

Network of Educators in Support of a Public University Expanding Rapidly

I attended two excellent workshops in June this year, the Workers' Education Meeting TUC/Unionlearn Leeds: Higher Education Forum in Yorkshire and the Humber, held at the Leeds TUC (11/06/12) and organised by Alan Roe, Cilla Ross, Miguel Martinez Lucio, Kate Hardy, and Sian Moore; and the For a Public University event organised by Andreas Bieler and sponsored by the Local UCU Association at Nottingham University, the Centre for the Study of Social and Global Justice (CSSGJ)/Nottingham University, the Centre for Research in Higher, Adult & Vocational Education (HAVE)/Nottingham University, and the International Political Economy Group (IPEG) of the British International Studies Association (BISA), held at the University of Nottingham (15/06/12).

Within the space of one week at these two events, the most pressing issues in higher education in the United Kingdom today were laid out on the tables in these rooms, and the urgency and frankness of discussions by experts in the areas of further education, community education, worker education, and trade union activities was both refreshing and troubling. In Leeds, discussions started with a quote from Bernard Shaw who pointed toward a 'conspiracy against the laity', as linked in the case of our discussions, to the marketization and 'businessification' (Allen and Ainley 2007, 21) of Higher Education in the United Kingdom. In Nottingham, the first speakers made reference to Burawoy's influential quote that 'the University is becoming a means to someone else's end' (2011). Discussions at both events surrounded questions of limited resources for Higher Education and for trade unions; focussed on the crisis of critical education and the need for a renewed platform for these discussions; highlighted the current government's weak training and skills agenda; and asked how we can appropriate the 'widening participation' agenda to better serve the communities we are in danger of failing given the rapidly loosening ties between the public sector and Higher Education. We are all workers, but the history of union activism as well as the history of education, is being overlooked in current curricula. Rapid, market led transitions have begun to threaten the very core of our capacity to offer a truly public service.

In Leeds, representatives from the Workers Education Association, from TUC, CPU, the Really Open University, the Space Project, Working Lives Research Institute, Unite, GFTU, CWU, and the Global Labour Institute attended, as well as representative from a number of Universities including Leeds, East Anglia, Manchester, and Strathclyde. Presentations and discussions were driven by the desire to organise a forward thinking set of initiatives that will work to incorporate existing resources we can identify within our respective practices to offer courses that reflect our critical agenda for public education.

In Nottingham, discussions delved into the issues we face today as researchers and activists in the current context, including the blatant exclusion of the politics of reproduction in discussions of framework-able results; the catastrophe of allowing education institutions to invite shareholders and 'new providers'; the issues of unpaid work; the place for a student producer; and the worry that 'sat-navigation' of education

will undo the very principles that educators have fought to inculcate, an educational philosophy that is not exclusively for the elite class.

After these two events, the Yorkshire/Humberside group held a second meeting on 16/07/12; drafted a statement; and an evolving working group is discussing holding a Workers' Education Festival on the 01/12/12 to be held in Leeds. Organisers of the Nottingham event have published speakers' presentations and papers on a website that encourages further discussion and collaborations <http://andreasbieler.net/for-a-public-university/>. These groundbreaking activities signal the proliferation of public discussion and debate in these ever important areas.

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