



General Assembly

The Bulletin of the Education Workers Network

Spring 1993

The Education Workers Network:

An introduction from a member at the University of Salford.

Industrial Networks

This newsletter has been created by a group of people in education from different places around the country. Our immediate aim is to bring like-minded people together in a unique forum of debate, including education workers from different sectors and different occupations within schools, colleges and universities. There exists a crying need for basic information in our sector and also for basic solidarity and vision that goes beyond that of the standard unions. We, like workers in Transport and Public Service, believe that we need an organisation which is primarily workplace-based and which is open and democratic: in touch with our day to day needs.

We Need a Fighting Union

The kind of union we want goes beyond the TUC unions in many ways. The existing unions have shown their limitations and in many industries now offer better insurance deals, credit cards or cheaper holidays - all in an attempt to reconcile our needs as workers with governments' and bosses' demands. They are increasingly divorced from workplace issues. Officials, supposed to 'represent' us, often simply play the role of mediators between management and us, with little come back for us if

we disagree. We are quite clear on this point: the bosses' interests and ours are different.

Control from Below

The so called left has tried for years to get us to elect left-wingers onto National Executives in order to 'radicalise' the union. This 'strategy' has resulted in time and effort being wasted and has only resulted in demoralisation as these new leaders do not deliver and our real situation gets worse. What we want is an organisation controlled by us without bureaucrats to tell us when and how we can take action. Whatever affect us should be decided by us.

Tired Solutions

These ideas are not particularly new. Workers in Britain put them into practice at the beginning of the century. Fellow workers in other countries already have this kind of union, such as in France, Italy and Spain. Like many other workers, we are fed up with the same old tired solutions. The unions and the Labour Party and the like have played politics with us for far too long. It is about time we started to build our own form of resistance, based on relevance, solidarity and real strength. We think the first steps towards that have been made in the form of the **Education Workers Network**.

Fighting the Scab Unions

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John from Merseyside EWN explains how workers took on a scab union
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Scabs in Education

Whilst many educational workers and students have a good record of solidarity and militant opposition to the bosses there has also been an

undercurrent of scabbing in education. One form this takes is the formation of scab unions. In F.E. where I work we have to contend with a snivelling, toadying organisation called the Professional Association of Teachers. They are small at present but when the colleges are incorporated this April the management will almost certainly be instructed to recognise them. In my place of work we successfully

saw off an attempt by the P.A.T. to establish a base. Our experience may be of use to other workers and students faced with a similar threat. Remember that you won't get much help from the official unions but in your favour is the fact that these organisations mainly attract people with little fight in them.

Combating the Scabs

The first line of attack was to remove, secretly, any posters, notices etc. that they had put up. This got them hopping mad and resulted in them crying to the management and our union officials. Everyone knew who was responsible but we admitted nothing. It was great being quizzed by the boss who knew we had done it but was equally aware that he would never be able to prove it. The scabs eventually gave up when we not only removed a notice but nicked the board as well!

We did some research into past pay rises. Every year the scab union accepted the bosses' first offer whilst the official union put up a token fight occasionally resulting in industrial action. Usually we were able to win an improved offer which all worker received, including the scabs. Over a few years this meant that their approach would have cost the workers a lot of money and resulted in inferior working conditions. Most workers resented the fact that scabs benefited from our sacrifices and this really isolated them from the rest of the workers. Indeed the P.A.T. boasts it has a no strike clause in its constitution! I believe that this small effort put into research paid off. I doubt if they picked up a

single member after that.

Disciplinary Charges

We soon discovered that the P.A.T. was unwilling to take on the management even in individual cases where its members faced disciplinary charges. The first time this happened we watched as one of their members received sympathy from the P.A.T. but no advice or representation. We had a good record of winning such cases and when the individual concerned was forced to come to us for help we greeted them with good grace and got them off a sticky charge. We did this on one other occasion and then announced that we would refuse to take any more similar cases. This left the remaining members feeling very isolated and insecure.

Student Action

Finally we involved the students by naming the scabs. I was pleasantly surprised with the level of support we received. Most students gave the scabs a hard time in class. This removed the P.A.T.'s claim to be putting the interests of students first.

Vigilance

We won in this instance but we remain vigilant. I strongly urge all workers and students to stamp on these scab outfits as soon as they emerge. Don't wait until they get too strong to take on. Finally, in fighting scabs you may inadvertently be promoting "reformist" trade unionism. Be careful, but your militant stand will be recognised by most workers and students as being far removed from the "official" teaching unions' approach.

The National Curriculum

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Jan from Midsomer Norton EWN explains the effects of the National Curriculum at her primary school

A Stimulating Environment

Go into any primary school in the country and you will probably find a self-contained community who's ethos is based on trust and mutual respect that has stood the test of time for children, parents and staff. The environment will be visually and physically stimulating, with an atmosphere of happy confidence, calm and purposeful.

The children will have been encouraged to plan, modify and review their work, and ask questions and make non-destructive criticism. They will know their opinions are valued. This self esteem is high regardless of academic potential. They will move freely around the building, trusted to work unsupervised with tape recorders, projectors, tools and musical instruments.

"Your school is a business..."

The prognosis for your future visit is very different. Firstly we have been told, and I quote, "Your school is a business. The parents are customers, and the

children are marketable products." Schools will have to compete with each other being encouraged to tout for business in the market place using glossy brochures and school emblems and by seeking publicity in the local press. With the introduction of the National Curriculum (N.C.) - now in its second full year - the work patterns are already changing.

Testing Targets

Whilst much of the content of the N.C. (especially studies in the Science and the Humanities) is galvanising; real value to the child is negated by the speed at which one has to move in order to cover the ground in the allotted time, One cannot afford to digress or take up

interesting, unexpected tangents. It is necessary to provide evidence of 313 minor points of attainment within the main targets for each child at 7 and 519 minor points between 5 and 11 years. The children are

tested until they fail. Those from middle class backgrounds may be coached to jump through the hoops - some will succeed. Mainly computer literate children whose parents will buy the set books in order for them to mug up on reading passages which have been suggested in 'quality' newspapers.

Individual one-to-one help for children with learning difficulties has been cut to the bone. The work is either given to a general assistant (some of whom are excellent) or you have to try and give them as much attention in class as possible - try that with a class of 32! These children have to be tested and will become marginalised very early on in their school careers.

Education Psychos

Disruptive children with histories of family problems must be absorbed (we are told) and *behaviour* policies are being developed by Ed Psychos who want to keep their jobs. These policies usually involve rewards for positive behaviour (yes, stinks doesn't it?). This rubbish for street kids who know it ain't very nice out their is at the best patronising. For them the only way towards co-operation is to constantly re-negotiate the ground rules, of course this takes *time*. The government wants us to teach facts by rote rather than skills. This seems to impress many parents. In the last year the teaching

of English has changed and is now concentrated on clerical skills. Handwriting, punctuation and spelling. This is the death knell of creative writing for 5-7 year olds. We will be asked to publish results - set school against school. They have tried to get round this one by giving children entry-level tests (it took four solid weeks to administer). Then they say, "Look what progress he/she has made considering that he/she couldn't speak English, tie shoe laces on arrival."

"Bad" behaviour

Too many children are being excluded from school, either permanently or temporarily, for 'bad' behaviour. Under the new arrangements there will be a clear obligation for the provision of alternative education (concentration camps?).

Education systems reflect the society they serve.

Nothing has changed in the last 50 years in so far as the rate at which a child becomes competent at using basic skills and absorbs concepts. Some learn quickly, most at a steady rate. Standards have not been eroded - they were never measured. There have always been children leaving school unable to read or write properly. The difference now is that there are no jobs for them and they are more visible.

At the moment teachers have no negotiating rights but 'pay rises' keep the public largely ignorant of this. They are disillusioned with a union which has allowed the bureaucrats in Whitehall to call the shots. They are divided by the incentive allowance system, making it difficult to rock the boat if you are in a position of influence. Rock the boat - lose your allowance.

We are told the education system has failed and that it is our fault. We are left isolated with, seemingly, no will to redress issues. This enables government to become increasingly powerful as the divisions within teaching become acute. I haven't mentioned teacher appraisal - a stick to beat ourselves with (we've been told it won't affect promotion or involve personality conflicts!). Government has the perfect scapegoat - a voiceless, defensive wimp with a guilty conscience.

"The children are tested until they fail. Those from middle class backgrounds may be coached to jump through the hoops - some will succeed."

Incorporation in the Colleges

John from Merseyside EWN looks at the future for staff and students in the Further Education sector

On April 1st this year virtually all F.E. colleges will be removed from local authority control and placed under the control of the F.E. Funding Council. This is far more than a bureaucratic re-organisation - the implications are extremely important for staff and students alike.

Who Will Control the Colleges?

Colleges have never been run on a democratic basis. Most are controlled by local councils who have shown only limited interest in them. They have a long record of complacency and mismanagement. The day to day running of the colleges is undertaken almost exclusively by principles who are only nominally controlled by boards of mainly unelected governors. Under incorporation the colleges will become self managing rather like the NHS Trust hospitals. This will make the college management even more powerful. A central body called The F.E. Funding Council will ensure that colleges that don't fit in with government plans will have their budgets cut or cancelled. So from April onwards there will not even be the pretence that the colleges are subject to democratic control.

Threat to Staff

The implications for staff are immense. Their present conditions of service and pay can be altered by the management providing the management go through a process of "consultation" first. Most college principles have joined a sinister organisation called the College Employers Forum (annual subs £7,000). The leader of this organisation, Robert Ward, is a particularly nasty piece of work. He is demanding that there are massive changes in staff conditions e.g. teaching hours to increase by at least 50%; holidays halved; and no pay increases this year for any staff who do not accept these new conditions. If these proposals are accepted then the demand

for teaching staff will be reduced and the quality of service will suffer greatly. There will be no more national negotiations. Pay and conditions will be negotiated on a local level. The staff in some colleges may be able to protect themselves for a while but in colleges with weak union organisation the staff can look forward to a very rough ride in the near future.

Recognition for scabs

The Employers Forum are insisting that the scab unions be given recognition and equal status to the T.U.C. unions. This is despite the fact that the scab outfits are tiny and hardly capable of organising anything. The T.U.C. unions aren't much better and are only now beginning to wake up to the threats coming from the employers. Although I suspect they are more worried about their own jobs than those of their members.

Attacks on students and courses

Students will almost certainly suffer in that courses will have to operate on a profit making basis. This means that you will have to pay enormous fees or enrol on courses that the government selects for you. There will be a strong emphasis on low level training courses, which experience shows are pretty useless in actually getting students jobs and at best qualify you for the most boring and poorly paid jobs.

Where do we go from here?

The situation is serious but not hopeless. We need to get organising now. All staff and students should prepare themselves for any and all eventualities. It is likely that changes will be introduced at different places throughout the country with existing staff and students remaining relatively unaffected for a while. It will be new staff and courses that will be hit first. We need to liaise nationally and be ready to react when colleges and staff are picked off. The official unions don't have a good fighting record but we will be able to use them to communicate with fellow workers and students. ***The coming fight in F.E. will without doubt test us and the unions.***

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