Support the UCU Strike - and more!

Last Thursday, 4th February, the University and College Union (UCU) at the University of Leeds released their strike ballot results. In a record turnout of 65.8% of UCU members, 63.8% voted ‘Yes’ to strike action and a staggering 78.1% voted ‘Yes’ to action short of a strike.

The Really Open University welcomes the decisions of the members of the UCU and support both strike action and action short of the strike. This is a move towards defending not only the livelihoods of lecturers and support staff, but more significantly the future of education in the UK.

Lecturers and other UCU members cannot struggle against these cuts alone however. It is the responsibility of all of us to help fight these cuts. If implemented the government’s cuts will have a massively detrimental effect on higher education. Already it is possible that many people will not be able to enrol in degree programmes next year. These are people such as your friends, brothers and sisters. What education system awaits them after years of hard work at school? Likewise, what awaits those of us currently in the University system? With record levels of graduate unemployment and spiralling debt, any positions available to us upon completion will likely be poorly paid and offer precarious employment conditions.

The Vice-chancellor of Leeds University, Professor Michael Arthur, warned on Friday against the struggle over cuts at the university becoming “a battleground for the future of higher education in the UK”. The crisis the university is facing is linked to a wider and higher education crisis, one that is international in its scope. In Europe and the US, movements have sprung up to defend and expand education, with over forty campus occupations across Europe, as well as hard fought struggles in New York and California.

This higher education crisis is linked to the wider financial crisis currently being felt around the world. At the root of these crises is the same problem: a system that prioritizes profit over people, competition over cooperation and collaboration.

The £35,000,000 in cuts we are facing at Leeds university is only one manifestation of a system that exploits daily life in the name of ‘profit’ – our ideas are not valued on their merit but on their ability to generate money; our work is valued not on what we create but on how much we can sell it for in the marketplace.

Whilst proponents of this failed economic model claim these cuts are ‘necessary’, not just in universities but across society as a whole, we understand that it is those very economic and political systems that are at fault.

The same system that demands compulsory redundancies as a “very last resort” is responsible for the global climate crisis and the continued impoverishment of the Global South through international debt. Only at its most superficial level is this struggle over education and the state of the economy.

The Really Open University stands together with lecturers and support staff in opposing the cuts and the economic system that demands them. We urge you to do the same. Together we can transform education and help create a different world in the process.
Strike, Occupy, Transform

The Tragedy of Neoliberalism

Since the mid-1980s the academy has undergone a process of neoliberalisation. The Keynesian welfare model, where universities were supported with public funds, has been eroded and substituted with a wholly competitive market logic. Not only do students compete with each other in order to get into the “best” universities, and then in order to obtain the best grades, but this competition is rolled out throughout the whole institution. This means academics competing with colleagues in their departments, for funding, status etc, but also departments competing with other departments within the same institution. This pattern repeats itself throughout the whole university system, with institutions competing with other institutions. Increasingly other universities are discussed as “competitors” in the educational marketplace.

However, all is not well, the neoliberal economic model is in crisis, possibly even in its death throes. This crisis is being felt throughout the world. Here in the UK it has already meant the loss of hundreds of thousands of jobs and the planned implementation of cutbacks in public expenditure. Universities face cuts of £2.5 billion. At Leeds University the Vice Chancellor has prefigured these planned cuts, so that it can maintain the ‘competitive edge’. These cuts are exacerbated by an accountancy error that resulted in the loss of £100 million. The same VC that wants to impose these cuts earns £237,000 a year (last figures published – 2007-08), the Prime Minister earns £197,689 (May 2009). The VC lives in Southampton and flies to Leeds once a week, because he doesn’t want to live in Leeds! This is another example of a dead financial system – as we lose our jobs and our houses, those at the top continue to count their bonuses.

As once was the factory, so now is the university.

Where the traditional ‘drivers of growth’ used to be found in the Fordist assembly lines churning out tv’s, car parts and kitchen utensils, the university today is symbolic of an economic system that demands the constant enclosure of knowledge. The commodification of ideas has put knowledge in competition with itself, where the ideas that ‘win’ are those than can turn a quick buck. The antonym of evolution, this process is rolled out across the whole of society, rapidly homogenizing our imaginations and reducing our capacity to think anything that hasn’t got a price tag on it. What’s the value of an idea if you can’t sell it? The university has become an “educatory”, whilst our societies are becoming “social factories”. In the words of a text published at recent occupations at Universities in California:

“We work and we borrow in order to work and to borrow. And the jobs we work toward are the jobs we already have. Close to three quarters of students work while in school, many full-time; for most, the level of employment we obtain while students is the same that awaits after graduation. Meanwhile, what we acquire isn’t education; it’s debt. We work to make money we have already spent, and our future labor has already been sold on the worst market around”.

This is the “higher education experience” that Leeds Student Union and Mandleson wish to promote and protect.

Avoid the bite of the ‘zombie’ economic model!

The current neoliberal economic model is dead. Stripped of its lifeblood of privatization and speculation, and with debt at an all time high, the neoliberal economy has now fully realized its role as the blood-sucking Hollywood zombie. Like the undead feeding on its prey, this rotten economic model continues to unveil its policies in a desperate attempt to keep itself going that little bit longer. First the post office, then the bin-men, and now the university; these are the last gasps of a dead economic system desperately trying to keep itself moving. With each bite, its prey becomes infected with the same morbid logic; the same precarity, the same redundancies, the same pay cuts, the same exploitation, all tied up in a dead system whose face is getting closer and closer to hitting the pavement.

Towards an Autonomous university, towards an Autonomous society!

It is through debate, struggle and the re-appropriation of ideas, not just in the university but across the whole of society, that we can start to realize our freedom to think and live without the whip of precarity. It is through the establishment of alternative educational practices that we can start to value ideas for the laughter they bring or the freedoms they inspire – the creation of spaces where we can burn the price tags and instead appreciate the value of ideas themselves. We must resist the pathogen of zombie neoliberalism that corrupts our desire to learn, research, create knowledge. Inside and outside the academy, from the university to the post office, we must start to create the society we really want to live in – rethinking the role of the university in society is only a small step in the generalized reclamation of life that we must all undertake.

Our struggle is not a defensive one. We do not wish to preserve the university as it is, an elite and insular institution that reproduces the inequalities in our current society. We don’t care about theories of governance, corporate strategies, or how art ‘should’ be done – we don’t care for teaching or learning how to control our imaginations! We must create a university which bases itself entirely on different values: for now we will call this the ‘autonomous university’. How do we build this autonomy? Through the occupation of the spaces where we work, play and consume and the reappropriation of this time and space for our own ends.

Imagine working to produce what we need, to learn so as to enrich our lives, to wake up looking forward to Monday. Imagine a world on our own terms.

“Everything that we know is up for sale”.

No longer!

The Really Open University
info@reallyopenuniversity.org