Strikes called off

At ACAS talks yesterday, February 24, university management agreed to reopen discussion on terms set by the University and College Union (UCU). In response, UCU have agreed to postpone strike action. Lectures will be held today and all next week, but student action must continue.

This is a victory for lecturers and tutors at the university. Make no mistake however, it is only a small victory. The economies exercise is still on the agenda; at best, university cuts have only been forestalled until the impending Tory government forces them through.

The acquiescence by university management has valorised strike action. Even at the university, this remains a powerful tactic. But UCU could not have done this alone. The call to strike could only have been passed with the support of students, and it is only through our activity that the VC/management have reopened discussion.

But beware: Easter is looming, then exams, then corrections and feedback. It will be hard to wage a successful strike in the post-Easter period. We are at a dangerous point, where the power we hold in this struggle could be taken away. So student action must continue. The demonstration at noon on Thursday 25th will continue. Students will be joined at the Parkinson steps by members of the UCU, who will then hopefully line up with us for Capture The Flag.

As we discussed in the last issue of ‘the Sausage Factory’, the strike is a defensive tool. Now more than ever, we need to go on the offensive and move beyond the struggles of the university staff and fight for the future. We must really open the university and ask more lecturers to join us in this struggle.

25th February: Capture the Flag. Parkinson Steps at 2.30pm

What is the ROU?

The Really Open University exists everywhere. It will not be a once only event, but an ongoing process. It will be non-hierarchical and make a start at breaking down traditional student-teacher dichotomies. The ROU will engage with other communities in Leeds and beyond. The ROU will be a prefigurative wedge of the transformation of everyday life.

We wish to create a university where people have a passion to get up and come in and engage in learning and knowledge production.

We wish to break the process whereby education and knowledge production is linked to capitalist reproduction rather than towards the general social-good.

We wish to link up with other social struggles in Leeds (as well as globally), and transform the university from an insular self-serving institution to one that better serves the needs of everyone in Leeds. To this end we cannot let the struggle against cuts remain a university-based struggle. The current situation at the University of Leeds is just a window into the wider world – not just the cuts, far more than that, the mode of life they are based upon.

Part of the process of resisting the cuts and the neoliberal model of education is demystifying the university, showing it for what it really is.

The university is fundamentally based on a lie: that we will go out into the world and get great jobs. The Vice Chancellor, Michael Arthur, is preparing the university for a political model which hasn’t got a future.

What is a really open university? Parkinson Steps at 5.30pm

4th March: Demo and International Day of Solidarity at noon

The ROU sets out to change the expectations people have of university life, and by extension, the whole of our lives. The multiple crises we face (higher education, neoliberalism, climate change), open a crack for other narratives; a long-standing refrain of the alter-globalisation movement was that ‘another world is possible’.

We wish to reflect that here at the university, another university is possible. To this end we can see the university as a form of laboratory of subversion, where we can begin to collaborate and create collective solutions, asking questions about how we really want to live our lives.

The praxis of strike/occupy/transform is a form of direct action – directly making the changes we would like to see. We see this as one of the most empowering ways of engaging in politics. For too long university politics has been stale and boring. We wish to engage in creative-resistive tactics that reclaim space and put it to different ends (flashmobs, capture the flag, public assemblies). Through this process we hope to transform subjectivities. We wish to engage in affirmative and positive struggle, living life in different ways, even if it is only for a short time. To this end ROU will be a series of interventions and explorations of different ways of living.

We want education to be more organic and more critical, more holistic, including the whole body as well as the mind. It is amazing what we can do differently in different contexts, using different parameters.

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Love, Sex, Money

“It’s tough,” she said, “break-ups always are. The important thing to remember is that it won’t always feel like this. You’ve just got to fight through it.”

These words have taken on a whole new meaning in light of recent University issues.

Let me explain. For some time, University has been courting a pretty and intelligent, if not somewhat neurotic and ruthless young lady named Money. This happy union has continued for a number of years now, and all of University’s friends – Department, Student, Union, and Exec – were pleased with this.

Sadly, Money and University are no longer together. It has been a bitter break-up. You notice the little changes that have affected University as he stumbles around like an angst-ridden teenager, bereft of any sort of understanding. He is undergoing the Kubler-Ross model, the five stages of grief, with some curious results.

First comes denial. University refuses to believe the relationship is over, and begins building giant blocks of accommodation despite the fact that there are more places for students to live in Leeds than there are students themselves. Then there are the other developments, like the new SSC building and the placement of flashy signs around campus. In the early stages, University’s friends leave him alone, believing that he’ll work through the problems himself.

Next comes the anger stage. University begins to get suspicious and embittered towards his close friends. After an unhealthy dose of Linkin Park and other emotional despair ridden soundtracks, University decides to blame all his problems on Department. Department was always a close friend of Money, and they hung around together a lot. Department must have influenced her decision to leave. Maybe they were secretly cheating behind University’s back! University begins to hate Department, and much text-messaging and adolescent posturing takes place.

Following on from that comes bargaining. University begins to seek ways to get Money back, all the while blaming the original problems on Department. University manages to convince Exec and Union that he was right all along. Exec and Union, for their part, try and convince Student of Department’s guilt in the whole debacle. This is the stage we’re at now.

Student is very much the paternal figure of the group. Student is the gentle giant whose quietly tolerant presence tries to mitigate all the various factors and come up with an amicable solution to help University deal with the rejection he is feeling. Student really doesn’t want to take sides that much, after all, Student has a close relationship with all four of the other friends, especially Department.

The thing Student has to remember is that Money is gone. Money isn’t coming back, and is probably immensely enjoying herself somewhere else. Money is a capricious creature. Student just wants everyone to get along, and thinks University needs to work through the problems. Student wants an intervention to show University just how wrong he’s been. Sometimes, it’s not about blame, betrayal and retribution. These things happen, and University is wrong to take it all out on Department, and then try and influence Student.

Whether University makes up with Department is probably down to which side Student takes. Of course, whatever the outcome there is still the depressive stage, during which University mopes around for a bit, before finally reaching acceptance. The road to getting over Money won’t be an easy one, but as was recently pointed out to me, it’s just something University is going to have to push through.

Since it was first announced, our so-called representative body, the Leeds University Union (LUU), has been helping to undermine resistance to the VC’s ‘economies exercise’. It has refused to criticise the £35,000,000 cut – a restructure that will involve the loss of at least 400 jobs – and has openly attacked staff for even considering action in defence of their livelihoods. This has created the appearance that students are gathering in opposition to lecturers. We believe that rather than the student voice, the student union has come to represent the homogenising and undemocratic neoliberal governmentality pervading our welfare system. The union building is now little more than a collection of bars and shops; LUU itself, little more than a training ground for New Labour ministers.

Recently, a motion has been put forth by powerful elements within LUU to close one of the few truly open and democratic spaces left on campus, the Peanut Gallery. With these things in mind, we have created a spoof of the Leeds University Union website that we call ‘The Really Open Union’. You can find it at reallyopenunion.org. We like to think of it as a directory for other websites and information relating to the Leeds cuts and the broader education and economic crises. It is a constantly evolving project, so be sure to check it regularly.

New website launch

Join us on March 2 to debate what being part of a really open university could involve. Meet us at the Parkinson Steps at 5.30pm.

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Think you can do better? Send us your political art.

art@reallyopenuniversity.org