27 hour ‘flash occupation’ at Sussex

On Monday the 8th February more than 100 people were involved in a 27 hour “flash occupation” at the University of Sussex.

The occupation was staged in the University’s conference centre, thereby emphasising opposition not only to UK wide education cuts, but to the business-like nature of the contemporary university.

Like in Leeds, Sussex University is facing huge cuts that threaten the quality of education, the livelihoods of thousands, and the possibility of enrolling at University for innumerable amounts.

Statements of solidarity were received from across the world. The Really Open University wrote: “In order to fight the latest in a long line of attacks on education and the education system behind it we must not be merely defensive. We must act to transform education; to open it up, allow people to teach what they want to teach and learn what they want to learn, we need to restore the intrinsic value of the idea and the quest for knowledge. In doing so we can help fight against our oppression more generally.”

The Sussex University branch of UCU is poised to ballot for action against 107 impending redundancies so more action is to be expected. Across the world people are resisting attacks on education and many are choosing to go into occupation. While important, Really Open University wrote: “In occupation can only form one part of a wider struggle to redefine attacks on education and the education.
What do we mean by ‘Strike, Occupy, Transform’?

“Strike v 1. To produce as if by playing a musical instrument”

A strike is the removal of our daily life from the circuits of capital, a refusal to let our flesh be turned into profit, a refusal to let all that is solid melt into air. The institutionalized strike can take many forms; a walkout from the office, the slowing down of production through “lazy” marking and the disruption of the flows of the system. Why are these strikes institutionalized? Their effectiveness relies on the very system they seek to challenge, their energy relies upon a functioning system of exploitation, wages, timesheets, efficiency. The essence of the institutionalized strike is the system it purports to challenge – it is limited to a reshuffling of the world that already exists. Just as we know what it is like to be a slave of profit the institutionalized strike is the slave to ideas.

We do not reject the institutionalized strike; it is a valuable tool in our box of tricks. However, we must use it in the knowledge that it is only defensive. It’s value comes in forcing open time and space; the time and space in which to do otherwise. What we must do is generalize the method of the strike, not just spreading it through space, to other universities and shop floors, and extending it through time, a day, a month, a year. To generalize the strike is to make it a way of life, the general condition of everyday life.

The refusal to participate in the dominant system of Value, where the production of life is reduced to the production of commodities, is only the right hand man to the affirmation of different social relationships. The affirmation of different social relations is not only an affront to the homogenizing force of capital, it is the creation of a world where we can live our lives according to our ethics. From reaction to affirmation, that is the strike we must experience.

“Occupv v 1. To fill up (time or space)”

Occupations are a common part of student struggles across the world. For example in France in 2006 a massive youth movement against the contrat première embauche (CPE, or, the first employment contract) occupied high schools and universities and blockaded roads. In 1999, the National Autonomous University of Mexico City was occupied for close to a year to prevent tuition fees from being charged. Both of these struggles were successful. Here in the UK we are beginning to see occupation used as a vital tactic in community, workplace and university struggles; from the Visteon and Vetas workers disputes, to school struggles in Glasgow and South London and the wave of university occupations in 2009 in reaction to the Gaza siege. But these historical examples do not get to the bottom of what it means to occupy.

We are always in occupation; of time, of space, of our values, ethics and beliefs. Everything around us is also occupied at every single moment, there is no bit of space or time that is not laced with values and content. Contrary to the ‘common sense’ which has been bred into us, neither space nor ourselves can exist as an absence – that ‘empty’ feeling you get is still a feeling, the classroom without its pupils is still a purpose built institution with endless potentials contained within it.

So what do we mean by occupy? It seems the most ordinary thing. Firstly, we need to learn how to understand what is it that is ‘occupying’ a given space, or rather, what is it that makes something what it is? Much more than a language trick, we often take this for granted to do the impossible with it. Whether the classroom, the city or your own body – you don’t know what a tool can do until you try to do the impossible with it.

“Transform v 1. To alter or be altered radically in form, function, etc.”

Transformation is a liberating and exhilarating process. It is the point at which you pick up a tool and use it according to your imagination, when the occupied is put to use according to different ethics or values.

Only through transformation will we create a university that people want to go to, where the exploration of knowledge is taken to its limits, where spaces encourage creativity rather than hinder it, where everyone and anyone can teach what they want, how they want. Where boundaries are broken.

Take hold of the walkways, the classrooms, the email systems and the student paper, and use them in a way you didn’t realise they could be used.

Transformation begins with yourself – it begins when you ask ‘Why do I think how I do? Who is interested in me thinking like this?’. Transformation, however, can only be a collective process; your dreams remain dreams until they are actualised with the dreams of others. Collectively we must transform the university, but also the societies we produce around us. We must appropriate and put to use the classrooms and the shopping centres to our own ends, towards the point where strike, occupation, transformation is a way of life.

We encourage you to ask yourself ‘what is a really open university?’. In doing so we may help ourselves understand what it would mean to ‘strike, occupy, transform’ every bit of the world you live in.

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