

Looting the university

Sussex occupation over privatization

The recent campaign at the University of Sussex against the outsourcing of 235 non-academic jobs has confronted certain organizational and ideological limitations of the struggles in higher education so far. It constitutes an escalation of the anti-privatization movement in the UK. Porters, security, catering, maintenance, and other non-academic staff at the university face their employment contracts being transferred to a private-sector contractor. The university hopes to reduce labour costs by cutting real wages, pensions, sick pay and annual leave. Though the transfer is covered by the Transfer of Undertaking (Protection of Employment) law, portrayed as protecting the conditions of employment for outsourced workers, in fact TUPE allows the contracting employer to cut wages, conditions or jobs from the moment of transfer for 'organizational, technical or economic' reasons. With no immediate legal protection, the struggle to counter this process has resorted to other means.

Criticisms of outsourcing made by the mainstream media and some trade-union and student elements have focused on the economic 'inefficiency' of outsourcing, the value of education as a 'public good' (rather than an individual consumer product), and its antagonism towards the 'campus community'. These criticisms have played into the hands of the outsourcing process: questioning the empirical economic efficiency of outsourcing tacitly concedes that cuts are justified if they produce real cost reductions; so long as the function of the university is 'education for education's sake' the labour conditions of workers within the university are of marginal concern and cuts can always be justified so long as the university can keep 'educating'; finally the harmonious 'campus community' is a fiction which conceals real divisions and competing interests.

On 7 February 2013 students began an occupation of a campus conference centre that continued for eight weeks and cost the university up to half a million pounds in lost earnings. They were eventually forced out by private security, bailiffs and police, empowered by a High Court possession order which also rescinded the rights of unauthorized protest on campus until the next academic year. Unlike the established unions

calling for negotiations, the occupiers refused all negotiation unless management revoked the privatization process. This shifted the struggle away from a purely discursive plane; in the face of real job losses, resistance at Sussex has attempted to exercise material leverage. And, crystallizing around the labour conditions of the non-academic university workforce, the campaign enacted a cross-sectional solidarity between students and workers which was largely absent from the 2010–11 cycle of higher-education struggles.

A national demonstration on Sussex campus took place on 25 March, with about a thousand participants. A management building was invaded, its glass doors smashed and documents burned – the first employment of the tactics of Millbank within the university. The slogan of the day: 'The University is a shop – loot it.'

To bypass the inertia of the established unions, a single-issue 'pop-up union' is being formed among the 235 affected workers. Including key workers such as security personnel, without whom the university would struggle to remain open, the pop-up union could exert significant leverage on university management through the threat of strike action. Lacking the bureaucratic structures and processes that have thus far paralysed established unions, it appears more able to exercise this power. Currently this pop-up union is awaiting the legal recognition that would grant it the right to strike. Assuming this is granted, the question remains whether a temporary union will be able to counter a longer-term, low-intensity attack on labour conditions, such as the person-by-person, contract-by-contract outsourcing over several years of laboratory and office cleaning services at the university until 2011.

The resistance to outsourcing at the University of Sussex – still, despite the end of the occupation, ongoing – advances beyond the demand for 'education for education's sake'. It enacts a material solidarity between students, academic and non-academic staff. Further, it surpasses the inert bureaucracy of established trade unions by means of a spontaneous workers' organization. And rather than discussing the terms of privatization, it refuses to negotiate and instead applies disruptive force.

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