

Austerity in the Mind Factory. Educational struggles are breaking out all over

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In March 2012, over 200,000 Quebec students are waging a general strike against tuition increases and have faced brutal police repression. British Columbia teachers just finished a three-day strike against an austerity budget and are set to engage in further strike action. Teacher collective bargaining seems to be headed towards an impasse in Ontario. Faculty members at Dalhousie University in Halifax were on the verge of a strike to resist concessions demanded by their university administration, though a last-minute agreement kept them from the picket lines.

Over the past few years we have seen the brilliant mobilization of the Chilean student movement against their thoroughly neo-liberal education system, which dates back to the authoritarian Pinochet regime that overthrew the democratic left-wing government of Salvador Allende. British students occupied numerous universities and organized huge marches and militant protest actions to resist the tripling of their tuition fees. Students in California mobilized against austerity cuts and tuition increases, and that activism has continued with a wave of Occupy actions and other organizing. That is just to mention a few.

Education and the Austerity Agenda

It is not an accident that education is looming so large in anti-austerity struggles. Education is a costly item at a time governments are looking to slash expenditures, and full-time teachers or profs are an ideal target in campaigns to vilify and attack unionized public sector workers with decent job security, benefits and pensions. But that's only part of the reason. Education is about the formation of the population, and changes in workplace organization, labour market practices and models of democratic conduct require a reorganization of the schools, colleges and universities. Education systems are designed to develop particular kinds of worker-citizens, and current government policy documents, supported by statements from employers' organizations, argue that the mind factory is still turning out last year's model.

For example, the "three-cubed" position paper prepared for the Ontario government and recently leaked to the press argues that today's students need to be prepared for work in the "new creative economy." The paper argues that there is a need to: "redefine the role of higher education to serve the foundational needs of the new creative economy." Students need to be prepared to be more entrepreneurial in this context: "we will create more than just one of the best educated workforces in the world, we will also be in a position to create the entrepreneurial talent — the job creators of tomorrow — that Ontario's economy will benefit from for decades to come."

There are lots of debates about whether this really is a “creative economy” given that most workers simply face new kinds of drudge work, only now it often involves a computer screen. There is, however, no doubt that significant changes are underway in the workplace and state policy, changes that have real impact. One important example is the deliberate shift from security to precariousness as a way to motivate worker productivity. At the height of the welfare state, management strategies sought to motivate some sections of the working class to work hard through expectations of security — sustained employment, benefits to protect against adverse circumstances, pensions for a decent retirement, etc. Now, they are opting for precariousness as a strategy, so that no one feels their job is safe or that they can rely on benefits or services to help them out in times of need. Of course, many workers — and particularly women workers of colour — never won security and have always faced precariousness.

The education system helps frame the expectations of future generations around security and precariousness, as well as many other issues. Sharp increases in tuition fees, for example, send a clear message to students that education is not a right, and that they are entitled to nothing they cannot afford to buy. This is not only about what is taught, but also the way the education system is structured, which in itself sends a strong message to students.

Governments are using the age of austerity to radically restructure education systems around the world. The basic blueprints for education “reform” that were laid out during the neo-liberal period beginning in the 1970s are being implemented at double speed in the age of austerity. But governments are emboldened by the deep austerity programs already in place in countries like Greece, Ireland and Portugal. And while they have faced some impressive resistance, so far it has not mobilized to a level that threatens the government agenda. Employers and state policy-makers are pushing much further than they might have dreamed even a few years ago.

The Ontario government’s “three-cubed” document on post-secondary education does not lack for audacity. Even though it is a background paper that might not be implemented in precisely this form, it marks a rapid policy shift for the Liberal government of Dalton McGuinty, who has wanted to be known as the “education premier.”

“Three-cubed” refers to the document’s basic framework which reduces the complex business of education reform to a simple numerical equivalent — the magical number “3.” It calls for the rapid conversion from four-year to three-year degrees at universities, and a one-third reduction in the length of college programs. It suggests all institutions should run for three full semesters (year-round). Perhaps the boldest measure in the report is the recommendation that three out of five university courses be offered on-line, so that 60 percent of degree requirements could be accomplished without any classroom time. It also sets a target for three percent annual productivity improvements (with a footnote pointing specifically at increasing faculty teaching loads). Those institutions that don’t opt into this program would face annual budget cuts.

This is a background document not a policy framework yet, but it does give the flavour for the direction of one government that has claimed to be pro-education. It is a rapid and thorough-going restructuring of the post-secondary system, with virtually no consideration of the educational impact of these changes. This document includes no serious discussion of the effectiveness of on-line learning, or its impact on the social character of the university that is an important part of the learning environment. There is a lot of discussion these days about the importance of developing “soft” labour market skills (such as effective written and oral communication, ability to work with others, deliberate presentation of self, problem-solving skills, self-direction) through post-secondary education. There are good reasons to doubt that these skills will be developed by remote control through on-line course delivery.

Nor does the document discuss the educational impact of slashing a year off university programs. The change is justified as a cost-saving measure, and one that would allow students into the workforce sooner. The paper points to the trend towards three-year degrees in Europe, though it notes that students would need an additional year to qualify for most American graduate programs. The fourth year of undergraduate programs is simply considered a wasteful excess that can be trimmed away without any loss. Although not discussed in the report, it is likely that this plan is connected with a more American-style hierarchical structure for post-secondary institutions, according to which a select few (perhaps the more research-intensive institutions) would develop an elite stream offering honours degrees, while non-elite institutions would pump out three-year degrees with loads of on-line learning.

Making Sense of the Education Agenda

It is curious that there would be a great desire to accelerate student entry into the full-time labour market (as a high proportion of students are already in the part-time workforce during their degrees) at the same time as employers are clear-cutting “good” working-class jobs that offer any degree of job security, decent pay, benefits and pension. The rate of unemployment among young people is currently high, and hopes for decent employment in the future are fading as good jobs are irreversibly destroyed, to be replaced by part-time and contract employment, generally with lower pay and few benefits or none.

This is not rational policy-making, nor is it intended to be. The global slump is being used as cover by governments and employers seeking to destroy entitlements and protections working class people won through bitter struggle, particularly in the great upsurges of the 1940s and the 1960s-70s. The frenzy of destruction is reflected in aggressive management bargaining strategies, including repeated use of the lock-out in contract negotiations, through which employers force workers onto the picket line. Social programs are being slashed and plans are being prepared to sell-off social housing. Immigration regimes are becoming ever more brutal, and employer needs are becoming the only selection criterion, with no consideration to the human needs of migrants themselves. Along with these other changes, education systems are being rapidly restructured.

Employers and policy-makers are willing to live with the mess these policies will create in the short term in order to crush expectations and grind down potential resistance. A bit later they will worry about forging a new phase of reform that will rationalize and clarify the focus of policies. Grand policy shifts often require a destructive moment, where the widespread legitimacy of the existing framework is wiped out and the inevitability of change is established. This can happen from below, in great upsurges of militancy when workers, students and community members develop new expectations, ethical frameworks and commitments to solidarity. It can also happen from above, when employers and state policy-makers seek to smash existing expectations among the population to create more modest ones.

None of this brutal slashing will restore economic well-being. Indeed, these policies are driving economies deeper into recession, at least in the foreseeable future. The goal, however, is not avoiding recession but deeply undermining the position of “the 99 percent” (the working-class, broadly defined to include all those who need employment wages and/or social benefits to survive), while the rich thrive. Indeed a recent study that shows 93 percent of wealth in the “recovery” since 2008 has gone to the hyper-wealthy one percent.

Fighting for a Better System

The education fights currently underway are merely a taste of what is to come. The relentless assault we face puts a premium on preparing the fightback, and finding new ways to build activist student-staff-faculty alliances capable of resisting the austerity agenda and fighting for accessible, democratic and decolonized education. Our movements are going to have to learn a lot to resist this agenda, and that learning will not take place in classrooms.

This is an important time to learn from the Occupy Movement, to take over spaces to be used for a different kind of collective learning processes. Instead of mounting a purely defensive campaign, we need to use these freer spaces of learning to discuss a range of issues and concerns. To begin, the university is a workplace, employing a wide range of workers in a variety of positions. Full-time faculty do labour-intensive work that relies on a specific skills base, and in some ways can be compared to craft workers in the skilled trades who were once able to bargain and resist even when other employees did not feel confident because of their control over a skills base. Like the assembly line, on-line learning will undercut this bargaining position and provide a basis for employing cheaper forms of labour, a process already underway on our campuses where underpaid sessional instructors with virtually no job security do more and more of the teaching, as do teaching assistants who find their tutorials and marking loads growing out of control. The relationship between faculty bargaining and other forces on campus needs to be discussed bluntly to build genuine spaces of solidarity oriented around the needs of the most vulnerable.

Secondly, we need serious discussion of democratic learning, where it takes place and what it means. Students are too often the objects in discussions of university learning and teaching, the things that are acted upon with more or less efficacy. It is time to imagine what spaces of education might look like that were organized around genuine democratic learning grounded in student power.

Finally we need to understand the basis of the current education system in colonial rule of Indigenous peoples and Eurocentric perspectives in which the particular experiences of certain people of European ancestry (disproportionately male and wealthier) are treated as the universal history of humankind. In pretty much any discipline you choose, the core knowledge base is seen as a European heritage, and other ways of knowing are marginalized. Similarly, there are gender-normative, heterosexual and ableist commitments buried deep in the ways of knowing now on offer.

When governments and employers come swinging axes to destroy the prevailing apparatus, it will not be sufficient to defend the way things are. That will not offer the inspiration or radical strategies required to genuinely defeat the age of austerity by mobilizing a truly anti-capitalist movement. The spaces of movement education, including campus spaces taken over and used for “free” learning outside of the structures of the system, not only provide an opportunity to explore new ways of mobilizing, but can also provide a model for free, democratic and decolonized learning. We face the challenge of building those spaces if we want to defeat the austerity agenda.

Alan Sears

P.S.

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Alan Sears teaches at Ryerson University and is a member of the Toronto New Socialists.