

THREE BROAD AREAS OF STUDENT STRUGGLE

THE STRATEGIC STRUGGLE

On June 14 and 15 the RSSF held its founding conference at the LSE. On the 15th and 16th June 1968 more than forty vice-chancellors and principals met in secret at Downing College, Cambridge, and exclusively discussed the student movement. For the first time in a quarter century a struggle is taking place in Britain over the political allegiance of an entire social bloc.

A much needed revolutionary organisation was born in painful confusion. At that very moment a powerful, well-polished and experienced opposition planned how best to emasculate it.

What is the enemy hoping to do? Essentially to demobilise the students; by absorbing their leadership and sterilising it with futile labour, by conceding consultations and social reform, by isolating the militants, victimising and expelling them. They will attempt to out-manoeuvre the students, buy them off, fragment them and then contain them.

What are the vice-chancellors afraid of? Certainly not revolutionary slogans without a mass of students, educational reforms within their institutions, ideological denunciation unbacked by coherent theory. All these will play into the hands of the authorities. What is this enemy afraid of? - A RED MAJORITY.

The pivotal struggle over student power will be the organisation of the student masses.

How will this struggle take place?

The vice-chancellors and principals have decided to try the well-oiled English strategy of concession, integration and ruthlessly wielding the big stick against an isolated and fragmented leadership of those articulate enough to oppose them. Their specific strategy in relationship to the English student movement is quite clear. First, they are backing the National Union of Students as hard as they can. They will attribute advances in university organisation to the NUS, they will encourage 'leading' students to participate actively in this massive and leaden organisation. They understand its union function perfectly. But the NUS is very far from the students, indeed it works very hard to remain so. And this makes its intervention in an actual student struggle very difficult, and its ability to contain an insurgence almost negligible. On one occasion, however, NUS did successfully intervene; at Leicester, Martin, who happened to be a personal friend of both the vice-chancellor and the Union President, skillfully cooled out both sides and dissolved the confrontation into fruitless negotiations. But this mode is too haphazard for the vice-chancellors to rely on. Their real weapon in the struggle to contain the students will be the Union presidents and their councils.

In each institution the vice-chancellors and presidents will attempt to fragment and disperse the students through the power of the student unions wielded by their para-police of bureaucratic careerists.

## AN UNDERSTANDABLE RELUCTANCE

Most revolutionary and radical students hate their unions and want to have nothing to do with them, except for the occasional intervention in general meetings. But this understandable reluctance cuts them off from what at present are the decisive determining arenas of the student movement.

The lesson of past union actions is students should not enter union politics on its own terms, and on reformist platforms. But the capture and abolition of the unions is essential to maintaining a student movement in a university or college, further it has inherent advantages, but finally it is not an end in itself. Direct democracy only becomes a form of direct integration unless it is created on issues which strike at the machinery and process of higher education.

These issues must be developed and tested in practise and this text is not going to discuss them or the demands and slogans which will go with them: it is concerned with the directions of activity.

## RSSF'S FIRST TASK

RSSF's first task will be to debate these issues and slogans and the directions in which they are aimed. There are three main positions. First: some comrades are arguing that student revolutionaries should go for the classical forms of militant action, namely agitation and self education (leading to mobilisation on particular issues and the formation of cadres). Second: others argue that our task is to combat the reactionary power of education, that as students it is our part of the struggle to create a critique of bourgeois hegemony, and attack the class basis of the educational system, further a group of students working in this area insist as a primary necessity on confronting bourgeois culture in oneself and in one's daily relations to others. The third broad area of action is among the students as such. This is seen by the third group of revolutionary students as the key to the students movement, both as its social base and as the majority within the institutions.

All of these three broad areas of activity are part of a revolutionary student movement. Without specific political debate and agitation on agreed issues the movement will fail to link up to other sectors of society. Without a full-scale assault on bourgeois ideology and education no confrontation will succeed in holding any democratic advances that it makes. Without the students there can be no student movement.

Three broad areas of struggle: agitation and self education aimed at a global political consciousness; ideological confrontation against the specific dominations of bourgeois education and linking the two together work among the mass of students should provide at the same time the living social base for militant students and the dead raw material for the institutions.

Before we look at the relations of these three broad areas of struggle more closely it is necessary to confront ouvrierism, the shady obsession with the working class, which asserts that as the proletariat are the only force which can sweep capitalism from the battlefield, they are the only force that can make students socialists. The demand for a prairie fire to light a spark! The ultimate need for a proletarian alliance is not an excuse for refusing to confront the bourgeoisie on its own territory, unless of course this would distract from an existing working class struggle. By insisting on the ultimate struggle as coming first, 'hard' militants set up a discontinuity between themselves and other students. (Similarly, militants who are only interested in university struggle inevitably find themselves compromised through assuming the co-ordinates of the bourgeois institutions as their own, they set up no discontinuity between themselves and the present situation.)

The whole problem is a measure of the primitive level of politics in this country. The bourgeoisie have their own counter-revolutionary distinction between reform and revolution, as Tom Fawthrop has pointed out. Its kernel is the assumption that 'politics' is a special sphere, apart from life and ordinary institutions like schools, the family etc. For example the media and press insist that revolutionary confrontations are external to the universities and colleges; they only 'disrupt' them and are inevitably led by 'small groups of individuals', i.e. by outsiders. Reform on the other hand, is 'inside' the universities and colleges, is 'practical' and concerned with actual existing organisations. The wretched division which puts politics outside the university and university life, and its distorted refraction among student militants needs to be abolished once and for all.

Despite the fact that it is nominally open to young works, RSSF draws on one distinct social base, and must face the problem of relation to it. RSSF members should reject both an organic union role towards students and a separate political one. As Tom Nairn writes in 'The Beginning of the End', "there can be neither a revolutionary theory nor a revolutionary movement without a living revolutionary practise." Amongst themselves, members of RSSF must speak the revolution, learn its language and theory: among the broad mass of students they must act the revolution. Too many British revolutionaries have got these priorities in reverse.

### THE THREE TWO'S OF STUDENT STRUGGLE

There are three broad areas of student struggle, each of which has two moments. The first of the three two's are the two moments of work which lay the basis for making ourselves revolutionaries. The second of the three two's are the two moments of combat against the domination imposed through the educational system. The third of the three two's are the two moments of struggle among the students: for revolutionary democracy, against institutional domination. This can best be shown diagrammatically.

#### Student Revolutionary Practice

(Revolution)

(A)

#### 1. Direct Agitation

Political Strike Power:  
National demonstrations,  
working class liaison,  
conflict.

#### 2. Self-Education and Experiment

Political Intelligence:  
Theory, strategy, culture,  
counter-bourgeois way of life.

#### Power in Education

(Counter-Revolution)

(B)

#### i. Production of Knowledge

Transmission of ideology, the  
imposition of social hegemony:  
Teaching tied to the demands of  
Capital and the State.

#### ii. Educational Process

The means of terror:  
Exclusion and fragmentation  
through exams and hierarchy  
of institutions, class  
recruitment and language.

(C)

#### 3. Student Organisation

Political-social base:  
Student mobilisation,  
autonomy and mass debate,  
direct democratic decisions.

#### iii. Institutional Authority

Hierarchy of power and prestige,  
Administration and bureaucracy,  
Apparatus of rules and discipline,  
including the Unions.

The 'first two' (A), political agitation and self-education, are classical aspects of socialist activity. It is crucial for the students' movement to guarantee that it produced politicised human beings, not lobotomised caricatures of adults that have emerged from the fifties. Political self-education, now possible for British students, opens a first chance of a breach into the revolutionary tradition of Europe.

Action confined to these two moments alone produces sectarianism, also a classic form of socialism, abstract from the mass of students it will continue to isolate itself.

The 'second two', combat against (B) the ideology of bourgeois society and its production and transmission in the universities and colleges, will be an essential part of any successful confrontation. As Pete Gibbon has pointed out, we need a "systematic exposure of the class basis of higher education and the initiation of attacks on the university as a class-institution, producing from the middle class, for the ruling class, its bureaucrats, its liberal apologists, its professional anti-communists, its military scientists, its mass media manipulators." Within the colleges academics must be challenged at their own level or they will use their apparent intellectual superiority to impose social segregation. Both theoretical work at the highest level, not just political education, and detailed research (as in Regent Street Poly) demystifying the institution and its personnel are needed.

Action confined to this work, abstract from, and unlinked to, direct political activity will become academic and purist, assuming the static existence of its subject.

The 'third two' (C), the social base of the student movement, are the object of direct institutional control. The mass of students are the living test bed of revolutionary student practice, and their control and demobilisation is essential to the authorities. Among the mass of students the repressive power of the authorities and the progressive struggle for experiment and direct democracy meet head on.

Action confined to agitating students and their institutional relations, abstract from politics, is thoroughly reformist; whether it takes the form of bureaucratic participation or switching on to a free university.

Revolutionary students will be forced either to combat or to submit to the power of capital in all three areas.

Vittorio Rieser (a student leader from Turin, scene of the most bitterly contested student struggle in Europe) in his outstanding article in the International Socialist Journal of July 1968 has argued the importance of the first area of struggle, although his article is not confined to that and there cannot be a socialist unfamiliar with its importance. Simon Clarke, in his RSSF document, has argued the importance of the second area of struggle; he shows how it is part of a proletarian conflict, both in smashing bourgeois ideology and in revealing the class role of educational institutions. The second half of this text will be about the third area, the arena of student action, the most immediately controversial but least discussed aspect of present student struggles in Britain.

Strategically, this is the crucial area of struggle at the present time. At universities and colleges where students have been mobilised and there is a mass basis of militancy, students should go into the offensive to establish their own direct self-government. In universities and colleges where this pre-condition does not exist, it should be created through agitation on broad educational and institutional demands. The struggle in the local institutions is the pre-requisite for a single nation-wide movement.

Of course the authorities and the reactionary students may succeed in containing the broad mass of students. In which case, having lost the strategic initiative, if only for a short time, militants may need to switch their priorities to another of the three main areas.

ABOLISH THE UNIONS - SET UP POPULAR ASSEMBLIES

The front line of the student struggle at the present moment in England, and it may radically change but it hasn't yet changed, is found in each separate institution. At stake in each struggle is whether the students will be controlled or will collectively control themselves. It is not particular issues or posts that are at stake, but the power structure. Will students become an autonomous bloc, or will they be passified and ultimately moulded into an obedient group rent with internecine struggle?

The universities in Britain are unique in their density, their residential basis, their small size, and their high staff-student ratio. This claustrophobic over-institutionalisation of the universities is paralleled by the subordinated dispersal of technical college, training college, art college and polytechnic students; where the students are atomised by virtually non-existent unions and dull technical education. In the universities, the polytechnics and the colleges the organisation imposed on the students has ensured, until this year, that the majority of students are quietists.

In the confrontations at the LSE, at Leicester, at Leeds and at Hull where there were already established unions, the power of initiative held by the president and the institutional majority represented by the unions, played decisive roles in the development of the struggles. If union presidents and their minions can exercise powerful control during the mobilisation, what is their role in times of peace? Even during sit-ins as the threat of negotiation looms, as chairmen are elected, telephones and offices used, time and again the legal if illegitimate representative of the students will play a crucial part. Time plays into the hands of the authorities and this was as true of the union bureaucrats as it is of the university ones. Outside confrontations and occupations the union apparatus will again and again play a decisive role on the issues on which confrontation can take place, by compromising the majority of the students with the authorities, by colluding with victimisation - as at Sussex over the red paint throwing - and by funnelling the students into the established hierarchy.

The old union structures through their pseudo-democratic voting procedures function directly to contain the students. Their apparatus is the university's handiest weapon to control student opposition; its members serve their masters in the hope of future jobs and in order to gain valuable experience in wielding arbitrary authority.

PARTICIPATION = GAULLISM

An able and experienced opposition has chosen the ground and is preparing to fight for control over the students. The terrain is favourable to youth but the battle has yet to be fought.

If a confrontation is to be won, then the union, the representative student body, must play a vanguard role which means that before the confrontation begins, the union must be in the hands of the students. Victory is impossible when the students' organisation is an ossified remnant of parliamentary balloting. Collective struggle seems to engulf the union; experience shows that as time passes, it is contained by it.

More than victory in a confrontation is at stake in the organisation of the union. We know that the socialist reorganisation of the university as an institution will not be tolerated by the ruling class. Even if this means closing the university down completely or cutting off all the students' grants. Until a nation-wide student movement can play its role in overthrowing the State, the universities will remain a hostile environment. But the socialist transformation of the unions offers English revolutionaries a chance to carve out potential bases in the heart of bourgeois society. Not permanent red bases of peasant Communism, but Latin Quarters with an internal life that is open and militant, and a majority capable of switching to the offensive overnight.

### WHAT IS A POPULAR ASSEMBLY?

All power in the hands of the general meeting. Chairmen elected from the floor meeting by meeting. A sabbatical secretary. Special task committees for particular jobs. No secret or informal negotiations.

Will such an organisation work? This is the first question that has been posed by practical men. Have they ever seen the present union bureaucracy at work, permeated with laziness, jealousy, petty squabbles, rank inefficiency, minor corruption and vanity? The amount of mundane organisational work involved in an ordinary union can be swiftly executed with the minimum of money and time where there is will and determination. If students cannot organise their own union, what hope is there for worker's control? These minor executive functions are peripheral to the present social role of the union, which we repeat, and will repeat again, is to organise and contain the mass of students.

To assure victories in confrontation, to test and experiment with socialist democracy, to guarantee future generations of students the experience of non-institutionalised self-government, the students' unions must be transformed into popular assemblies with all power in the general meeting. For the mass of the students the slogan is popular government, for revolutionary militants: RED DEMOCRACY.

The urgency of this particular struggle cannot be overstressed. Political battles cannot be fought by the institutionally weaker side at their own time and choosing. The university authorities have already chosen the field of battle. They may succeed in encapsulating the student movement for the next decade even if it takes them a year or more to do so. Their class reflexes have honed them onto the problem of controlling the actual social group whose behaviour they find threatening. It is this social group which is to be taken out of their hands. Control of the student unions is the strategic area of struggle.

### THE IMMEDIATE PROFITS

The democratisation of the unions will benefit the students in itself as well as striking a blow against the authorities. Under present conditions all collective democracy is an advance in itself. The conservative right and liberal centre have long developed a special style to mask their rapacious intentions: polite obeisance to the chairman (who in the unions is also quite undemocratically the executive power); gentlemanly references; the whole paraphernalia of debate; patronising 'plain talk'; inevitable references to the 'special', almost mystical, knowledge of an apparatus too complex to explain. It is a joy to see these creatures howled down by a collective assembly which has felt its own strength and is no longer impressed by the mystery of office. All collective discussion and decision-making is an advance.

Secondly, collective decision-making will allow students to insist that their delegates take specific stands, and will allow them to recall any representatives who negotiate secretly and compromise with the authorities. There is much talk of the necessity to ensure that leading students are not bought off. The only way this can be guaranteed is to ensure that such students are not trapped in bureaucratic machines, and not isolated from the effective opinion of the mass of students.

Thirdly, democratic assemblies are areas for full and complete discussions of wider issues. Abolishing the dominant role of the union machinery will open the union for effective debate, in which decisions will be an expression of the student body, not of some debating scenario.

Particular issues of education, such as faculties, admission, and final examinations, and the role of universities and technical colleges can be argued. A collective democratic assembly is the polar opposite of an examination room. In examinations, hundreds of students are spaced apart in strict serial ranks competing against each other for a final judgment. Some academics castigate mass occupation as 'violent'; the secret, vicious and punitive process of examination is the incarnation of terror.

WHAT ARE THE TACTICAL DIFFICULTIES?

First, the need for planned and purposive action at mass meetings. Where conflicts are being decided, skill, intelligence and foresight are at a premium.

Secondly, in parallel with the reluctance of revolutionary students to train themselves for this kind of work, goes a deep and understandable distaste for all formal organisations including open ones. It is essential to grasp the fact that decisions are made and will affect the lives of all students. The question is how these decisions shall be taken and by whom. Some students oppose taking any decisions on the grounds that it is bureaucratic, they fail to understand that bureaucracy is a mode of authoritarian decision making.

Finally, and most important of all, RSSF must combat student unionism among its members. The unions can be overthrown only when hundreds of students have already been mobilised.

Putting forward a slate of candidates without genuine mass backing will be fatal. It merely ensures that militants will be devoured by the official procedures.

---

The formation of RSSF presents revolutionary students with urgent problems of political strategy. A slowly moving student mass, a highly conscious and effective ruling class oblige us to learn more than experience will teach us.

The immediate goal, as French students have shown, is to fight the enemy on our own ground. When effective and possible revolutionary demands are made, education becomes real, debate electric, politicisation rapid. Discussing revolution before and after an occupation is to debate different things. The first an external, strange and continental animal, an object of academic curiosity. The second a living possibility.