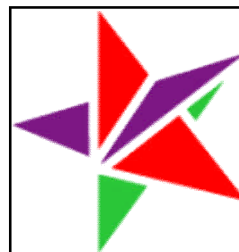


Socialist Resistance

The Fourth International in Britain



Birmingham Forum

Higher Education and the Capitalist Crisis

Speaker

Jim Jones



Tue 14th December

You didn't expect that now, did you Con-Dems?

7.30pm

Bennetts'
Bennetts Hill,
Birmingham City
Centre
B2 5RS.

Neo-liberalism is the dogma that all aspects of human social life should be treated like commodities and subjected to the "discipline of the market".

Since 1979 universities in Britain have been pushed in the direction of a market system in higher education by a number of factors: differential funding based on the results of repeated research assessment exercises, league tables based on A-level entry scores,

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postgraduate completions, “student satisfaction”, and so on.

Despite this, although teaching staff in higher education have been faced with increasing workloads, poorer pay, and casualisation, and although funding per student has been decreased dramatically, to a certain extent teaching has been insulated from the neoliberal drive for privatization.

With the recent Con-Dem *Comprehensive Spending Review* and the publication of the *Browne Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance*, any vestiges of insulation from the market are about to be removed. Osborne’s spending review announced massive cuts in the public funding of higher education: the Times Higher put the figure at £2.9 billion, or a 40% cut overall, with the complete withdrawal of public funding for teaching, except for some “priority” subjects, mainly in science, engineering and medicine.

Although the Browne Review was officially independent of Osborne’s spending review, it assumed cuts of roughly the order of magnitude that Osborne went on to announce. Although the Con-Dem coalition rejected Browne’s suggestion that caps on tuition fees be lifted completely, it has raised the basic limit to £6000, with universities being allowed to charge up to £9000 in “exceptional circumstances”. It is estimated that universities will have to charge £7000 a year in tuition fees just in order to cover the cuts in public funding alone.

The coalition proposes to accept Browne’s suggestion that raised tuition fees and maintenance allowances be funded mainly through government loans to students, repayable at interest rates of 2.2% plus the rate of inflation. The University and College Union (UCU) estimates that a standard 3 year degree at an English university will require students to take on a debt of £32899 at the start of their studies. For students taking a 3 year degree plus a 1 year teacher training qualification the estimated debt is £44307. The Browne review envisages universities competing for fees from students largely on the basis of teaching standards, projected future earnings, price and value for money, and claims that such competition will “drive up quality”.

The report even envisages a 10% increase in the number of students in higher education. However, UCU argues that the adoption of the Browne proposals (even in modified form) will effectively provide for the privatization of higher education, exacerbate class and social divisions, deter students from non-privileged backgrounds, and lead to widespread course closures and redundancies throughout the country. It is possible that some universities will go bankrupt and taken over by private companies.

It is ironic that a funding crisis caused by untrammelled neo-liberalism in the financial sector should lead to the imposition of a neoliberal model in higher education. It is time to say no and stop the neo-liberal steamroller in its tracks.

Contact ***Socialist Resistance*** at 0777 594 2841

or write to PO Box 62732 London SW2 9GQ.

or visit <http://socialistresistance.org/>

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