

# HIGHER EDUCATION

The struggle for  
the future

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## INTRODUCTION

Today's economic and social distress is not an uncomfortable prelude to a period of prosperity and well being, but a manifestation of the absolute decline of capitalism in Britain - a decline brought about by the strength of our own working class. The student movement, a relatively new yet important sector, has played its part, rapidly developing from its earnest but politically immature actions of a decade ago to building a developed trade union, fighting for its independence from the state, for improved grants and conditions of work.

But today capitalism has shifted our struggle's focus from conditions within education to its continued existence. To meet the challenge, all workers must be crystal clear about the place of higher education and of students within modern society and their relationship to the rest of industry.

Confusion on this issue opens the way to division within the class and will deny us that vital conviction, not only essential for our day to day resistance but the understanding that the fight to save education is, of necessity, part of the class conscious struggle to save Britain from capitalism, for revolution, for socialism.

## WHAT IS HIGHER EDUCATION? WHY SAVE IT?

Britain is a manufacturing nation. The working up of raw materials into finished products has long been the basis of our cultural identity and material wealth. Modern industry was first developed from the skill of the British working class. The world industrial revolution started here in Britain and that tradition of skill continued with such things as the Bessemer process, the Siemens Martin open hearth furnace. In electronics Faraday continued the tradition of Watt and Arkwright. The names continue through Whittle and the jet engine to Concorde today.

Transforming nature through labour is the source of all wealth - even if those who labour are rewarded with nothing but impoverishment.

Just as labour is a necessary condition of human existence, so skilled labour is the basis of modern industry. All society is based on the transmission and extension of skill from one generation to the next; modern industry demands high investment in human beings as well as in plant. The higher the level of skill of the working class, the greater is the potential wealth that can be created. Conversely, the less the skill, the less the potential.

That transmission of skill and knowledge is education, and higher education is an essential part of it. Education in all forms is, by its nature, a developing, dynamic process. As new theories are put into practice, new skills are needed requiring the further advancement of knowledge. Without research to develop our knowledge and skills our society cannot progress, our future needs will not be served. And yet the ruling class fosters the illusion to the contrary - that education is a luxury, a waste of precious resources. To understand how false this is, we must understand the crucial importance of the various aspects of knowledge and skills that higher education produces. There are two aspects to skill. First there is the skill we normally think of - vocational skill, the ability to do a particular job, produce a particular commodity, like the skills of a doctor, engineer, cabinet maker. A quick look at the breakdown of subjects taught in higher education shows how many of these skills are taught.

The Government divides the courses studied into nine sections: education (teacher training etc.); medicine; engineering; agriculture; science; social studies (including business management, economics, geography, accountancy, government and public administration, law, psychology, sociology and anthropology); architecture; language; the arts. (Today the majority of students study under the broad heading of science, though the press would have us think otherwise.) These skills, ability to do specific jobs, have transformed the world and continue to transform it in the space of decades.

But there is a more important type of skill - less easily defined or measured, but nonetheless more important. This is the general level of skill, of education and knowledge in society - the basis upon which all specific skills rest.

The general level of skill is the reservoir of potential; without it there is no future development. It is the bedrock not only of specific skill, but of society, the totality of our culture. It is the basis on which specific skills are developed and advanced. There is no place for such a reservoir except in the minds of the people, since it is they who must draw upon it. Furthermore, the more advanced the labour, the more advanced must be the skills of the labourers, not only adequate to use the tools, but in advance of the tools, since it is the labourers who create the tools.

Thus during the industrial revolution, the three Rs were adequate in the main for capitalism's needs, whilst in a highly technical society like ours a much higher level is needed, the key is flexibility of labour.

"Under large scale industry, it becomes a life and death matter that the monstrosity of an unhappy reserve army of labour kept at the disposal of capital for its varying needs in the way of exploitation, shall be replaced by the perfect adaptability of the individual human being to the changing needs for different kinds of labour; so the detail worker, who has nothing more to perform than a partial social function, shall be superseded by an individual with an all round development, one for whom the various social functions are alternative modes of activity. Factors of this metamorphosis, factors which are a natural growth upon the foundation of large scale industry, are polytechnics and agricultural schools; other factors are schools of craft training ... " (Capital p. 527).

Both types of skill, the specific and the general and their development through research and practice are essential to the industrial future of this country, certainly for a self reliant socialist Britain ... but not for a capitalism in absolute decline. The present onslaught on the scope, quality and availability of education in Britain is not the harbinger of a new cycle of capitalist expansion, but on the contrary, the groundwork for a new Dark Age.

The British ruling class always has lagged behind in training its workers and in extending its skills and knowhow. A Royal Commission set up in 1868 to look at educational provision pointed out that

unless appalling general standards were remedied "we shall gradually but surely find that our undeniable superiority in wealth and perhaps in energy will not save us from decline". It was pointed out, but the contradictions within capitalism meant that nothing was done. The few colleges and mechanics' institutes were in the main set up through the efforts of the working men themselves, helped by the self interest of a small minority of more enlightened (in understanding capitalism) entrepreneurs. In 1913, the British university was still a finishing school for gentlemen rather than an educational establishment. Britain had 9,000 students, of which 300 graduated in all branches of science, technology and mathematics. Comparable figures for Germany were 60,000 and 3,000 in engineering alone. By 1940 the ruling class was still complacent; state aid to all higher education amounting to a grand total of four million pounds. Only the shortages of skilled men during the war, the glaring proof of Britain's relative industrial decline in the post war years changed their attitude ... for a short time. By 1971, the universities alone received £389 million worth of state backing and nearly 30 per cent of school leavers now go on to some further or higher education training. Even so, this compares very unfavourably with Britain's competitors.

And now, the very same class who held back educational development in Britain for a century blame in part, education for the country's decline! And they seek to destroy it. Round one of the cuts has come and gone. There will be no further expansion and universal economies mean lower standards everywhere. This if successful, will mean the end of higher education as we know it, the closing of many courses and institutions, the end of even the existing limited facilities for higher education for the mass. It was never the ruling class, or any of its governments, which adhered to the demand of educational opportunity for all. Nor was any act on their part meant to increase that opportunity, but on the contrary to increase their opportunity for exploitation. Their real failure to achieve that means that now, under the slogan 'for the regeneration of British industry' they intend to destroy education.

The reappraisal of the role of higher education by the ruling class

started in 1972 with a House of Commons Select Committee to deal with the 'mismatch between the outputs of higher education and the needs of the labour market.' The conclusion was that the policy of 'natural demand' advocated by the Robbins Report ten years earlier, the idea of providing more or less as many places in as many subjects as there were students to fill them, 'has not only failed to produce the right sort of people for British industry' but has even resulted in 'polytechnics devoting an increasing amount of their effort to providing places for sociologists' (Oh horrors!). In 1974, the Expenditure Committee Report on Postgraduate Education proposed that it should be shaped 'not by student demand alone, but principally by the needs of the economy and of society as a whole.'

Major changes in education are therefore in preparation. Anyone who is not studying production engineering will be branded as a useless parasite - and the British education system will be blamed as the cause of Britain's industrial decline. The cry for the integration of higher education further into society is not progressive, not is it intended to regenerate education as an essential part of society, but is meant only to divide artist from scientist, divide into 'useless' and 'useful', to put education into the straightjacket of giving the most immediate return in the short run and of ceasing to be, in the long run.

The first step was the suggestion that those going into 'useful' areas should receive a higher grant. This was soon outdone by the suggestion that those going into 'useless' subjects should have to pay for the 'privilege' by means of a loan instead of a grant. When these ideas have sunk in the true meaning will become apparent - with limited resources we will have to decide on 'priorities' - which do you want, arts or science? Money, developed to accelerate circulation, to aid production, is now being used as a means of strangulation. The 'logic' runs: only the potato part is immediately productive, and it is a waste of precious resources to have things like roots, stems and leaves, so we must cut those to get more potatoes. Any one could tell that such a course would leave us to starve - but then that is the intention.

## SAVE EDUCATION . . . . FROM WHOM?

It is an unmistakable fact that not one of the public services was freely given to the working class for their benefit and well-being. The Health Service, education, the social services were all wrung from the state by the working class as the fruits of years of bitter class struggle. At no time has the bourgeoisie desired an educated, cultured working class for its own sake, but that with training and skill of all sorts more profit was to be made. Education has always been under attack from a system that dictates that the narrow financial profit of the few should be the foremost criterion in all things.

The economic motive behind successive educational reforms has always been paralleled by the political motive. The following comes from a parliamentary debate on the Education Act of 1870; to "... instruct working men and women how to answer the arguments of the radicals, socialists and atheists in the workshops, in the public houses and at the street corner." While capitalism has had to give the working class the tools to wield a modern technology, it is unable to prevent that class from using those tools to fashion its own liberation.

The especial product of capitalism is its own gravedigger, the proletariat.

In the pursuit of its own profit, it has to create a class with the capacity to understand its relationship with capitalism and the necessity to overthrow it. This has been long understood; the engineering worker, Thomas Wright, wrote in 1867, "To cultivate the mind of a man who, with his family is condemned to live in some den inferior in every essential of health and comfort to the sty of a prize hog, and compared with which a prison cell would be a desirable residence and who would regard prison fare as riotous living, may seem to be beginning the task of elevating him at the wrong place, or even to be doing him a positive injury. But practically, such is not the case, for the cultivation of the mental faculties gives rise to a keener and more painful consciousness of physical degradation and that consciousness is essentially of the nature of an ardent desire for better things, and the creation of such desire is an important step towards its own fulfilment."



Of necessity, capitalism has had to develop the understanding and initiative of our class. The inherent contradiction is that the weapon capitalism seeks to yield, can be taken up against capitalism itself.

Whilst bourgeois education can not of itself produce a working class capable of and willing to overthrow capitalism, it cannot purge wholly from our minds those arguments of 'radicals, socialists and atheists'.

The fact is that we, the British working class, now face a problem of our own creation. The strength of trade unionism in protecting and enhancing the dignity and independence of our class, and in nourishing our thought, has led to the necessity for the ruling class to destroy that dignity, independence and thought since those oppose the exploitation by which capitalism survives. Yet self-imposed limit of the class has meant that capitalism has been permitted to remain in being, has indeed been driven to its extremities in seeking to wipe out the spirit of our class. British workers have tried to assert their independence within capitalism and have failed. The onslaughts on us today are in essence political, aimed at the cowing of our class, at submission. Hence the social contract, not a matter of £6 or £7, but a matter of attack on principle; whether or not a working class should agree beforehand with a capitalist state, itself the country's largest employer, the limits on its own struggle. Nor has the process ceased with that agreement. It is now bandied abroad, and not rejected outright, that profit is the mainspring of industry and the source of employment. The unions, ever a defence of the working class against profit, are being made into a defence of profit against the working class.

Similarly, with education. The destruction of skill and industry necessary to cow the class, to sap its ability to resist, is one and the same as the destruction of the class; it is an onslaught on people on workers, for therein lies our skill and industry. Thus education is for the ruling class an aspect of that dignity which is the antithesis of that they seek to create.

It must be destroyed. Hence the cuts. Most obvious of all are the cuts in teacher training, in the schools of tomorrow, surest sign of the permanence of decline under capitalism. Nor is it a case of cutting here to strengthen there. From nursery school to re-

search, from classics to computer science, the pattern is the same, less and worse.

Nor is it true as argued that education is cut in order to regenerate industry. Industry is skill, is the working class, for that is what makes the products and the machines to create them. Advance depends on extension of that skill. Yet we are asked to believe that skill can be regenerated by education cuts, health cuts, housing cuts. As if workers would produce more if only they were less well educated, sicker, worse housed . . . and of course, unemployed.

The so-called National Enterprise Board has been enterprising at throwing workers onto the dole in quest of a quick profit before 'minor' industries like telecommunications, shipbuilding, aerospace, motors, paper, die on their feet through lack of investment. The basic nationalised industries - steel, rail, power - are all set on a course of deliberate and disastrous contraction. The Science Research Council, core of Britain's scientific research has been cut and cut again. Only these projects most conducive to immediate profit are going ahead.

The truth is that this 'regeneration' is nothing but the process of squeezing the last drop out of British industry as quickly as possible - before it dies altogether.

As we begin to develop the fight to save all of education, we must begin to question what type of society we are saving these skills and resources for. For capitalism which has distorted educational development and misdirected its resources, is now pointing to this distortion to fuel their attack on the whole. Discipline of mind; the ability to express a viewpoint clearly; the ability to identify and understand the complexities in a situation or proposal and see it in general perspective; the ability to understand differing arguments, their origins and inconsistencies; the ability to understand how a situation and argument can change and develop; all these are general skills which are possessed by our class, skills which are essential to the workers of any advanced nation. Higher education develops these skills in students with regard to their specific disciplines just as similar skills are developed by other sections of our class with regard to their job training. Students are apprentices too.

But higher education is also a centre of bourgeois ideology. This is not to say that knowledge itself is ideology, but rather to say that all knowledge must be used ideologically. Thus elitist values are encouraged, the myth being fostered that only highly educated people can think for themselves; so devaluing thought and (they hope) creating a dependence on experts for opinion. Book learning at its worst prevails. Relativism rules the roost - all ideas are equally valid (and therefore all equally invalid). Only originality within abstract confines is welcomed. The thought of students is devalued within training, just as the thought of those outside is.

We require for the cause of education that we be convinced that the knowledge belongs to the working class, that the defects in our establishments of higher education are caused not by the defects of knowledge, but by the usurpation of education by capitalism to its own ends. Our task is to take what is useful from education and to regenerate the whole by placing it in the service of our class and of advance of knowledge.

All over the world, capitalism is in decline. Trapped by its own internal logic, it attempts to resolve its perennial crisis by the destruction of the means of production, of the very means by which it lives; it can but destroy. Here in Britain that process is most acute. The destruction is deliberate and conscious, and aimed at the independence of mind, our mind. This is not the result of any particular government's policy, but a strategy dictated by the contradictions facing capitalism. This strategy is nothing less than counter revolution to forestall revolution.

There is no future for education, or for Britain, under capitalism.

## HOW?

Education is being destroyed and there are none to save it except us, the workers. We, the whole working class, must think carefully about our education system. Do we want it? Why? For at present, the major threat is not so much that there is an attack, but that the apologists of destruction can find a responsive chord in the minds of

the British people, students not excepted. Are we totally unabashed and confident in opposing 'progressive' arguments that primary and secondary education should have priority over higher education? Don't some of us agree that higher education is useless, or at best a luxury that can be sacrificed? Our clarity is the paramount factor in the defence of education, for it is only our absolute intellectual conviction that can bring all our other weapons into play. Without that conviction, the battle is lost before it is begun.

Capitalism has admitted defeat in its education programme in saying that higher education has not produced the right sort of people for British industry - for they are saying that they have failed to produce the mindless but productive robots to serve the anarchic and decaying needs of capitalism. In saying that they pay unwilling tribute to our student population. But we must beware, for they also declare war on us by doing so. It is in part the struggle of students which has denied to capitalism the fruits that it desires from education. It has been our refusal to accept that we are useless, fit only for loans, high hall fees and the limitation of our potential, that has contributed to the failure of education for capitalism. And for that they will exact their price. It is because students are important that they must be isolated from the rest of our class. It is because students are part of Britain's productive capacity that capitalism seeks to cut off and demoralise us. Our relatively new consciousness of our position within the opposing class forces of Britain carries within it the old notion that we are outside, a special privileged group battenning on the backs of others. All attacks on students - and hence on higher education - are directed at increasing that sense of isolation.

We must be clear as to what confronts our class at the present time.

Its history is one of struggle, never making peace with capitalism yet never accepting the necessity of overthrowing it. A policy of survival within capitalism which gave birth to its ideology, social democracy. In our struggle we must understand the peculiar wisdom and present uselessness of such a course. Today, when to accept the constraints of capitalism is to accept defeat, social democracy has been transformed from an ideology of survival to one of destruc-

tion. It must be totally discarded, this applies to our own union, the National Union of Students. We must break the stranglehold of social democracy on it. If we allow capitalism to restrain us we will be allowing the NUS to become another weapon of the system and finally a part of the corporate state.

In truth, the battle to save education is a revolutionary battle, because it can only be saved by destroying capitalism.

There can be no middle way. The task is to direct all struggles to political action, to revolution. For in seeking to turn aside from the burden of overthrowing capitalism, what we do above all is to seek to ignore the political kernel of events, that central core' of class against class, them and us. Such a task shall not be accomplished without our Party, without scientific theory. Just as scientific theory transformed the world, so now we face the crying task of building, through revolutionary struggle to save education and Britain, the theory of revolution in an industrial country.

Only with that theory will our class be able to unleash our own atom bomb of socialist revolution which will shake this world for construction not destruction. Such a task demands that our class, aware of the need to undertake it, set itself consciously to accomplish it. The manifestation of that is our Party. To be able to solve it without a Party would be to develop a theory unconsciously - unthinkable!

Without theory we are nothing, incapable of more than tailing after events which bring our destruction. If we grasp revolutionary theory, then we are indeed a force to shake the world!

#### WHAT ARE WE SAVING EDUCATION FOR?

We are saving education as an integral part of saving Britain from capitalism, to enable ourselves to accomplish economic recovery by preserving the knowhow and scientific understanding we shall need in running our own country. We are saving it because education provides the major part of the intellectual strength of the working class, just as the health service provides us with physical strength, both of which are necessary if our class is to come to

maturity under its own social, cultural, political and economic system. We save it to serve the development which thriving socialism brings, and which a declining capitalism denies. Education is an essential part of industry, and there is an end to the argument that it must be sacrificed in order to save industry under capitalism.

And in saving education from capitalism, we are also declaring that we will transform it for socialism. Only in socialism is the question of how education can serve manufacture a real one, since only in socialism do education and manufacture serve wholly the same purpose - the political, intellectual, cultural, economic development of the working class, our class. Only in socialism can education be purged of the idle theorising and abstract learning which are the marks of capitalism, because only in grasping and strengthening the dictatorship of the proletariat can the thought of the producing class, the most advanced thought, be truly liberated to change the world. Only in socialism can education be rid of idealism, because only then are the needs of our class all. For us, the workers, self fulfilment can only come within the fulfilment of the needs of our class.

The spirit and dignity of a people go hand in hand with its skill and knowledge. The mastery over nature is the source of this spirit. The ruling class now wishes us to be ignorant - and therefore slave to nature, and therefore to other men - them. There are two classes in Britain, and education is already manned by the working class. This is a strength that must not be squandered. The whole of the working class must rise to seize its birthright. Only revolution will suffice.



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