from the student movement and from YFJ. It should be seen as a vital next step in the movement against cuts.

Although time is short, trade union branches, student unions and activist groups should be organising transport, funding them directly but also through fundraising events. Many workers and students are eager to link up and support each other's struggles, and the march will be

an ideal way to do that on a national level.

Unfortunately the Socialist Workers Party and others have called a demonstration exclusively on education issues in London on the same day. This was in the full knowledge of the events in Manchester.

YFJ argued against this because it would cut across the message that ours is a united fight for all.

Having a separate education march in London, counterposed to the TUC one in Manchester, only serves to aid the grotesque media stereotype of the student movement as purely self-serving and middle class.

This is clearly miles from the truth as second year college students have fought to maintain the Education Maintenance Allowance even though they won't be affected by it being cut and university students have likewise fought higher fees.

Many students have built links with the trade unions on campus and the anti-cuts campaigns that are developing around the country. For those with doubts about the role and potential of the trade union movement this divisive action will cloud, rather than clear.

However, many students and workers, especially those in southern parts of the country will find it easier to get to London if the demonstration there goes ahead.

Youth Fight for Jobs and Education will be present at both and will



YFJ brings together students, young workers and the unemployed.

photo Alex Ivanov

argue for an escalation of the student movement and for strong links

to be built with anti-cuts unions and workers in struggle.

Obituary

Grunwick: leader of historic strike dies

JAYABEN DESAI, the leader of the famous Grunwick strike died just before Christmas aged 77. She inspired many who saw her, especially when she stood up to the bullying brutes of the Grunwick management and the police during the strike.

Bill Mullins

She led 200 mainly Asian workers out on strike in August 1976 when Grunwick refused to recognise her union (Apex, now merged with the GMB).

Grunwick was a photo processing company in Willesden in northwest London, which paid some of the lowest wages in the industry. Some of the workers were on £28 before stoppages for a 40-hour week.

The 1970s saw increasing militant strike action by more and more workers in the fight to improve their wages and conditions. Trade union consciousness was at an all time high. Previously unorganised sections of workers had been encouraged by the example set by the miners, engineers, car workers, dockers and others as they moved into action in defence of their living standards, led often by the politically conscious shop stewards' movement.

Grunwick was one of many strikes of low-paid workers at the time but it became famous because of the role of people like Mrs Desai. From the capitalist point of view, the strike represented a crucial test of what was necessary if the unions were to be curtailed.

Keith Joseph, Thatcher's guru at the time, declared that unless the unions were defeated Grunwick represented "all our tomorrows".

Many in the labour movement saw that it was essential to support

the Grunwick workers. Thousands came down regularly to join the mass pickets. Even Shirley Williams, who was a Labour minister and an Apex sponsored MP, joined the picket line briefly.

She was regularly reminded of this to her eternal embarrassment by the right wing press. Williams was one of the four right wing Labour MPs who split from the Labour Party soon after and formed the Social Democrats, now part of the Liberal Democrats.

Grunwick depended on the post office to deliver their products and the Cricklewood postal workers refused to handle the mail.

Arthur Scargill of the NUM miners' union had called for mass pickets and regularly attended along with miners from Yorkshire and elsewhere.

Car workers from the midlands, engineering workers from the north west and workers from all over London joined the mass pickets.

At one time 4,000 cops, including 200 thugs from the Special Patrol Group (SPG) fought with the mass pickets.

The height of the movement came in the spring and early summer of 1977. On 11 July the pickets succeeded in not only stopping the scabs' bus coming in but also repulsed a cavalry charge of 36 mounted police.

The mass picketing went on into the autumn. 108 pickets were arrested and 243 were hospitalised, 12 with broken limbs.

Bob Ashworth, one of my fellow shop stewards from the Rover plant in Solihull had joined the Militant (now Socialist Party) with me. He had both his ankles broken when the SPG charged and forced the pickets against a wall which then collapsed.

It was clear to many of us that if the TUC had lifted its little finger then the Grunwick bosses could have been squashed like a bug. Instead the TUC leadership manoeuvred behind the scenes for the strike to be brought to an end.

At one stage they called for a mass demo, but not outside Grunwick's gates. The result was that the scabs' bus was able to get in with the minimum of resistance.

The Apex general secretary Roy Grantham, an extreme right winger (in labour terms) called for picketing to be reduced and threatened the strike committee with the with-

drawal of union support if they did not agree. The postal workers' leaders meanwhile instructed their members to lift the blockade on the mail.

The combination of these events was to encourage the bosses to dig their heels in. For Thatcher the lessons of Grunwick encouraged her to introduce laws to stop mass picketing. But it could have been so different.

Ordinary workers were prepared to give their all in support of the Grunwick strikers. Postal workers put their jobs on the line to maintain the boycott. But none of this

was matched by the union leadership, with a few honourable exceptions like Arthur Scargill.

The dispute was lost when the TUC and Apex withdrew their support. It ended with Mrs Desai going on hunger strike outside the TUC.

Her courage and determination in standing up to the bosses was an inspiration to many and in the future it will be her name that is remembered, not the right wing union leaders.

For more details, see Rise of Militant by Peter Taaffe, available at www.socialistbooks.co.uk



A march in support of the Grunwick dispute.

photo Socialist Party