

# Workers who can win against New Labour's FHE agenda

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One implication of Jan Pollock's article in the May *Post-16 Educator* ('Politics and the teaching unions') is that NATFHE's effectiveness as a union depends on its becoming more consistent in challenging the New Labour policy agenda for FHE. This would in turn require that the union evolve a critique of that agenda and, behind that, its own, independent concept of how FHE should develop. Since Jan's overall standpoint is that grassroots members should have more control over the union, it follows that any movement amongst those members which aims at winning control must involve itself in working out such a concept.

No critique of government policy can be effective, in the sense of linking itself to action, unless it arises from a discussion of the politics of FHE amongst grassroots members. And this discussion must, in turn, be rooted in day-to-day struggles around the point at which learning is produced, the teaching and learning process. Whether these struggles do or do not develop into industrial action, they are essentially about how far we as workers, and our working class students, can control intellectual production.

A group is coming into existence within the FHE workforce whose day-to-day experience must push them, regardless of their personal convictions, ambitions etc, towards generalising these struggles into a critique of the type we have identified. This group is quite different from those on which rank and file type movements within NATFHE have hitherto been based.

The rank and file movement which existed in NATFHE and predecessor unions from the late 1960s to the early 1980s was based, like the union's official structures, disproportionately on lecturers in polytechnics rather than in FE, even though the latter formed the majority of ordinary members. Alongside this earlier rank and file movement there also developed a movement within what was then called General Studies - roughly equivalent to today's Key Skills (Communication). This movement, initially (from 1977) in the form of General Studies

workshop, and then (from 1980) as the NATFHE General Studies Section, was based on tenured staff who were fairly young and who had often been radicalised via student politics while at university. NATFHE Rank & File today, like the Socialist Lecturers' Alliance (SLA) which preceded it, is based mainly amongst A-level lecturers. No such group has so far succeeded in mobilising vocational staff. Neither the SLA nor Rank & File has managed to become much more than a left caucus at the level of regional councils, national conference or the national executive.

FE, along with the former polys that are now recruiting teaching universities - is essentially about three things. First, it provides a limited amount of academic education for people who have not been in a position to follow the mainstream academic route via sixth forms to old-style universities. Secondly, and far more importantly, it is about openly employment-related courses. Thirdly, it provides forms of general education servicing, hitherto mainly to vocational students as General Studies, Communication, Key Skills etc, but now, with the expansion of HE, increasingly to academic students in the form of study skills and English for Academic Purposes.

New Labour's **decomprehensivisation** of FHE will make these three essential aspects of FHE stand out even more starkly, as innovations which have overlaid them, for example sixth form-type provision in tertiary colleges, are stripped away. The working class character of the student population will be more obvious than ever. At the same time, the concentration within that population of people from ethnic minority backgrounds will also, at least within urban centres, be intensified. Globalisation is **creating**, still more rapidly than before, a 'third world in the first world'.

General education across FHE increasingly reflects this. This trend within the student population means that lobbying for control over Key Skills by people - and more particularly by state-sponsored agencies - from a basic skills-type background, and increasingly with links to an ESL background as well, will be more and more successful.

In short, a second effect of decomprehensivisation will be the emergence of a unified form of basic skills-centred general education across FHE, from level 1 in FE colleges up to level 4 in recruiting universities.

This general education provision will be staffed, and even line-managed, increasingly by women, and specifically by women who, whether they define themselves as 'black' or not, are at the receiving end of racism, both in its popular, institutional and state forms. They will work under, and hence necessarily start to fight against, poor conditions - increasingly casualised, hourly paid, on short term contracts or via agencies, and often with the status of facilitators rather than lecturers. In FHE as in other public services, the state will try to use some people from within oppressed communities to control others, and to control working class people more generally. This group therefore will therefore have the potential to play a pivotal role in union activity.

For example, because these general education staff will increasingly service not only openly vocational but also nominally academic courses, a stage is likely to be reached at which the situation will polarise, such that lecturers in these other two fields will either act in solidarity with them or opt out of union activity altogether. At the same time, this new layer of activists will have an unprecedented potential for organising community support, thereby threatening to deprive management of its ability to pit strikers against the surrounding community. Finally, it will be amongst these general education teachers, and only amongst them, that discussion of the politics of education can produce an adequate critique of government policy and become collective, ie spread beyond the private thoughts of individuals or articles like this, and link itself to action.

However, the history of black people's involvement in unions here, including in particular the struggle around the cadets course at Hendon police school in the early 1980s, shows that when this starts to happen, the powers-that-be bring ideological weapons against it. In the case of the police school the main such weapons were Racism Awareness Training and multiculturalism. In the situation now emerging, the weapons are likely to be identity politics and communalism. Plainly if the workers concerned were to fall victim to this, and hence to organise themselves on an identity or communal basis rather than on a class one, the whole development would go up a blind alley.

What can existing activists, for example within Rank & File or via a publication like *Post-16 Educator*, do to forestall this?

The key issue for these general education workers will not be so much how to counter union bureaucracy, and still less how to oppose direct racism or sexism. Collectively they will know - indeed already know and/or will rapidly evolve - techniques for dealing with these. The main issue is far more likely to be racism and sexism as



introjected within their own communities, and up to a point even within their own minds, namely the various forms of 'fundamentalism'. This will make its appearance in direct proportion to their involvement in union activity, because such activity within colleges will immediately threaten to spill over into the organisation of homeworkers and others exploited by sweatshop owners who are themselves part of the same community. Therefore the existing left in NATFHE must rapidly generate arrangements, for example publications and discussion meetings, which allow the workers concerned to explore ideas, as developed for example by Nawal El Saadawi, Southall Black Sisters, Women Against Fundamentalism etc, about how to deal with such a backlash.

This exploration needs to be linked to an evaluation, by the workers concerned, both of the dominant ideology within basic skills itself - ie the synthesis between Fabian socialism, behaviourist psychology and missionary-style do-goodism - and of the main oppositional current to it, namely the ideas of Paulo Freire, and in particular to the influence exercised over those ideas by Frantz Fanon's experience of struggle in Algeria.

In other words, there are three fields of struggle that we should prioritise: first, an economic struggle around day-to-day teaching and learning situations; secondly, a political struggle to secure and sustain real (as distinct from formal) democracy within NATFHE structures; and thirdly, the ideological struggle outlined here. This third struggle could be the key to winning the other two.