

FHE: which side are we on?

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The roots of the present day further education (FE) colleges, and to some extent also of the universities that were formerly polytechnics, go back to the development, primarily by local initiative, of technical education provision, including aspects of commercial education, in the latter part of the 1800s. In short, they are totally different from the origins of statutory schooling on the one hand and of traditional universities on the other.

This technical education was provided at a range of levels, most commonly by 'night school' classes held in the evenings. It was closely related to forms of time-served apprenticeship, especially in engineering and in building crafts.

The Industrial Training Act, passed in 1964, was an attempt by the then government to respond to complaints by large engineering employers that smaller rivals frequently 'poached' workers at the

end of the apprenticeship (including release to college for associated technical education) that these larger firms had made available. It set up a levy grant system aimed at countering this. By the 1970s, then, an arrangement was in place by which most local education authorities (LEAs) had one or more colleges that provided craft and basic technician level technical education, along with parallel commercial education in such fields as typing, accountancy etc, assessed through external exams organised by bodies like the City and Guilds of London Institute.

However, in the 1980s the Thatcher government, by off-shoring large sectors of industrial production to repressive regimes overseas, one aspect of which was an attack on unions here, cut away the ground on which time-served apprenticeships, the levy/grant setup and the associated college courses were based. Few union leaders did anything to oppose these developments. FE is as it is now fundamentally because of this assault on working people's life chances. This assault was carried further by the Major government in 1993 when colleges were removed from LEA control by the process termed 'incorporation'.

One long-term effect of these measures has been to exclude broad swathes of young people from proper jobs and often from employment altogether.

Incorporation initiated a situation in which the senior managers of colleges, and especially the principals, competed with one another as if they were running private businesses. This resulted in high levels of in effect compulsory redundancy, especially of former technical lecturers, destruction of pay and conditions for those who remained, along with high profile cases of corruption, a vast increase in bureaucracy and, eventually a workforce cowed by its vulnerability to repeated re-organisation and consequent precarity of employment, often contrived by senior managers via the substitution of Ofsted and mock Ofsted inspections for formerly supportive or neutral inspectorial arrangements.

Attempts by colleges to sustain themselves in this situation by developing second chance GCSE and A-level courses were negated by the Blair government's expansion of universities, leading to ferocious competition on the part of schools to monopolise such provision, a corollary of which was the exclusion of 16-19 year-olds classed by school managers as academically weak. Nevertheless, despite mergers and closures, much of FE has survived in a diminished form, mainly by providing vocational courses to young people who aspire to service sector employment, and by a big growth of adult education focused on English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). This shows that, whatever happens in the spheres of statutory schooling and mainstream selective HE, a big section of working-

class people have a bedrock, lifelong need for locally provided, democratically accountable further education. The question is, then, what can grassroots activists, both amongst FE staff and more generally do now and in the foreseeable future to build, extend and sustain a set-up which provides this?

Such a set-up would ideally be characterised by sub-regional consortia of colleges integrated with post-1993 universities. The governing bodies of these consortia would be directly elected and recallable by the public, including by 16-19 year-olds, in the locality they serve. Ofsted would be replaced by a national inspection framework under the control of practitioners and unions organising workers in the employment fields for which technical education is provided, both prior to employment and at any and every later stage at which workers needed or wanted it. The technical side of such preparation would be integrated at all points with valid forms of general education devised jointly by vocational lecturers and those staff from academic backgrounds who are willing to commit themselves to this field. Such general education would be centred on project work integrating vocational content with the acquisition by vocational students of wider knowledge and understanding of the world. It would allow students and tutors to negotiate and implement a high degree of individual choice as to the areas to be investigated. The culture of awarding bodies would have to change to facilitate this.

Ultimately the valid development of FE is likely to depend on and reflect the combativity or otherwise of grassroots organisation around labour processes, both in the service sectors which predominate now, and in struggles over the shape of green industrialisation. In this regard activists will have to tackle those sections of capital which are attempting to profit from the tokenistic form in which this is developing now. The question is, however, whether, in doing so, those activists will develop ways to make the UK section of global production start to reverse the Thatcherite offshoring of processes, thereby rebuilding industrial employment here and, along with that, valid forms of technical education. Such an approach would need to be informed by a renewed confidence on the part of grassroots union activists in their ability to take control of their own collective self-education. To the extent to which people are able to do this they will by the same token start to revive both FE as it exists now, and the technical education side of HE. However, the issues at stake here can also be seen in a wider perspective.

During a miners' strike in the U.S. Florence Reese famously posed the question 'Which side

are you on?' The election of a Labour government in the UK now makes this question central to many aspects of life here and now, including with regard to the universities that were formerly polytechnics and to FE colleges.

A central reason why Thatcher's assault on UK mineworkers and their families 'succeeded' is that potentially powerful interest groups, including the leaderships of the TUC and of the Labour Party, along with sections of working-class people bought off by Thatcher's sale of council houses failed to stand with the miners.

Aspects of this crept in during the 1970s. Something like the early stages of an embryonic civil war began to develop, in which people who would previously have worked together and who would have pinned their hopes on shared outcomes were pitted against one another. This happened in F.H.E., stimulated by some of the events described above.

If, for example, a higher proportion of FE and polytechnic lecturers had proactively asserted the importance of General Studies as a component of technical courses, many thousands of vocational students would over the years have had a chance to think twice about the ideological direction in which agents of the powerful were pushing them. This could not have cancelled out the effects of de-industrialisation and off-shoring, but it could have helped to prevent several generations of people from becoming so defenceless against 'commonsense' racism as many now look to be. This would have been the case especially if the lecturers concerned had worked together across internal and external institutional boundaries to reshape such general education from below into a more valid form than the half-hearted one in which it had originally been set up.

They could have done so, and in the here and now their successors can do so, as long as they start to ask themselves 'Which side are we on?'



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