FROM 2010 TO 2018: SOME OBSERVATIONS ABOUT OCCUPATIONS

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The shadow of 2010 lingers over the 2018 strikes. This is not to reify 2010. After all, to many current student activists, the wave of street protests and campus occupations that followed the tripling of tuition fees and the slashing of vital public spending are a hazy memory. Nevertheless, it remains true that there are deep connections between the events of 2010 and the sudden surge of campus activism during the industrial action by the University and College Union (UCU) over the proposed cuts to the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS). This surge contrasts sharply with the employers’ expectations that students would oppose the strikes because they would feel cheated of the teaching for which they were incurring tuition fees.

Two distinct, but closely related, connections between 2010 and 2018 are worth emphasising. First, there are young members of UCU who came of age politically in 2010. Second, there is a broader understanding that the pension cuts at the centre of current dispute are but one aspect of the marketisation of education, which is the root cause of many issues students face. This means that, in contrast to the largely student-driven and student-focussed campus unrest of 2010, the activists taking direct action in solidarity with UCU in 2018 are doing so with a keener sense that students and education workers are in a united state of struggle. This conscious worker-student solidarity has allowed the 2018 occupations to gain material concessions.

1. Bringing the ‘youth revolt’ into UCU

The transition of activists from the student movement to the trade union movement should not be underestimated: it promises to change UCU from a relatively bureaucratic, quiescent union into a more active, enterprising one. By most outward appearances, the contrast between the average anti-cuts group and the average UCU branch could hardly be starker. The general (and, in this author’s experience, largely justified) image of trade unions in the UK is one of monotonous monthly meetings over issues that, while important for day-to-day life in the workplace, are not the stuff of radical social change. In other words, the world of the local UCU branch seems far removed from the world of flares, barricades, and police kettles which the 2010 student protesters knew intimately.

With trade union membership in Britain having plummeted from 13.2 million in 1979 to only 6.2 million in 2016, most would not expect the rebellious spirit that animated the occupations and demonstrations of 2010 to find its way into the national union for academic staff. Yet that is precisely what happened. This is not say that every UCU branch is now a hotbed of militant union organising. Rather, it is to make the point that many current UCU members, now PhD candidates or early-career academics in their mid-20s to 30s, were students eight years ago. This means that a layer of UCU activists formed their political consciousness in 2010. This generation of UCU members has brought the lessons gained from organising against course closures and tuition fees into the current struggle against the pension reforms. Put simply, the battle against one wave of cuts has directly fed into the battle against another wave of cuts.
Moreover, many of those postgraduates and young academics have come into the education sector hoping to start long careers in teaching or research, only to find a world rife with insecure employment conditions. By UCU’s own estimates, staff on hourly paid contracts perform between 15% and 40% of teaching at most UK higher education institutions, and it is possible that casualisation rates are even higher at some pre-92 universities. Faced with the erosion of present job security and future retirement security alike, it should come as little surprise that education workers and postgraduate students forged in the fires of 2010 are on the front lines of the current struggle. Indeed, young academics on casual contracts feel the strain especially. This is because they take a high risk not receiving pay on strike days, but also stand to lose the most from the proposed changes to USS because they have accrued little or no benefit from the current pension scheme.

There is further significance to the political aspect of these young trade unionists’ formative experiences and the casual employment they readily endure today. The student movement against fee rises and austerity cuts forced the marketisation of education into the spotlight. This is where the second major connection between 2010 and 2018 enters the picture.

2. ‘When they say “marketise”, we say “organise”!’

The tripling of tuition fees and accompanying changes to higher education policy are manifestations of grander processes within the public sector that reconceptualise education’s purpose. In a well-known critique from 2013, Andrew McGettigan identified the following processes:

(i) Marketisation, i.e. the notion that higher education providers, whatever balance they strike between public and private funding sources, are competing with one another to survive.

(ii) Commodification, i.e. ‘the presentation of higher education as solely a private benefit to the individual consumer; even as a financial asset where the return on investment is seen in higher earnings upon graduation’. (McGettigan, p. 9)

The rallying cry against marketisation and commodification has remained at the centre of student activism, even with the apparent shift away from the initial focus on fees and debt. Indeed, popular targets of campus campaigning in recent years are readily tied into the overarching problem of conceptualising education as a commodity and students as consumers within a free market. For example, ‘Cut the Rent’ campaigns, which have achieved material successes through rent strikes such as those at University College London (UCL) and the University of Sussex, typically view the extortionate costs of campus accommodation as embodying the perception of students as a source of university revenue.

Opposition to commodification and marketisation has also driven anti-gentrification campaigns against the expansion of certain university campuses. For instance, in January, students occupied the London College of Communication (part of the University of Arts London) in protest against proposals to replace the local shopping centre with luxury flats. This occurred because the College was in partnership with the property firm that made these proposals and was set to benefit from the redevelopment by being able to build its new campus. Similarly, UCL’s plans to
expand its campus in Stratford and increase its student numbers to an eventual 60,000 have been met with student outcry. In both cases, activists have identified universities’ grand projects to construct ‘shiny new buildings’ as a consumerist means of making campuses more superficially attractive to prospective students whilst masking the deeper ills of increased rents and low wages.

The continued awareness of and resistance to marketisation and commodification allows one to contextualise the 2018 occupations. Although many of the students involved in these occupations are too young to have experienced the 2010 anti-cuts protests, they remain able to identify the attack on staff pensions as a consequence of the same ‘education as commodity’ and ‘student as consumer’ logic that led to rising fees, extortionate rents, overcrowded campuses, and other student hardships. Indeed, it appears that the prospect of making universities more attractive to private lenders was a driving force behind the USS cuts, as the reforms would shift financial risk away from the universities and onto the individual employee.

3. The 2018 occupations

In total, 26 campuses saw student-led occupations in solidarity with the UCU strike. These varied considerably in duration and number of participants, as well as strategic purpose, with some pursued more for persistent disruption and others more for symbolic value. Nevertheless, numerous occupations leveraged significant concessions from senior management.

The University of Bristol, for example, saw a three-day occupation of the floor in the Senate House building where the Vice Chancellor’s office is located. Consequently, the Vice Chancellor pledged to come out in support of UCU and not to deduct staff pay for working to contract as action short of a strike (ASOS). At the University of Cambridge, the five-day occupation of the Old Schools site by what began as approximately 30 activists resulted in the Vice Chancellor promising not to deduct staff pay for refusing to reschedule lectures as part of ASOS. Additionally, the Vice Chancellor wrote an open letter to the Times in which he blamed the strikes on marketisation, and allowed himself to be questioned by staff and students in an open meeting chaired by officers from the local Students’ Union and UCU branch.

At the University of Surrey, a far smaller occupation of the Senate House building by 10 students was still able to gain agreement to a similar open meeting with the Provost in under 24 hours. Additionally, the university agreed not to deduct any staff pay for ASOS: a concession that takes on a special significance in light of Surrey’s initial intent to deduct pay by 100%. More recently at Queen Mary University of London (QMUL), an occupation of the iconic Octagon building for almost exactly a month led to the establishment of an interim fund of £260,000 per year to cover money lost by cuts to student bursaries.

In all these examples, we saw students draw explicit connections between their struggles and those of staff members via such broader concerns as the democratic accountability of academic institutions and, of course, the marketisation and commodification of education. In other words, despite the expectations of UUK and the Government, students’ broader political awareness trumped any narrower consumer-protection concerns. Moreover, these occupations succeeded in gaining meaningful concessions from senior management without any coordinative or material assistance from the National Union of Students (NUS). This suggests a parallel dynamic within
UCU and NUS of an energised rank-and-file able to make gains despite a largely distant and passive national leadership.

One can largely attribute this success to the fact that, unlike the 2010 occupations, the catalyst for the 2018 occupations was a national strike. Whilst plenty of individual academics opposed the increase (and, indeed, the introduction) of tuition fees, and plenty of anti-cuts groups tied their campus activism to workers’ struggles, the prevailing image of 2010 occupations is that they were ‘by students, for students’. This time around, universities found themselves contending with students and workers in a united struggle.

There are two valuable lessons here. First, visible solidarity between student activist groups and trade union branches makes a significant practical difference to the success of campus occupations. In addition to producing material leverage, this can make university managers more hesitant to use heavy-handed tactics against protestors, since they do not wish to be seen aggressively repressing an action taken in defence of university staff, especially if the occupiers have the explicit support of their local union branch. Second, the occupations—and students’ supportive actions around the strike in general—highlight the importance of bringing the student and labour movements together.

This is why I am glad that, at a summit held in March by the National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts (NCAFC), attended by approximately 40 activists from 13 different campuses that went into occupation, the attendees produced a joint solidarity statement that recognised the intrinsic links between the pensions dispute and the wider fight to transform the education system. This consciousness of the fundamental connection between students and workers in struggle, with each finding the courage to fight tooth-and-nail for the other, is the most valuable legacy that the 2010 generation has passed down to the student and trade union activists of 2018.

In a single phrase, ‘Students and workers of the world unite!’

Cover image

University of Exeter students sitting in silence on the floor of the Forum, on an ‘offer holder day’, 14 March 2018 #ExeterOccupy.