

### Principles

Any serious consideration among revolutionaries of students must of necessity begin by an analysis of the concrete position of the mass of students and the problems and contradictions that they face. This must be undertaken in depth and breadth and continue as the situation develops. Regrettably much time of discussion between revolutionaries is taken up by emphasis in minor differences in revolutionary perspective that are of little or no consequence to the position of the mass of the students.

Revolutionaries must have a profound understanding of the mass problems and work to solve them. Lenin's quotation is particularly apposite: "We can and must begin to build socialism, not with abstract human material especially prepared for us, but with the human material bequeathed to us by capitalism. True, this is very 'difficult', but no other approach to this task is serious enough to warrant discussion."

The approach of Communists is to work with students on these issues and to win the majority of the students into a position of support for the working class and socialist revolution. It has never been our approach that it is only possible to win a minority of the students for socialism and then lead away from the student movement to act as leaders of the working class or to work in other fields.

The number of students proclaiming a revolutionary commitment has increased in absolute numbers over the past few years. It is also our position that two other developments have taken place: 1. There has been a general shift in the attitude of students towards a more radical position. Students are more willing than they used to be to exercise their strength in pursuit of certain objectives.

2. There has been an increase in the influence of the organisations of the right wing in certain colleges (Anglo-Rhodesian societies and Monday Clubs) as well as the maintaining of a significant proportion of students under orthodox right wing and conservative ideas.

The basic change we must note is that students have been and will be in the near future more prepared to use militant methods in furtherance of their aims. Though the increase of numbers of students have been adopted a progressive and left wing stance on a wide range of political and social issues outside their own narrow environment - Vietnam, Racialism etc is marked. The main developments have been on the front of student problems of democracy of college government, union autonomy, representation and course structure.

### WHAT ARE THE ISSUES?

By student problems or issues we mean matters that are particular to students in the colleges and universities. Similar problems are of course evident elsewhere among the British People but these are not of primary significance to the students.

1. Student representation and student control.

Colleges and Universities are undemocratically run and dominated directly and indirectly by the needs of capitalism.

Courts, Councils, Senates, Governing Bodies and Academic Boards are replete with the 'captains of industry' and the older and privileged echelons of academics.

The processes of government impringe on students rather than being influenced or created by them. Students therefore put forward democratic demands of reform stemming from a desire to control, influence and shape their own education and future lives.

Students wish to see an end to paternalistic attitudes, in loco parentis, double discipline and so on. On the matter of union autonomy very often students are unable to do what they wish about their own lives in the Institution distinct from the academic aspects e.g. the freedom to write to the press as at LSE last year.

It is an essential and deeply felt demand that students should be allowed more freedom in the colleges and ability to exert some power over the way colleges are run. These often run directly against the wishes of establishment governors and academics and the objective interests of capitalism.

The aim of students should be 1. To control the committees that deal with specifically student "welfare" matters - halls of residence and so on.

2. To have not less than 1/3 representation on all committees that deal with academic life, including committees that deal with staff selection and promotion. This is an essential demand to balance their search preoccupation if on any teacher in the universities and distinguishes us from the reformists in the student movement who state that this area of government should remain the preserve of the establishment and its minions.

## 2. Course content and assessment.

This is a problem that is allied to the first one. Nevertheless, it is the most central of all issues as it affects students in higher education at the very core of their education. The main areas of concern are:

1. Overspecialisation leading to academic subject oligarchies, useless qualifications and an enforced passiveness on the students. Art students recently have been particularly concerned with this group of problems.

2. Outdated examination systems and rigid syllabuses leading to rote learning, grading, nervous tension among students and so on.

3. Teaching methods - a reaction against the formal lecture system and its predominance in much of higher education.

Student demands here are much the same as under 1. basically putting forward the right of students to influence the character of their own education - to humanise it. Students want looser syllabuses, greater ease of transfer between courses, a more

open and pluralistic type of assessment and more emphasis placed on direct forms of contact with teachers.

### 3. Student finance.

Students are financed by a grants system that has deteriorated rapidly over the past five years. The real value of grants has deteriorated as a result of deliberate government policy. The 1968 assessment was a travesty and represented the direct expression of the policies of international monopoly capitalism.

Students are about to be recognised as adults by the government and given the vote, yet at the same time it persists on levying parents to supplement students income. Adults are made financially dependent on other adults. This parental means test is at best an anachronism to students and financial expediency to the Government. It is a perversion of education. The students that are in favour of the means test are an insignificant minority with muddled principles.

In addition to this, sections of students have to suffer all sorts of discrimination in the grants system - married students, art students, college of education students etc, etc.

The so called anomalies of a particular and general characters have been approached by the NUS leadership in the philosophy of 'piecemeal social engineering, the result being a contribution to the decline of the economic position of students.

Grants is the cinderella of the student left. Any analysis of students must take them into account but little attention is given and action planned. The reasons for this are complicated in character but the need for action and effort here are:

1. Our credibility as revolutionaries is in doubt if we are unable to alter the present situation in the interests of students. The task of socialist revolution is a much larger task.

2. If we cannot lead the struggle on grants then we are doing student interests a great disservice.

3. The Government's policy on grants represents the clearest confrontation between the students as a whole and capitalism. We are faced by the full array of the ruling class - the DES, Treasury knights, international bankers and monopolies. Student power, as far as a determination of our level of income is nil. The machinery of assessment would make any trade unionist worth his salt blush in shame.

Some left wing students adopt a right wing argument about grants saying that it would be a good thing if the Government introduced loans or depressed the levels of grants still further as this would make them more inclined to be militant. The philosophy here is presumably 'things have to get worse before they get better'. This is rather like the posadist argument that says nuclear war is inevitable and that socialism will be created after the holocaust. Any revolutionary must fight for student interests now.

The aim should be to create a system of student finance that creates no barriers for students in the pursuance of their studies, no barriers in the way of working class recruitment into higher education and a standard of living comparable to other young

people of the same age as students. A long term demand linked to our immediate struggles should be student salaries. A system of salaries in contradistinction to grants would reduce the economic difference between students and young workers.

#### 4. Student living and working conditions.

Students living in halls of residence are often subjected to an authoritarian system of rules and regulations. The fight against these is of the same character as item 1.

Students are forced to live in squalor. This was the realistic slogan of the 1967 NUS Accommodation Campaign. Student grant levels and soaring rents force students in increasing numbers to live in abysmal conditions in lodgings and flats. Students in privately owned lodgings and flats must join with other tenants in the Tenants' Movement. Students in general must apply pressure to the Authorities at all levels to ensure that a greater amount of the education budget is allocated to building residential accommodation for students. This area of struggle like that of grants is always regarded as an important tributary to the river of student militancy by the left students, but not something that is given the appropriate priority in struggle. Again like grants we are opposing the whole structure of capitalism and the fabric of society that it produces.

Conditions of study are equally important. Many students have no place of work. Laboratories and libraries, particularly in Technical Colleges are over-used and the student has often no place that he can call his own to study in the college. Again, this is an area of student life little considered and policies have been instituted by the government called 'productivity exercises'. Our response should be analagous to that of the working class on 'productivity'.

#### The Organisations

The NUS and student unions. Lenin said in 1920 in his classic 'Left wing Communism - an infantile disorder': "And we cannot but regard as equally ridiculous and childish nonsense the pompous, very learned, and frightfully revolutionary disquisitions of the German Lefts to the effect that Communists cannot and should not work in reactionary trade unions, that it is permissible to turn down such work, that it is necessary to leave the trade unions and create an absolutely brand new 'Workers Union' invented by very nice (and, probably, for the most part very youthful) Communists, etc, etc."

The left students involved with NUS have long regarded the NUS as at present constituted inappropriate to becoming a student trade union. The NUS has its confederal structure, its ultimate reliance on money from non-student sources and membership which is not based on individual membership.

Therefore the BSA is forming itself precisely into this sort of organisation - based on individual membership and corresponding commitment.

The RSA and The NUS are involved in the same type of field - the student issues.

Student radicals and revolutionaries, often with nil experience, have tended to treat the NUS and its constituent unions as though it were an agency of the capitalist state.

While it is true that the leadership of the NUS has in many cases been objectively nearer to the Government than to the students and that it has never really provided organisational and political leadership to the students (it would not claim to have done). Similarly the very confederal character of the NUS as a whole does not assist this.

Nevertheless, it is a gross error to sum up the whole of the NUS and the Student Unions in the pejorative, trendy term - Bureaucracy. Student Unions have, it is true, problems of bureaucracy, but it is very important to remember that in most cases of student militancy over the past two years the Student Union has acted as the vehicle of student action.

Student unions, unlike radical and socialist student organisations, possess money. Leeds University Union, for example, has nearly £100,000 in its reserves. Communist students have always stood for struggle in the student unions, rejecting the thesis put forward by Richard Kuper of I.S. a year ago - 'The danger of being elected was too great'. We have stood for elections in the unions and in the NUS in order to win'. There is no doubt that democratically elected student representatives in the unions who are radical and socialist in far greater numbers than at present would be valuable in the NUS nationally and in its regions.

The role of radical and socialist student union representatives should be to reform and democratise the student unions, transforming them into more effective organs of student policy and action.

Clearly the student unions are not to be seen as agencies of revolutionary leadership. For revolution to take place it is essential that there is a revolutionary vanguard party\* - not to mention the vital objective conditions and the subjective attitudes of the working class. Nevertheless student unions like the trade unions have a vital role to play in any revolution and an indispensable function in the creation of a socialist society.

There has been a change of character in the leadership of the NUS over the past three or four years. No longer is it dominated by careerist right wing labour politicians. It is now less cohesive and the leadership as a whole is more open to change (albeit rather erratic). There is a real probability that there will be a substantial leftward shift in the leadership of the NUS and student unions in general over the next few years. There can be no doubt as to the significance of such a change.

The Radical Student Alliance was formed two years ago in reaction to certain developments within the National Union of Students. Since that time it has moved into the position of being a student trade union. We in the RSSF do not see this development as hostile to the RSSF, rather it is an essential link between the actions on particular student problems and revolutionary change.

\* See the British Road to Socialism

The RSA has set itself up on the basis of college chapters or branches composed of individual members of the organisation. These will act as nuclei of activists in any future struggles. It is absolutely essential that the student movement can have such organisations at a local level in order to develop action in the student unions and on issues of a wider social nature.

SUMMARY

We have urged in this document that all revolutionaries consider the objective problems that face students and build their analysis and revolutionary perspective on this basis. The tendency has been to regard revolutionary change in isolation from the mass of the students. It has been and will remain our role in the student movement to win students to the working class and provide a valuable ally not only on immediate struggles but also in the future revolutionary change to socialism.

Written by Digby Jacks

For the Communist Party National Student Committee.

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