

Politicising the education crisis

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'Am I performing?' asks Centenary Commission on Adult Education joint-secretary and University of Nottingham professor John Holford, at a recent conference. Holford is trying to find out if the audience on the other side of the screen is actually there and can actually hear him. You may think I'm being harsh, perhaps even cruel, in picking on John's offhand remark made as he struggled with Zoom. We have all made similar remarks, more often than not, expletives, as we have wrestled with the online conferencing technology that has now established itself at the very centre of our work and social lives. But as with many of our offhand remarks, as Freud explained, John was saying far more than he meant, more than he knew.

Bringing together the 'great and the good' of further education and lifelong learning, the 'Right2Learn is Right for Now' conference was indeed a performance. Organised by a new grouping - Right2Learn - which is led by former UCU official and general secretary candidate Matt Waddup, former Labour MP for Blackpool South Gordon Marsden and academics Vicky Duckworth and Graeme Atherton, it expressed perfectly the liberal-left belief that, if only the right policies can be designed, the world will be saved. In this case, the aim of this new movement is to win, for a post-COVID England (further education is a devolved policy issue), the central recommendation of Labour's 2019 Independent Commission for Lifelong Learning: 'To introduce a universal, publicly-funded right to learn through life'.

A product of the incredibly fertile Jeremy Corbyn years, the 'Future is Ours to Learn' paper that provided the 'Right2Learn' slogan was notable for its absence. Another Corbyn policy consciously or unconsciously repressed was the magnificent

National Education Service idea, which still provides the best framework for socially useful, cradle-to-grave education. The organisers, no doubt, have their eye on Labour's next election manifesto, and are aiming to have a 'long term strategic plan', as Helena Kennedy Foundation founder Ann Limb put it, in place for when Keir Starmer storms to power. With the Post 16 Education and Skills Bill now making its way through Parliament, the education-left will have plenty to write about, discuss in endless Zoom meetings and formulate clever alternatives to.

Meanwhile, a crisis like none of us has seen before (except, perhaps, in documentaries about the Great Depression or in apocalyptic visions of the future) has swept across the globe. The pandemic has changed everything. Three and a half million people are dead because of COVID-19. A significant proportion of these deaths could have been avoided had the world not been so unequal, with a third of earth's human inhabitants in extreme poverty, with little or no access to free health care or social security. As second and third waves of the virus spread across the world in January, a staggering 93 per cent of the world's workers were in some form of lockdown. Even with furlough and job retention schemes, an unprecedented 114 million jobs were lost relative to 2019.

And yet nothing has really changed. In the UK, Boris Johnson's crony government is still handing out public service contracts to friends and Tory funders. A 2020 National Audit Office report found that ten billion pounds worth of contracts were awarded without competition during the first COVID wave, with the Government setting up a special channel that allowed almost 500 suppliers with links to politicians or senior officials to pitch directly for work. Meanwhile, despite growing awareness of the need

to radically reduce CO2 emissions - with the UK hosting the 26th UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26) in November - and big promises to 'build back better' in the wake of the pandemic, the Government is refusing to rule out new licenses for oil and gas drilling in the North Sea.

As I argued recently, the coming economic crisis, combined with the continuing overpromise for the power of education to fix crises of capitalism, will further radicalise young people, as will the under-delivery of climate policy. With millions of adults thrown out of work by the Pandemic, older generations will also feel betrayed by the way the system uses them up and spits them out when they are not needed, no matter how much Kool-Aid they drink. This growing contradiction between capitalist ideology and reality creates the potential for a global movement towards socialism. But this is only a potential. This inter-generational anger and frustration can just as easily be channelled into reactionary causes by right-wing populist and neo-fascist parties and organisations, as we have seen in the last few years.

Against this context, we can neither wait for another Labour government nor get distracted by any more intellectual projects. We must act. To guide our action, we should look instead to another famous assertion of rights - the 'right to work' by the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders. The UCS occupiers were under no illusion that, simply by asserting their right to work, the British government would step in and save their jobs. In 1971, they occupied the shipyards to politicise the crisis of British industry, which had seen under-investment during boom times and slash and burn tactics in the face of competition from Germany and Japan. By refusing to stop working, they symbolised the plight of the British working class, united local communities against the power of international capital, and, alongside a wave of factory occupations in the following years, as well as the 1973 Miners Strike, brought down the Tory government in 1974.

This is the kind of strategy we need to defend the 'right to learn'. Students across the country are refusing to pay their student housing rent. Meanwhile, university staff are striking in numerous universities and colleges against redundancy plans and course closures. The key here is solidarity. While academics at the University of Leicester, for example, focus on the right to teach and research - the right to 'academic freedom', embodied by the *idea* of the modern, bourgeois university - threatened by redundancies, the student strikers use their 'consumer power' to defend the material interests of

their teachers and of non-academic staff. At Manchester, after occupying a university building for a month, and with images of fences erected and torn down splashed across the media, students won not only 30 per cent off rent for the first half of the academic year, but also a no-redundancies policy for maintenance staff.

Student strikers are clear that rent reduction is a tactic, not an end in itself. 'Although the short-term goal may be about getting a few quid in a student's pocket, the end goal is the resistance to marketisation of both universities and, more importantly for the working classes, housing', a statement on the website *rent-strike.org* reads. 'It is our collective action that can take housing out of profit so that we no longer have to bear the exploitation of not only our labour but also our existence. And it is this mindset that can create a society where everyone has access to home, no matter their lack of means.' The strikers are also clear that the time for clever arguments is over: 'We cannot wait for the benevolence of the wealthy and the ruling classes to improve our situation . . . When we already suffer the indignity of an existence that uses every waking moment to further our exploitation, the time for action is not tomorrow, but today.'

It is notable and exciting that young people are returning to the strike weapon - the most effective disruptor to 'business as usual' - for example, also in the global School Strike for Climate movement. The students are right, if their strikes can be linked together with the UCU disputes and industrial unrest in other parts of the economy, where workers are facing redundancy because of COVID-19, we could see another 2010 or even 1968. Despite myths about the latter being merely a generational crisis, books like Kristin Ross's *May '68 and its Afterlives* and films like Chris Marker's *A Grin Without a Cat* show that solidarity between workers and students brought France very close to a revolution. But what the 1970s and the UCS work-in show is that sometimes a single fight can come to symbolise and focus a crisis, which, if supported by the entire working class and the wider public, has the potential to topple a government.

One of the most insidious aspects of English higher education marketisation is the Office for Students' promise not to bail out a university if it goes bust. As I have argued elsewhere, this is a key plank in the government's aim to consolidate the sector and build fewer mega-universities that can pump out human capital and R&D for an ailing capitalist economy and export UK Plc's 'soft power' across

the developing world. We should be preparing for this eventuality. Not by writing more impassioned defences of the idea of the public university, or of academic freedom as a 'public good', but planning meticulously for the occupation of an insolvent institution, and being financially, intellectually and politically ready to pile in with massive public support.

Universities have now become significant anchor institutions in many local economies, not only taking up (and privatising) public spaces, but also providing jobs and secondary income from hospitality, housing and other forms of student consumption. If any of these institutions were to fail, especially given the stress that the pandemic has already put on local economies, this may push whole areas into destitution. Singing about the havoc wreaked by 1980s deindustrialisation on my home city, Coventry, the lyrics of The Specials' *Ghost Town* are more relevant than ever: 'All the clubs have been closed down/This place is coming like a ghost town'. In the event of such a future, it would be easy to build alliances between student and staff occupiers - perhaps even with university management - against Tory marketisation.

One of the reasons there is an FE crisis is that young people are pushed into higher education. The 'skills agenda' is a back-to-front attempt to fix the problem of a stagnating economy that no longer invests in people or society, thanks to thirty years of neoliberal - Tory and New Labour - deregulation. We are being force-fed the idea that apprenticeships will, by themselves, create new, good jobs and drive the green industrial revolution. The reality is that youth with the 'cultural capital' to succeed at university will continue to fight it out for a diminishing number of decent, professional jobs while the rest face a lifetime of insecure work, in-work poverty, or, even worse, long-term unemployment. Asserting the right to a future for young people that is better than the past will bring parents and an ageing public on board.

By occupying a failing university, communities will be asserting the right not just to learn and work, but to a future for themselves, their children and humankind. Occupied universities can be transformed into prefigurative spaces for the stewardship of planet Earth, sharing the science and policy that is now established and 'shovel ready', and training activists to work together to force local and national government to act in line with the Paris Agreement. By politicising the education crisis, we may just bring to a head the wider contradictions of an extractive monopoly finance capitalism and open

the possibility of a different world. As Greta Thunberg insists, 'change is coming, whether you like it or not'. Let's bring the change we want, rather than allowing capital to benefit from yet another wave of creative destruction.

Where we stand:

Post-16 Educator seeks to defend and extend good practice in post compulsory education and training. Good practice includes teachers working with students to increase their power to look critically at the world around them and act effectively within it. This entails challenging racism, sexism, heterosexism, inequality based on disability and other discriminatory beliefs and practices.

For the mass of people, access to valid post compulsory education and training is more necessary now than ever. It should be theirs by right! All provision should be organised and taught by staff who are trained for and committed to it. Publicly funded provision of valid post compulsory education and training for all who require it should be a fundamental demand of the trade union movement.

Post-16 Educator seeks to persuade the labour movement as a whole of the importance of this demand. In mobilising to do so it bases itself first and foremost upon practitioners - those who are in direct, daily contact with students. It seeks the support of every practitioner, in any area of post-16 education and training, and in particular that of women, of part timers and of people outside London and the Southeast.

Post-16 Educator works to organise readers/contributors into a national network that is democratic, that is politically and financially independent of all other organisations, that develops their practice and their thinking, and that equips them to take action over issues rather than always having to react to changes imposed from above.