

Why being anti-vocational is not good enough

Colin Waugh (14/10/08)

On 11/10/08, a motion was put to the London Regional Council of UCU in the name of City and Islington College (C&I) branch about UCU's response to the financial crisis. Its clauses included: '1. That the Leitch review, based upon a boom economy with skills shortages, can no longer be the policy foundation upon which Education policy should be built. 2. That Further, Adult and Higher Education needs a drastically changed direction away from a narrow employer-led skills agenda to one that is more responsive to the needs of local communities.'

There is every reason to be against Leitch and 'a narrow employer-led skills agenda', and for provision that is 'more responsive to the needs of local communities'. Likewise, ESOL and the provision of second-chance routes into academic study are essential FE college functions. However, we should also campaign for valid technical, technological and scientific education and training for all who want it, integrated with valid general education which builds capacity in areas like reasoning, problem solving and democratic organisation. Unless the C&I points are located within this positive demand, which they were not, they become demagogic and reactionary. Why?

First, they become crudely anti-vocational. In a pre-industrial society, the knowledge and skill needed for production can be handed down by word of mouth. But without technical education and industrial training the modern world would grind to a halt in a few weeks. The computer on which the C&I motion was typed, the UCU HQ in which it was proposed, the tube trains on which those who proposed it travelled - none of these things could be in place without

trained workers to design, build and maintain them.

(That many jobs have been deskilled does not negate this. Cooking in MacDonalds may be unskilled, but the ovens used are designed, made, installed and maintained by trained people.)

Secondly, to be anti-vocational without demanding valid general education is automatically to back academic curricula as the only valid form. In FHE now, that boils down to saying that the jobs of GCSE, A-level humanities and some ESOL lecturers should be defended, while those of vocational lecturers, ie the overwhelming mass of FE staff, should be abandoned to cuts.

Thirdly, if we fail to organise for valid technological education and training for ordinary workers, so far from fighting against 'a narrow employer-led skills agenda', we in effect say that the bosses can go on deskilling the majority and creating an elite group of skilled people loyal to themselves. Likewise, since in reality workers with skills are still needed, to go along with cuts to vocational courses in FE is to accept that the bosses themselves should train and certificate those workers. This in turn means that we no longer care whether workers know enough about their jobs to fight for control in the workplace.

Fourthly, the C&I approach ignores the fact that GCSEs and A-levels are themselves vocational - that is, shaped by the bosses' need to produce professionals, a large proportion of whom are themselves waged workers. To ignore this is to take an uncritical attitude towards academic learning, and hence to fail to challenge the dominance of Oxford, Cambridge and the Russell Group over the whole system.