

Catalyst

Grants NOT Fees!

The World Trade Organisation's General Agreement On Trades and Services (GATS), where government is forced to create an 'equal playing field' through the removal of 'barriers to trade' in the services industries has long been the subject of the anti-capitalist lefts' rhetoric and polemic. Barriers cited by the WTO include "the existence of government monopolies and high subsidisation of local institutions". It is in this context of attacks on public services that the Irish Government has raised the student registration fees by 70% from 396 euros to 670 euros.

As his first significant moves as the new Education Minister, Noel Dempsey also increased the standard maintenance grant by a pathetic 5%, an increase to 2,510 euro a year. A rise barely covering the projected rate of inflation for 2002, and going no where near tackling the huge discrepancy between the real costs of attending college and the amount received by students on the grant. It is perhaps the most cynical aspect of Dempsey's move that he has attempted to disguise it in a facade of social inclusion. Increasing and extending the 'top up grant' for more disadvantaged students, on the same day that he has almost doubled the student registration fee. The reintroduction of tuition fees in Britain upon the election of New Labour was also dressed up in the rhetoric of wealth distribution and social inclusion.

In the framework of GATS, free fees for undergraduates and the grant are defined as discriminatory payments and are being slowly phased out as governments across the world implement GATS. USI is correct to point out that Dempsey's move represents an attempt to 'introduce fees by the back door'. Students in Spain have already fallen victim to the extensive intrusion of the private sector into education, the right wing government's introduction of the LOU saw the re-introduction of full

fees and a marked decline in the number of students from working class backgrounds attending college. European student groups, networking over the Internet and outside the official structures of their unions if needs be, have been engaged in a 'Hot Summer Of Protest' against attacks on education. In one example of the anger among continental students, on June 18 following a wave of occupations and decentralised protests 8,000 students stormed the regional parliament of the German state of North-Rhein-Westphalia. Student blocs have been organised at the past two EU Summits, as opposition rises to the EU Commissions implementation of the Bologna Declaration of 1998, which seeks to pave the way to a uniform system of higher education, all in the vein of privatisation.

Education in Ireland too is facing into a period of major restructuring and change. In UCD, students that have failed exams can no longer repeat externally, instead they have to pay full fees to repeat the year. Our Arts faculty has been split in two to facilitate courses geared towards the needs of business. Despite claims made by successive governments about improving access to third level education, not a lot has changed since the abolition of college fees in 1995. The refusal to significantly extend the income threshold determining if a student receives the grant means only 37 per cent of university students and 47 per cent of students in ITs receive financial support from the government. The composition of those attending third level education hasn't seen any change despite the creation of 'free education' at third level. In fact the past decade has only seen a 0.02% rise in the number of disadvantaged students reaching third level. It is a harsh reality, that those with most to gain from campaigning and fighting for a decent accessible education system are not those already in third level education but the hundreds of thousands of secondary students and young workers who will never reach third



level because of the financial impediments maintained by successive governments. The attitude that dominates many of those holding office in student unions is that concern should not stretch beyond those already in college. Any attempt to broaden the horizon of student unions is met with declarations that they are strictly apolitical bodies, with a leadership more concerned with maintaining services on campus, than tackling the issues really affecting students. Those in the positions of most influence in Unions are only too willing to admit their complete ignorance of issues like GATS and privatisation and when forced to act will dismiss and white-wash concern as the paranoia of the loony left.

The Skilbeck report issued by the Higher Educational Authority a number of months ago gives ominous signals for the direction of Irish Education, recommending among many things the abolition of the grant, re-introduction of tuition fees, increased links with industry and increased use of money from the private sector to fund education. A similar move by the government in 72-73 when the attendance fees were raised from £87 to £105 led to a weeklong occupation of Earlsfort Terrace. A rise in capitation fees in the early 90s also led to a 100 strong-

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attempted occupation of the UCD Administration building. The Skilbeck report didn't cause many in leading student union positions to bat an eyelid. The main organised criticism in UCD came from the SIPTU Education Branch and not from the student union.

Members of Socialist Alternative, along with other student activists were involved in setting up the Campaign For Free Education. In order to effectively challenge the direction education is being dragged in by the political establishment and big business, we need a grass roots network of ordinary students capable of acting on two fronts. Not only must we act against this reintroduction of fees, but we must also reclaim our Student Unions for ordinary students. For far too long they have served only as career ladders for hacks. It is time the redundant politics of the current leadership of UCD SU locally and USI nationally were challenged.

This challenge can only come through a mass campaign of students on the ground. We must tackle the very structures which isolate and alienate elected representatives from ordinary students. The only way to defeat attacks from the government on education and the standard of student living is through mass action. We have been silent for far too long. Now our anger, needs to translate into action. We need to stop begging the government to throw back the few measly crumbs that they have already taken away, instead we must demand a far larger share of the cake. Our vision of education has to be a lot stronger and far-reaching than simply a return to the status quo of Thursday July 18th before this hike was unveiled. We need to campaign for an end to all financial discrimination in education and for a genuine, open and accessible public education system for all.

Bush Gets Ready For War

George Bush's speech to the UN two weeks ago, cynically exploiting the memory of September 11th to cow opposition, signals that

his government is determined to make war on Iraq. Bush has been forced to tone down his bullish stance towards the UN by US public opinion, which remains opposed to unilateral US action against Iraq. But his speech left no doubt that he intends to launch an attack with or without the approval of the international community.

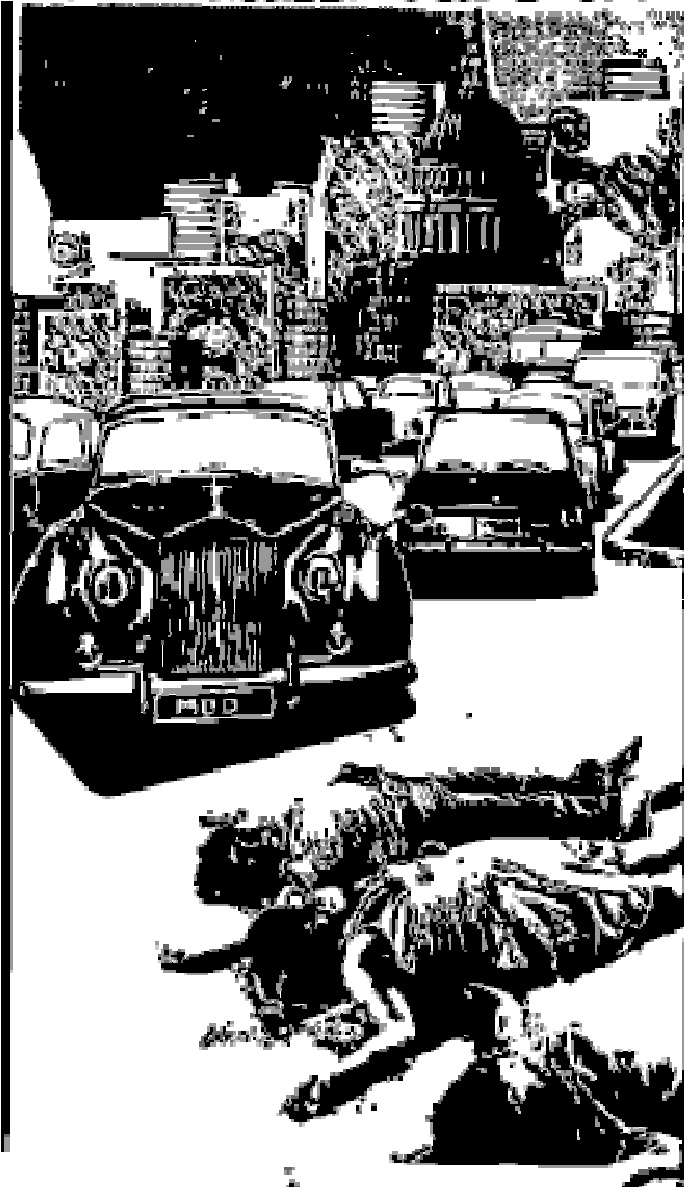
The Bush administration claims that the credibility of the UN will be fatally undermined if it fails to take action against Saddam Hussein. This touching concern is a recent development; when Bush refused to attend the UN anti-racism summit last year, refused to sign the Kyoto treaty, and obstructed UN action against Israel, he showed no such interest in the "credibility" of the UN.

Neither Bush nor Tony Blair have produced evidence to substantiate their claims; there is no proof that Iraq possesses the weapons of mass destruction referred to by the two leaders, let alone that Saddam intends to use them. Nor is there any prospect of objective evidence ever materialising. Donald Rumsfeld and Paul Wolfowitz have both insisted that the responsibility for analysing intelligence data lies with them, not professionals in the CIA. In other words, whatever information the CIA possesses about Iraq will be manipulated to justify war.

It takes little effort to see why the US government is so anxious to overthrow Saddam. Saudi Arabia, hitherto the closest western ally in the Arab world, is seen by the US as dangerously unstable; there is fear that the House of Saud may go the same way as the Shah of Iran, even with US troops based in the country to protect the regime. Securing oil supplies by smiting the Iraqi dictator and establishing a permanent US presence in the country is seen as a matter of urgency by Washington. It would also send a lesson to other Arab governments that the US can do what it wants to disobedient states.

Contrary to some naive hopes, there is no prospect of real democracy being established in a post-war Iraq. The record of US military intervention, in the Middle East and elsewhere, shows that where the US army goes, democracy rarely follows. Washington has always made clear its preference: a pro-western military dictatorship in Baghdad (just like the pre-Kuwait Saddam regime).

WAR IS MURDER FOR PROFIT



Opponents of war in Ireland should focus their attention on our own government. With a seat on the UN Security Council, Ireland has the opportunity to make a difference. But the record of Bertie Ahern, who allows US warplanes to land in Shannon airport, is not promising.

Eco Summit Ends In Failure.

The recent Earth summit in Johannesburg provided further evidence that the world's political elites cannot be trusted to deal with the threat of environmental destruction. The scale of the danger facing our planet as a result of uncontrolled industrial growth is now acknowledged by everyone (bar a few pseudo-scientists in the pay of the oil industry), yet ten years after the first Earth summit in Rio no effective action has been taken.

Predictably, the US government was the main villain. Following his rejection of the Kyoto treaty, George Bush thumbed his nose at the rest of the world by refusing to attend. His representatives obstructed progress at the summit at every turn. They tried to exclude reference to global warming and the need to reduce emissions from the resolutions of the summit. They argued against any binding commitment to alleviate poverty in the "Third World". Unsurprisingly, Colin Powell was loudly jeered by delegates when he spoke; he claimed that the US was fully committed to protecting the environment, to general derision.

The EU took the high moral ground on many issues, but it remains to be seen whether its leaders will have the guts to abolish the Common Agricultural Policy. This bloated subsidy regime, which protects European farmers from competition and allows them to dump their produce in African countries, is one of the main culprits for extreme poverty in the developing world

Many African delegates argued that the summit was being hijacked to promote the agenda of the World Trade Organisation. In many ways Johannesburg was a follow-on to the last meeting of the WTO in Doha. At one point the summit delegates were five minutes away from voting to give WTO trade rules precedence over environmental legislation, before the Ethiopian representative made a powerful speech which swayed the mood of the hall. Ireland, of course, had no such positive contribution to its credit. Bertie Ahern urged the delegates to increase aid to developing countries while his government slashed its own development budget.

With such an irresponsible group of leaders dominating the political establishment, it was a relief to see protests outside the summit organised by radical groups in South Africa, notably the Landless People's Movement. Ecologists are increasingly coming to the conclusion that in order for real change to occur, pressure will have to be brought from outside the official channels of politics. The sooner this lesson is digested, the sooner we can start repairing the damage done to our planet.



Vote No To Nice!

The E.U. is committed to a far reaching programme of privatisation. The Nice Treaty is a step in this direction.

Nice changes Article 133 of the Treaty of Europe, so that the unelected European Commission gains the power to impose "uniformity in measures of liberalisation". Liberalisation being the polite way of saying privatisation. The E. U. is committed to the introduction of GATS, the General Agreement on Trade in Services, which is the long way of saying privatisation.

Under the World Trade Organisation' GATS treaty, practices which 'discriminate' against foreign businesses in favour of native companies (including the state owned public sector) are outlawed, this can include, in the context of third level education, grants, free fees and any state subsidy to universities or colleges (if they are not equally applicable to all private education).

To privatise a public service, first of all it'S got to be making a profit, to attract investment, so you have to have people paying for it. (see, for instance, new 'registration' fees, higher ESB prices and the bin charges). Privatisation's child is two tier services, with the capital of private investment being poured in to develop services that provide for whoever can pay for them while an under-funded and over-crowded state owned service must provide for the rest.

The Nice Treaty excludes, for the moment, E.U. wide 'harmonisation' in the privatisation of education, however it makes the E.U., rather than individual governments, responsible for negotiations with 'international organisations' i.e. the W.T.O. Thus individual governments can hold their hands up and claim that they are being forced into introducing the W.T.O' privatisation assault.

As such it is a step forward in the E.U'S and the W.T.O'S education privatisation programme, and that is their goal, the EU's chief negotiator for GATS, Robert Madelin, describes the education sector as "ripe for liberalisation".

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This kind of liberalisation has already had a disastrous effect on education in countries like Spain and Italy. Instead of opening up the colleges, privatisation closes them further to the vast majority of society.

There, grants and subsidies to third level institutes have been slashed left, right and centre. Students are now forced to pay full tuition fees regardless of background.

Irish students recently fell victim to the government's attempts to pave the way to liberalisation with a 'reintroduction of fees through the back door' disguised as an increase in registration costs.

If the Skilbeck Report issued by the Higher Educational Authority is anything to go by, we can expect attempts to scale back the grant as well as more links with industry.

All this is a reflection of the big business agenda driving the E.U., which as well as 'liberalisation' also makes for an education system increasingly geared towards satisfying the labour/research demands of corporations.

The big business lobby group behind the E.U. is the European Round Table of Industrialists (E.R.T.) which includes the bosses of Carlsberg, Fiat, Vodafone, Volvo, Philips, Nokia, Renault, Pirelli, Shell, BP and the Smurfit group.

According to one of its members, Gerhard Cromme, of the ThyssenKrupp corporation, there is a 'culture of laziness' in the European education system where students take liberties to pursue subjects not directly related to industry'.

Resistance has already hit education systems across Europe. For instance, in May and June students across Germany went on strike, demonstrated, blocked roads and briefly occupied a TV station and the buildings of the ruling SPD party, in response to the introduction of fees for what was formerly free education.

Likewise Spain has seen massive demonstrations, and the mass protests at E.U. Summits in Brussels (last December), and Seville (June) have had 'student blocs'.

We don't think that a vote will stop this, after all we saw how much that was worth when the first rejection of Nice was binned. The only way to get anything is with mass direct action as described above, however as a first step, as a protest against the policies of the E.U., vote no.

The European Union, complete with "neutral" Ireland, is setting up a military wing – the Rapid Reaction Force. Land, sea and air forces from 14 E.U. states, a total of 60,000 plus troops (and 200,000 plus in reserve).

Britain and France plan to give a vast array of weaponry to the project including combat planes, nuclear submarines, war ships and aircraft carriers. It also involves a layer of bureaucracy with a E.U. military committee which includes Irish army officers. The plan is to have it all ready by next year. Of course it's all just peacekeeping, right? Wrong, and don't ask me, ask the chief of the Irish defence forces, Lieutenant General Colm Managan, "We are at a watershed in the evolution of the defence forces. We are moving from a garrison-based organisation ...to having a significant part of the defence forces prepared to deploy with a rapid reaction force for European operations." Irish Times 15/11/00)

Now 'watershed' means only a turning point in my dictionary and does not mean more of the same something like Lebanon.