

The Myth of the Student Radical

Thinking about Anarchism

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There is a commonly held idea that universities are some sort of “red nucleus”, a hotbed of activism and socialism. The fact is that students come from many different backgrounds and classes, although mainly ‘middle’ and upper class. There is no underlying political or economic interest that unites or could unite all students.

You would think that poor housing, low grants and student poverty would have everybody flocking to become socialists but surprisingly these are tolerated by many students because of the promise of wealth at the end. In reality therefore only a small fraction of the student population ever become active in the “student politics”.

This happens most commonly through student unions. The largest part of any student union’s work lies in welfare and provision of student services. In many student unions much more time is spent arguing about control of the student bar than on any political issue.

THE POLITICS OF PHOTOCOPYING!

The candidates who win elections are often the ones who promise an increase in student services like photocopiers. In the last decade the only politicised part of the students unions’ ongoing work has been fighting the increasing cuts in education being made by government. The only notable exception was the campaign for abortion information.

The way these campaigns are fought is important. If the campaign is fought only through full-time student officers writing letters to the press and lobbying ministers then the majority of students remain uninvolved and often uninterested. While the cuts are making an impact on their lives they do not see how, practically, they can stop them. This type of campaign is good for a full time official looking for credibility with the minister but not very good for winning improvements.

The kind of tactics which win are the kind of tactics which get students involved. The only way a student union can show the government that it means business is to show that it has most of the the student body behind it. This means tactics like occupations, sit-ins and marches. These cannot be just for show but must be part of a well organised and co-ordinated campaign. As anarchists we would argue that structures must be democratic, with decisions being made by everybody involved.

GETTING ACTIVE

The value of campaigns like this must not be underestimated. While fighting only on a student issue may seem quite narrow, it does teach the value of struggle and the empowerment of taking control over an issue that affects your life... in short Anarchism. Trinity College Students Union won, through an occupation, an extra library earlier this year. If they had relied on representatives sitting on the College Board they would still be waiting.

While the student movement can be a way for students to learn the need for struggle, it is only through building links with the working class that the potential for a proper class struggle movement is created. The best known example is what happened in Paris in 1968 with students joining workers in struggle.

Closer to home, the fight for abortion information did involve Irish students in something happening outside the four walls of their colleges. If, when the summer dole was abolished,

students had fought its the loss in terms of the broader issue of unemployment and joined forces with the Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed and the trade unions, then this would have been a small step in the right direction.

It is not enough for students who have become politicised to sit around and talk all day in socialist discussion groups. It is only through getting involved in struggles both inside and outside the colleges that students can really make a contribution to the class struggle.

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