



**WE MUST  
BREAK FROM  
THE STUDENT  
UNION**

**Last terms occupation gave the impression of a very radical union leading students into confrontation with management. However anyone involved will know that reality is very different.**

At the first occupation of term Quicksilver Place students told the union not to get involved and mess things up as they had in the past. Although it was inexcusable that I never got round to organising meetings earlier, it was precisely because meetings at Cat Hill were unrestricted by the union constitution that the occupation could be organised so swiftly without losing momentum; the largest proportion of students attending a meeting at any site was at Cat Hill. Similarly it was non-union meetings at Ivy House, Quicksilver Place and the Interior Design department at Bounds Green that voted for occupation there.

The executive did propose pro occupation motions at two meetings but of the twelve members of the executive only four of us were active in the occupation; at least two of us considered our involvement as that of student activists and not as MPSU representatives. Of course some union facilities were used but so were many poly ones. In fact many of the union offices were closed down; I can think of no other work place union that closes down its facilities during a dispute.

As anyone who went to Blackpool will tell you NUS conference was almost a total waste of time. The Labour dominated executive was obsessed with whether or not to have any more Winter Conferences and it was only because delegates from occupied colleges physically threatened them that they allowed us ten minutes to speak. Even if we had won a motion for NUS to advocate nationwide occupations, by past standards it is very unlikely that it would have been advertised. Not only did the NUS lawyer advise us to leave occupation, he totally let us down by failing to turn up in the High Court when we were relying on him. The NUS in fact appear to have actually told the press *not* to cover the occupations!

NUS London seems a little more useful but most students know nothing of its existence and it is populated largely by left-wing activists. If it were more honest it would reconstitute itself as an activists conference and stop giving legitimacy to a bankrupt NUS structure.

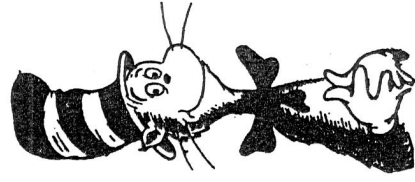
Of course it could be said that the "union" is just a collectivity of students and therefore the occupation represented the union more than the bureaucracy. But the reality becomes very clear when the union turns against the occupation as happened in

Sussex and other colleges last term and at Middlesex in '88. Then their exaggerated talk of the union losing its block grant and being destroyed becomes the biggest threat to any occupation.

Management are highly unlikely to do this as unions provide services such as bars, shops and welfare advice more efficiently and cheaply than they can and they need these to attract students. They have used student unions to buy off student protest since the '60s and '70s, and hope that we will back off from protests if they threaten to bankrupt the union. This could in theory mean the union executive 'choosing' to make staff redundant in the classic 'Catch 22' that management want us to think that we are in.

In reality union facilities are no different from any other that the college provides; they are dependent on custom from students, on funds from management and on student pressure on management. It is pure fantasy to imagine that students really have more day to day control over union facilities than they have over any other. You cannot have 'socialism in one college union!' The only way we can really maintain any services is to take direct action to defend them.

In the meantime we should spend our time organising such action to force improvements out of management, not getting involved in organising and expanding the union. Of course there is a place for the idea that we can take over college facilities, indeed the whole world, but that can only be done through struggles such as strikes and occupations that eventually remove capitalism completely. Institutions such as unions or the welfare state, whether in the West or the old

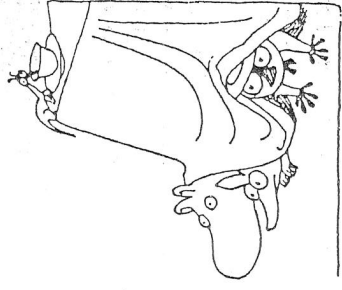


**CAPITALISM**

Soviet system, have nothing to do with the idea of people really controlling their own lives, they are means of buying off protest and confusing people.

After the bitter experience of '88, last term's occupation had few problems from the union, but even then the Director managed to manipulate many of the negotiators into arguing that we had to decide on his farcical proposals two hours before what turned out to be a fake deadline one Friday; they allowed him to set our agenda. Now he is using the injunction to intimidate the MPSU executive to become his mouthpiece in the student body and oppose any direct action.

Of course all of this is made totally irrelevant if we continue to do what we did in the occupation and totally ignore the union bureaucracy. By all means let's continue to use the union funds and facilities (although much of the money used was raised by selling food) but let's keep organising outside the union; we should organise site meetings at Trent Park and Enfield not branch meetings that are so stifled by bureaucratic red tape. And if you are standing for election for a union post, think again, could you not be more effective as a student activist than as someone with a silly title who feels responsible for an arm of the polytechnic, called MPSU?



# The Teach-In

Students care about education. The occupation was in protest at the attacks being made on Higher Education and the drop in standards that they incur. At the Enfield site a Teach-In was set up to assist students and attempt to minimise the effects on their studies during the action.

The results of the Teach-In were very positive proving how committed students are to their education. People were asked to organise meetings for specific modules or general courses. From there they timetabled informal seminars/group discussions in the subject areas of most interest. We also saw third year students assisting first year classes. This worked particularly well as it gave first year students the rare opportunity to find out more about the way their courses would progress.

A useful and diverse range of subjects was covered. Many students also used the time to catch up on written work. The library was open 24 hours a day, and because no books were being issued it meant everyone had a better chance of gaining access to material they needed. For the benefit of the students with young children one student gave her time every day during the occupation to run the creche facilities. Volunteers from outside also showed their support by offering to take seminars in their specific field of study. The philosophy students were very fortunate to have a postgraduate student who came in on several occasions to discuss, in depth, leading philosophers such as Hegel. And the nurses had extra tuition from a biology teacher, who was a friend of a student and offered his support.

Because of the enthusiasm and success of the Teach-In the management did their best to obstruct and dissuade lecturers at the Polytechnic from taking part. In many cases we believe scare tactics were used. The lecturers Union NATFHE were very supportive of our cause. Although they could not participate in continuing the normal work programme lecturers had the backing of their Union to come in to college to continue good student/staff relations. This helped immensely as tutors were available to students to discuss work and allay any fears or problems they found with their studies.

The success of the Teach-In was due to the motivation and willingness to be involved that students displayed. I would like to thank everyone who participated at all levels. I think it proves that throughout the protest we did not lose sight of the reasons we were fighting. Education matters!

