

How not to lead a strike

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THE eleven-week strike at Southwark Further Education College in south London has been defeated. The dispute began when senior lecturers were threatened with compulsory redundancy. Some staff were to be replaced by casual, agency staff and £1.5 million from a staff budget of £10 million would be cut. Teachers voted by 2 to 1 to return to work on Friday 27 June.

This was further education's bitterest dispute. There are many lessons to learn — not least about the role of revolutionaries in such disputes.

The last week of the strike began with 150 members receiving recorded delivery letters from the Principal: return to work by 10am on Friday or you are dismissed. A strike committee later that day is told by Norman Jameson, President of the national union, that the national strike fund is exhausted. Our members will now depend on the collection of a voluntary levy. This was a major blow to a strike in its 10th week.

Here was a strike that had begun under a Tory government but woke up on its tenth day to share in the euphoria at the election of a Labour government. Most of us had reasonable hopes in the new government and what it would mean for our strike. For the Socialist Workers' Party however — who had maybe half a dozen members in leading positions in our union — nothing could dampen their expectations. Various fantasy scenarios were put forward about what Blair would do about the deeds of the evil Principal of Southwark College. Both the Principal and her spell-bound Board of Governors would be swept away to loud chants of "education, education education".

This sort of fantasising was to become a major theme of the dispute and a material factor in keeping a section of the membership attached to an increasingly directionless dispute. We were forced to debate nonsensical possibilities put forward by the SWP — would the Blair government allow a militant college union to demonstrate how to punch a hole in its Tory-inherited and accepted public spending plan and give a green light to every college, school and hospital union to follow suit? The real possibilities — which became clearer every day after 2 May — were very different. Labour would do everything possible to isolate, ignore and extinguish such a dispute. The lobbies and pickets we organised of Blunkett, Blackstone and Harman were politely received and then just as politely forgotten.

The reaction of Labour would have been expected by most experienced trade union militants. Yet leading revolutionary activists of the SWP couldn't, or didn't want to see it. The fan-

tasies about Labour were accompanied with fantasies about the general prospects of the dispute.

Two weeks into the dispute a "Picket Line News" written by an SWP member was telling us that: the "nutcracker tightens on Principal". The proof of this? An article in the *South London Press* had contained some statements of support for the teachers by a few par-

ents. A letter campaign was being invested with the sort of force only a large and active involvement of the community would have had. The result of such aggrandising statements? We were, inevitably, distracted from building a larger community-based campaign.

It appears that the SWP did, in private, have fears about the success of the dispute. After the strike was over, we discovered that a leading SWP member of the strike had applied for and accepted another job! A nice little safety net for someone there. We would not have minded half so much if the same person along

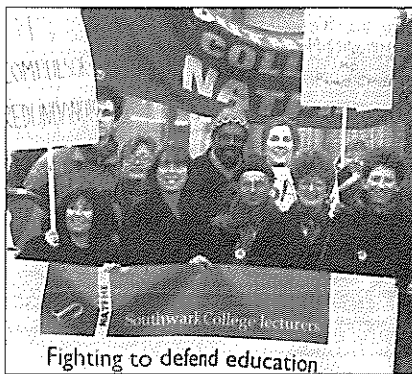
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with the rest of her comrades had not spent so much time in strike meetings vigorously demanding we ignore the Principal's threats and stay out until September to "hit recruitment".

While all this was going on the Principal appeared increasingly belligerent and ready to sack the lot of us.

But not to worry, the same SWP comrade reassured us. Our sackings would rally "millions to our cause" when they read about it in... *The Guardian*! But if *Guardian* readers aren't rallying to the Mersey dockers' cause why should they bother with us?

Towards the end of the dispute about 40 scab lecturers arrived, provided by an agency and we are able to turn only a handful away at the picket lines. Clearly the union needed to reassess our position at this point. However, the inability of some to think clearly was not helpful. The SWP say this is a sign of desperation on the part of the Principal and, anyway,



agency staff could not do the job as well as we could. This is just not the point, the agency staff are there to break the strike!

As we enter the examination part of the term, it becomes obvious that the management do not care about what will happen to the students. All they care about is winning the dispute and forcing through cuts. As

teachers, we have possession of coursework and mark sheets which will enable students to complete examinations. The SWP say we should keep hold of these as it is the leverage in the dispute. All that withholding work will do, however, is hurt the students and offers the Principal a propaganda coup. The debate on coursework and marks was cut short when an injunction was served on us demanding the work is returned.

Such misjudgements, for which of course we must share as much responsibility as the rest of the strike leadership, were also the product of a low level of discussion in the union at key stages in the strike. A culture of informal caucusing replaced that of formal, organised, well-advertised open forums. For example we had been told the Board of Governors was on the verge of splitting over the Principal's tactics. Our lone supporter on the board was threatening to not turn up to future meetings. This fact was discovered by accident when a comrade and myself stumbled across an informal caucus in a beer garden! It was just one of the many fragments of reality which unfortunately did not puncture the hot-air balloon demagoguery of some strike meetings. Any alternative suggestions were branded defeatist. Some general conclusions and lessons must be drawn from this experience.

The membership of our union demonstrated all you could ask for in terms of courage, tenacity and comradeship. We all had a lot to learn about operating in a difficult dispute.

This was a small college headed by a determinedly anti-union management, surrounded by a labour movement full of expectations in a Labour government, but not yet possessed of the confidence to fight the government for our demands. The anti-union laws ensured that we could not hope to win solidarity from college workers all around the country who are facing the same attacks. Our union however does remain intact after this dispute. Along with other unions we will fight to demolish those anti-union laws. That particular nightmare of the Tories, and now Blair, will be consigned to the dustbin not by sectarian fantasies — how Southwark workers will become martyrs if we are dismissed, etc. — but by broad campaigns which attempt to unite the labour movement.