

mainly interested in (say) opposing islamophobia. Indeed, this will also ensure that discussion on the woefully inadequate EAN 'mission statement' will be rather pinched.

These factors conspire to ensure that what we will not get to discuss is anything like a strategy. Not that anybody really has one. The SWP, whose influence hangs particularly heavily over this conference, reproduces itself in a simple cycle. It recruits on a shallow basis, and sets its comrades to work building demonstrations and holding stalls; the 'old' comrades mostly get burned out when this headless-chicken model of politics proves to be going nowhere, so new ones are recruited on the demos and stalls staffed by the last lot, and the cycle begins anew.

We should learn from the experience of the Stop the War Coalition. SWP comrades made heroic efforts over the years building for every demonstration its prestige front could put on. Yet after the dizzying peak of February 15 2003, they kept getting smaller... and smaller. Given the political dynamics at work, this was inevitable - what was not inevitable was the continuing monomaniacal focus on getting people onto demos. The SWP, however, could not broaden Stop the War's methods of struggle without alienating its allies. It could not countenance calls for industrial action against the war because it would alienate the trade union bureaucracy. It could not even recommend anti-war votes in elections because that would rub against Labour MPs' interest in returning a Labour government, no matter how reactionary.

All the indications are that the same problems will dog the Education Activists' Network. The absence of any commitment to free education in the main motion to this conference is not an accident. During recent debates at the University of Manchester and Manchester Metropolitan, no SWP comrade would defend free education and some actively argued against it. They feared alienating the NUS bureaucracy at a time when the latter has seen fit to organise demonstrations and protest against education cuts - now would "not be the right time" to make criticisms of the NUS, which of course dropped its 'unrealistic' commitment to free education many years ago.

The comrades have it completely backwards. When is the right time to criticise the NUS bureaucracy if not at the moment it sees fit to lead us all down a blind alley? What exactly do the SWP expect to achieve by kowtowing to quite possibly the least reliable ally the student movement has ever produced, dominated as it is by right-wing Labour careerists hoping for a quick shimmy up the greasy pole to a seat in Parliament? Will the SWP change its tune when, as it has done repeatedly, the NUS leadership scabs on lecturers' strikes?

This is a road to nowhere. Anyone who is serious about confronting the attacks on our education has to take seriously the task of working out what needs to be done - not what is palatable to sundry self-serving bureaucrats. Marxism makes the stakes absolutely clear - what is at issue here is not a contingent act of government policy but a new front in the class struggle, on which the bourgeoisie hopes to junk almost every concession wrested from it by the working class since the second world war. We should treat this offensive as what it is - and respond in kind. A demand for free education would be a start, of course; but there is no more any such thing as a free education than there is a free lunch. Accounting for this demands a serious vision of an alternative society, where the rule of profit is overcome.

Socialism is not an optional extra, or something only to be discussed amongst the initiated at annual schools. Still less is it a harmful barrier to broad unity. It is no great shame if the NUS leadership cannot bring themselves to touch EAN after all. If they were remotely interested in activism, they would not have transformed themselves ever more into a hollowed-out organisation of pen-pushers and unelected trustees, gutted their conferences of any power and stood aloof from every struggle of the last five or ten years.

They did all this to cut themselves off from the troublesome left - now they have come crawling back because it turns out, after all, that in order to conduct activity, they need activists. Meaningful unity between the Marxists in the student movement would be worth far more than an alliance of convenience with NUS officials. Let us fight for that goal, rather than let the terms of our movement be imposed from without. Perhaps then we will stand a chance of playing a positive role in the tumultuous class battles to come.

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