

# Education and the struggle for human liberation

*Dear friend,*

**I**N the current demands and concerns of the student movement, something important is conspicuously absent: any broad concept of education.

We need that if we are to make sense of what we are campaigning for and of the social context to which we react. Without it, we risk floundering in confusion. With the odd exception, all students are against tuition fees. The vast majority are for grants and against loans. Yet the framework that most students and their national union operate within is one of bargaining with and making concessions to this system rather than making demands upon it or organising to fight for something beyond it.

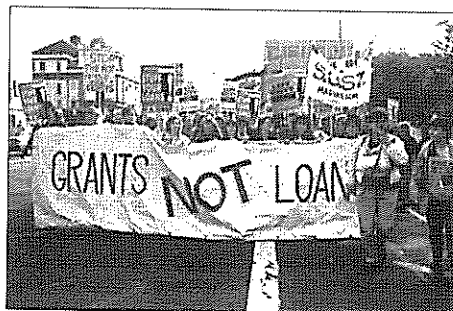
There is no ideal, no higher conception of education — let alone of society — for us to believe in and fight for. Without that, we can only react to the agenda of the government and the educational establishment. Without that, we have no agenda of our own to set.

Without that, student politics, for the small number of students who are currently politically active at all, will reduce itself to a blind thrashing about in the entrails of the National Union of Students, and to mere “personalities.”

What is education? And what should it be? Is it “education” as it is offered up to us in the schools and colleges now? Is it what we get in the universities, where humankind’s achievements in knowledge — the power to explain our history and control nature, science, ourselves, and our societies — is made so inspiring that we largely reduce learning about it to reading a couple of chapters of a textbook at the last minute so that we can knock off an essay as fast as possible and then go and get pissed.

This is “education” that breaks up knowledge into “modules” and “units” — the better to grade you, to make you a “unit” too, an economic one. And that, of course, is if you are able to study at all. This is a time when the few concessions won from the system for working-class people are disappearing and more and more people are excluded from higher education. The working-class element among students gets ever thinner, and students are once again being drawn mainly from the socially privileged.

And in the schools? The same — only



more so. The comprehensive schools, on paper at least, once represented some sort of educational ideal. They are now physically crumbling. Classes swell. The curriculum is standardised — the better to iron out the inconsistencies in the “product” delivered to the job market.

Increasingly we are moving away from any comprehensive educational ideal at all. Not even the Labour Party will now pay lipservice to equality in education. Once again the grammar, the grant-maintained and the private schools with scholarship schemes are set to cream off “the best” —

---

**“You are being educated to ‘know your place’. You can be part of that system or you can fight it. You can not do both.”**

---

for which read “the most useful to the system” — while thousands upon thousands of youth are dumped in the so-called “sink schools”. There they waste a few years of their life doing nothing productive or fulfilling, before graduating to the Jobseekers’ Allowance.

This is “training”, not education. Throughout history humanity has held somewhat loftier ideals. Education is defined in the dictionary I have as: “The development of character and mental powers.”

Why are we offered so little, in a society that still occasionally voices those educational ideals? Because in our class society, capitalism, the social norms and values of society are determined by the ruling class. “Character and mental powers” do not make money. We get what the rich think they can “afford” and what they find profitable. They own the world. Selective,

divisive education serves their interests.

That’s their point of view — but what is ours? What is yours, as a young person trained to sift ideas? Do you accept it? Will you go on accepting it? The market is no immutable law of history. The world is rich. It is only the way society is organised that makes it a place of poverty, deprivation, and even starvation for so many human beings!

Capitalism stunts human beings rather than developing them, and reduces education to training, in a world where the immense wealth produced offers the objective possibility of a better and more human society. Human liberation is a material possibility — and, meanwhile, the student movement actually debates whether or not it is in favour of student grants!

Human liberation may seem a million miles away, but the class struggle that makes it possible permeates every aspect of life. Whether you care to acknowledge it or not, you are a part of it; you cannot abstain from society. In the small things, as in the large, we have to see education as a question of “their” education and “ours”. “Their” education *or* ours! The ruling class know this, even if so many in the student movement do not.

Back in 1983, Margaret Thatcher’s assault on the labour movement was in full swing. Resistance erupted in riots in Toxteth and elsewhere. A senior Department of Education official outlined “their” plans for education in a leaked secret report.

He wrote: “We are in a period of considerable social change. There may be social unrest, but we can cope with the Toxteths... but if we have a highly educated and idle population we may possibly anticipate more serious conflict. *People must be educated once more to know their place.*”

It is a tragedy that the other side know the great potential power of ideas and that so many students seemingly do not. You are being educated to ‘know your place’. You can be part of that system or you can fight it. You can not do both. Unchain your mind!

Yours for socialism,

**Mick Duncan  
and Alan McArthur  
Workers’ Liberty**