

CRISIS

EDUCATION

ON THE

CHEAP

Ima Pamphlet
by Iing Teachers.

2p.

In the face of a deep economic crisis, the policy of the last government has been a systematic re-distribution of wealth to support and protect the profits of the capitalists by depressing the relative standard of living of the working class. To do this several strategies were introduced; the idea of raising rents of local authority housing and giving subsidies to the less well off from those paying high rents. House building went down and within 3/4 years most council rents were expected to double. As a result the cost of all housing rose astronomically. Curbs on wages in Phases 1, 2 & 3 were introduced which limited wage rises to a fraction of the rises in cost of living, and in order to limit organised protest, the Industrial Relations Act was passed. In this way, by reducing the effectiveness of the Trade Union movement it was hoped by the capitalists to put the brakes on any erosion of profits, wages would fall relative to the cost of living and so the labour forces would be cheaper to maintain.

It remains to be seen whether the new Labour government will tackle the crisis in the same way as the Tories but it is necessary to understand the precise nature of the attacks already made, so as to fight more effectively against them.

However the strategy did not end at these direct means. The economic crisis which we have all seen manifested in a three-day week, in soaring inflation and the statutory wages policy has simultaneously had less obvious effects on standards of living, mainly in the area of social services, where thousands of millions have been cut from budgets. Less obvious because expenditure has been cut, but the services remain. Patched over, less effective but still in existence. What this means is that services now seen as an essential part of Welfare State Britain are being run down so that taxes etc., which should hit the rich remain as low as possible. The services of the Welfare State represent important gains made by the working class in the past as part of the struggle, against the capitalist class and though they are largely paid for by the working class through taxes and National Insurance, we must be prepared to fight for their improved effectiveness.

The areas most acutely affected are the health and education services where facilities are often hopelessly out of date and staff shortage is critical in some areas. But all the services provided through the local authorities have also had to cut back; lighting, roads, services for the elderly and youth, sanitation, parks, libraries, and leisure etc. and this in some cases means redundancies. The purpose of this pamphlet is to illustrate how these policies of continual undermining have had a serious effect on the education for the working class, but at no time should we allow cuts in any sector of social expenditure. The capitalists are the ones to pay.

In the field of education both aspects of the Tory policy operate to erode the standard of education being provided for the working class. Salaries, cuts in social expenditure and staff shortage are inextricably linked. It is the cumulative effect of the former two which has resulted in the acute lack of teachers available in some state schools. Add to this the reduced numbers of teachers being trained and it is clear that sizeable inroads are being made into the cost of education for the working class. Public schools remain in a privileged position with tax concessions, small classes, highly paid teachers etc. while conditions in state schools are being allowed to deteriorate.

Under the Tory government, many of the gains made by working class pressure for comprehensive schooling, for new buildings, up to date equipment, variety of courses etc. were directly attacked. During Phases 1, 2 & 3 cuts in social expenditure amounting to thousands of million pounds were introduced. These cuts affected the whole spectrum of state and local government social services, but very hard hit were health & education.

In the schools it was the plans for new buildings to replace the Victorian inheritance of board schools which has first curtailed, so conditions worsened as the school population increased. Temporary huts remained, classes grew in size and cramped space meant a cramped curriculum. In some areas the choice, or rather non-choice which faced teachers and parents was whether to use up lay space with temporary classrooms until the never-never time when a new building would be provided or to keep play space and have bigger classes. Teaching takes place in corridors, in halls where there is a continual traffic of pupils, in rejuvenated cloakrooms etc. In the Inner London Education Authority alone, one already suffering drastically from teacher shortage, 31 replacement primary schools have had to be dropped from the 1974/5 building programme.

This kind of policy does not only affect conditions, it affects the different kinds of education services being provided, especially those minority teaching groups such as remedial work, nursery classes, specialist help, new subjects and courses, small examination groups etc. as there is simply no room in which to teach.

After this, the amount of money available for equipment, furniture and books became a victim of the cuts, so that any real progress in the variety of courses being provided, the depth to which study can go are all reduced. In a situation where this is happening the children are very much aware of the inadequacy of their education. The advances being made in industry, technology, etc. are simply not affecting the teaching within the schools. Frustration for both teachers and pupils sets in.

All this has occurred at the same time as the raising of the school leaving age to 16, a welcome measure in itself but sadly, introduced in 1973 as a way of disguising the growing number of unemployed, and without the necessary resources, in terms of staffing and equipment, which could make this an educationally progressive measure.

Many schools have introduced comprehensivisation, a gain which could mean a lot to the education of working class children but unless this is supported with the financial means to give a comprehensive range of subjects, methods of teaching, etc., then the change is merely in name. In out of date buildings, and with out of date books and equipment, problems obviously arise within the schools. But it is clear that these problems are being created not by the growth of violence in kids but by the systematic financial starvation of the education system.

The other major area of attack has been on teachers wages. Systematically the pay structure has fragmented staff into a 50 point hierarchy which allows for a cheaper wage bill since promotion is seen as a way of increasing wages rather than unity to secure substantial rises for all teachers and an eventual abolition of the salary scales. Now the NUT Exec. have capitulated once more on the question of salaries, under the assumption that we should get what we can now (even if it amounts to a wage cut) rather than fight and may be get nothing. What the Union leaders fail to recognise is the depth of the crisis in education and how teachers can and must be mobilised to combat the collapse of the education of working class children.

Similarly the unsuccessful campaign on the London allowance failed to take into account the urgent need to bring all teachers nationally into the struggle on salaries. No national mobilisation of teachers has occurred on any of the crucial issues facing education and we are in a situation today where unless drastic action is undertaken on the question of both salaries and education cuts, the teacher shortage will grow so rapidly that meaningful education will have ceased.

The action put forward by the NUT Executive on the question of staff shortage in London is a policy of non-coverage for absences of more than three days. This has been welcomed by most schools, precisely because teachers are aware that unless a decisive show of strength is made, staff shortage will become a norm and eventually the problem will no longer exist. However, on closer examination, putting the Executive's policy into practice reveals many traps. For every teacher who is absent, one class is to be sent home and the teachers who would normally teach that class then cover for the absent teacher. Thus the timetable of the whole school becomes disrupted and teachers are faced with a ludicrous situation where they create more difficulties for themselves and the children by taking militant action than by simply leaving the absent teacher's classes unattended.

Of course the whole point of taking action is to cause a situation which forces the authorities to take notice, but what most teachers are asking is just how effective the NUT's policy is. It is not an instruction, so isolated schools may be waging a very militant campaign while, down the road the shortage is being covered. There are schools in some areas where no covering at all is going on.

But the NUT Executive's militancy is mere rhetoric. On the question of class size, in a period when this is a major issue, they are proposing to postpone the date for action to achieve classes of 35 in primary schools and 30 in secondary schools until 1983. The main problem is how to obtain a massive and united campaign on the whole question of the disintegrating education service.

Firstly teachers themselves must mobilise and become active on the questions of salaries and cuts in educational expenditure. Only by taking up these issues seriously and being prepared to take action can we have any effect at all. Making do for the sake of the children will in the long term have the effect of condoning the erosion of the education system. The few instances of militancy will remain isolated unless we educate and organise all teachers around these lines. Teachers nationally should refuse to cover for any absences and call for supply teachers to be employed for such emergencies. Free time is needed for preparation and marking and is already far too little.

But on such important issues we must explain to the children, parents and Trade Unionists why we are undertaking such action and point out that the State must provide more money and more teachers for the education system.

The essential starting point from which we can successfully wage a struggle on the cuts in expenditure is to make effective links with other Trade Unionists, parents, children and working class organisations. We can then immediately take up the effects of the cuts occurring in each area. Regular bulletins and leaflets can be produced with information on class sizes, accommodation etc. so that those people most affected the working class, can be organised to fight any cuts, both independently in their organisations and uniting together.

The fact that working class children are constantly being legislated against, that the aim is for a chaper labour force must be illustrated constantly in union branches, local area conferences on cuts in social expenditure, leaflets etc. Wage restraint and the cuts are part of the same attack on the working class and teachers should be encouraged to support other sections of workers fighting these policies. Only in this way can a concerted struggle be waged.

The Labour Party is now in power, and we should see this as an opportunity to stop the continuation of the Tory policies immediately. Local Labour councils have felt the effect of the cuts badly, and some members of the Labour Party have played a part in defending the social gains of the education and welfare services; we should now call on the Government and local Labour Parties to reverse all the decisions taken by the Tories. The cuts in education, health, and other services and local amenities must all be restored in full, at the expense of those who obtain their wealth from the labour of others.

International Marxist Group



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the Fourth Inter-
national)

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