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10p

NUS Services Crash



A SOCIALIST ANSWER

**RED
WEEKLY**

pamphlet

By IMG Student Commission

Why this pamphlet was written.

ON FRIDAY 19 NOVEMBER the Executive of the National Union of Students issued a press statement announcing the collapse of three NUS Service Companies – NUS Travel, Photomech and Uniprint. 200 workers employed by these companies were sacked, in some cases with only a couple of hours notice.

The liquidation of these companies ushered in the most serious crisis the NUS has faced since Margaret Thatcher's attacks on student union autonomy in 1971-72. As Charles Clarke, NUS President put it: 'I would not conceal that the events of the day are a blow to the union. It will be difficult to maintain our unity in campaigning.' What will students and trade unionists now make of the editorial in the November issue of *National Student*, the NUS's newspaper, that: 'What is needed is a completely new economic strategy. The tired old 1930s formula of cutting out jobs and services for the people will not do in 1976.' ?

The failure of the NUS Executive to consult the mass of students or the workers involved about the future of NUS Services has opened the NUS to accusations of gross hypocrisy and deceit in its campaigning against unemployment and cuts. The aim of this pamphlet is to explain the extent of, and background to, the present crisis in the NUS, and to point to the type of socialist alternative which can maintain the fighting unity of the NUS.

We argue that such unity can no longer be on the basis of 'pressure politics' and the running of private service companies, but rather on the transformation of the NUS into a mass campaigning union allied in action to the working class.

Student Commission, International Marxist Group, 25 November 1976.



Charles Clarke announces the closure of the companies at a London press conference.

The Services crash: end of an era.

AT THE TIME OF WRITING the full facts behind the collapse of the three service companies have not yet seen the light of day. But it is already clear that the financial crisis of NUS Travel had been known to the Executive for at least two years. The company's accumulated deficit by mid-1977 would have been of the order of £500,000.

Not so long before the final collapse, NUS Travel had sacked 40 workers as 'the only way to avoid a total collapse'. With the liquidation imminent, the bank operated a 'set-off' agreement, whereby student union moneys could be seized to settle debts. £43,000 of members subscriptions were liable under this arrangement. Its operation could have placed the whole financial viability of the NUS in jeopardy.

It is in this light that the irresponsibility of the Executive in maintaining a cloak of secrecy around the ongoing financial affairs of NUS companies must be seen. The failure of the Executive to alert the membership was seen quite clearly when only a fortnight before the crash, an NUS Services Conference was assured that NUS Travel's financial problems could be overcome by the summer of 1977. Furthermore the fact that the NUS did not insist on trade union organisation in its companies, whilst paying chief executive, Mike Naylor, a salary of the order of £20,000, left the workforce weak and disorganised.

The political lessons have to be learnt from this debacle. For years the Broad Left has fed the membership with the idea that the heart of NUS was its services. When some of the most important of these services collapsed the 'socialist'-led executive behaved like any capitalist employer by making the workers pay through throwing them out of work. It was inevitable that the right-wing would have a field day. Wasn't this after all what the Tories advocated with respect to any employer?

The tragedy is, of course, that the workers in those companies, with the full facts at their disposal, could have been the best allies for the NUS in campaigning for State finance to maintain both services and jobs. But the majority of the Executive chose to ignore the views of the 1975 NUS Conference, which threw out a proposal for three (let alone 240!) sackings, and instead buried their heads in the sand.

The Broad Left and the FCS: hand in hand.

THE FRAMEWORK WITHIN WHICH the Broad Left majority intend to approach the present crisis in NUS was illustrated in the statement of David Aaronovitch, Vice-President Services, following the collapse. The central point he made was that the 'most essential' services were not affected. In other words the Broad Left have learnt nothing from the demise of NUS Travel. They intend to continue to try to peddle students the illusion that a united student movement can be based primarily on services.

This approach was underlined in the joint statement issued by the Broad Left together with the Federation of Conservative Students (FCS), the Union of Liberal Students and others reaffirming the unity of NUS. For the right-wing FCS, no problems are posed by the collapse. On the contrary, they will demand that the Broad Left now applies similar criteria in its attitude to redundancies and cut-backs in companies not owned by NUS.

As Steve Moon, FCS member of NUS Executive put it, they will be demanding 'political concessions' in exchange for backing the Broad Left majority on the Executive against 'a probable blizzard of criticism and disillusion at its next conference' (*Guardian*, 19.11.76). The Tories will argue that, in order to maintain 'competitive' private service companies, the NUS should drastically cut its spending on campaigns around the cuts, overseas students and womens rights. By reasserting the need for private service companies (even as they collapse around us) and signing joint statements with the FCS, the Broad Left is laying the basis for a Tory takeover of NUS.

It's the right one

The aim of the British Students Association, founded by Leonardo Martini Brown, is to provide a union more democratic and open than the 'Marxist-controlled' NUS.

So they base their constitution on ballots. According to a report in National Student, their constitution provides that any issue may be put to the ballot on 'a specific written request signed by one tenth of the membership, the cost of such a referendum to be met in advance by the applicants.'

We don't know whether the BSA will be running a campaign for higher grants so that students can afford the democracy they are offering.

The myth that services are the key to a unified student movement does not simply fuel the Tories inside NUS. The British Students Association, a company recently formed by right-wingers to compete with, as they put it, 'the marxist-dominated National Union of Students', will also attempt to cash in on the collapse of NUS Services. (One of the wilder allegations made by the BSA was that NUS Travel suffered from uneconomical flights to Moscow which were run for ideological reasons.) They will argue for students unions to disaffiliate from the NUS on the basis that it has been shown to be incapable of managing its own service companies.

The only answer to right-wingers inside and outside the NUS is that with the correct policies, NUS can become a genuine mass campaigning organisation capable of defending students by linking them with the working class in defence of education and living standards. In this the Tories have no interest.

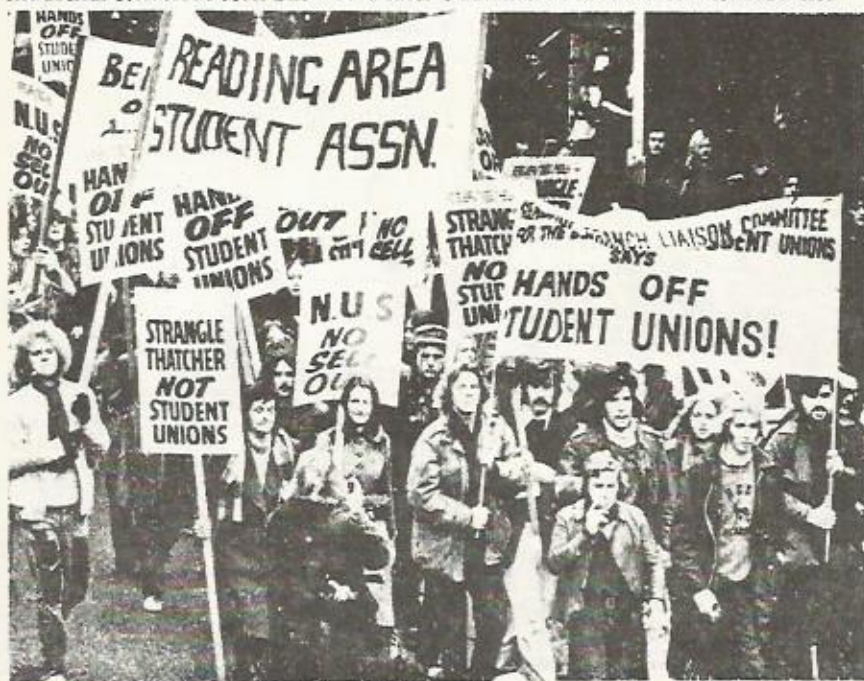
The Broad Left leadership hope to be maintained in office by the votes of the Tories. They refuse to campaign for the nationalisation of the service companies so as to maintain jobs and services. Socialists in NUS, who have campaigned for such a policy since the first 40 redundancies were announced, are accused, in Charles Clarke's own words, of having a 'touching confidence in the deep-rooted socialism of this Labour Cabinet'.

Yet the Broad Left's motion on Government Economic Policy to the December 1976 NUS Conference goes somewhat further in calling for 'the nationalisation of all the banks and insurance companies'. Perhaps the answer to that apparent paradox lies in the fact that the Broad Left is addressing itself to some mythical 'left' Labour Government in the dim and misty future, this absolving themselves from fighting now.

The Broad Left's leadership: the record.

TO UNDERSTAND the present Broad Left/Tory alliance and the failure of the Broad Left leadership to come up with any answers to resolve the present crisis of NUS, it is necessary to examine the record of the NUS leadership over the past seven years.

The last really successful struggle led by the NUS was the defence of the autonomy of the Student Unions against Maggie Thatcher's attempts to bring them under state control in 1971-72. 8 December 1971 saw 400,000 students on the streets in defence of autonomy. The active support of trade unionists had been won through students' direct action raising the political link with the Tories' Industrial Relations Act. Six weeks later Thatcher was forced to withdraw her



Students march in 1971 against Thatchers proposals to bind their unions to the state.

proposals. Even the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals had been forced to oppose Thatcher's 'Green Paper', as they feared the mass action of students more than they welcomed Thatcher's initiative.

Since that time, however, the NUS has failed to win any of its national campaigns around the central issue facing the mass of students – that of the grants level and the cuts. (An annual grant of over £1,400 would now be needed to bring up student living standards to their real value in 1962.)

But with the Broad Left firmly entrenched on the NUS Executive in 1972 a big drive was made to attract students to the union and fight disaffiliations, not on the basis of NUS's ability to defend education and living standards, but on the base of its services, such as travel, insurance and cheap printing.

The Broad Left also argued that because students have no direct 'economic power' the grants and cuts campaign had to be one of 'pressure politics'. Up until 1973 this took the form of trying to win the support of the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals for the demands of the Grants Campaign. This meant limiting the mass action of students so as not to alienate their new-found allies who, 'under protest', were actually implementing the cuts.

This 'strategy' was finally ditched with the return of a Labour Government and the biggest round of social expenditure cuts since the war. Another aspect of 'pressure politics' came to the fore. The student movement was to rely on pressuring the 'lefts' both in parliament and the trade unions. The only problem was that the 'lefts', in particular Scanlon and Jones, the darlings of the Communist Party (the driving force of the Broad Left), were tied hand and foot to the Labour Government through their support for the Social Contract.

The disastrous consequences of the Broad Left's strategy are best illustrated by the example of the student teacher occupations of 1976.

Photo: JOHN STURROCK (Report)



Moray House delegates greet the decision by the Manchester Conference to lobby the TUC.

'It is necessary to know when to end an occupation.'

LAST SUMMER SAW THE BIGGEST WAVE of student action since the campaign in defence of autonomy. 140 colleges of education were occupied to demand jobs for student teachers. Yet the whole of Scotland was in occupation and calling for the extension of the struggle before the NUS Executive issued a statement supporting the campaign!

Photo: John Sturrock (Report)



The main demands of the occupations embarrassed the Broad Left leadership of the NUS considerably. Democratic conferences of student teachers' elected representatives demanded that the leadership of the National Union of Teachers should implement their policy of reducing class sizes to 30 through direct action in the schools, and for full trade union rights for unemployed teachers.

But the NUT leadership, supported by the Communist Party, was committed body and soul to support of the Social Contract and the Labour Government. A leading member of the Communist Party, Max Morris (recently resigned) was among those instrumental in leading an attack on the ability of the rank and file to take action.

The latest issue of the **Broad Left Journal** explained their attitude at that time to demands on the NUT leadership as 'very dangerous to our continued good relations with the trade union movement.' On this basis they denounced student pickets of NUT headquarters and finally split the movement by refusing to support the lobby of the Special TUC conference called by the Manchester Conference of Student Teachers.

This same conference called overwhelmingly for the extension of the occupations. Only a few days later the NUS Executive called them off.

Thus the biggest wave of student occupations ever seen in this country ended up by being sacrificed on the altar of 'good relations' with the trade union bureaucracy.

The growth of the Right.

THE STUDENT TEACHER OCCUPATIONS were a big blow to the right wing within NUS. Tens of thousands of students made it quite clear that they stood with the working class against the attacks of the Government. Nevertheless, the right wing have since regained ground. FCS membership has increased 60% since September 1976. They will have more delegates at this National Conference than ever before.

The reason for this is essentially that, at a time when the trade union bureaucracy is tied to a Labour Government attacking students' and workers' living standards and job prospects, then any strategy which limits students' actions to pressure on this same bureaucracy is doomed to failure. That failure can disillusion students with the left as a whole. The Tory arguments for an end to politics in the NUS, and for a students union based on services feed off apathy and disillusion. Not that a Tory led student union would be a-political, on the contrary the experience of the 1920's — when students played the role of strike-breakers — is a dire warning of the consequences of Tory control.

The problem is that in order to maintain the unity of the NUS, it has to be transformed into a union which is not 'above classes', as the Broad Left would have it, but into a union which can link students to the working class in action. At the moment that clearly means placing no reliance on the lefts inside or outside of Parliament and fighting for those 'lefts' to ally themselves with students and workers fighting the cuts and unemployment. Secondly it means cutting the ground from underneath the Tories by insisting that services to students should be provided by the State, with no strings attached.

Unity. Yes, but with whom?

PERHAPS THE MOST INSTRUCTIVE lesson of the collapse of NUS Travel is the fragility of NUS while it remains a pressure organisation, based on the provision of services. At a purely financial level, the fact that the bank could use NUS funds to recoup its own liabilities is a very simple and clear indictment of attempts to run large private companies.

At the level of politics, however, the threat is equally transparent. By entering into agreements with the Tories, the Broad Left are paving the way for an FCS Executive, which is 'better' at running private companies, in the near future.

Such an executive would seriously and probably permanently divide the student movement. The Labour Government's attacks on education are at present laying the basis for a qualitative change in the way education is financed. Already Callaghan is rationalising the need for cuts by calling for more "productive education". By that he means education geared to the needs of capitalist industry. In many colleges the stake of investment from private companies like GEC, ICI and others is rapidly increasing. This is only the first step to these firms demanding a direct say in the content of education. Tory spokesmen like Dr. Rhodes Boyson call for higher student/staff ratios, and cuts in 'non-productive' courses. These calls are being taken up by the Labour Government. Industry increasingly needs a skilled workforce but it wants to pay the minimum for it, giving students such a narrow training that their skills will rapidly become outdated and obsolete.

A new twist to the cuts has been introduced by Dyfed and Avon local authorities who have decided that students should pay their own student union affiliation fee — cutting student living standards at a stroke and their ability to fight back. Many Tory councils will see this as the green light for a more widespread attack.

By actively collaborating in policies such as these, there is no doubt that an FCS leadership in NUS would split the student movement right down the middle. A Tory leadership would attempt to develop further a liberal though cut-back university sector, while gearing the polytechnics, technical and further education colleges more and more to the needs of industry. Thus, they will re-establish the system of one education for the rich elite and another for the future workers.

Any agreement with the Tories can only increase their credibility with the membership of the NUS. The Broad Left leadership must roundly be condemned throughout the student movement for their latest pact with the FCS.

The international experience.



FRANCE 1976 — far right law students prepare for battle against the left.

IN OTHER EUROPEAN COUNTRIES attempts to make education fit the needs of capitalist industry are more advanced. In France, for example, there have been many struggles over the past eight years against 'reforms' of higher education. The biggest obstacle to these struggles has, however, been the the divisions in the student movement.

The state-financed student union in France broke up during the Algerian War when the Government withdrew state finance because of the union's support of the Algerian freedom fighters. Since then there have been at least three left-wing 'students unions' and a couple of right-wing ones which have co-existed. Nevertheless over the past year the student movement in France has been able to launch its biggest ever campaign — against capitalist rationalisations of the education system. Hundreds of thousands of students have been involved in strikes and occupations, democratically run by mass meetings and with regular national 'co-ordinations' of elected delegates from the colleges defining the demands and direction of the campaign. What is now posed in France, following this experience, is the possibility of breaking down the sectarian divisions within the left of the student movement, and rebuilding a unified students union. This will however, be on the basis of **an alliance with the working class**, in action, against all of the present French government's attacks.

Inevitably many fascist and right-wing groupings within the mass of students will not join such a students union. But, nevertheless, such a union has the potential of winning the allegiance of hundreds of thous-

ands of students and building firm links with the working class.

We can start to draw some conclusions for Britain from these events. As the social crisis in Britain grows ever deeper, there will simultaneously be a tendency for students to polarise according to different class solutions for that crisis. At the same time, the state will continually aim to weaken the ability of students to defend themselves through a unified, politically autonomous union.

The major fight for all students is to defend a unified student union capable of opposing attacks on living and educational standards. If, on the other hand, that union becomes transformed into a body which far from defending students, actually assists the government of the day in carrying out attacks on students, then students must start to rely on other forms of organisation to defend them from such attacks.

We are only talking here about possibilities. The main task today is to develop an alternative to the disastrous road being pursued by the Broad Left — a road which leads to the door of the Conservative Party Central Office.

Policies to meet the services collapse.



Photo: DEREK BOWIE (IFL)

Campaigns must come first. Services should be financed by the state - with no-strings attached. THE EXISTENCE OF A UNIFIED STUDENT UNION in Britain has been an asset in building campaigns to defend student interests. Such unity will be jeopardised by every success of the right wing. To fight for a different direction for NUS requires the maximum unity of the existing left wing forces in the union. Of immediate concern is the need for the left to have an answer on the collapse of the service companies.

In the past few years the left, including the IMG, has not presented such an alternative position. Part of this has been a failure to understand the international experience in dealing with the problems of a unified student union funded by the state. Despite the self-criticism that all the left must bear, we can have no excuse for not arriving at a correct position when we are confronted with the problem turning into a disaster.

During the time leading up to the crash of the service companies, neither the workers employed nor the mass of students were aware of the gravity of the situation. If such facts had been readily available, the possibilities of mounting an effective defence would have been on the cards.

Now a meeting can and should be organised from the next NUS National Conference in December to involve the sacked workers, staff still employed, students and trade union delegates. This meeting could start a campaign for the Government to inject enough cash for the workers to be re-employed and the services re-established. This would be the first step to their nationalisation. A joint commission of students and workers should be elected to investigate the events surrounding the collapse, using the experience of the staff involved to develop an alternative plan.

The demand for nationalisation should be extended to include the remaining Endsleigh Insurance as the continued ownership of the firm will only jeopardise the union's future. In the longer term, the provision of services and the defence of jobs would be best guaranteed through the development of active links with workers in the transport sector, particularly ASLEF and NUR, to fight for a plan for travel and transport which served the needs of the entire working class.

The Court Line disaster should be a warning to those who advocate the re-building of services through the setting up of local student travel offices and working through the charter companies. Charles Clarke himself readily admits the precarious state of the charter travel industry. Local offices will only set up NUS Travel disasters in every student union.

The Tories will go along with 'local offices plan' for the moment, as they have no alternative. They would really want a Tory Government in power before they would go for a travel service. There is no doubt that the financial backers that they could find in that situation would have big assets behind them. The Tories aim to change the NUS to a union representing and servicing an educational elite – along the model of professional organisations such as the British Medical Association.

A fighting leadership for the NUS.

WE NEED A SOCIALIST LEADERSHIP which can win students to an alliance with the working class. That alternative leadership will not be based on one or other of the groups on the left. Indeed, any such illusions on the part of any of the left groups will effectively play into the hands of the right wing.

For nearly two years, since the right wing began to re-emerge as a force within student politics, the IMG has fought for unity of the left combat this development. The basis for unity cannot be the programme of one or other group or individual. The basis must be clearly defined as that around which the maximum possible forces on the left can be organised in the fight for a campaigning union.

The battle lines have to be drawn between the left and the right. To build an alternative that sees students as the allies of the working class in fighting the Labour Government's policies, the left must break from reliance on the trade union leaders and the 'lefts'. Instead, students should be

won to unity with the trade unions at the base, and in action. By taking a clear stand of opposition to the major planks of the Government's Social Contract strategy, on cuts and wage restraint, and putting themselves in the forefront of the struggle to further the interests of oppressed sections of society, the left could gain massive active support in the colleges.

The call by NOISS for left unity, the attempts by dissident members of the Communist Party to set up a new radical alliance to fight the right wing and the decision of Manchester Poly Student Union to call a meeting of the left are all indications of the broad forces that can be involved.

The Tories will feed off the disillusion in the Broad Left leaders' policies. They will claim that socialist mismanagement was the cause of the companies' crash. We have to put the question to students — Whose responsibility is the crisis? With which class do you stand?

We should recognise that state finance and a unified NUS are great gains for the student movement, and fight for their maintainance, with **no strings attached**. The French experience tells us that even larger numbers of students will drift to the right as the conflict between workers and employers sharpens. Our best guarantee of having the vast majority of student on the workers' side of the picket lines in the future is to build a united left alternative based on class struggle policies for a socialist NUS. This sort of positive alternative is the way to stop the Federation of Conservative Students and other similar right wingers winning the leadership of the National Union of Students.

If you would like more information about the IMG and its activities, write to: IMG Student Commission (P1), 97 Caledonian Road, London N1.

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