

Student debt explodes



Higher Education

By Rosie Woods

THE TORIES boast that they have increased participation in Higher Education. That much is true. But they are not telling you the truth behind this fact.

Many people now go to university simply because there is no other option for them, no prospect of a decent job. Expansion has not increased the proportion of working class people at university. And although there are more people than ever starting HE. courses, there are more people than ever before dropping out before their courses finish.

What have this year's new students got to look forward to? The student grant, hav-

ing been frozen in 1990, has now been cut by a further 30%. A recent survey by the National Union of Students (NUS) has shown that 87% of students are worried about money, and more than a third consider themselves to be in real financial hardship. It is increasingly common for students to be unable to eat properly, or to travel to college, let alone to buy the books or equipment they need.

Facing financial crisis more and more students take up part-time work. Mostly, their jobs are low paid and in poor conditions, sometimes illegal and/or dangerous. And, of course, spending all your spare hours working in a pizza bar means that you don't achieve educationally to your full potential.

Shrinking finance is compounded by increasing costs. Housing for students is

either in overpriced college accommodation or in the private rented sector. University halls of residence are often designed primarily as short-stay conference centres, with their role as a home for students incidental.

Private housing is often cramped and unsafe. Many landlords convert three bedroom houses into six bed houses by putting up hardboard dividers so they cram in more tenants.

At college, students often find their libraries under-stocked, books beyond their finances, and forced to pay for essential course materials and facilities.

At the end of their three or four years of study, students graduate with an average £8,000 debt, and 15% join the dole.

Further Education

By Ed Whitby

AROUND 3 MILLION people now study in Further Education. FE. training is a second chance for many working-class people — for people failed by the school system; for older people needing new skills after redundancy.

But that second chance is failing them too.

- Colleges are now "corporations". They are now run by unelected, unaccountable boards of business representatives. Students, workers, and the community have had their representation cut. Course are geared to the demands of employers, not to the needs of students. Students find their courses cut or moved with no consultation and no concern for their needs.

- Training provision has hit crisis point. Where Training and Enterprise Councils (TEC's) fail, training courses are thrown into chaos and insecurity. Training allowances have been cut by more than half in real terms. Instead of preparing you to do a worthwhile job, training courses are too often poor quality, unsafe and lead you straight back to the dole.

- Life is being made more difficult unemployed for people who study whilst unemployed. Students on part-time courses (many of whom would be studying full-time if they could get a decent grant) are under pressure from Government departments who want to cut unemployment statistics not by creating real jobs but by driving people off benefits.

- Many local councils have zerobudgeted discretionary awards. That means that no money is available to help students who are taking courses which don't carry mandatory grant entitlement, including A levels, City & Guilds and BTECs.

All this adds up to insecurity, to poor quality, and to crisis. The need for a fight-back is urgent.

Out, Proud and Organising

By Rosie Woods,
National Union of
Students Executive.

THE NATIONAL Union of Students' (NUS) Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Campaign has gone from strength to strength over the last few years. We have campaigned around many issues — for an equal age of consent, against fascism, against homophobia.

The Stamp Out Homophobia campaign is continuing this year. In addition we will be campaigning for anti-discrimination legislation and wider employment

rights such as the minimum wage.

The other major campaign will be in health and welfare. We will be campaigning for equality for lesbians, gays and bisexuals in health care, and for the restoration of our Health Service and Welfare State. We will ally with other groups fighting the Tories.

At the last LGB campaign conference there was general agreement that the Pink Pound will not deliver liberation.

The LGB campaign will take its greatest steps forward by fighting for liberation alongside all those most oppressed by the Tories and their system. By doing that we can break down barriers, become stronger and start to win the fight for liberation.

Diary of a tubeworker: Friday 25 August 1995

Phew, what a sell-out!

DEAR DIARY,

Some things are totally predictable. Any hot weather disturbing the cold wetness of the typical British summer provokes a rash of "Phew what a scorcher!" headlines in the papers. Equally the news that there's a dispute on the Tube should make you immediately think — when are the ASLEF leadership going to sell out? And how bad is the deal going to be? The answers to these questions are "they already have" and "bloody awful".

However let's start at the beginning. The dispute is over this year's pay claim. RMT's claim was centrally for a 6% rise and the return of paid meal breaks (meaning an effective cut of 2½ hours in the working week). There was also a separate ballot of some RMT members over piecemeal privatisation proposals. ASLEF's claim was for a substantial pay increase and a reduction in the working week. As light relief the white collar union TSSA (to scared to say anything) angrily insisted that their referral of their claim to arbitration constituted industrial action!

Oh how London Underground bosses quaked in their boots... with laughter. Both RMT and ASLEF balloted and got 3-1 majorities for action on good turnouts — 70% in ASLEF's case.

At this stage the ASLEF/BR dispute was still running. We were now days away from a solid joint BR/LUL strike which would have

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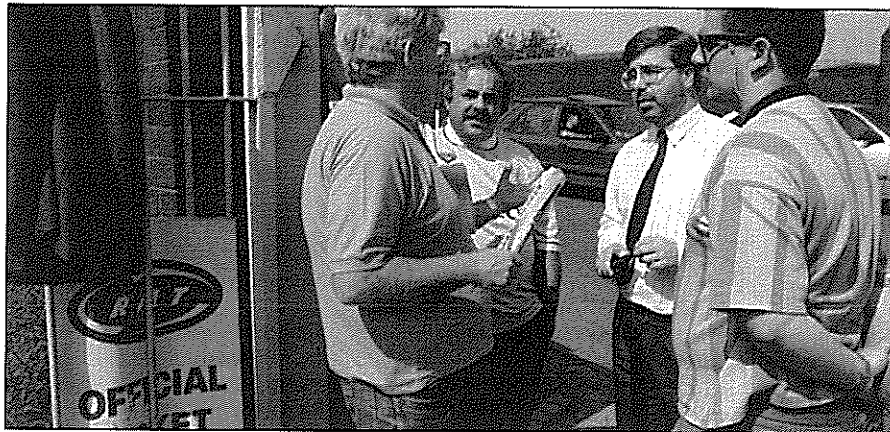
shut down London completely. The tables would have been turned and railworkers would have been calling the shots for a change. Of course such a situation was intolerable to the intellectual and moral giants who make up the ASLEF leadership — and they promptly called off the BR's action in return for the "promise" by BR of two hours off the working week...

But not until 1997...

But not guaranteed to come in even then...

But any reduction to be linked to productivity gains...

But to be self-financing...



The RMT need to continue their dispute, but what we need is workers' unity!

That's more butts than you'd get from a herd of goats on crack!

There was tremendous explosion of anger at the deal amongst rank and file ASLEF members on BR, which was not however channelled or directed in any real way and consequently burnt out quickly into a fatalistic "sold out yet again" feeling.

This was reflected in the narrow majority vote to reject the deal.

Lew Adams then quickly agreed to a "different" deal which was largely the same deal in different wrapping paper. Bang — end of BR dispute.

Meanwhile LUL management are terrified at the prospect of a joint RMT/ASLEF strike. They produce an unprecedented barrage of propaganda leaflets, posters, letters, you name it. As the first day, Friday 25 August, draws close, their final offer (oh yes it is! oh no it isn't!... and indeed it wasn't) went from 2.75% and strings to 3% and no strings to 3% plus 1½ hours off the week and no strings to... and here it all gets very strange.

A united strike would have been rock solid — 100% closedown of the system. The tables would have been turned and tubeworkers would have been calling the shots for a change. Sounds familiar, doesn't it. Guess what happens next.

The latest offer is 3% plus an hour off the week — but not until August 1996. BUT the reduction is conditional on agreeing "line plans" ie productivity increases negotiated separately at local level plus the introduction of part time train staff i.e. more strings than the London Symphony Orchestra!

Lew Adams then gets up on his hind feet on TV and pronounces it a "very good" deal. He claimed it was worth 5.8%.

You may have noticed that this latest deal is actually a hundred times worse than what was already on the table. The Company Plan in 1991 tore up all our previous conditions and agreements. This is Company Plan mark 2 — the end of any combine wide conditions agreements an negotiations and the effec-

tive splitting up of the Tube in readiness of line by line privatisation. Not "very good" at all, Mr Adams.

Earlier this week drivers in particular were straining at the leash to go out on Friday. The atmosphere and people's mood was electric.

At work on Thursday (24 August) as news of the deal came out there was shock and anger and a feeling of betrayal everywhere. People could scarcely believe such a deal could be accepted, let alone recommended.

ASLEF members are going to get a referendum on the deal and will vote to reject it (hopefully). Does this sound familiar? It should do — the whole thin is like an action replay of the BR dispute except the Tube "deal" is worse by far.

So what happened today? Well the RMT strike rightly went ahead. There was severe disruption on the lines where RMT was strong amongst traincrew; and where ASLEF was strong, very little. From line to line the train service varied from under 30% to near normal. A lot of RMT station staff came in where RMT branch organisation was weak. Where the organisation was good, as in the excellent Finsbury Park branch, a number of stations were closed. Not a huge success overall but not a disaster either.

And where to from here? The ASLEF rank and file don't want the deal. They will vote no, but so what? The referendum will take 3 weeks and then what? Another ballot? And how long would that take even if Adams agreed to it? Adams' strategy now is to delay and demobilise.

What should RMT do? The dispute must go on but activists need a serious discussion about the best way forward.

Fundamentally rank and file tubeworkers need to organise themselves across grades and unions at a local and combine-wide level. The price of disunity is defeat. We haven't lost yet, but it doesn't look overly brilliant.

Anyway got to go now, to picket the afternoon turns. ■

Troops used against firefighters dispute

By Chris Jones, FBU (Out of Trade), Ex-Brigade Chair Merseyside

AS WE went to press on 27 August Merseyside firefighters had staged the first two strikes in a series of 9 hour stoppages. Troops were on the streets of Liverpool driving antiquated "Green Goddess" fire engines in a costly attempt by the Labour authority to provide substitute fire cover. The strikes are a protest against a reduction of 3 days in annual leave which results in a loss of 20 jobs.

10,000 firefighters marched through Liverpool to applause from the public. During the following strike, on Saturday, firefighters peti-

tioned in Church St, the main shopping area and received overwhelming support. 81% of firefighters voted to strike.

The strike is the outcome of years of struggle against a Chief Officer who is one of the most aggressive in a new breed of fire brigade managers. The Labour controlled authority has repeatedly backed CFO Best against the FBU, blaming financial limits imposed by central government for their actions. In fact New Labour is repeating the mistakes of that old Labour government of James Callaghan. By attacking a solid trade union New Labour exposes its contempt for its own supporters.

Firefighters organised in the FBU have to rely on solid union organisation to defeat this current threat. In the long term firefighters need to build a political response. It is only when we can present a powerful alternative to all the established parties, including Labour, that services and hard won conditions can be properly defended.

The SWP leafleted the march with a call for a national walkout. This is a realistic immediate demand but leads advanced workers no further than simple trade unionism. A political challenge to the corrupt Labour administration of Merseyside is the step these self-proclaimed revolutionaries are reluctant to take.

casual labour would be established to cover staff absences in the children and young people homes.

The casual workers would have no real employment rights and no sickness protection in the event of accident or assault at work and casual labour will undermine the quality of the service.

Negotiations had taken place over seven months. During most of this time, the residential workers were operating an overtime ban. In March, the management told the negotiators that there was no point in further discussing the dispute and that they should talk to the Labour councillors. At the end of June the councillors said the union should go back and speak to management.

Lodging a Failure to Agree the union notified management that it would ballot the members for industrial action.

Two ballots have taken place in the course of this dispute. The second had to be held when the first was overturned by the High Court on a management complaint that the list of names provided to them under the Tory anti-union laws was incorrect. Interestingly, the management's drive to use the full force of the law against UNISON is spearheaded by none other than Graham Burgess, former chair of Liverpool UNISON and Communist Party member.

Both ballots were overwhelmingly in favour of strike action. The strike is strong and most workplaces are being picketed.

● Send donations (cheques payable to UNISON Strike Fund) and messages of support to: UNISON Residential Workers, Fourth Floor, Produce Exchange, 8 Victoria Street, Liverpool L2 6QJ. Phone (0151) 227-3965/236-1944; fax (0151) 258 1247.

The rail sell-out

By a Scotrail driver

ON THE evening of Thursday 10 August, I, like many other drivers and traincrew, went through a range of emotions within a few hours.

After the six o'clock news there was relief, when we heard that members of the drivers' union ASLEF had voted to reject a sell-out deal and strike action was on again. When I heard the nine o'clock news, that turned to disbelief. Strike action had been cancelled, without any new ballot of ASLEF members. My feelings turned to anger as I realised that the "new" offer was still pie in the sky.

We had known some months before that the RMT, the biggest rail union, organising some drivers and many other grades, would be balloting over its demand for a six per cent pay rise. The day before the RMT's formal announcement, ASLEF, the main drivers' union, said it would ballot for strike action for "a substantial increase". ASLEF leaders were running scared after last year's RMT signal workers' strike.

ASLEF's vote for strike action came out on 3 July. The ASLEF leaders named Tuesday 11 July as the first strike day. This made the activists in the depots very angry: ASLEF had deliberately chosen to go it alone and make joint action with the RMT impossible, because the RMT's result would be out on 7 July, and legally RMT could not call action before 14 July.

ASLEF put the date back to the 14th, but the RMT's vote went narrowly against action. ASLEF rushed to negotiate. After two solid one-day strikes and with the possibility of strikes on the London Underground coming up, they called the action off and put a "new offer" out to ballot — no extra money beyond the three per cent British Rail had already put on the table, and a promise of two hours off the working week in two years' time — maybe!

The depots were full of disbelief and anger. Everyone knew it was a sell-out, but some argued for voting to accept — why should we lose more

pay just to be sold out again? We got a "no" majority, but then came Thursday 10 August.

And, in the meantime, the potentially decisive London Underground strikes by both RMT and ASLEF had been put off because ASLEF lawyers — highly-paid from our union dues — had got the wording on the ballot paper wrong.

It is difficult to find words to describe the feelings of rank-and-file ASLEF members and other railworkers who realise that we are all interdependent on the rails. ASLEF's members are now in a race against the privatisation clock, and it is time for rank-and-file workers in that union to take bold, decisive, and collective action to change the way it is going.

Trade unions are only a means to certain ends, not ends in themselves. But ASLEF's representation of its members is continually being subverted by bureaucrats who see the property and funds as far more important than the members. The word is that the ASLEF leadership — desperate to save that property and funds — want to convert the organisation into an agency for hiring out drivers to the new private train operating companies, or to find partners to take part in buying some franchises itself.

The activists must find a mechanism for recalling the AAD (ASLEF's conference), if necessary lobbying union headquarters at Arkwright Road when the Executive is in session.

Strike against casual labour

By a UNISON Residential Worker.

ABOUT 300 residential workers, members of UNISON employed by Liverpool City Council, are on indefinite official strike.

The strike of residential workers in the Children, Young People and Adults with Learning Difficulties sections started on 16 August, in opposition to management plans to set up a pool of casual labour and bring in pay cuts. The pool of

Defeated council plans library closures

By a Sheffield Library Worker.

AN EIGHT week long strike by over 350 Sheffield library workers won an important victory last month when Sheffield's Labour council backed down on their attempt to remove enhanced pay for weekend working.

Ten ward Labour Parties and one constituency Labour Party in Sheffield came out in support of the strike; a packed public meeting in the city set up a Labour Libraries Strike Supporters campaign; and decisively, seven weeks into the strike a ballot of UNISON members in Sheffield's sports centres and swimming pools showed 74 per cent voting to join the library workers on all-out, indefinite strike.

During the strike Sheffield council announced plans to close six libraries. At the last strikers' meeting, library workers voted that they would immediately walk out for a day and ballot for wider action if any libraries are closed.

Action groups have been set up in five of the six areas where libraries are due to close. A lobby of the council is planned and petitions are being organised. The council takes its final decision on the closures in early September.

Sheffield libraries and leisure workers have shown that the Labour council's attempts to drive down its workers' conditions can be stopped. A co-ordinated campaign which brings together library workers, service users and Labour Party members is needed now to stop the library closures.