

The history of the student left: from the 1980s to 1997

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The left-wing student movement in the 1980s

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Workers' Liberty has organised in the student movement since the early '80s. Sue Hamilton was the key organiser of this work in the mid '80s. Here, she recalls some of her experiences and suggests some directions for student action today.

When Labour was last in government, from 1974 to 1979, the student movement was headed by the Broad Left. This was an infrastructure composed of CP members, onto which were grafted independent radicals and some National Organisation of Labour Students' (NOLS) members. It was an effective meeting. In 1981, on the second attempt, Labour finally broke from the BL and fought the remnants of the CP for the leadership of the NUS. NOLS have had control of NUS since their first successful Presidential candidacy, that of Neil Stewart, in 1982. Labour's dominance of the student movement was maintained at the March 1997 NUS conference, surviving allegations of widespread corrupt election practices.

Now with a Labour government in office the situation has changed for the student movement and for its leaders. They will find the already apparent contradiction between fighting for students' interests and loyalty to Tony Blair uncomfortable, and the ruling group have to reposition themselves, reassess their direction and re-invent their reason for being.

The history of Labour Students is a history paralleling the labour movement in terms of the positioning of the hard left, the attitudes of the ruling groups, and the nature, forms and substance of the political arguments.

In 1976 the Militant/Socialist Party had taken control of NOLS at about the same time they took hold of the structures of the Labour Party Young Socialists. NOLS left the Broad Left, and Militant ran a failing election campaign in Labour's name. A "mainstream" Labour left opposition, "Clause 4", formed in NOLS and launched what they called "Operation Icepick". They grouped together a motley crew of Labour Party Stalinists and others who could be united against Militant. They quickly succeeded in reclaiming NOLS for the mainstream labour movement and so began the modern phase of NUS history.

Labour Students won control of NUS in 1982 after an abortive attempt the previous year. They did it by riding the climate in the student movement against the Tories and by clever organisation - primarily an election stunt known as the "M62 Axis".

In the week leading up to NUS conference, when the election of delegates was held, the Higher Education colleges along the M62 corridor, from Hull to Liverpool, went into occupation and the CP leadership of NUS was exposed as hostile to such displays of student militancy. Ballot boxes were put up in the occupations and, true to expectations, the ballots returned a Labour mandate for their union's

delegation to the NUS Conference. NOLS won a majority at conference on a promise of creating a campaigning NUS that would fight for student concerns. That slogan would become the focus of dispute in the following years as NOLS began to betray its roots and turned into a logjam against student militancy.

In NOLS there was still an atmosphere that made real political debate possible. In comparison with the Militant-run LPYS, NOLS was an open, democratic organisation. Almost all of the big HE colleges had a Labour Club that was a forum for debate and campaigning activity. In the outside world the left-wing Bennite movement in the Party and unions was growing and found willing partisans in the student movement. It was a rare Labour Club or Labour Club activist who would stand up and support Labour right wingers like Denis Healey or Roy Hattersley. Some key figures in NOLS supported the Benn-Heffer leadership ticket in the internal election of 1983 against Kinnock and Hattersley. The majority would have liked Kinnock for Leader and Benn for Deputy.

It was axiomatic that Labour Students shared the concerns of the broader movement and swore on the same oath - "Never again a Labour government like the last!" At a national level, NOLS supported the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy and the Rank and File Mobilising Committee for Labour Democracy. Similarly, there was automatic support for women's demands, activity against racism and fascism, and for lesbian and gay liberation. Indeed "the politics of liberation", as they became known, were later to dominate NUS and NOLS and replace the basic support for working class demands dominant in the early 80s. All in all, NOLS stood in stark contrast to the LPYS where there was no real debate and little activity apart from promoting Militant. The electoral system inside NOLS guaranteed minority representation on the leading committee.

As class-struggle socialists gravitated to Labour in the early '80s there was a decline of the far left in NUS. There has always been a presence of Trotskyist groups in NUS. The International Socialists (SWP) and the now defunct International Marxist Group (IMG) were in competition for the leading role for a decade leading up to the early '80s.

As the early '80s battle between the Bennites and the rest inside the Labour Party raged on, the far left in NOLS, organised as Socialist Students in NOLS (SSiN), was able to grow and consolidate a base in the big universities after its official launch in 1982.

Running NUS takes up a great deal of time and energy - it is the largest membership organisation in Britain after the National Trust and the largest student organisation in western Europe. Once NOLS got control of the NUS, the priorities of Labour Students changed - away from developing NOLS, towards running the national union. This shift consolidated the drift rightward of NOLS, but only after some spectacular battles took place.

NOLS was part of the left of the Labour Party, as was SSiN. Militant was usually out on a limb, choosing to substitute campaigns of their own, and just for themselves, for any organic and broad campaign that came into existence.

At NOLS conferences it was common for motions from SSiN colleges to be passed against those of the leadership, because SSiN were offering positions which chimed in with the direction of the broad movement - against immigration controls for example. But this period of relative harmony and creative campaigning began to close in the fallout from Labour's defeat in the 1985 election, after which Michael Foot made way for the renegade, politically self-gutted leftist Neil Kinnock as Leader. There was a reappraisal within the Labour leadership and bureaucracy, and Labour's slow, steady march to the right began.

New political alignments developed around different explanations for Labour's defeat. NOLS blamed the left for defeat, changed sides and joined up, like a broad and amorphous "soft left", with the right. Kinnock was at his most popular during the subsequent election campaign of 1987. He witch-hunted Militant as a means of scaring and intimidating the last flickers of independent life out of the soft left. Militant was being served notice that nearly two decades of dominating - and half-strangling - the LPYS were over.

Certainly the Militant was a foully bureaucratic organisation that had stifled and stultified the LPYS. By that stage they were a very large, passive, propagandist sect, incongruously domesticated in the Labour Party. About this time they had control of Liverpool council, where they bottled out of confrontation with Thatcher and wound up pulling the stunt of sacking a large part of the council workforce - to put pressure on the Tories! It was their evident failure in Liverpool that opened the road for their destruction in the Labour Party. As Frank Field MP said: "We will never get a better chance to shake this group warmly by the throat." After the Liverpool fiasco, Militant was an easy target and a convenient chopping block for other leftists. Nonetheless, the process of expelling the Militant became the touchstone within NOLS. Gone was the opposition to the Tories as the major concern. Gone the commitment to realigning the Party to ensure that no future Labour government would be as bad as the last one. Instead, supporting expulsion of the Militant became the mark of virtue and political correctness for the right and soft left inside NOLS.

It required a sharp volte-face. From one NOLS NC to the next in the summer of 82/3, NOLS shifted from defending the Militant against expulsion to accepting a transfer of Labour Party money away from the LPYS to NOLS. Effectively the Labour leadership cut the YS's financial life-line and gave it to Labour Students. Perhaps a little shamefaced about it, they were only too pleased to take the cash and the "insiders" tag which it carried. In so far as an excuse was offered up inside the student movement it was that Militant was hostile to "liberation politics". They were 'sexist', 'racist homophobes' - and therefore they deserved expulsion, and possibly should be burned at the stake. It was socialist virtue to support their expulsion!

In the aftermath of the 1983 defeat, the right, nourished by the soft left, regained the power to assert itself. The left lost

the battles against the Witch-hunt. While previously there had been no enemy but the Tories and the past practice of Labour, now there was a focus around which the right could regroup. Labour, it was said, could not win a general election as a divided party, the 85 manifesto had indeed been "the longest suicide note in history" as Gerald Kaufmann quipped. The leadership of Labour Students were consolidated as part of the re-formed right of the party. However, the miners then went on strike, and students saw the biggest display of Working class action that they had ever experienced. Most would have been aged about ten during the '74 miners' strike. The process of NOLS battenning down the hatches on student protest was suspended for a year.

Labour Students, and most of the Liberals too, supported the miners. There was now a three-way fight between Clause 4, SSiN and the SWP/RCP - with the Militant looking on somewhat bewildered - in colleges all around the country. It came to a head in a workshop at NUS Conference 1984, where students were treated to a theatrical display of argument which summed up the rights and wrongs of socialist practice in the student movement.

The scene is a small theatre workshop space in the Winter Gardens at Blackpool. A semicircular room layout is headed at the top-table by NUS President Phil Woolas -- now an MP - who is to defend his section of the Executive Report to the NUS on student support for the miners. On the way upstairs to the room every left group is selling their paper. Nottinghamshire striking miners - a minority in their area - are collecting for their strike fund. Most socialist delegates to the conference are in the room, and so too are the national organisers of the socialist groups, there to have a look at how the most important debate of the year will pan out.

Phil Woolas did support the strike. He did indeed organise for students to go on national demonstrations and to sign petitions and to collect food in colleges to send to beleaguered mining communities. It was unfortunate but typical of the SWP and Militant that they could not understand this: to them Woolas was Labour, Labour are right-wing witch-hunters, ergo NUS and Woolas and NOLS did not support the miners. Woolas thought he was in heaven, as students from the SWP and Militant got up to denounce him.

The SWP itself, whose 'theoreticians' had convinced themselves that no serious working class struggles would occur during "the downturn", had taken months to involve themselves in miner support activities. Against their allegations of not supporting the miners he pointed truthfully to a list of activities which he himself had been a part of or had officially sanctioned. He made the complainants look like fools, people out of touch with the real world. But what Woolas could not argue against was the view put by SSiN that, while it was true that NUS did support the miners, there was a lot more that the student movement could and should have done, and that the NUS leadership were miles behind some colleges in delivering effective support to the miners. Woolas was asked where was the carnival of student support, which tied the development of the union as a whole in with the rhythms of the miners' strike? Why was the occasion not seized with both hands? Where was the role for the Entertainments lads, where was the role for the Lesbian and Gay Societies? Why had there not been proposals for student union buildings to be made available for miners to stay in?

Where was the national guideline for student unions to organise cross-campus union committees to organise support for the miners? And so on.

Another key division was over donations to the strike funds. College student unions are legally restrained from giving money to outside bodies which are not concerned with student Welfare, or with education in a broader sense. But the National Union is not so restricted. A SSiN conference motion that £50,000 be given to the miners out of central NUS coffers caused NOLS consternation, out of all proportion to the proposal. The Executive stomped and raged - and no one was quite sure why. NUS at that time had big reserves and such a donation could not threaten the fundamental financial security of the Union.

Despite the Executive, Conference voted to make the donation. However, on a national scale that was a very small amount of money - what was most important was the political lessons of the strike for the student movement: NOLS simply did not see themselves, and therefore the NUS, as a movement to be turned to activities around the strike - they could not see it when SSiN argued that the future of the education system was tied up with the outcome of the strike and that therefore, students, in their own interests, should give every bit of help they could to the miners on the picket lines and in financial support.

SSiN argued that the miners' strike should have been the struggle through which the student movement consciously and deliberately linked up with the labour movement in the front line. At ground level, the strike should have been the moment when links were made, in anticipation of the battles to save the student grant and fight off the cuts which were certainly coming if the Tories survived their war with the pit villages.

In their victorious election campaign only 18 months earlier, NOLS had promised to build a campaigning student union. And NOLS did run campaigns - often too politely and restrainedly - nonetheless there were real campaigns. But NOLS idea of a campaign did not include the idea of mobilising the membership! At the time the sour joke was that NOLS campaigns came in an envelope, their demonstrations consisted of a couple of posters and a petition sheet, and their idea of aggressive action was a model letter to send to MPs. There was never a drive to encourage colleges to unify the different interest groups on campus, never a willingness to recognise the widespread interests of students and use that concern to strengthen the union.

Out of this experience germinated the SSiN document *Towards a Mass Campaigning Union*, in which was set out a plan to develop NUS. The document recognised that the most significant indices of development was student participation and not student union facilities. It was proposed that SUS should draw together the wide and varied concerns of students into Charters of demands which could be modified according to local conditions. So, for instance, where a science-based university mistreated animals in research, and there was an animal rights/environmental group, their demands could be brought into the mainstream of the union by adding them to the Charter - alongside, for instance, the demands of the women's group, of the overseas students against fee increases, and so on.

Within the formulation, the fundamental difference between NOLS and the far left surfaced. Not only were there policy differences on this and that issue - but, more significantly, there was a difference in perspective for NUS as a whole. Was it to be a campaigning union with an orientation to the working class movement and its methods of organisation and struggle? Or was it to be an organisation which sometimes sided with the labour movement leadership but kept its distance and did not know how to develop the campaigning potential of its own membership? It was this deficiency within NOLS which finally produced the now notorious NUS reluctance to take a high profile in political campaigns, and the mole-like policy of NUS battenning down the hatches and lapsing into inactivity so as to promote the chances of a Labour victory in the 1987 general election. Such a strategy was religion to NOLS and the rest of the Party managers by the time of the '93 and '97 elections.

On the other flank, the miners' strike consolidated SSiN as the organisation of the left, not just in Labour Students but also in NUS. The first-ever Labour President of Durham University, Simon Pottinger, stood for a non-sabbatical post on NUS Executive alongside member Karen Talbot. They formed the first ever SSiN team on the NUS Executive and opened doors previously closed, as Simon travelled up and down the country visiting unions and Labour Clubs and expanding the network of SSiN. In the following months, SSiN grew from a small base in a few colleges into a large rank-and-file movement, with operations in NOLS and in the NUS.

The premise of SSiN was quite simple- it would unite students who wanted to fight the Tories by building a mass, campaigning union. But there was more to the organisation's success than that. The time was right for a rank-and-file movement in the NUS - there were many students educated by the miners' strike who had had a taste of working class struggle. Essentially, SSiN was able to unite those socialist students who were not in Militant or the SWP and give them the benefit of a well-organised machine to influence NUS decision-making processes, and to organise events which should, by right, have been run by the national union but weren't. The best example of this was the organisation of an annual demonstration at Tory Party conference - the "Beat the Blues" march.

This fixture was first organised after NUS abandoned the traditional first-term demo, which activists needed as a focus for campaigning in the first few weeks of the academic year. SSiN took on the organisation of this march to make up for the inadequacies of the national union.

Beyond the basic issues of the student movement, SSiN would raise the heavy political issues when they arose, and take a firm line when that was called for. The solid understanding of NUS and the good campaigning proposals meant that SSiN was able to keep within its ranks people who disagreed on some of those big issues. In particular, there was a group of people from Brighton who vehemently hated the SSiN majority line on Israel [emphatically for Israel's right to exist] and were supporters of Briefing. SSiN benefited from the participation of a group of Briefing-affiliated students at Sussex University and individuals at UCL and at Coventry Poly.

How the Left established itself

by Sue Hamilton

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A previous article described how Labour Students won the leadership of the National Union of Students [NUS] in 1982. Then, they were a left-wing alternative to the previous leadership, around the Communist Party and its allies. After the 1983 election they moved to the right, but a left-wing challenge to them, both in the NUS and in the student Labour Clubs, was developing round Socialist Students in NOLS [SSiN].

NOLS, the National Organisation of Labour Students, had been relatively open and democratic in the early 1980s, but after 1983 it became harder and harder to set up new Labour Clubs, or to secure delegate credentials for the annual Labour Students conference.

Opposition clubs were ruled out on trivial technicalities. Leading critics' membership cards were lost in the national office so that they became ineligible to attend conference, and whole batches of cards disappeared to reduce the number of delegates that clubs could send to conference. Local Labour Party full-time officials, who had to be present for a new Labour Club to be officially set up, would often cancel at the last minute.

Rules preventing part-time Further Education students from joining the Labour Students organisation meant that every student who was also signing on the dole became ineligible for membership.

The fight came to a head at the Hull Labour Students Conference in 1984. After the 1983 election they moved to the right, but a left-wing challenge to them, both in the NUS and in the student Labour Clubs, was developing round Socialist Students in NOLS SSiN].

In the first batch of elections, the left slate won some positions. The second batch never took place because the Labour Party official in charge closed down the conference after goading the Militant into behaving badly.

Clause Four alleged that one of their members had been thumped by a Militant supporter. Maybe she did hit him, but it is just as likely that one of his own side did it. More votes had been cast than delegates accredited. Militant declared that they had evidence of how the ballot had been rigged and demanded a roll call vote. They bungled it by accusing the Labour Party official in charge personally, without evidence. He took his chance and closed down the conference.

All the elections for a new National Committee were nullified and the old committee, dominated by Clause Four, stayed in office for another 12 months. SSiN candidates Clive Bradley and Bryn Griffiths had been elected as Publicity Officer and Vice Chair but never took office.

Years later, Danny Nicol, a delegate from Oxford University who had gone on to be a leading figure in the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy, revealed that his delegation had indeed rigged the ballot. They had been given more ballot forms than they had delegates, which accounted for the discrepancy between registered delegates and votes cast.

Clause Four made sure that subsequent conferences were firmly under their control, and Labour Students steadily dwindled from a political movement into a machine for putting careerists into NUS positions.

The South Africa debate

Right up until the end of the 1984-5 miners' strike, however, NUS was an open forum. That began to change after a debate on South Africa which frightened the life out of Clause Four.

Students had long supported the movement against apartheid in South Africa, for example in the protests against the South Africa rugby tour in 1970. Every big college had an anti-apartheid society. The Anti-Apartheid Movement had a full-time student organiser.

In the 1980s, struggles led by the new non-racial trade unions highlighted to the world the fact that other anti-apartheid organisations existed besides the African National Congress, which had heavy backing from Eastern Bloc governments, the Communist Parties internationally - and the Labour Students leadership.

Now the issue of direct links between British trade unionists or student unionists and the new non-racial unions and student groups in South Africa came to the fore. The ANC had always insisted that all contact with South Africa should be through them. Any other contact they insisted was a breach of the international boycott of the apartheid state. The new trade unions -- developing in the teeth of hostility from the ANC, which recognised only its own exile trade-union front - did not agree. Many of their leaders talked about launching a new workers' party in South Africa. They wanted links with the international working class on their own terms - not mediated through the ANC.

In 1986, Moses Mayekiso, one of the leaders of the new unions, toured Britain with the backing of SSiN and Workers' Liberty, speaking to colleges, union branches, Labour Youth conference and NUS conference. It was impossible for the Labour Students leadership to denounce him as a pro-imperialist.

Labour Students had been saying that direct links would threaten the safety of activists in South Africa. When Moses said that of course caution was necessary, but the best way to make links was to telephone his union's office in South Africa, it was very hard for the ANC's "security" mumbo-jumbo to maintain its old credibility.

At NUS conference, the Labour Students leaders denounced SSiN as counter-revolutionaries, dupes of imperialism and so

on. Yet several speakers had long family histories of involvement in the South African struggle; two had had their fathers murdered by the South African state.

The pro-direct links motion was lost by ten votes, thanks to the SWP, whose speakers grasped the microphone to explain that only revolutionaries favoured direct links and reformists opposed them.

Labour Students and Stalinism

Labour Students also denounced SSiN and the rest of the left as “cold warriors” and “pro-American” because SSiN wanted NUS to support the independent student union in Poland set up by Solidarnosc in its revolt against the Stalinist police state in 1980-1. The Polish state-stooge student union, the NZSP, was a regular partner in the NUS’s international lash-ups, and it was impossible for some people in Clause Four to grasp that there was a third camp in world politics, and neither Washington nor Moscow carried the banner of the international working class.

One reason they gave for not supporting the Solidarnosc student union was that it did not have a head office with a fax machine! The union had been driven under-ground, and its members communicated by tiny pamphlets which could be concealed in the inside lining of a jacket without altering the fit. Members wore electrical resistors as badges to identify themselves.

Labour Students’ politics here, as elsewhere, were a mix of the Clause Four politicians’ Stalinist ideology and the careerists’ notion that student union development was to be measured by facilities and seats on the board of colleges, not by levels of participation and internal democracy!

Clause Four had begun as “Operation Icepick”, named after the tool with which a Stalinist agent murdered Trotsky in 1940. Their more political members believed in Stalinism. Their younger careerists enjoyed international jaunts to Eastern Europe. Each year NUS leaders would go off to the Eastern Bloc to be entertained by “peace movements” or “student movements” which were in fact nothing more than government fronts. When delegations arrived in the UK from the Eastern Bloc, it was party time for Labour Students; they genuinely believed that they were mixing with representatives from a higher form of society, and that they were rehearsing for when they themselves would be grown-up politicians conducting matters of state. Now some of them do it with Blair.

Today, after the collapse of the Soviet Union it is hard to imagine the importance of this network, but it was as important as it was corrupt.

Banning Jewish Societies

Besides South Africa and Poland, another big international issue – the Israeli/Palestinian conflict – also figured largely in the student politics of the mid-1980s. Here, the alignments were different.

In 1983, Sunderland Poly Student Union banned its Jewish Society because it was explicitly “Zionist” – i.e., it would not

disown Israel. The Union referred to the United Nations declaration that Zionism was a form of racism, and argued that banning the Jewish Society was anti-racism.

The long debate which followed covered many issues: the Palestinian question, anti-semitism, ways to fight racism, and also norms of democracy in student unions. SSiN became the main force campaigning against the banning of Jewish Societies and a general culture of “banning the unrighteous”. Workers’ Liberty, the main group in SSiN, argued further that the right of the Palestinian Arabs to a state of their own – which we vigorously supported – did not and could not undo the right of the Israeli Jews to a state. For the Israeli Jews to want to be independent from neighbouring hostile nations was no more necessarily racist than the self-determination of any other nation.

Some of the Stalinist current in Labour Students were unmistakably anti-semites, but all the NUS leadership were against banning Jewish Societies. Left groups like the SWP and Socialist Action were in favour of the ban.

The argument also brought new players on to the NUS stage – people who had not previously been involved in the mainstream of NUS, who had perhaps been involved in single-issue international or anti-racist campaigns. Some black students saw the campaign to lift the ban on the Jewish Society as support for the policies of the Israeli state: those who opposed the ban were denounced as anti-Palestinian, racist and pro-imperialist!

As the row spread, it became clear that many students who considered themselves socialists, and certainly not anti-Jewish, believed that Zionism was not the majority reflex culture of British Jewry, but rather a conspiratorial ideology which declared the Jews a master race and ipso-facto the Palestinians as inferior beings. Nonetheless, the only Zionists anyone wanted to ban were Jewish ones. There was never a cry for banning Labour MPs like Tony Benn or Eric Heffer who backed Israel. Yet, before being allowed to have a Jewish Society in a college, Jewish students would have to denounce their heritage and their community culture, and side with those who wanted to destroy the state of Israel.

And to many students who saw themselves as militant anti-racists, the NUS leaders’ opposition to banning was just one more example of the NUS Executive being too timid to carry through the logic of their position.

So misguided “Trotskyist” anti-racists went to bed with some anti-semites, who were also lashed up with Stalinists hostile to Israel from the viewpoint of the international interests of the Soviet empire. The battle line-up here influenced NUS politics long after the Sunderland Jewish Society was reinstated and other, copy-cat bans were lifted.

Holding together a broad movement

It was a difficult time for SSiN. The project was building a broad left alliance in the student movement, but here SSiN also had to oppose a large part of the left. SSiN members who were “anti-Zionists” – who accepted that Zionism = racism – suffered tremendous pressure to break with the majority, whom they considered to be “Zionists”.

Through all the head-banging, name-calling and theatrical

absurdity, SSiN stuck together by delivering results on the ground and getting the bread and butter issues right. No matter what one's opinion was on the Middle East, there was more to keep the rank and file movement together than there was to split it.

Throughout this period, SSiN won nearly all the debates on domestic issues at NUS conferences – and there were then two conferences a year, large, lively affairs. On every issue of student unionism – the erosion in student grants, denial of social security benefits to students, housing crises, threats to student union autonomy, cuts in courses and facilities – SSiN had vigorous and practical policies for campaigning.

In a Britain where the Tories were running roughshod over the labour movement, we could score no big victories – and that fact determined a slow but steady drift to the right in general student opinion. Yet for anyone concerned to build a campaigning student union in their college, SSiN were the people with the ideas.

Opposition to banning Jewish Societies in fact became something which bound SSiN together. Even those who felt that Zionism did equate with racism knew very well that banning the unrighteous was no way to build effective student unions with mass student involvement.

The SSiN coalition held together by doing all that a good working democracy could do, and that was a lot, to make the organisation habitable for the minority: they were offered space in SSiN publications, their alternative model motions were circulated and they were never denied a platform from which to put forward their opinion. Another of SSiN's strengths was that its slates for elections were not drawn only from the dominant tendency in the coalition.

SSiN's influence grew especially in the Further Education colleges, where working-class youth study vocational and pre-university courses. The key here was the Area structures of NUS – autonomous, locally-funded, federations of local student unions. Because SSiN activists in the Areas were able to organise good campaigns at a county and city-wide level and to provide assistance to the hard-pressed student union organisers in Further Education colleges, we got access to the younger activists in the weakest sector of the national union.

Unable to match SSiN [and Militant's] ability to work in the Further Education sector, the NUS leadership decided to block up the conduit by giving areas more equitable funding, from central resources, at the price of the loss of the right to campaign on locally-decided issues.

SSiN combined with Militant to defeat the Labour Students plan, Areas remained autonomous, and the cack-handed, obvious ploy only served to discredit the leadership and widen the support of SSiN as the rank and file organisation which knew what was what in NUS.

Establishing a voice on the NUS Executive

SSiN had first won places on the NUS executive in 1984, with Karen Talbot and Simon Pottinger. In 1985 Simon won Vice President Welfare against the Union of Jewish Students' candidate Lindsey Brandt, who was supported both by the NUS leadership and by sections of the left.

In 1986 SSiN had to make a watershed decision. Up to then SSiN had never run directly against Labour Students in NUS elections. Labour Students would (and still does) run only partial slates, leaving slots empty for other groups it wants to horse-trade with, and SSiN had always stood in those slots. Now Labour Students decided to stand their own candidate, Jo Gibbons, against Simon Pottinger in an attempt to stop him winning a second year in office. SSiN ran against Labour Students and won.

In 1987, after yet another Labour Students selection conference which would not have passed scrutiny by independent observers, SSiN ran against their official candidate for President, Maeve Sherlock, though we lost. Then Michele Carlisle stood in a "gap" that Labour Students had left for the Communist Party, and was returned as National Secretary, with Paul McGarry and Emma Colyer also winning non-sabbatical positions on the NUS executive.

In 1988 Michele was re-elected on a non-sabbatical post and was joined by Liz Millward and by Dave Brennan as the Area Convenors' observer on the executive.

Since then Left Unity and the Campaign for Free Education have regularly elected a left-wing minority to the NUS Executive. This year, 1997, CFE became the largest single faction on the Executive, with more members than Labour Students, though alliances with right-wing "independents" leave the Blairites' control of the executive still solid.

Left cover for a right shift

As the reverberations of the Sunderland Poly ban continued after 1983, we also had the University of East Anglia banning Frankie Goes to Hollywood, Preston Poly trying to ban the television, and an SWPer trying to ban Desmond Decker's song, "the Israelites".

The culture of banning remained deep-rooted in the student movement, and it was fuelled by many themes – from anti-fascism and "no-platform"-ing through to student unions who wanted to free their buildings from the contamination of the outside world's racism and sexism. The whole left culture was unclear about the importance of liberty and free debate. This took the "liberation campaigns" to absurd postures in the years which followed, and banning became an ideological weapon of the right wing against the left.

As the Labour Students leading group, Clause Four – by now renamed Democratic Left – moved right, it shifted from a broadly pro-working-class viewpoint to one which privatised politics. The old slogan of the women's liberation movement, "the personal is political" was reversed into "the political is personal". It became impossible, for example, to treat men and women equally in political discourse. And how the "feminists" used this new-found moral blackjack!

The norms of democratic debate were superseded by assertion and counter-assertion in an ideology which became known to its critics as "femocracy". The ground rules of femocracy was that members of oppressed groups were always right, unless they were objecting to that assumption, in which case they were the intellectual prisoners of white, heterosexual men. To speak up against the collective

assertions of a group of the specially oppressed was to lay oneself open to allegations of racism or sexism or homophobia. For a man to argue with a woman on a broader political issue was thought to be evidence of sexism or even sexual harassment!

We had the Community Party denouncing SSiN as “the harem” of one of its leading men because SSiN objected to the rhetoric of “I experience therefore I am right”. The most enlightening incidents were in Manchester.

The Labour Club candidate for Campaigns Officer in the University student union’s annual executive elections, Matt Davies, was in SSiN. He was gay, but he was denounced by the Gay Society as a homophobe – because he was standing against a Gay Society candidate! No matter that Matt was in the Gay Society, no matter his sexual orientation, the fact that he stood against the Gay Society made him a certified “homophobe”.

An article in *Socialist Organiser* (the journal then published by *Workers’ Liberty*) on “Class Politics not Rainbow Alliances” got Matt’s posters ripped down and the author – Clive Bradley, a former member of the Labour Club and activist in the Gay Society at the university – banned from the union building!

Then, just across the road at the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology (UMIST), there was a social at NUS’s national convention for Area Convenors (the elected organisers for the local federations of NUS). A SSiN area convenor got into a row with two Labour Students convenors about NUS proposals to reduce the autonomy of the Area organisations. The Labour Students people were a man and a woman, and the SSiN convenor was a man. He spoke to the woman in an aggressive and argumentative way – just as he spoke to the man and they in turn to him.

The following day, at UMIST Labour Club, the NUS President denounced the SSiN member for sexual harassment! Later she had to retract and apologise, but only after the matter was taken to the NUS Executive.

Despite SSiN’s Michele Carlisle being well-respected as the student organiser for the National Abortion Campaign, SSiN lost the support of many women activists by a hastily written, and rather cross article in *Socialist Organiser* entitled “Feminism not Femocracy”. It declared that it was time to put a stop to the trend in NUS whereby all politics was becoming a matter of pandering to and balancing the claims of the self-selected representatives of various oppressed groups. Speaking up against the tide was politically the right thing to do, but perhaps it could have been done more gently, and earlier on.

SSiN was able to survive the outbreak of femocracy in part because a good chunk of our leadership were women. Had the majority of our central organisers been men, then it would have been very hard indeed to survive the critical stand we took on ‘liberation ideology’.

Yet we did survive, and established a base that has been built on since then by Left Unity and the Campaign for Free Education.

Since 1987 – which was Labour’s third general election defeat in a row – Labour Students’ march to the right has accelerated, in line with the “Blair project”, as it is now known. Some of the minor figures in the triumph of this New Labour Right have been former NUS or Labour Students activists, and NUS has been well and truly consolidated as a pillar of Blairite good practice. In the past, the arguments in NUS were about how to campaign. Now the argument is about whether NUS should campaign at all.

Now, when the honeymoon period with the new government is over, the Labour Students faction in NUS intend to relaunch themselves as “independents” – so as to be able, for self-protection, to distance themselves from the Blair government. They know that students will clash with the government, and they are not prepared to stand up and defend New Labour policies. A serious left in the National Union of Students can soon, if its organisers know their business, come into its own.