

# Avtar Jouhl on FE incorporation

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Avtar Singh Jouhl was born in 1937 in Jandiala, Punjab. In 1958 he came to the UK with a view to studying at the London School of Economics. Instead, however, he spent nearly thirty years as a foundry worker in Birmingham, until he became in the mid 1980s a lecturer in the Trade Union Studies Centre at Hall Green College, now part of South and City College Birmingham.

On 13th June 1992, Avtar gave a talk at a small conference on 'Quality and Equality' at Westhill College Birmingham, organised jointly by the NATFHE General Education and Adult Basic Education Sections. We published a transcript of this talk in the September 1992 issue of *General Educator*, predecessor of *PSE*.

Introducing himself, Avtar explained that he was on the National Executive of NATFHE and also General Secretary of the Indian Workers' Association (IWA) GB. In the first half of his talk he spoke about the IWA's struggles against racism in industrial workplaces, in the Foundry Section of the then Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU) and the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU), and in local communities, particularly Smethwick, including with regard to schooling.

He then went on to talk about the quality and equality situation in FE, doing so with reference to the impending 'incorporation' of colleges - that is, the outcome of the Major government's FE Act, which was going to remove them from local authority control with effect from September 1992.

Regarding the local background, Avtar explained that:

... there is a great subject divide. In my own college there is a very high proportion of black students both male and female in General Education and the overwhelming majority of these are doing O level or A level. But when it comes to information technology, engineering or construction the employers don't send many blacks onto day release courses, and so therefore the college has the excuse, "Well we can't do anything because the employers are not sending them". Meanwhile, the employers are saying that "We can't send them, they are not in jobs".

(He clarified that this applied in colleges across Birmingham.)

Addressing the likely effects of incorporation, he maintained that:

To NATFHE, quality means better facilities for students or teachers so that they can deliver quality

education. For the employers quality will relate more and more to unit costs.

As an example of how the lead-up to incorporation was beginning to affect his own working life, he explained that:

... in my college they have introduced already that each teacher in this term will have a photocopying quota of only 1000 ... Over eleven weeks of teaching that will be my photocopying. But in trade union education, photocopying is like spanners to a plumber, for me it is a tool because I can't teach from the textbook only. Shop stewards and health and safety representatives come in, they bring their problems from the workplace and we have to work out case studies and create activities, and that is out now, more or less.

On how 'practitioners and activists' should respond to such cuts, Avtar argued that 'under the new system, where almost everything is going to be negotiated at branch level', an approach based on 'being nice to the managers' that had existed hitherto in education unions 'will not work'. Instead it would be more than ever necessary for 'NATFHE members, ... rather than seeing themselves as individuals ... to come together in the branch structure'.

Pointing out that the FE Act 'says that, yes, there will be an immediate transfer of the contract of employment, but after that it's not certain whether that contract will remain', Avtar stressed how crucial it was 'for members to get their contract of employment, local agreements, local authority agreements, put together and start negotiating now'. He further said:

And if the colleges don't agree, the traditional trade union approach should be there, to organise the workers and stand together even if it comes to some sort of action.

How prescient this was soon became clear, as in the years following incorporation rank and file struggles on the part of NATFHE members across the country erupted in response to attempts by employer after employer, coordinated through the College Employers Forum by the corrupt former TU official Roger Ward, to force FE lecturers onto the drastically worsened contracts that exist to this day. (For two of those years, NATFHE recorded more strike days than any other UK union.)