

# Making space for the "lost boys"

By Jane Ashworth

**A**S THE TEACHERS fight it out for more resources and events take an ugly turn in The Ridings School, the debate about disaffected youth has grown narrower and narrower. When the government used to think there was such a thing as society, pupils who were not doing well at school were a cause for concern. Now that the government says society costs too much, the arguments are no longer about how reforms could be made, but about how to discipline pupils into accepting schooling. The issue has been privatised: disaffection is now a personal, moral weakness which can be beaten out of children or fined out of parents.

A future with employment would be the most immediate remedy for the situation. That is not going to happen without a vast shift in the balance of class forces. There are changes which could be made, which are winnable even now, even from a very right-wing Labour government.

Children spend seven hours a day, and 39 weeks a year in school. The rest of their life is spent in their home and in their community. When mass unemployment has meant three generations on the dole and the development of informal coping structures, too often the children's sphere is the unsuitable environment of the streets.

Media stories about violence, drugs, "taxing" and gang rule have a base in truth, and that world is not where junior-age school children should be. When Jack Straw calls for a curfew, he voices the anti-children response to the problem. But he is addressing a big social issue. It is not that he is meddling with issues which of no concern to the labour movement, but that his is a right-wing answer to the problem. He is blaming children and families for a situation which is not of their making.

The situation produced by twenty years of mass unemployment demands of the labour movement more than trade-union responses and implacable hostility to public sector cuts. What is needed is a clear-headed response to the social consequences of the economic crisis, which does not deny the facts of brutalisation but which recognises the types of reforms

needed if working-class areas are to free themselves from the burdens of poverty and social decay.

In the education debate, we need to look at the whole lives of pupils. Quality childcare before school, after school and during the holiday times is essential. Play centres run by local organisations would make a substantial improvement to the quality of children's lives. Creating safe environments, with decent food, run by adults with the time and inclination to listen, talk and play with children, would protect children from the dangers of their streets and ease parental worries about what their children were doing, who with and where.

Alongside such community centres for children would go facilities for parents to get the support they need to keep their heads above water in an impossible difficult situation. Breaking down the isolation of unemployment with drop-in centres, hosting toddler groups, credit unions, advice shops and so on, does make a difference to the morale of women trying to cope.

There have been such facilities in the past, and some councils still do provide such services, but most do not plan them with the participation of the users. Not only does such neighbourhood planning validate a service, it offers opportunities for people to learn the skills of organisation which used to be learned in the labour movement. It allows them to come together to restate that what the media insists is a personal inadequacy is in fact a common problem and not of their own making. It is part of a process of building solidarity where the traditional solidarity of the workplace no longer exists. Such rebuilding will encourage and help create the space for politics. It will challenge the decisions of Labour councils. It will create the space where the "lost boys", as the police propagandists call them, can re-examine their relationships with each other; make real decisions about what is good and what bad; where they can express their alienation and depression without losing respect for themselves and those around them and without having to resort to real-life video-game violence to make themselves heard.