Don’t be fooled by “New Solutions”

By Andy Robinson

I am surprised anyone can be taken in by the so-called arguments of the right-wing student body, the misnamed New Solutions (misnamed because debt and hardship are neither new, nor a solution). Their articles in Workers’ Liberty 35 and 36 demonstrate how ideologically bankrupt this reactionary little clique really are.

There are some false statements which just beg to be countered.

Firstly, New Solutions’ claim to be “independent” yet toe Blair’s line at every turn. I have yet to meet a New Solutions activist who is not also highly active on the Labour right. In terms of their policies, this group are about as independent of Blair as Pravda was of Stalin.

Secondly, New Solutions’ funding policy is not “reform”, as Erin Lyon suggests. The word implies improvement, and positive development. This group’s supposed “solutions” will actually make matters worse by increasing the level of debt per student from the current £7,000 to about £15,000.

Thirdly, business, society and the individual are not distinct categories but are interlinked to such an extent as to make segregation of the kind New Solutions attempt spurious. In any case, if business and society are independent, their argument that we can’t afford free education falls down straight away.

Fourthly, graduates do not necessarily earn more as a result of going to university. Oppressed groups, such as women, black students, lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and students with disabilities, are not guaranteed an income after graduation due to both deliberate and institutional discrimination.

Fifthly, the demands of the Campaign for Free Education would not cost £11 billion (a figure New Solutions appear to have plucked out of thin air). House of Commons research showed that the real cost of free education is closer to £3 billion a year. £40 billion a year would refund the entire welfare state. This compares to the £30 billion a year which would have to be spent on prison running costs alone, to imprison as large a proportion of the population as America (an aim Howard and Straw seem to have). Surely education and welfare are more deserving of cash than coercion and punishment?

Finally, it is not possible to talk of a “partnership” between ordinary people and business in a society split down the middle by class conflict.

New Solutions make at least three major errors.

“The prospect of debt makes education a financial investment, not a right, and excludes anyone who cannot gain a highly paid job.”

Firstly, they assume that a fair, accessible system can be achieved without a fight for free education. This is false. The prospect of debt makes education a financial investment, not a right, and excludes anyone who cannot, or does not wish to, gain a highly paid job as a result of their studies. This hits oppressed groups, anyone who studies for reasons other than financial gain and students aiming to enter necessary but badly paid careers such as nursing.

New Solutions are good at producing rhetoric about accessibility and expanding education, but without free education the system will only be accessible to the children of the rich, and expansion of further and higher education will become nearly impossible. Secondly, they think the student movement should go along with Blair in the hope of picking up scraps. They don’t understand that ordinary people have only achieved victories through fighting, not through grovelling. If NUS caves in on loans, it will look weak, and Blair and the Tories will know they can ignore NUS campaigns elsewhere, including the fight against tuition fees.

Thirdly, they assume we can’t afford free education. Who decides a basic right like education — enshrined as it is in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights — is unaffordable, when government arms spending, huge share dividends and expensive consumer goods are affordable?

We could “afford” something nearer to free education in the 1970s, despite our economy being smaller than it is now. A number of Third World countries can afford free education for a similar number of people to Britain despite weaker economies than ours (e.g. Cuba).

The money for free education could be raised without hitting ordinary taxpayers, or other areas of social spending:

- A one-eighth tax on overseas investment would raise £30 billion a year. Cutting defence spending to the European average would raise £6.3 billion, axing it altogether would raise £20 billion.

- Reversing the Tory tax cuts to the top 10% would raise £10 billion a year. Raising the top rate of corporation tax to the European average would raise £4 billion.

- Reducing dividend levels to 1979 levels would raise £22 billion.

The total raised in these ways alone would raise nearly £110 billion a year — enough to pay for free education and the welfare state many times over.

The question, therefore, is not whether the government can afford it, it
What's ahead for students?

By Kate Buckell

As the London School of Economics becomes the first college to commit itself definitively to charging students top-ups, the student movement continues to be dominated by the division over education funding.

The right wing, dominated by Blair's Labour Students, are trying not only to ditch as much as possible of the National Union of Students' [NUS] traditional commitment to well-funded students in a well-funded education system, but also to gut the movement of any inclination to campaign.

These people continue to run NUS, but wherever students have been able to make an informed choice they have backed the policies of the left in NUS, the Campaign for Free Education: a living grant for all students, high-quality education, restoration of benefits, opposition to tuition fees and graduate tax.

Big student union general meetings — at Queen's University Belfast, De Montfort University in Leicester, Sheffield University, Staffs University and the University of East Anglia — have backed CFE policies. A referendum at Warwick University went 3:1 for free education, on a big turn-out, despite a number of right-wingers on the Executive.

The 250-strong Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual student conference voted overwhelmingly for free education, with only a handful opposing motions moved by our comrades. The Black Students conference, deliberately badly advertised, but still attended by 80 students, also massively backed free education.

The right wing led West of Scotland area has collapsed. Other NUS Areas back free education.

We are hampered by the general low level of struggle in society as a whole. The product is a somewhat depoliticised student movement, with low levels of activity. Nevertheless, the CFE got 4,000 students marching against student hardship in London on 20 November last year.

March organisser Mick Duncan, a member of the Alliance for Workers' Liberty, said: "The mood on this demo was the best I've seen for ages. I've been discussing with CFE people in Scotland, and we will be holding a march in Glasgow too."

That march is set for 5 March. It represents a major breakthrough for students in Scotland. Perhaps the most significant event of all in last term's student politics was the formation of a Scottish Committee for Free Education. There is now a big, organised minority for free education in Scotland, based in some major colleges. Scotland has been the major base for Labour Students in the past ten years. If the ice is breaking up here, then they have big problems.

Our general orientation has been to tie the ideas of free education to action and activity in the colleges. The Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual campaign organised a march in York demanding equality. Another demo is planned in Brighton. More action is planned in opposition to the threat of tuition fees. A Further Education activists' conference is coming up at the end of January. It will discuss the NUS right wing's shameful neglect of the FE sector.

Despite the low level of struggle overall, the AWL student fraction has doubled in size in the last three months. We are now entering the busy conference period, with national NUS conference, Women's Conference and Labour Students' parody of a conference in the next three months.

Labour Students have the high ground, with the election looming. However there is a large cliff awaiting Blairite students at the other side of an election victory. If Labour abolishes grants, brings in some form of graduate tax or cuts education, students will rebel en masse, led by us.

That's something good to look forward to — and some consequence to the workers' movement facing a Blair government.

is whether they will. Or rather, how can we force them to pay.

Clearly the state, with this £110 billion at its fingertips, is better able to afford to pay for further and higher education than cash-strapped students and graduates. Indeed, collecting repayments in the face of poverty, resistance and bureaucracy could actually cost more than giving full grants.

Thankfully, in their Workers' Liberty articles New Solutions supporters have stuck to the slightly less silly arguments. The content of some of their propaganda in NUS shows how weak their arguments are.

They have tried to claim that the CFE is costing Labour victory in the general election by splitting the student movement (when New Solutions are responsible for the division); that free education would involve taking money from the homeless (despite the fact that attacks on education and housing are linked); and that New Solutions supporters have not supported council house building or utilising empty properties; that free education discriminates against people from oppressed backgrounds (because of some unarchived 1979 figures, which are more likely to be taken from data about parent contributions than from data about the actual grants); even that the CFE is in league with the Tories to undermine the student movement (as though they're not the ones who are accepting Thatcher's every argument).

I would be surprised if even their own supporters believe their ridiculous arguments. But, in my experience, most of their sympathisers are careerists out to impress Blair to get jobs in the Labour Party, and will reproduce any nonsense to win votes.

If we want a fair, accessible system of education, where no one is excluded because of their background and where education is not undermined by the demands of business, free education is the only "option" open to us. There is no problem with affordability. The only problem is in how to force the government to give us what we demand.

The answer is that we must stand and fight, through mobilising in our colleges, through demonstrating, through union activity, and through pressure on the labour movement.

A fight of this kind may be difficult, but this struggle is nothing next to the hardship, suffering and inequality which would result from accepting New Solutions' pay-to-learn "alternative".

* Andy Robinson is a Campaign for Free Education activist, writing in a personal capacity.