

Scotland: Spending cuts across the education sector

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Between 8,000 and 10,000 lecturers, students and parents gathered in Glasgow last Saturday to protest cost-cutting policies across the education sector. Organised under the banner of the Education Institute of Scotland (EIS), the main teaching union, and the University College Union (UCU), the demonstration took place in response to attacks on funding for education at all levels.

But despite confronting such a deep crisis, and having correctly identified the massive bailout of the banks as a source of the cuts, the demonstration could advance no programme to oppose the onslaught on education. Instead it became a contest between sections of the union bureaucracy that are pro-Labour and seeking to score points against the Scottish National Party administration in Holyrood and the SNP and its supporters, who countered that it was Labour in Westminster that is responsible for the cuts in Scotland.

Des McNulty, Labour's education spokesman, used the cuts being imposed in Scotland to declaim against the SNP's Education Secretary in the Scottish Parliament, Mike Russell, for "cutting teacher numbers, slashing teacher education and mishandling the implementation of Curriculum for Excellence."

For his part, Russell countered that it is "the UK Government" that "has already cut the Scottish Government's budget by over £500 million in 2010/11—the first real terms cut since devolution" and boasted that "education has been protected by the SNP Government, with councils reporting planned increases of 2.6 percent this year."

SNP Members of the Scottish Parliament and activists joined the EIS march, seeking to utilise it as a means of justifying its call for greater devolved powers for Scotland and eventual separation from the UK.

There could not be a more grotesque spectacle than this spat between two thieves over which has committed the worst crimes. The reality is that Labour is intent on slashing public spending on vital services such as education and the SNP is more than ready to do the same north of the border.

Cuts are being imposed in education at every level.

Just prior to the EIS march, the faculty at Edinburgh University was notified on March 4 that their positions were at risk of being cut. This is due to the SNP minority government in Edinburgh scaling back funding for teacher training programmes even as it claims to be reducing class sizes in Scottish schools. Across the higher education sector, teacher training places are to be cut by 40 percent next year. The announcement brought protests by students and faculty at the university, after it emerged that 12 redundancies would be confirmed as early as July.

The unions are culpable in allowing the cuts to take place. In line with its policy of collaborating in the imposition of job cuts across the country by advocating "voluntary" lay-offs, the University and College Union (UCU) complained that "so many had received the letter of redundancy", adding "The UCU really does hope to avoid any compulsory redundancy through the consultation process."

In a separate development, Edinburgh University revealed that talks had begun with the Edinburgh College of Art regarding a possible merger. The Art College, which has had an independent existence for over 250 years, could become part of the university by 2012. Such a move would almost inevitably lead to redundancies.

Cuts have been announced at Dundee University, where the English literature programme will lose its renaissance literature course. Wider cuts are being

prepared, with the Principal Peter Downs declaring in the staff magazine that the university confronted “hard choices.”

As well as the hundreds of job cuts announced by major universities in Scotland, there are reductions in funding for schools being imposed by local authorities controlled by the SNP or Labour—more often than not in coalition with the Liberal Democrats. Fife council has outlined plans to cut 100 staff from its education department and Edinburgh City council is preparing to announce redundancies. A recent report from the main teaching union told of teachers being forced to purchase supplies for their students due to funding cuts.

Since the SNP took power in 2007, teacher numbers have declined by 2,500, and classroom support staff suffered over 1,000 cuts. The SNP’s 2011 budget imposed a £50 million cut on education and training, and local authorities will face upwards of £200 million in cuts this year. This will have a direct effect on primary and secondary education, as councils increase efforts to reduce costs across all of their services.

In two of the most prominent cases, Lib Dem-SNP controlled Edinburgh City Council is seeking to close a budget shortfall of £90 million, and Labour-controlled Glasgow City Council has a £30 million budget gap.

As to the SNP’s pledge ahead of the 2007 Holyrood election that every child starting school would be in classes capped at 18 pupils for the first three years, no legislation is yet in force. Edinburgh City Council has said in reality it is facing class sizes as high as 30 in primary one from the summer.

The cuts in Scotland parallel those being carried out in the rest of Britain. At least 6,000 further and higher education posts have been eliminated over the past year, and the Labour government at Westminster has revealed plans to cut funding for higher education by close to £1 billion in the coming three years. Although the administration in Edinburgh has refrained from imposing cuts on the budget for universities and colleges directly, this is certain to change as Scotland’s overall budget will fall by 8 percent, or £2.5 billion.

These cuts are merely a foretaste of a much broader assault being prepared on public spending in the coming period. Since power was devolved to Holyrood in 1999, successive administrations have been able to offer minor concessions due to the favourable budget settlement enjoyed by Scotland under the Barnett

formula. Measured by head of population, Scotland receives funds one and a half times greater than England and Wales. But this is set to change. One example of the plans under consideration was outlined in a report released late last year by the Centre for Public Policies for Regions (CPPR), which recommended that the education budget be slashed by £600 million.

Recent statements from government representatives suggest that the SNP is preparing to impose some form of tuition fee for higher education—which it has previously opposed. Russell, speaking recently at the National Union of Students (NUS) Scottish conference, called for a “long-term and sustainable funding solution—a uniquely Scottish solution—to funding universities in the future.” This could only be achieved by a “full debate” on the issue of funding higher education.

Calls for a full inquiry in to the funding of universities have been embraced in recent months by the advocates of a re-imposition of tuition fees, including a growing number of university principals across the country. The report later this year by Lord Brown into the funding situation for universities in England and Wales is expected to propose the lifting of the current £3,000 cap on tuition fees. Charging fees of up to £7,000 per year could be permitted, although some elite universities are pushing for the upper limit to be set much higher.



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