

**RADICAL EDUCATIONAL COLLECTIVE:
BEYOND THE FACTORIES OF KNOWLEDGE:FOR A WORLD FREE OF CAPITALIST
EXPLOITATION**

“In factories and universities - resist the dictatorship of capital!”

This was one of the slogans that marked the 2007 student protests in Slovenia against neo-liberal reforms of higher education, which have since been followed by a number of long-term attempts to subordinate state universities to the principles of the market economy and subsequent waves of student protests against these privatization processes. We have chosen this slogan because it clearly shows that students realised that their particular position at the university was in fact part of a comprehensive programme of capitalist exploitation. In 2007, students from the Autonomous Tribune (AT) movement demanded autonomy and an end to privatization, and also made broader anti-war and anti-capitalist statements. What is even more important, they also expressed their opinions on the exploitation of university employees and demonstrated their unwavering solidarity with other anti-privatization movements and the working class in general. Although AT managed (with several occupations, protests etc.) to stop the passing of a new law that would have, to a large extent, privatized universities, their attempts were unfortunately (mostly, though not entirely) met with silence from university workers.

In 2010, several occupations, plenums and protests later, we are looking at a similar situation government efforts to establish the National Programme of Higher Education 2011-2020, which once again attempts to transform universities into business enterprises. At the same time, the government has introduced a new tuition scheme for PhD students, which *de facto* renders higher education elitist. And what of the struggle? It seems that none of the student groups (under-graduates, graduates, post-graduates) or university workers (professors, lecturers and assistant lecturers etc.) are able (with some commendable exceptions, attempting to establish a common space for reflection) to attain the goal and lead a united protest, let alone solidarity with other social groups in resistance (the elderly, workers in the private and public sector, ecological and other social movements etc.). Influenced by images of the massive student and teacher demonstrations in Great Britain, Italy, Greece and other places, all we hear is complaints about the lack of class-consciousness among students and university workers.

Such fragmentation is not surprising, since, as Rastko Močnik notes, the ‘modern’ university is organized according to medieval, pre-capitalist methods (enclosed society, strong hierarchy, etc.). Such organizational structure is also close to the late-capitalist model of a business enterprise, which is also extremely hierarchical and exploitative towards its proletariat (assistants, lecturers etc.) and sub-proletariat (mostly PhD students) who are only offered an extremely unstable future. Its organization into departments, the competition for

positions, the artificial divisions between natural and social sciences and the private jargon of individual branches prevents a dialogue between students and university workers, which, according to Močnik, is an indispensable element in creating knowledge, since science (and its achievements) can only exist for the common, and not the private good. Dialogue in itself constitutes the development of theories, an essential step for any class in identifying its common problems, reflecting on its reality, developing academic concepts enabling resistance, creating its consciousness and therefore establishing itself as a class. In that sense, it is clear that student occupations of classrooms and corridors in Slovenia in recent years were mainly an expression of the need to create a common public space (assuming that most of the departments did not have student common rooms) in which to reflect on their situation. Positive examples, such as in Croatia, where farmers held a plenum devoted to universities, show that the methods developed and used during such reaffirmation of the community, are also useful in reaching out to other social groups.

The latest governmental attempts worldwide to privatize higher education have sparked (at least) two more controversial issues we would like to address, namely productivity and autonomy.

The mantra of the authors of neo-liberal higher education reforms is productive knowledge, applied knowledge, knowledge that can be used on the market, i.e. knowledge in the service of capital. In Marx's analysis of the concepts of productive and unproductive work, developed by Adam Smith in the *Wealth of Nations*, it is stated that (from the perspective of capital) that the only productive work is one that produces a surplus value, or in other words, serves the capital. Work at university is not directly, but indirectly productive, since it consists in educating the future working force and therefore it meets the basic requirement of the capitalist system of production. We should note at this point, though, that as Močnik suggests, it does not follow that just because such work is not directly productive, university workers are not exploited. We agree with the Edu Factory collective, who noted that the term "knowledge factory" does not reflect, from the analytical point of view, the organization of work at university, because such work is not organized according to the terms of Fordism. As mentioned before, today's universities are closer to the medieval guilds and operate according to similar principles. For this reason, it is in the interests of university decision makers (the privileged group) not to oppose the government's efforts towards increasing the productivity of universities because the restructuring of a higher education institution into a modern business enterprise would allow them to retain their privileges.

When it comes to autonomy, we often hear romantic appeals for the preservation of the autonomy of universities. However, we do not want to focus on such a definition of autonomy of the academic sphere, because in our opinion, such autonomy cannot be attained in advance, nor it can be established by government officials. Instead, it is gained through hard

struggle. The more we resist, the more autonomy we can achieve through our actions. We feel that today's challenge is not to stand on the barricades of the imaginary 'old university' that has long been the place of blind reproduction of existing relations between capital and labour. We can go even further and according to Althusser's interpretation, claim that the educational system is actually the most important system of social cohesion. Therefore, it is clear that there is no point in defending the existing form of university. Instead, based on our experience of struggle in the field of education, we are led to believe that it is our obligation to develop an autonomous system of knowledge production beyond hierarchy, alienation and commercialization. As we have stated before, if it is pointless or impossible to sustain autonomous universities as islands in the sea of capitalist society, we should examine how student demands and new models of their political organization can translate into the wider social struggle for a world free of capitalist exploitation.

Sources and Inspirations:

- Althusser, Louis. 2000. *Izbrani spisi*. Ljubljana: Založba/*cf.
- Marx, Karl. 1961. *Kapital I*. Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba.
- Močnik, Rastko. 2010. Delovni razredi v sodobnem kapitalizmu. In: *Postfordizem: razprave o sodobnem kapitalizmu*, ed., Gal Kirn, 149-203. Ljubljana: Mirovni inštitut.
- Močnik, Rastko. 2009. *Spisi iz humanistike*. Ljubljana: Založba/*cf.
- The Edu Factory Collective. 2009. *Towards a Global Autonomous University*. New York: Autonomy.
- Student and other social resistance movements around the globe.