

The fight for an education:

A striker's view

Martin Pitt

At the beginning of 1995 a strike took place at Southwark College of Further Education, in London, to save jobs and to protect the education provided to students against the attacks by management. The experiences and the success of the action provides an insight into how cuts can be effectively fought.

The issues

Just before Christmas 1994, the principal of Southwark College announced that the three month consultation period with the union was over and that thirty eight lecturers would lose their jobs. This was in addition to forty two voluntary redundancies. In total, a quarter of all teaching jobs would have been lost in just two years. This evidently entailed a large increase of the work-load on staff and a much poorer deal for the students whose education would suffer. In fact, the new Tory funding scheme for FE had the result of carving-up the education service.

The NATFHE unions met in the various annexes at the college and balloted to vote on an all-out strike. The national union officials insisted on a straw ballot of everyone including those not at the meetings and when that supported strike action too, they proposed a postal ballot in line with Tory anti-union laws. The result was a narrow majority, by just nine votes, in favour of indefinite strike action.

The management then started to produce documents purporting to be information the union had requested in order to negotiate in the three month consultation period. It was too little too late and showed every sign of being hurriedly put together in order to avoid the strike. Not being able to trust management on past experience, the strike went ahead.

The strike

On Monday, 9th March the strike began. Lecturers turning up on picket lines at 8 o'clock in the morning were surprised to find themselves confronted by both management and police officers. The police were there, apparently, to prevent trouble. Although, it was a means of intimidation, as the picket was peaceful. Various groups of workers or students would approach the picket lines and we explained to them why we were striking and asked them not to cross the picket lines. Then, within three days, the police disappeared complaining how the management had wasted their time!

Even before the strike began we had the support of the students. They realised that the quality of their education would suffer if the management had their way. Indeed, they marched, had a rally and occupied the administration office in support of our strike. Other staff in the college—office workers, librarians, canteen staff, technicians supported the strike and provided the strikers with refreshments despite the risk to themselves for doing so.

Union meetings were banned from college premises in the week prior to the strike. The principal argued that lecturers had to meet on neutral territory, although, by contrast, the management had no difficulties in meeting on the premises. The union had to find a meeting place and had to try the local church hall. Indeed, the local vicar said he was completely behind the strike and volunteered a large room in the church as a strike headquarters which had a telephone, a computer, plenty of boards for picket rotas, maps and to highlight the shame of scabs.

We built support for the strike both moral and financial. The union branch put out a four-page newspaper showing the value of the college, interviewed those who had gained qualifications there and were grateful for the qualifications they had gained and were determined not to see it sacrificed. This was distributed throughout the community and country. A series of events, marches, parties, meetings, lobbies were arranged to push the strike forward. Strike meetings took place each afternoon and made every effort to involve everyone. Those who sat at home inevitably fell prey to fear and defeatism, while by contrast those involved had a renewed self-confidence.

As the strike continued, strikers were invited to speak across the country. Most people on strike are extremely worried about going into serious debt. But our hard work in gaining support meant that many thousands of trade unionists were prepared to support the strike nationally. Indeed, several fund-raising events were

prepared to support the strike nationally. Indeed, several fund-raising events were arranged and around £30,000 was donated by individuals and organisations in solidarity during the three weeks of the strike.

The strike had tremendous support from within the community and nationally. Local building workers provided support, a large oil drum for a brazier and a crate of beer. Post office workers respected our picket-lines and would not deliver mail. Trade unionists in Southwark rallied to our support. Indeed, in Southwark the strike had support of parent teacher associations, trade councils, tenants' associations, union branches, all three local MPs as well as the Euro MP. By contrast, not one member of the management supported the strike, however junior or left-wing they purported to be.

The victory for education

The organisation and support given to the strike meant that the management were forced to consult ACAS and an agreement was reached in which virtually everything had to be conceded. There were no compulsory redundancies, talks took place about the management's proposed savings and the strikers loss of earnings which would be spread over the months ahead. Indeed, so great was the confidence that thirty eight lecturers wanted to continue on strike for further concessions.

The management unable to sack lecturers to save money, are sacking themselves. Now some of the most despised managers are losing their jobs along with those who crossed picket lines sacrificing education, their students and their colleagues for the sake of their careers.

A strategy for success

Education cuts and other cuts in services in communities such as health, welfare and provision can be resisted. The strike at Southwark college shows a realistic strategy in action with a highly successful outcome. This means a return to good, old-fashioned, trade unionism to fight for our basic rights and to promote those of people in our communities. The alternative is to hope and wait for those like Tony Blair to produce the goods despite the fact that they say they have little intention of doing so. Regrettably, all of the management were supporters of those who claim to offer this 'alternative'. What is needed is for groups like Radical Statistics to provide the kind of information which could help trade unionists in their campaigns against those of all parties when they are intent on sacking people and wrecking services.