MARXIST STUDENT

Student bulletin of the Workers Socialist League



SPECIAL EDITION: AUTUMN 1979 PRICE 10p

This special edition of Marxist Student has been produced to coincide with the start of the first academic year under this Tory government. It is a year in which students are faced with the task of defending the education system from the greatest attack since before the 2nd World War.

The Tory government has already embarked on a full-scale attempt to dismantle the welfare state. This point cannot be over-stressed: the cuts already implemented by Wilson's and Callaghan's Labour government were only a scratch compared with the axe-blows of Thatcher and Joseph.

In their attempt to redirect resources into the private sector, into the production of surplus-value, the Tories want to destroy the notion that social services are a right. Education and a decent health service will once more become the sole preserve of the privileged and wealthy.

The role that the present reformist and Stalinist leaders of the student movement have played shows that in order to combat Tory plans for the education system, students will need a programme and a revolutionary leadership. It is in this context that the Workers Socialist League are publishing the student perspectives adopted at our annual conference earlier this year.

Readers will immediately be aware that the perspectives were written during the Labour administration. Nevertheless, a central theme of the programme we fight for and put forward in this document is a policy to fight the cuts. The importance of this policy is doubled with the Tory government.

Further Developments

Within the student movement there have been other developments since the "Perspectives" were written, which underline the importance of our emphasis on the bankrupt 'classless' policies of the Stalinist-dominated leadership. The Communist Party's decision to wind up the Broad Left in order to establish an alliance which is even broader and even less 'left' represents a further move towards collaboration with the enemies of NUS, of the working class, and of a free, open education system.

This new alliance was specifically established in order to draw in the Liberal Party students. It is also open to individual members of the Federation of Conservative Students (FCS)--certainly the policies of the Broad Left (which will live on in this new alliance) will hardly exclude "progressive" Tories.

The WSL does not regard this document as a definitive programme for organising and leading the student movement. Indeed, we recognise that several important areas are not adequately treated. It should be read in conjunction with other policy documents. An example is the fight against women's and gay oppression, which is not specifically dealt with.

Feminism

Our orientation towards the feminist movement is outlined in our "Perspectives for Work Among Women"* and in our regular publication Woman Worker*. We fight to link the demands and struggles of women with the struggle to overthrow capitalism on a world scale.

This requires building a communist women's movement and a fight against the feminist perspective of a women's movement autonomous of the working class.

Another section which requires expansion is that dealing with the specific problems of overseas students. The Tories' plan to remove all "subsidies" to overseas students makes a campaign in their defence all the more important.

NUSS

The fight to build the National Union of School Students is also central to work among students. The recent moves by Trevor Philips, NUS President, and his Stalinist cronies, to squeeze NUSS out of existence by withdrawing financial support underlines the importance of organising support for NUSS within the student unions. Again, this document should be read in conjunction with the Socialist Youth League pamphlet: "The Way Forward for Youth"* which puts forward policies for building NUSS.

Ireland

The campaign against imperialist oppression in Ireland is also not specifically dealt with here. Work around the demands for the immediate withdrawal of British troops, and for political status and amnesty for Republican prisoners is doubly important in NUS because of the role that Trevor Philips has played. His recent "anti-IRA" tour to the United States underlines the pro-imperialist content of the Broad Left's "Peace, Jobs, and Progress" campaign.

Conclusion

This document is to be used. It should be seen as a weapon to use in the fight to build a revolutionary leadership among students, capable of organising students behind the working class in the struggle against capitalism. This task is all the more essential as the crisis of capitalism deepens further, and the attacks of the ruling-class intensify. It is a task which cannot simply be confined to Britain, but is part of the fight to reconstruct the Fourth International--world party of socialist revolution. We hope that students reading this will join in that fight by, as a first step, building a WSL Society in their college.

26/9/79

* The publications cited here can all be obtained from:
WSL, 31, Dartmouth Park Hill, London NW5 1HR

"Perspectives for Work Among Women" Price 5p + 10p postage
Woman Worker, Price 6p + 10p postage
"The Way Forward for Youth" Price 20p + 10p postage

PERSPECTIVES FOR WORK

AMONG STUDENTS

The capitalist crisis and the policies of the Labour government have produced a series of attacks on the education sector. Teacher training colleges have closed; courses have become over-crowded and under-financed; facilities for students and education workers have been reduced, while fees and rents have increased, and the living standards of students have been cut by inflation and inadequate grant increases.

The onslaught of these education cuts has provoked a militant response from the student movement. The government's attempts to close teacher training colleges in 1977 was met by a wave of opposition, including occupations of threatened colleges throughout the country. The tuition fee increases of the same year, which hit overseas students very hard, forcing many to leave their courses, were also met by national opposition, which was again expressed in a wave of occupations.

The militancy of large numbers of students has also been expressed in the involvement of students on demonstrations in support of workers' struggles (eg. the Grunwick mass pickets), and on anti-fascist mobilisations, such as Lewisham and the A-NL Carnivals.

More recently, the 1978/9 year started with a campaign of rent strikes which spread throughout the country, but was particularly concentrated on London local authority colleges, where hall rents had been increased by 20%. As with the campaign against fee increases, the discrimination against overseas students (who are charged rents about twice as high) was highlighted by the rent strikers.

The militant action constantly being taken against cuts and 'economies' in government spending; against racism and fascism; for democratic rights; and in solidarity with workers' struggles, show clearly that sections of students are willing to take action against the government's attacks on their living standards and on the working class.

The WSL has always stressed that the working class is willing to fight back against attempts to impose a capitalist 'solution' to the crisis, but are held back by their treacherous Stalinist and reformist leadership. The same is true of the student movement.

The Broad Left coalition of Stalinists and reformists which controls the National Union of Students has continually betrayed the attempts made by students to defend education. The crisis of leadership in NUS is highlighted, on the one hand, by the rapid erosion of living standards and the dismantling of the state education system, and, on the other hand, by the action taken by students in opposition to this. The Broad Left have responded to the crisis facing the student movement, not by calling for a national campaign of occupations and rent strikes, but by refusing to even co-ordinate those actions which have taken place. During the occupations of teacher training colleges, the Broad Left refused to recognise the only body which was attempting to bring together the isolated actions in colleges--a co-ordinating committee based in London. During the recent wave of rent strikes, many students unions involved did not even know that they were part of a national action, because the Broad Left refused to circulate the information they received about colleges on rent strike. The Stalinists and the rest of the Broad Left continually

head off any action by demanding 'sensible' negotiations, [illegible] lobbies, letter-writing, and discussions with trade union bureaucrats.

Bureaucrats' Training-ground

A place on the NUS Executive is used as a stepping stone to and a training ground for a more permanent niche in the Labour bureaucracy. So the NUS leaders continually ape the methods of the senior bureaucrats, at the expense of the student movement.

The politics of the Broad Left is dominated by the counter-revolutionary force of Stalinism. The treacherous nature of the Stalinists became particularly clear during 1977/78, when Sue Slipman, a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain national committee was president of NUS. Slipman's term of office was dominated by attacks on the democracy and independence of student unions, spear-headed by the Stalinists. Clearly, containing struggles as they broke out was becoming difficult for the Broad Left--they had to create the conditions where these struggles would not take place at all. Slipman's energies were directed towards establishing the 'responsibility' and 'democracy' of student unions in the eyes of governing bodies and the state. So they kow-towed before the 'ultra-vires' law, and promoted the notion of 'public accountability'; in other words the Stalinists argued that student unions should not have the right to dispose of their own funds as they chose. At the same time, Slipman launched an attack on the participatory democracy of general meeting sovereignty, and welcomed and assisted the involvement of Tory students (the Federation of Conservative Students) in NUS by voting for FCS members in the National Executive elections, thus guaranteeing them a seat and involving them in the 'Unity against Racialism' campaign.

Of course, Slipman's policies (which have been faithfully carried on by her successors) are not unique to her or to NUS, but are just one aspect of the role of Stalinism internationally. The strategy of the British Road to Socialism and of other Stalinist parties throughout the world is based on a cross-class alliance with 'democratic' (ie. bourgeois) forces. In Italy this strategy has taken the form of the 'historic compromise', a coalition between the Italian CP and the Christian Democrats, which has been used by the government to force through attacks on the working class. In Chile, it was this strategy that lay behind Allende's Popular Front government and policies, and which resulted in the Pinochet coup and the smashing of Chilean working class organisation. In the British Labour movement Stalinist class collaboration finds its expression in, for instance, the 'worker-participation' bodies in BL, where Stalinists such as Derek Robinson agreed to Michael Edwardes' first job-cutting plans. The class collaboration practised by Stalinists all over the world is encapsulated in the Broad Left's policy of building an alliance with 'progressive' FCS members, and 'progressive' Vice-Chancellors.

As a Trotskyist organisation, the WSL is uniquely placed to challenge the leadership of this Stalinist-dominated bloc. Carrying on the tradition of Trotsky's fight against Stalinism, and characterising all wings of Stalinism as equally counter-revolutionary, WSL members are able to expose the Broad Left within NUS, and to relate their betrayals to those of their fellow-Stalinists in the British labour movement and throughout the world. The main groups to the left of the Broad Left in NUS are incapable of carrying out this task; they cannot challenge the Broad Left politically, but are reduced to simply attacking them for their lack of militancy. The Socialist Workers Party, with their state capitalist position are incapable

of understanding the manoeuvres of Stalinism; the International Marxist Group, whose politics dominate the Socialist Student Alliance are engaged in fraternal discussions with Stalinists the world over, and have no conception of the utterly reactionary nature of all shades of Stalinism.

Why Student Work?

Why is it necessary for the revolutionary party to work within the student movement?

Students, in technical colleges, further education colleges, polytechnics, universities, teacher training colleges, all have a vital role in the defence of education. The state education sector expanded enormously during the post-war boom, under pressure from a strong, militant working-class. Of course, the bourgeoisie attempts to turn these gains to their own advantage through their control of courses etc. Nevertheless, they remain gains which must be defended by students and the working class. Students, school-students, teachers and education workers are most fully involved in the education system and therefore have a vital role to play in its defence and expansion.

Secondly, the revolutionary movement needs the work of intellectuals to develop its theoretical positions. These intellectuals will, in the main, be recruited from the ranks of the student movement. As part of its development of theoretical work, the WSL needs to train intellectuals. WSL student memners are therefore centrally involved in our international commissions and in work on Socialist Press and Trotskyism Today.

Thirdly, NUS has over 1 million members--nearly all of them youth (although mature students cannot be neglected). Like all youth, they are susceptible to revolutionary ideas--many of them will provide the necessary forces to revitalise the workers' movement. All the arguments for involvement in work among youth, outlined in our youth perspectives apply to work in the student movement. In fact, the colleges can provide enormous opportunities for the development of youth work, and the building of a Trotskyist youth movement.

Fourthly, the vast majority of students leave college to become journalists, teachers, lecturers, clerical workers, civil servants, etc. As Marxists we argue that this middle-class has no independent political future: it must choose either to follow the capitalist class into the camp of reaction, or to follow the working class towards socialist revolution. In advanced capitalist countries, such as Britain, this middle class is extremely large, and it is vital that these elements are drawn in behind the strength of the working class and the programme and leadership of the revolutionary party. Work among students, as well as in the unions that represent the middle class, is an essential part of the fight to win them to the banner of revolution.

Work among students, is therefore, a fundamental part of youth work in all the areas. The WSL has very deep and significant roots in the working class, particularly, of course, in the car industry. This strength has been the result of our insistence on an orientation towards the working class, the only consistently revolutionary class in capitalist society, and the only class capable of leading the overthrow of capitalism. This approach in itself seperates us from the subjectively revolutionary groups who have thrived in the idealist atmosphere of the student movement, but have failed to build a base in the working class. Our orientation towards the working class is

an important strength, but it is a strength which we have only just begun to carry adequately into the student movement. A large section of students is turning towards revolutionary politics and looking for direction--the numerical strength of the SWP and the SSA, who pose as a revolutionary alternative to the Broad Left, proves that. It is important that these students are not abandoned to the unprincipled politics of the revisionists.

Students and the Working Class

A central theme of all our student work is to emphasise the need to direct the student movement towards united action with the working class. All the 'left' currents within NUS (including the Broad Left) talk about the need to 'forge links' with the labour movement. For the Broad Left, this means talks with trade union bureaucrats. For the SSA and the SWP, it remains on the level of abstract exhortations. Students are urged to unite with the working class in a 'student-worker' alliance, but the policies that the 'alliance' should be built on are inadequate, or not mentioned at all. Instead, the fight for programme is rejected in favour of simple support for syndicalist militancy. WSL student members campaign for an alliance between workers and students as part of the fight for programme and leadership in both the student and labour movement.

Students have no economic power, although they have considerable scope for protest action, which has been demonstrated in past student-oriented campaigns, particularly in the 1960s. The effectiveness of protest campaigns is extremely limited, as the WSL stresses in all its work. Rent strikes, occupations and student strikes are necessary parts of the strategy to defend education and students' living standards, but the success of such actions cannot be assured unless trade unionists take supporting strike action. To make this a possibility, WSL members take the initiative in establishing student-trade union committees, particularly with campus trade unions. Active student support for workers' struggles, such as presence on local picket lines, should be organised through student unions. Our work in building the Oxford student trade union liaison committee (OSTULC), which has played a leading role in union recognition strikes in the Oxford area, such as the Randolph and Linton Lodge hotel strikes, provides an example of how such work can be carried out. Not only has OSTULC organised practical support among students for these strikes (picket rotas, donations from SUs etc.), but it has also involved students and other trade unionists in discussions with the strike committees about the progress of these strikes. The role of the WSL, including student delegates, within this committee, has been to give leadership to the workers involved in the dispute. In particular, we have pressed for strike committees to fight for such policies as full blacking throughout the union. In each case, the treacherous role of the union officials who refused to implement this essential policy was sharply exposed to strikers and supporters, workers and students, alike.

Are Students a Class?

Students, even more than the petty-bourgeoisie, do not have an independent political identity. They do not exist as a class--or even as a permanent, homogeneous group in society, since the composition of the student movement changes as students enter and leave education. Students are at a transition stage: they come from a variety of class backgrounds and face a variety of class futures. The majority are the children of the petty-bourgeoisie, training to become themselves doctors, lawyers, teachers, civil servants, engineers etc.. Increasingly, because of the expansion of higher

education and the relative fall in white-collar employment, these graduates are faced with unemployment, or with jobs that ten years ago would only have required A or O level qualifications. For a very few, their future as stockbrokers, directors and managers of capitalist industry is assured. Of these, supported by rich parents, it is true to say that their interests lie on the side of the capitalist class. It is this layer that the Tories draw on, enabling them to organise within NUS in a way that has not been possible in trade unions. The fight against self-confessed Tories (as opposed to the disguised Tories of the labour movement) is therefore unique to NUS and very important in the colleges and universities which are FCS-controlled. The SWP and the SSA, who have welcomed FCS involvement in the A-NLare incapable of fighting the Stalinists' policy of increasing the influence of the FCS. The WSL, however, takes a principled position against such collaboration with the party which represents the capitalist class--the class in whose interests education is being destroyed.

The Fight for Programme

The crisis of capitalism has driven down the living standards of students and workers. The WSL fights for a sliding scale of grants to compensate for the effects of inflation. We do not accept the cost-of-living figures put out by the government, but campaign for the establishment of price committees, elected from student unions, trade unions, tenants committees, to investigate the real needs of workers and other oppressed groups and the real effects of inflation. Committees such as these would also work out the basis for wage levels under a sliding scale of wages. By fighting for the establishment of these bodies, the WSL is fighting for the control of public spending, wages, (and ultimately of all production) to be in the hands of the working class and its allies. We also campaign for the abolition of discretionary awards in favour of mandatory grants for all students (including school students) over the age of 16, and for the abolition of the parental means test.

The fight for increased grants is inseperable from the fight against public spending cuts. The WSL has a record of resisting all cuts and closures, particularly in the health sector, through occupations and strike action. In the education sector, college closures must be stopped in the same way: through occupations by students and both teaching and non-teaching staff, and strike action led by campus trade unions.

The WSL argued for all fees to be frozen, and for overseas students fees to be reduced to the same level as British students', as a first step towards a completely free higher and further education sector. Occupations to stop fee increases should be backed up by the refusal of trades unionists in college administration to implement them. We also fight for the complete nationalisation of the university sector, and an end to the financing of education through charitable endowments and capitalist profits.

NUS has a nominal policy of opposition to all cuts, but the Broad Left leadership has, of course, never called for or even supported any action to stop a single closure. The WSL combines actions to stop the cuts with a fight for a programme to defend and extend the gains made by the working class and students. We fight for the expansion of the education system so that all entrance restrictions can be removed, and facilities are provided for all those who wish to study. In particular, we fight for the establishment of council-funded nurseries to provide free care for the children of students,

so that single parents and women are not excluded from education. These facilities should be controlled by the parents and delegates from the student and trade unions whose members use them.

Local authorities argue that they cannot afford to keep colleges open, provide nurseries, or pay higher grants: we answer this by demanding that they open their books to elected committees of students, trade unionists, parents, and school students. Students already know they have to pay inflated prices for books and equipment--let the LEA show them and the working class how much of their money goes to the publishers and education supply industry. These industries should be nationalised, without compensation for their parasitic proprietors and shareholders. and taken under the control of the workers, as a step towards a fully planned economy which can meet the needs of students and workers.

The recent government proposals to demolish the political independence of student unions, by further restricting their control over their own funds, is part of the government's general attempt to weaken student unionism and so forestall the fight against the education cuts that they still want to push through. These proposals should be seen in the context of the increasing utilisation of the state's repressive powers and resources which have been aimed at weakening the labour movement. Examples of this strategy should be familiar to everyone: the use of the army as a strike-breaking force; the training of the SPG as a trained force for smashing picket lines; the legal attacks on the right of trade unions to take sympathy action or to picket effectively.

The fight to defeat any proposals to restrict SU autonomy is therefore essential. Far from organising such a fight, the Broad Left leaders actually opened the way to the government's attacks by accepting the 'ultra-vires' limitations on SU spending (which legally forbids SUs from spending money on donations to workers' struggles or paying for coaches to demonstrations, etc) and by announcing that SUs should be accountable to the 'public', which in practice becomes defined as state bodies.

Further Education Students

NUS has been able to expand its membership to over 1 million because of the expansion of polytechnics and universities in the late 1960s, and the provision of automatic student union membership. However, this has been done to the neglect of FE and technical colleges. These cater for students on one or two-year courses, many of them part-timers and very few with grants. This particularly oppressed group of students faces extreme problems when trying to organise into an effective union. FE colleges are usually run by authoritarian governors who have much the same attitude towards student unions as most headmasters/mistresses have towards the National Union of School Students. The students are rarely allowed time or rooms for general meetings, or the use of rooms for union offices. Since most of the students are part-time and few have grants, they have to pay their union fees out of their own scantily filled pockets. This is in sharp contrast to the capitation fees of up to £60 paid by LEA's for students at universities. Not only are FE students unions short of funds and facilities, but they frequently require the signature of their governors on their cheques, or are compelled to have staff members on their union executives.

The defensive campaign against the government's attacks on union autonomy must be combined with an offensive campaign to extend the

autonomy and political and financial strength of these small colleges. That means campaigning for a minimum guaranteed capitation fee level of £15 payable by the LEA for all students regardless of their course. This capitation fee level must also be protected against inflation together with grants and public spending. WSL members campaign in the NUS Area structure for the bigger student unions at Polys and universities to put their resources behind such a campaign, which should be directed into local Labour parties, (especially at local Labour councillors) towards the lecturers' unions NATFHE and AUT and towards other local trade unions and trades councils.

Fighting Fascism and National Oppression

The large student delegations on anti-fascist mobilisations, and the protests made at racist fee and rent differentials have demonstrated the willingness of students to fight all manifestations of racism and fascism. However, that militancy has been continually misdirected by the Stalinists, and by the SWP and the SSA into the bankrupt policies of 'Unity Against Racialism', and the Student Campaign Against the Nazis (student wing of the A-NL). The WSL's opposition to such class collaborationist movements has frequently been made clear. We stand for the expulsion of known fascists from NUS and support the refusal of student unions to allow their facilities to be used by fascist organisations. We fight for the mobilisation of students and trades unionists to break up or prevent fascist marches and meetings. Student unions should organise defence squads, in co-operation with trade union branches and other local labour movement bodies, to defend blacks or others who are threatened by fascist thugs.

A plethora of international solidarity groups can be found attached to all university or polytechnic student unions. As internationalists, the WSL regards it as its duty to intervene in solidarity movements, and to fight for concrete acts of solidarity in the labour movement and in the student movement. Solidarity groups in colleges can often provide the opportunity to contact overseas students and develop our international work. The basis on which we do this, and turn these groups towards programme and the working class, and away from moral pressure is outlined in other perspectives documents.

Conclusions: build WSL Societies--develop Marxist Student

Various groups--Socialist Societies, Labour Clubs, Left Caucuses--will be found in virtually every college. Conditions obviously vary throughout the country--some will be large and and full of 'independents', while others will just be composed of members of the International Marxist Group. Decisions on exactly where and how we direct our interventions will vary accordingly.

In order for the WSL to become a significant force in NUS, it is necessary to develop our fight for leadership in the colleges, and to win student unions to our programme. This will give us the base to intervene nationally in NUS, to give leadership to the thousands of students dissatisfied with the Broad Left and looking for an alternative. The development of work in the colleges also gives us the opportunity to develop Marxist Student into a living force in NUS, with more news about developments in the colleges, and student struggles. The expansion and development of Marxist Student must go alongside our fight for leadership in the colleges.

WSL students establish WSL societies in the colleges as part of the fight to bring other students closer to the WSL, and to establish the basis for presenting the WSL as an alternative leadership in the student unions and NUS nationally. Student work should be extended as part of the development of our work among youth. WSL members in Socialist Youth League branches argue for work around our programme in local colleges, in particular the Colleges of Further Education, to give leadership to the large numbers of working class youth who attend them.

WORKERS SOCIALIST LEAGUE

If you are interested in more details about the Workers Socialist League, then write to address below:

WSL,
31, Dartmouth Park Hill,
London,
NW5, 1HR

Our main publications are:

SOCIALIST PRESS: weekly paper of the WSL. Extensive international news, industrial news and coverage of the Labour Party, cuts struggles etc.

Subscriptions can be ordered from the above address and the rates are as follows:

TRIAL SUB (UK) 10 issues only £1.75

6 months. £6.00
1 year £11.00

TROTSKYISM TODAY: theoretical magazine of the WSL, available from the above address.

HOW TO FIGHT THE CUTS: WSL pamphlet on the cuts drawing on our experience in several major struggles.
Available for 40p, including post and packing from the above address.

P&P, WSL, 31 Dartmouth Park Hill, London NW5 1HR