



"THOSE KIDS OUT
SIDE WERE RIGHT,
AND WE SHOULD
BE ON THEIR SIDE.

The English Govern
ment's neglect of art
institutions is a vast
failure of political
imagination..."

Robert Hughes

STUDENT DEMO AT TURNER PRIZE CEREMONY

On 26 November over 200 Art and Design students from Middlesex Polytechnic and other art colleges around the country, including Brighton Poly, Camberwell, Chelsea and Central St. Martins, staged a lively demonstration outside the Tate Gallery, on the night of the Turner Prize award ceremony, to highlight the particular problems of art students as part of the growing national campaign against education cuts. The Turner Prize is an annual cash award given to promising 'new' artists. Eminent art critic Robert Hughes, presenting the award to Anish Kapoor, spoke in his introductory speech of the crisis we are facing in education "... whatever the indifference of the state was, short of tyranny or actual censorship, the chance that a society will produce significant painters or sculptors remains much the same, so long as their roots in training aren't starved or trivialised. Artists are generally pretty tough creatures, not fragile flowers, and if they have something to say, it will out. But this is not a rationale for neglect. English art education needs to be protected against the malign effects of the Thatcher years. **THOSE KIDS OUTSIDE WERE RIGHT, AND WE SHOULD BE ON THEIR SIDE.** The English Government's neglect of art institutions is a vast failure of political imagination..." This show of support for our protest was enthusiastically punctuated by warm applause from the audience of media and art world personalities. We received support from many of the guests at the presentation as they entered the gallery, leaflets in hand. Notable among those who gave their support was Mark Fisher, Labour spokesperson for the arts, who stopped on his way to offer his encouragement, promised to stay in contact and said he may bring the issue up in the commons. However his secretary has since said that he will not do this, implying that he can not publicly be seen to disagree with the front bench in the run up to an election!

POLYWIDE DEMANDS OF THE OCCUPATION (finalised after discussions at mass meetings on all 6 occupied sites)

1. That there be no victimisation of any person involved in this action.
2. That the Polytechnic returns to at least 1990/1 staff-student ratios-this would include the restoring of all posts which have been cut.
3. The immediate reopening of All Saints as a teaching site and assurance that that no other site will be closed.
4. A significant improvement in educational facilities and student support services.
5. That the management deal with their financial crisis without further detriment to students.
6. That management give a written public acknowledgement (acceptable to the student body) through the national press of their mismanagement and stating that educational provision is inadequate.
7. That steps are taken to reduce overcrowding on all sites.
8. Restoration of all benefits and grants.....



SECRET BALLOTS AND OTHER ARGUMENTS AGAINST THE OCCUPATION

Several students who opposed the occupation have complained that it would have been fairer to use secret ballots to decide whether or not to occupy. This sounds more democratic but elections for union posts, involve secret ballots and they never attract anything like the huge number of students that attended the six occupation meetings we had last term. There were so many that students could not fit into the room at the Enfield meeting, showing again the inadequacies of that overcrowded site; the large hall at Enfield was converted into the library so they could pack in more students when they closed All Saints.



Secret ballots are the sort of passive democracy that the government has imposed on workers in unions to weaken them. In our society people are atomised from each other as competing individuals, never sure whether, if they act, others will follow. This is why it is so important that students (or workers) have votes at mass meetings where they can see the potential of their collective strength, contribute, listen to all the arguments and make a considered decision. Very often disputes like occupations start in one area and spread to others once they see that the first group have gained the confidence to act. Secret ballots take far too long to organise making it impossible to respond quickly enough to changing circumstances. For instance last term Cat Hill would have rapidly become demoralised if they had had to wait a week or more for ballots to be organised at other sites before they joined in. By the time the occupation was voted for management would have locked up the site or employed security guards as they have in the past.

It is for these reasons that the government and management would prefer to see us use secret ballots, it would make us far less of a threat to them and encourage them to get away with even more cutbacks. Of course if they were remotely concerned about democracy they would hold ballots on how workers and students want to run their work places and colleges, or whether or not they accept this or that particular cutback.

Some who opposed last terms action argued that union meetings attract pro-occupation students and not those that oppose action. But if this were the case how do they explain the overwhelming vote against occupation amongst the Bounds Green engineers or the fact that Trent Park voted against a 24 hour occupation a few weeks before they voted to go into indefinite occupation. Others argued that the Trent Park and Enfield meetings were hectic and disorganised; there is some truth in this, people were very heated and even the most experienced chair would have had problems coping. However all views were openly aired at the meetings and clear majorities voted for the action.

The most absurd argument used against the occupation vote was the one implying that Cat Hill students swamped the meetings and swung the vote for occupation. Cat Hill students were there only to leaflet people and get as many local students as possible along to the meeting to make it as democratic as possible. There were of course far too few of them to swamp anything, especially as at Trent Park they were standing in the mansion doorways to prevent them from being locked. Cat Hill was always in the past the least politically active site and the image of extreme left wing Cat Hillians manipulating other sites for their own evil ends is too ridiculous to contemplate.

The strength of the wave of occupations last term came as a surprise to many of us, but it is not surprising that, after twelve years of Tory rule many students would rather keep their heads down, look after number one and oppose any collective attempt to save the benefits of this education for themselves and future generations. Perhaps I am being unfair to those who opposed occupation but it seems the reason that many are so obsessed with the technical details of how the vote was taken is that they have no effective alternatives to stop the destruction of all that is worthwhile in Higher Education.



KOZACKI
HILL: HIGHER EDUCATION
LOOK OUT!
198