

Defend education, defend jobs – solidarity to win

Tower Hamlets College are entering their third week of strike action. Support is pouring in – already thousands of pounds have been collected by UCU members and other trade unionists.

Westminster Kingsway College has raised £1,000 by taking strikers around. Similarly at City and Islington College over £500 was raised and the branch agreed to organise a levy of £10 per week per member for the duration of the strike.

The UCU branch at Tower Hamlets College have been on all out indefinite strike action since the beginning of term. They started their strike on the first day of their enrolment. It is because of their courage and determination to take such decisive action to defend jobs and ESOL provision that members across the country are being incredibly generous when donating to the strike collections.

The strike action, protests and demonstrations have managed to push management back. Last term they announced 40 FTE posts and 1,000 ESOL student places to go. It is down to 7 FTE posts. 4 FTE ESOL posts were also saved. However Michael Farley, The new Principal of the College, refuses to find £150,000 from their £6 million reserves to save these jobs and is threatening to make 14 staff compulsorily redundant.

National scandal

Tower Hamlets College is not alone. 2,000 jobs are under threat in the FE sector and 4,000 in the HE. Manchester College also started the year by taking action over jobs, one of which is that of the Branch Secretary and NEC member Dave Swanson. Barnsley College are also balloting their members because of a shortfall in their college finances due to the capital building funding fiasco.

It is madness sacking lecturers in any period. But in the midst of a recession – with 800,000 16-24 year olds already on the dole and hundreds of thousands of this year's school

leavers joining them – it is a national scandal.

As teachers and lecturers drill young people to pass exams and students get good at getting the necessary grades to go to universities the right wing press denounce the exams as not being worth the paper they are written on.

They will stop at nothing to deny working class young people the access to a better life that the vast majority of the writers of these headlines enjoyed.

It is not a coincidence that the places that are in the first line of fire are colleges and universities that serve some of the poorest communities in the country. London Metropolitan University, who are also facing compulsory redundancies, voted to take further strike action. London Met is the largest widening participation university in the country.

Tower Hamlets is the second poorest borough in the country and the college plays a central role in providing education to some of the most marginalised people in society.

Barnsley College is at the heart of what was the South Yorkshire mining community. It has never recovered from the jobs massacre in the 1980s, and is now once again being punished for the greed of the corporate bankers.

These attacks symbolise the direction of the attacks to come as the employers and government attempt to rescue their profit margins. Just like in the 1980s the poorest and the most vulnerable will be asked to make sacrifices first as the bankers continue to stuff their pockets.

And to add insult to injury the employers are offering the FE sector a 1.5% and the HE sector a 0.5% pay rise!

The money is there

The central argument put by management and government is that they cannot afford more funding due to the economic meltdown. This is a lie. The FE sector is sitting on £1.04 bn reserves. There is nothing stopping colleges using this money to stop this round of redundancies. If there was

a planned funding mechanism then resources could be allocated where they are most needed instead of allowing colleges to act like businesses - hoarding all their capital in order to sink their competitor college.

Of course this will not be enough. This money would soon run out. This is why we must also campaign to get more funds off the government.

Billions wasted

Billions are wasted sending working class youths to early graves in Afghanistan. Gordon Brown speaks about having to spend billions on “rescuing the economy”. We are a part of the economy. In fact we are, alongside others in the public sector, a central part of the economy which allows society to function. Without us there would be no economy.

So if it is right to spend billions on “rescuing the economy” it must be right to spend billions on rescuing society and that starts by ensuring that no lecturer is sacked and that any student who wants a place at university or college can have one – free of charge.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Join the rally for Tower Hamlets College this Saturday: 2pm at Altab Ali Park, Whitechapel Road, London E1. Nearest tube is Aldgate East.
- Invite strikers into your college to speak.
- Do a collection and organise a weekly levy.
- Organise a branch meeting. Reject the pay offer. Support the FEC's call for a ballot for industrial action.
- Get down to the picket lines.
- Elect a delegate for the special sector pay/jobs conference on Sat 19 September. The deadline is Weds 16 September.