

Education Worker

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Bullying at Brunel University

Under the Blair governments Brunel University promoted itself as the model of a new entrepreneurial university, a public-private partnership with the emphasis very much on attracting the interests of business. Having awarded an honorary degree to Margaret Thatcher in 1996 it was well placed to make such a claim. In the great league tables of British universities Brunel is a defiantly mid-table uni, the



Fulham FC of the University Premier league, but without the charming architecture. It is no coincidence that key scenes from Kubrick's adaptation of *A Clockwork Orange* were filmed at Brunel and indeed it is clear that several of the films sociopath's were left behind after filming where they have now gravitated into the ranks of senior management. Originally dominated by engineering Brunel has the reputation of being both an education factory and a revolving door uni, no one hangs around for long if they can get away.

With the appointment of New Labour acolyte Professor Stephen Schwartz in 2002 there was a conscious effort to change this and to push Brunel to becoming a global university with global research credentials. This process had begun in 1999 with the closure of the departments of physics, chemistry and materials engineering, fol-

lowed in 2002 by that of Geography. Schwartz had been a VC in Australia where he had already displayed his anti-union and bullying credentials. This, no doubt, led to his appointment at Brunel. This predictable management strategy was taken to another level in 2005 when Schwartz appointed sociologist

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FE Lecturers: Pay to Work?

FE Lecturers are being asked to pay for the right to work.

The history of the Institute for Learning (IfL) goes back into the nineties when the idea was put forward to create a professional body for lecturers in the FE sector, similar to the GTC for school teachers.

Surveys amongst lecturers showed that two thirds appeared to want such a body (though I wonder who was surveyed, as I've met only a small minority who see it as a beneficial thing). The IfL was incorporated as an independent and professional body in 2001 and by 2006 it became the official professional body for lecturers in FE.

Membership if the IfL became compulsory for anyone who wanted to teach in FE, but at this stage membership fees were covered by the government.

Now, in this age of government cut backs, funding for the IfL has ceased, the cost of maintaining the body (a private registered company) falling squarely upon the shoulders of the lecturers themselves. All of us working in the FE sector received a letter telling us that membership costs have now risen to £68 a year, and that we are personally liable for paying them. Remember: membership of the IfL is compulsory if you wish to teach in the FE sector.

What this amounts to is an additional tax burden placed upon lecturers for the right to work. We did not ask to be members of the IfL and as far as most of us can tell the body does nothing of value for us.

There is a lot of bad feeling amongst lecturing staff about this new burden placed upon us. The strongest feeling is that we will not pay for the right to work!

by workers – for workers

ACADEMIES: EDUCATION'S

In this article I'd like to talk about my experience of working in an academy school. I've been teaching in this school for less than two years, and in that short time have seen a lot of things that have angered me as a worker and as someone who values education, and made even more apparent to me the need for a radical overhaul in education that can only be achieved by revolutionary change in society as a whole.

Schools as business and the business of schooling

My school is run by a large multinational company, and its presence in the schools is well-felt. We've had representatives address staff meetings and talk about their 'visions' for the school. We have fantastically fancy looking building, great computer suites and lovely music facilities. Much is made of our students and parents as 'customers' and how we need to give them the 'service they deserve'. The pupils know the sponsor name; volunteers come in from the company to work with the pupils. It's perfect PR for the sponsor company – 'look at this fantastic community work we do, giving an education to these poor kids'. It's 'community outreach' or 'giving something back to the community'... something like that.

The flip side is that in some subjects we don't have GCSE textbooks because we can't afford them. We don't have enough classrooms for when the school grows. We count

every last piece of equipment in and out, cos we can't afford to replace rulers and markers. 'You know what the budget's like'. And we've class sizes of over 30 in some GCSE subjects, frankly appalling. The Trojan horse of the fancy building and uniform betrays a real lack of resources, a strapped budget, and massive class sizes, which are projected to increase in the next few years.

At the end of the day, it's a business. And pennies have to be saved somewhere, hitting frontline staff and students the most.

Organising

We have unions; NUT, NASUWT, Unison and GMB. They have members. None are recognised, nor likely to be soon given the almost total lack of a culture of dissent, or even awareness of advancing workers interests. So we're not tied into national agreements on pay & conditions and we've consultation over such issues.

There have been a few isolated, individual grievances and the like; atomised and easy for management to deal with without too much fuss. There's potential for organising and some small gains have been won, such as keeping a member of support staff from getting the sack after a solidarity campaign. But the struggle to organise is proving to be a long one, but not impossible. There are many structural barriers: Non-recognition of unions – no facility time for reps and no consultation over

changes to conditions etc; staggered lunchtimes – no chance for staff to have lunchtime meetings; compulsory after-school clubs and meetings – difficulty meeting and placing strain on admin duties.

Workplace issues

We work LONG hours, longer than I remember any of my teachers working. It's common for the photocopy room to be busy at 6pm, really. We ignore national assessment practices (such as 'opting-in' to SATs despite them having been abolished at key-stage 3) and we have extended school days through compulsory after-school clubs for all teaching staff. Many expect staff to stay much longer than 'normal' schools, and if people don't do it they aren't 'committed' to the 'team'. We have 24/7 access to the building, so the expectation is there that ALL the work gets done, on time.

In my experience, this has a depressing effect on any sort of dissent in the workplace. Many of the staff are union members on paper, simply for 'protection', and our union almost never meets. This is perfect for management – they have also intentionally employed a very young, naïve, and 'flexible' workforce – one that is unaware of even basic rights and standard practices, who have very little experience of a different model of education, and who are unlikely to have the 'burden' of outside responsibilities like children or spouses.

TROJAN HORSES

The culture of the staffroom is odd. No one seems to have a 'meta-critique' of education, and it's unusual to hear anyone question the policies we enact in our school. The staffroom culture is definitely not one of dissent, which makes organising all the harder, but not impossible.

What I do notice is that the demographic of teaching staff has changed dramatically. Not only has the school had a very high turnover of teaching staff, but most of the staff are under 30, most have only been teaching for 2 years or so. Even the heads of departments have probably on average been teaching for 4-5 years. This makes for an incredibly inexperienced workforce which is beneficial to management for two reasons:

1 – total naivety: inexperienced teachers are unlikely to 'know any better' and will assume that our practices, from class-size to assessment measures are 'normal' and 'how it's done everywhere'. They are also less likely to have been involved in workplace disputes elsewhere.

2 – less outside responsibilities: No families, no kids, no things that can stop them staying til 6pm every day to make sure that last bit of marking and data-entry gets done. The few staff that do have kids have faced serious childcare issues and dirty looks for daring to leave a meeting early to pick up their kids!

The relative inexperience and

young age of our managers means they are a bureaucratic authoritarian nightmare. Their 'authority' is not based on years of classroom experience in their respective subjects, which would at least make some sort of sense within the logic of education, but on a willingness to say 'yes' to senior managers and to implement uncritically every whimsical change in policy and practice, parroting manage-



ment jargon and viewing our pupils as 'customers', which only makes sense within the logic of business. I don't even take them seriously in meetings, but they make my working life a pain in the arse.

Compounding this is the growth of the Teach First programme (read: people who couldn't care less about education but are doing us all a 'favour' by lending schools their 'high-flyer' brains for a few years before they jump ship to management or consultant jobs). These people are the least critical teachers I have ever met. They parrot every single thing manage-

ment says, have little-to-no philosophy of education, and will not be 'normal' classroom teachers for longer than 2-3 years. Most I've met are aspiring managers and are looking to climb the ladder as quickly as possible.

The future

The most daunting aspect is that my school is a model for what Michael Gove wants. I'd urge workers in any school that is being touted as a future academy to stand up now. However bad your school is, whatever issues you have now, they will be compounded by becoming an academy. Do whatever you can to oppose it. Recently in London, three Hackney schools have voted in a preliminary ballot for strike action should their schools become academies. That sort of thing is a start, but it will involve serious collective action between education workers and their communities, revealing academies for the Trojan horses they are.

I love my subject, and I really value education for its own sake, but I want to work in a school genuinely run BY and FOR the community it is supposed to serve. As it is, it feels increasingly like "service-delivery", rather than teaching.

Some of our students refused to go to class recently during the school walkouts, that inspired me.

Me and my workmates could learn a lot from them.

Bullying at Brunel University (cont.)

Professor Chris Jenks (Goldsmiths) to become a Professor of Sociology and Pro-VC of research at Brunel. It appears that Jenks (now VC himself since 2006) was the driving force behind Brunel's plan for 'global status' which unsurprisingly involved the compulsory and voluntary redundancy of 60 academics. Some of these academics were sacked for 'over teaching', which translates as spending too much time with their students rather than writing articles for journals which no one will ever read. The management's strategy included decapitating the local UCU SC and since then there's been no President or vice-President as no one is particularly keen to stick their head into that noose. As a consequence Brunel was greylisted for 2 years by the AUT/UCU who proceeded to offer lukewarm support to the smashed local UCU, a pattern that persists today.

The local UCU struggles on with limited active members and a handful of case workers. Across the campus the management culture of bullying, harassment and victimisation is endemic and instilled from the top; Schwartz himself was found guilty of victimization of two academics by a tribunal

in 2007 having falsely accused them of 'dishonesty'. Brunel seems to specialise in appointing sociopathic and/or incompetent managers, most often jaded or failed academics. In all areas of the university staff have been hit by the culture of intimidation and bullying, from cleaners subject to endless changes to their terms and conditions with little effective support from Unison through to academic-related staff subject to the arbitrary power and decision-making of managers, morale here remains poor despite the PR-driven style of VC Professor Jenks (cruelly known as the 'hairstylist' due to his coiffured appearance and insincere crocodile smile).

There remain a number of committed and dedicated union people here, some longstanding, who have continued to work despite these obstacles. The possibilities of building the local remain but the big problem is that there are too few activists to reach everyone. For those involved in the UCU the management do what they can to make things worse for, denying facility time and generally abusing the rules which they have laid down for everyone else to obey.

Often seen as a de-politicised campus (there is no SWP or Socialist

party!) the recent student anti-fees protests in London saw a 400 strong contingent from Brunel taking part coupled with an admittedly largely unsuccessful teach-in on the cuts. In the face of an unremittingly stupid and vindictive management these are encouraging signs that the local UCU will aim to build on.

DEMO ARRESTS

The best way to deal with arrest on a demonstration is to meet others in the same position as yourself and stick together, by forming or getting involved with a defendants campaign. The police want you to feel isolated and alone - but meeting and talking with other people facing the same pressures, and working together, can make everyone stronger.

You may be under pressure from your family or college etc to co-operate with the police. But it is YOUR decision, your future, it is up to you how you defend yourself.

Above all - DON'T BE AFRAID! The police are not all-powerful, they can be challenged, and even getting charged does not mean you will be convicted. Defence campaigns in the past have helped people to win in court, and helped to win support for people facing charges.

More info from:
www.ldmg.org.uk;
www.greenandblackcross.org

Education Workers Network

EWN is made up of Solidarity Federation members who work in the education sector. Joining EWN also means joining your nearest SF group (solfed@solfed.org.uk or PO Box 29, S.W. DO, Manchester, M15 5HW for details). Even if you don't wish to join us, we welcome requests to join our discussion list (ewn@lists.riseup.net) and / or for bundles of *Education Worker*. Also available:

EWN intro pamphlet; basic EWN intro leaflet; back issues of *Education Worker*.

EWN, c/o News From Nowhere, 96 Bold Street, Liverpool, L1 4HY. ewn@ewn.org.uk; www.ewn.org.uk

EWN Intro Pamphlet *Building a Revolutionary Union for Education Workers*

Please send SAE to EWN (see address on left)

