



Free education for all, from the cradle to the grave!

By Alison Brown,
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UNTIL the age of sixteen, education is compulsory and free. Of course, the quality of your education varies widely between public schools, middle-class suburbia and underfunded, overcrowded inner-city schools.

Post-sixteen, education divides more dramatically. Many upper- and middle-class youngsters will stay on at school and then go on to university. Working-class youth are much more likely to end up in a dead-end job, on the dole, or trying to rescue their education on a training scheme or further education course of dubious quality.

The divide in post-sixteen education helps to reproduce class society. Some people get great opportunities and top qualifications, and probably end up employing those that don't.

In theory, everyone has the 'choice' to go to university. But in reality, it is a choice shaped by expectations and by finance. The lack of adequate maintenance grants is an insurmountable barrier to those people — whether school-leavers or adult returners — who can not afford to pay their way through college.

That is why the National Union of Students demands a decent grant for all students in post-sixteen education: as a prerequisite for achieving equality and full access. NUS Annual Conference in March voted to reaffirm that policy.

However, the Labour student right are

now making a hasty and undemocratic attempt to overturn that policy. They want NUS to advocate that students pay towards their education, through loans, tuition fees, or a form of post-graduation taxation.

Their reason? Providing students with grants costs money. To deliver a free, accessible and quality system of continuing education, Tony Blair, once resident in Downing Street, will have to set about shifting power and wealth from the privileged towards the common good. This may get him into trouble with the City.

The Blairite NUS leadership have decided that this can not be allowed to happen. They have decided that their job is not to champion the interests of students, but to make life easier for Mr. Blair — hoping, no doubt that he will reward them with jobs. They are determined that if students want to fight for decent grants, then they must do it alone, without the power and resources of their national union.

They know that students do not support them in this. That is why their 'consultation' consisted of a biased survey conducted during the Easter holidays. And why they aim to change NUS's policy at a small, unrepresentative Extraordinary Conference to be held on May 30th, during exams and half term holidays.

They are by no means certain of success. Hundreds of student unionists are organising together in the Campaign for Free Education. The Campaign is blowing the whistle on the NUS leadership's betrayal. Campaign activists are finding ordinary students on our side, and outraged at their national union's treachery.

Campaign for Free Education c/o NUS London Area, University of London Union, Malet Street, London WC1: 0171-637-1181.

Free Bolivian trade unionists! End the state of siege!

THE STATE OF siege declared in Bolivia on 19 April is still in force, and teachers' leaders are still in gaol.

The government declared the state of emergency, suspending all constitutional rights, banning meetings and imprisoning union leaders and activists, to stop strikes and protests against its planned education cuts, wage cuts for teachers and other public employees, privatisation of state-owned industries and anti-union measures. On 27 March the Central Obrera Boliviana (COB — Bolivian equivalent of the TUC) called a general strike which even shops and businesses in the capital La Paz joined.

The government's first act under the state of emergency was to arrest 1,000 trade union activists, including leaders of the COB who were meeting to plan their next move.

The COB leaders agreed to call off the general strike and were freed; the teachers remained on strike until the beginning of May. In spite of the teachers' return to work, the government is still holding prominent teachers' leaders, Vilma de la Plata, Gonzalo Sorucco and José Luis Alvarez. Government troops have even raided the human rights office where teachers are protesting against the detentions.

The state of emergency will continue until mid-July. It remains illegal to meet in groups of more than three, or to travel between cities without a permit. The army and police still have the power to impose curfews and detain people without trial.

You can write demanding the release of the teachers' leaders and an end to the state of emergency to the Bolivian government c/o Presidencia de la Republica, Palacio de Gobierno, Plaza Murillo, La Paz, Bolivia; to the Bolivian Ambassador at The Bolivian Embassy, 106 Eaton Square, London SW1, fax 0171-235 1286.

You can contact the Bolivian Union Solidarity Committee in Britain c/o BCM 7750, London WC1N 3XX, fax 0171-978 9144 for model motions and details of action.