

Can students be radical?

The following article is extracted from a talk given at a Workers Party forum at Canterbury University in October, 2006, by Philip Ferguson. The article is reprinted here and originally appeared in an earlier edition of The Spark that was published on 12 October 2006.



For many people, especially on the left, the answer to this question is an unqualified "yes". They might agree there is not much happening on the campuses in New Zealand right now, but point to big protests and even occupations over the past decade over issues like fee rises.

However, if we think more deeply about the question, the unqualified "yes" tells us more about the studentist politics of much of the left than it answers the question.

To be radical means to go to the root, to deal with the core problems of the existing society and work out a strategy to solve those problems by doing away with the system that causes them.

When looked at in this light, how do student protests over purely student issues challenge the existing order? Indeed, how do they even shed light on how university education is possible in the first place and the connection between the existence of university education and the exploitation of the working class?

Beyond appearances

At the base of most student protests over issues such as fees is the students' idea that they pay for their own education. On the surface this seems plausible. Students pay thousands of dollars in fees and have to borrow money to do this. Indeed, many students have to borrow money for living expenses as they are not covered by students allowance and/or because it is not sufficient.

But the reality of who pays for university students' education is very different from the surface appearances. In fact, it costs about three to four times as much to educate each student at university each year as what students pay in fees. Even with the implementation of "user pays", university students still only pay about a quarter to a third of the cost of their tertiary education.

So, who does pay?

Well, tertiary education is possible in capitalist society because there is a working class, a class which creates more wealth than what it is paid in wages. This surplus created by the workers takes the form under capitalism of surplus-value, a value over and above the combined value of the workers' labour-power and the value of the machinery and raw materials used by the workers.

This surplus-value is in the hands of the employing class, the capitalists, since they own the means of production and hire the workers. But part of this surplus-value is taken by the state and then used to fund services necessary to society, such as health and education, and services necessary to capitalism such as the police, army and courts.

In other words, university students' education is funded primarily out of the exploitation of the working class. Students, of course, come primarily from the middle and upper classes and their degree qualifications are to allow them to gain entrance into the middle and upper sections of society.

Workers fund education

Like exploitation generally, this was very clear under feudalism. Back then, peasants worked a part of the year for themselves and part of the year for their local baron and, out of the surplus created when they worked for the baron or other local overlord, came the wherewithal to fund the state. Part of the peasants' subsistence produce was also taken in the form of state taxes and by the church in the form of tithes. The universities which emerged in Europe in the Middle Ages, a product of European scholars visiting universities in the Arab and Islamic world, were attached to monasteries and funded out of the tithes and other parts of the surplus product (and subsistence) of the peasants.



It was very obvious to the small section of society that went to these universities where the social product came from that enabled their further education. In capitalist society, however, this process is more hidden, as the worker sells her or his labour-power at or around its value to the capitalist and then produces a surplus in the form of surplus-value. Their working time is not divided into two separate and clearly-visible parts of the year. Instead, they are involved in a single labour process during which they simultaneously produce the value of their own existence and a surplus-value, which

forms the basis of capitalist profit and government spending.

So, if we understand how university education is funded in class societies, and in particular how it is funded under capitalism then in and of themselves, student demands for more subsidies for their education are not radical. They are essentially demands that a greater chunk of the surplus-value created by the exploitation of the working class should go to fund the education of the middle and upper classes. (In this sense, university education is different from secondary education and from public health, as these are used by everyone regardless of class.)

Needless, to say the studentist left doesn't tell students these facts because they fear it would get in the way of recruiting students on lowest common denominator politics. By

contrast, the Workers Party attempts to explain to students how their education is funded and to get them to enter into reciprocal relations with the working class. We say, given that the working class funds most of university students' education, the least that students can do is support workers in struggle.

We believe that saying this won't win us popularity contests among all students, but it will attract the genuinely radical students to us. The students who just want more for themselves will go on to yuppie futures, screwing over the working class, but the students who understand who really pays for their education have understood something fundamental about the operations of capitalist society and can become genuine radicals.

Does the fact that university education in capitalist society is funded out of the exploitation of the working class mean that Marxists favour fee rises and making students pay the full cost of their education, as happens in many American universities where students may pay up to \$50,000 a year in fees?

No, not at all. For instance, in a socialist society, university education would be free and entirely funded out of the social surplus produced by the society as a whole.

In a socialist society, workers would not be exploited. They, as a class, would own and control the means of production. They would work the 20 or so hours a week which was necessary to produce the goods they needed in order to live and they would likely decide to work some extra hours to create a surplus to fund free public health and education and whatever other public services were necessary.

With a much-reduced work-week and a huge surplus, because none of it would be going into capitalist profits, many workers would be able to avail themselves of the opportunity of going to university. (Although the studentist left often argues that existing fees prevent people from working class backgrounds going to university, this is not really the case; what prevents workers from going to university is the fact that capitalist society requires most people to work 40, 50 and more hours a week, without which there would be no private profit for the capitalists. The problem is structural to capitalism, not a product of current fee levels.)

In a socialist society, study and work may well be combined. Students might do socially useful work while at university in exchange for their free education. They might, after graduating, go and work for a while in rural areas or in poor parts of the world, assisting development there.

The key thing is that, in a capitalist or socialist society, there is some kind of quid pro quo. In other words, if workers are creating the surplus that funds university education, the students who benefit from this owe something back to the class that has made their tertiary education possible (under capitalism) or the society that has made their tertiary education possible (under socialism).

In the 1960s, the most politically-advanced students understood the connection between their education and the exploitation of the working class. They continuously tried to link up with the exploited classes, rather than only concentrating on campus issues.

Radical students link with workers

In many Third World countries students who became radical went out of the campuses and put their skills at the service of the workers and peasants. They helped organise in factories, in poor neighbourhoods and among peasants, working to establish radical unions, workers' and peasants' militias and revolutionary movements.

In the capitalist heartlands, radical students joined with workers in challenging the system, most famously in France in May-June 1968 where a worker-student upsurge brought the country to the brink of revolution. In the United States, students used the universities as organising centres for building a mass movement against Washington's barbaric war in Vietnam.

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Across the world in the 1960s, genuinely radical students demanded a different kind of university – a university whose resources were used not to train the next generation of managers and scientists for capitalism but whose resources were used to fight for a different kind of world.

That understanding is largely absent today. The studentist left indulges and patronises students by patting them on the back for protesting about narrow student issues and for wanting more for themselves. It romanticises the degree to which any student action is radical. Even when the most pampered and reactionary students throw a tantrum over a non-political issue because, like the classes they largely come from and are going into, they always expect to get their way, there will be someone on the left to talk up the 'radicalism' of the 'action'.

This was the case in Dunedin when the student elite on Castle Street engaged in a couch-burning tantrum. While we certainly side with students against Otago University's draconian plan of a Code of Conduct for students, we see no need to romanticise anti-social behaviour by the privileged children of the middle and upper sections of society.

By contrast, we try to focus students on the working class. For instance, we encourage student members to become volunteer organisers for the Unite trade union which is organising fast food and other low-paid workers.

The only way students can be radical, in any meaningful sense of the term, is by challenging the very system of exploitation which underwrites their own privileged position. By putting their skills at the service of the working class, whose exploitation makes universities possible in capitalist society. By doing so, they can prove themselves worthy of free tertiary education and make an alliance with the only force in the world that can actually bring about free access to higher education for everyone – the working class.

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The Workers Party website is where you'll find interesting commentary on a daily basis, and in-depth articles posted several times a week.