



# A question of priorities

**F**UNDING students and their education is the new 'policy briefing' from the National Union of Students.

It is introduced by NUS President Douglas Trainer and Vice President Education Lee Findell as "an agenda for real change".

"Real change" requires a *political content* that would make a real difference to the crisis in further and higher education, and *some sign of a willingness to fight for it*. Both are noticeable by their absence from this document. What remains is rhetorical pretension to "radicalism", dressing up an acceptance of the conventional Tory-New Labour notion of an elitist, middle-class favouring, pay-to-learn education system.

Right-wing policy dressed up in "new", "modern" packaging: perfect for young Blairites with big political career ambitions; not so good for students.

*Funding students* claims to base itself on 'core principles' of "access, quality, lifelong learning and an end to student hardship." The only way to realise such principles is free tuition and a living grant for all students in post-16 education. Instead, the new NUS policy proposes abolishing grants, and making graduates "contribute, on an income-contingent basis, to an 'Investment in Education' scheme."

Yes? From what? In today's system, students finance their years of study by repayable student loans and by bank overdrafts. They are saddled with debt for years after graduation. Students pay towards their maintenance by outside jobs. 40% of students are now employed during term time. They are getting deep into debt. Many drop out. Millions of working-class people pay the price of a lack of student financial support by missing out on higher education altogether.

NUS's own research a few years ago took a detailed look at four overseas student loans schemes, and concluded that "negative attitudes to loans by sections of society that do not traditionally borrow have adversely affected working-class and low-income participation in further and higher education."

Some of the young Blairites who have engineered NUS's policy change

## Janine Booth looks at the NUS leadership's proposals for a graduate tax

openly claim that free education is neither achievable nor affordable. Not so long ago ideas like that were nakedly proclaimed only by the loony right of the Tory Party!

Do the resources exist to provide further and higher education to all?

Yes, they do. Human society is capable of constructing buildings, equipping lecture rooms, libraries and laboratories, teaching students, and maintaining their standard of living during their study time. Further, it is easily possible to do this for everyone who wants to benefit from higher education.

That the resources exist to provide general post-16 education is not actually

### "The problem is not that resources do not exist."

in dispute. The NUS document accepts that the resources are there: it calls for a funding system which "must ensure wide and equal access for everyone who wishes to enter post-16 education... [and] provide sufficient resources to maintain and enhance the quality of further and higher education."

The problem is not that resources do not exist, but that they are not organised to provide services such as education: instead, they are hoarded and wasted by a wealthy elite.

The document gives no real argument against grants for students. Its closest attempt is to claim that giving students grants "would require additional expenditure in excess of £10 billion — a sum which no government could justify."

Leaving aside the fact that the Tory government has "justified" giving away greater sums in tax handouts to the rich, this begs the question "justify to whom?"

It might indeed be hard to explain to the rich that they will be taxed. Nor would Tony Blair as Labour Prime Minister relish the prospect of "justifying" to

big business that he is going to tax to fund ordinary people's basic rights to education, healthcare and housing.

But it would not be difficult for a Labour Government committed to the needs of working-class people to "justify" student grants. Working-class people are not going to rise up in outrage at the prospect of themselves and their children being able to go to university.

No, the easier option for a New Labour government is to "justify" student hardship, long-term debt, and the continuing disgrace of millions of working-class people denied the opportunity to fulfil their potential through learning.

The issue here is: who should a Labour government justify itself to? To whom is it accountable? Our answer: to the labour movement and to the interests of working-class people.

The same issue is replicated in NUS: who does the union exist for?

**A**N NUS leadership that advocates the policies expounded in *Funding students and their education* is scabbing on the interests of students. It does not even aspire to represent a membership which has an interest in free education and which, with a lead, would be willing to fight for it.

What makes this document truly remarkable is that it does not even try to give the impression of being on the side of students. Instead, it speaks of a "partnership between the government, institutions, business and students" as if each were equally deserving, with equal power, responsibilities and humanity.

NUS's New Labour leaders see themselves not as leaders of a student movement, but as junior partners of those who administer the system. They fawn on those who attack young people's right to an education and student interests. They want to turn NUS from a "campaigning union" into a sub-section of the Department of Education under the next Labour government.

There will be a day of reckoning for this NUS leadership. Students will say to them: make room for the student movement to be led by people who actually want to fight for students!