Education Worker

Bulletin of the Education Workers Network - 2007 issue 1

HERA, the Unions and Class Struggle

HERA (Higher Education Role Analysis) is supposed to ensure 'equal pay for work of equal value'. However, this costs money and it appears that many universities are not prepared to pay for greater equality, especially for manual grades and clerical staff. Instead, they have used supposed difficulties in the job evaluation process to delay, move goal posts, and ultimately, it seems, avoid implementation of HERA.

The situation at the University of Manchester, for example, appears typical. When HERA was delayed an interim pay scheme was brought in, agreed by all campus unions except UNISON. This scheme was based on a totally unfair system of 'job matching' – basically, moving people across to points on the new pay spine equivalent to, or just above, their existing salary. The corrupt nature of job matching became clear when many manual and clerical workers were evaluated at a lower point than expected under HERA while senior management shot up the greasy pole with big pay rises. Worse still, many staff face substantial pay cuts, in many cases involving thousands of pounds. So much for greater equality!

What's more, the interim scheme was to be replaced in August 2006, the new HERA completion date. But August has come and gone and it's clear that the university has no intention of implementing HERA, with the interim scheme instead becoming permanent. Similar situations have been reported at Salford, Bradford and Edge Hill. In fact, at Edge Hill, management went so far as to impose new inferior contracts on lecturers, but this was overturned in the face of threatened strike and legal action.

What to make of it all. Though union officials have tried to resist management by imposition they have sought to do so largely through social democratic procedures rather than through a collective response.



university managers shooting up the greasy pole

It is not hard to see why this is the case. The whole culture of the campus trade unions runs counter to ideas of collectivism and class struggle. Branch meetings have either been scrapped or happen so infrequently that there is no real forum for workers to come together. When the odd mass meeting does take place it's more like a rally with the branch officials doing the talking and little chance for people to have their say.

The whole ethos of social democratic unions is based on the idea that the union is made up of individual members with individual problems who contact the union for advice and help, and union officials then act on the member's behalf. In effect the union acts as some kind of external body, made up of experts, who advise ordinary members when they are in need.

Stuck in this social democratic mindset, where workplace meetings to decide a way forward are an alien concept to union officials and members alike, it is little wonder then that when the shit hits the fan and collective action is needed union officials are able to manipulate anger away from action and on to the individual rights agenda. Thus, in the case of HERA, unions have encouraged individual members to write to mangement claiming that their individual rights have been breached!

We in EWN see the need to break with social democratic thinking and to offer an alternative reality, one based on class struggle and collective action. This can only come through workers coming together in regular workplace meetings that make decisions and delegate people to meet management, rather than leave all the organising to outside 'experts' employed by the unions.

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Dundee Victory

Dundee University withdrew its threat of compulsory redundancies earlier this year moving instead to a voluntary scheme. Nevertheless the UCU at Dundee expect management to attempt to introduce the cuts in other ways or to renege on the voluntary redundancy agreement. Therefore their campaign is far from over, and they have linked this to a petition for a national campaign against redundancies and privatisation, a UK-wide demonstration and a special HE conference. The petition can be found at:

http://www.petitiononline.com/fightnow/petition.html

Manchester Cuts

University of Manchester President, Alan Gilbert, has announced the axing of 400 permanent jobs. With the ditching of temporary and agency staff the true figure will pass 2,000. This comes on top of an increasingly dictatorial management style following Gilbert's arrival. 'El Presidente' is driven by right wing ideology causing havoc at his last post at Melbourne. In the face of this EWN urges the university's workers to organise to defend jobs. Simply relying on union officials is not viable. Dictatorial management don't respond to gentle persuasion by union officials as workers have found in other industries over the last 30 years.

Fightin' for Crichton

Students, staff and local people in Dumfries are campaigning to save Glasgow University's Crichton campus (UGCC) from closure. There have been demonstrations (at the Scottish Parliament, the Scottish Funding Council, Glasgow University's main campus and the Crichton campus), a letter writing and petitioning campaign and a phone blockade co-ordinated by, amongst others, the IWW (who have members amongst the threatened staff).

Crichton is the only provider of Higher Education in south west Scotland. There are three partner institutions – the University of Paisley (Computing and Management), Bell College (Health), and Glasgow University (Humanities and Arts). Despite continual underfunding – there are no sports facilities, students union or provision for hot meals – educational standards have been very high. However, in January the Principal of Glasgow University, Sir Muir Russell*, announced the closure of Glasgow's part of Crichton, threatening 41 jobs, so he can concentrate resources at the Glasgow campus.

Infuriated students, staff and local people are targeting not just the University Authorities, but also the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) and Scottish executive who share some responsibility for inadequate funding and the inappropriate funding mechanism which gives all monies to the main campus for distribution.

To support them, please write to: the Principal of the University of Glasgow, Sir Muir Russell - email: principal@gla.ac.uk, tel: 0141 330 5995, fax: 0141 330 4947; and to the Chief Executive of the Scottish Funding Council, Roger McClure - rmcclure@sfc.ac.uk.

*Russell is one more example of pure greed in the upper echelons of university administration; earlier this year he got a 15% pay rise while attempting to cut janitors' pay by £5,000 a year.

Further information:

http://www.geocities.com/glasgow_at_crichton/ (campaign site);
http://www.cucsa.org.uk/ (students union);
http://iwwscotland.wordpress.com/crichton-struggle/ (IWW);
http://www.gla.ac.uk/Staff/GAUT/Crichton/index.html (UCU).

First in a series exploring the basic anarcho-syndicalist politics of EWN.

What we Think of…

Industrial Unionism: one Union for all Education Workers

In a typical education workplace workers are split between several different unions depending on their job, or for some historical reason such as a merger. You may have lecturers and professional workers in UCU (University and College Union), manual staff in UNISON, lab staff and researchers in AMICUS and so on.

This is damaging to workers for several reasons. All industrial action is split and weaker from the outset. When UCU was on strike last year, UNISON members went to work, and vice versa. It also upholds the idea, one which suits management very nicely, that we as workers have more differences between each other than than shared interests that should unite us against the bosses, especially considering that all of these unions allow managers to join.

The belief that all workers in the same industry, regardless of their skill, craft, salary and so on, should be organised in one union against the bosses is called Industrial Unionism. It is based on unity and solidarity across the workers and organises us based on our class position as workers, rather than any other arbitrary criteria like job type that might divide us. Industrial Unionism has a long history in various countries.

EWN is based on such a principle and we have teaching assistants, IT staff, manual clerical and library workers and lecturers as members.

Resistance not Partnership

All education unions are wedded to 'social partnership'. Their role is to sit down with management to help run higher education 'fairly', including taking account of management's wishes. The problem is that management, backed by the government, aren't interested in partnership. Their world view is increasingly shaped by a free market ideal where staff are little more than a commodity to be ordered around and paid as little as possible. Management may pay lip service to partnership but only because it channels workers' anger and resentment into endless negotiations ending up in shoddy compromises which management ignore as they see fit.

Anybody who doubts this has to look no further than agreements reached by the Joint Negotiating Committee for Higher Education Staff (JNCHES), the main union/management national negotiation body. In 2002 the JNCHES agreed to reduce fixed-term contracts and casual employment. There were platitudes stating, among other things, that 'indefinite contracts should become the general form of employment' and 'fixed-term hourly paid staff should be transferred to indefinite contracts… unless there is an objective reason justifying the renewal of fixed term'. Union leaders, as ever anxious to ensure management have the flexibility they need, demanded no targets or time frames. As a result, universities have largely ignored the agreement so fixed term contracts continue unabated and casualisation continues to rise.

Unfortunately, failure by management to honour one agreement hasn't deterred the unions from entering into further agreements. In 2004 the JNCHES signed off the Framework Agreement, supposedly mapping out the way forward in all future negotiations over pay and conditions. Again there were fine words about the need to 'bring an end to low pay', to deliver 'equal pay for work of equal value', 'to recognise and reward the contribution which individuals make, and to underpin opportunities for career and organisational development'. This supposedly ground breaking document boasted of 'partnership between employers' and trades unions' representatives'.

Once again fine words by management mean little. The 3 year pay agreement made in 2006 barely keeps pace with inflation while the commitment to end low pay is a joke with the gap between the highest and lowest paid workers continuing to widen. Creeping privatisation and increased use of agency staff means increasing numbers of university workers survive on the poverty pay of the minimum wage. Nor has the commitment to deliver 'equal pay for work of equal value' been honoured. The supposed means of delivering this – job evaluation of all staff prior to being placed on a national pay spine – has proved a sham (see front page).

partners in compromise

As the commercialisation of higher education gathers pace, we as education workers face a difficult future. If we are to improve our working lives we must realise that the cosy world of social partnership, while it may provide comfortable jobs for union officials, will do nothing to defend and improve our jobs and conditions. This can only be done by university workers organising to challenge and confront management and their bosses in government. This will be best achieved if all education workers, regardless of which union they belong to, come together to form a united front.

Here at ***Education Worker*** we aim to play a part by providing a forum to raise and debate these issues and by beginning to organise meaningful resistance in the workplace.

Vice Chancellors' Pay

University vice chancellors are doing their bit for equality. VCs pay in 2005-6, as published in the Times Higher Education Supplement, is interesting reading. We university workers are constantly told there's no money in the pot while most VCs are well on their way to joining the super-rich. The top 55 VCs earn well over £200,000 a year with top earner, the VC of London Business School, getting £322,000 p.a. The next 74 have to scrape by on £150,000+, while the bottom 32 poor souls manage on a mere £100,000+. In 2006 many VCs got a rise of over 20%, and most had an increase between 5% and 20%. As higher education becomes more commercialised, the gap between the lowest and highest paid workers is widening. Universities are supposed to be about educating people not about making yet another group within society richer. As in the private sector, universities are now run by fat cat bosses completely divorced from everyday reality. Universities need greater equality, not less, and to start with it's high time that VC's increasingly obscene levels of pay became an issue.

Student Direct Action

Student Direct Action is a new group for students in Manchester interested in getting involved with real student issues instead of getting bogged down in clumsy NUS politics. For further information and a copy of SDA's bulletin, ***Wildcat***, contact sdamanchester@hotmail.com.

Has your Computer Work Station been Risk Assessed?

One in fifty workers in Britain suffers from work related upper limb disorders (WRULDs) which are caused by the improper use of computers. WRULDs, also known as repetitive strain injuries, most frequently occur in the soft tissues of the hands, arms, shoulders and the neck of computer users. Their effects can be devastating forcing people to leave their jobs and condemning them to a life of pain. However, WRULDs are avoidable if work stations are properly designed and the correct working practices are used:

* all workstations should be risk assessed by management to ensure they comply with health and safety legislation;
* people who work for more than one hour every day with computers should be provided with the correct type of chair, with seat height, back height and tilt adjustability;
* no one should work more than ninety minutes on a computer without a fifteen minute break or a change of activity, and a five minute break should be taken every thirty minutes;
* you should also receive proper training in the use of work stations as well as an eye test on request.

Contact ***Education Worker*** for further information on WRULDs and your employer's responsibilities.

Education Workers Network

EWN is made up of Solidarity Federation members who work in the education sector.

Joining EWN also means joining SF which is done by joining your nearest local group (see below for contact details).

Even if you do not wish to join us, we welcome requests for bundles of ***Education Worker*** and / or to join our email discussion list (see below).

Forthcoming...

Look out for our 'brilliant new pamphlet' on the current state of the class struggle in higher education and EWN's ideas on how education workers can respond to the university bosses.

Subscribe to Direct Action

- ❍ basic sub (enclose £5)
- ❍ rush me free info about ***DA*** and SolFed

Name.....

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cheques payable to 'Direct Action' –

return form to: DA, PO Box 29, SW PDO, Manchester, M15 5HW

Want to find out more / get more involved?

- ❍ I would like to be added to the EWN email list (or contact ewn@lists.riseup.net);
- ❍ I would like additional copies of ***Education Worker*** - please circle preferred amount: 5 copies; 10 copies; 20 copies; other (___ copies);
- ❍ I would like to join EWN (or contact your near est SF group)
- ❍ I would like a copy of ***Catalyst***, the Solidarity Federation free sheet
- ❍ I would like a free copy of ***Direct Action***, the Solidarity Federation magazine
- ❍ I would like to donate to EWN (cheques etc., pay 'West Yorkshire Solidarity Federation') - please circle amount: £5, £10, £20, other (£___) - 2nd class 'large letter' stamps also welcome

Name: _____

Address: _____

_____

Please send to: EWN, c/o New From Nowhere, 96 Bold Street, Liverpool, L1 4HY.

SelfEd Collective

'A History of Anarcho-syndicalism' is a series of 24 pamphlets covering the role of anarcho-syndicalists and anarcho-syndicalist organisations within the international workers' movement. All of them downloadable for free from www.selfed.org.uk.

SF national contact point

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07 984 675 281; solfed@solfed.org.uk; www.solfed.org.uk

Brighton – c/o SF contact point.

Bristol – c/o SF contact point; solidaritybristol@solfed.org.uk.

Edinburgh – c/o 17 West Montgomery Place, Edinburgh, EH7 5HA; 07 896 621 313; edinburghsf@solfed.org.uk.

Manchester – PO Box 29, SW PDO, Manchester, M15 5HW; 07 984 675 281; manchestersf@solfed.org.uk; www.manchestersf.org.uk; email list manchestersf@lists.riseup.net.

Northampton – c/o The Blackcurrent Centre, 24 St Michael Avenue, Northampton, NN1 4JQ; northamptonsf@solfed.org.uk.

North & East London – PO Box 1681, London, N8 7LE; nelsf@solfed.org.

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South Herts – PO Box 493, St Albans, AL1 5TW.

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South West – c/o SF contact point; sws@solfed.org.uk.

West Yorks – PO Box 75, Hebden Bridge, HX7 8WB.

Education Workers – c/o News From Nowhere, 96 Bold Street, Liverpool, L1 4HY; ewn@ewn.org.uk; www.ewn.org.uk; email list: ewn@lists.riseup.net.

Public Service Workers – c/o Bristol.

Health & Care Workers – c/o Northampton.