

## **Communities, Austerity and Devolution: there is a better way**

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Community Workers have historically been positioned between the state and the community. Even at the best of times this can be an interesting place. The election of the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition to Westminster and the global economic crisis has increased the tension. Whilst some might try, it will be difficult to hide from the life changing austerity that is planned. Pulling the blanket of 'values free' community learning and development over your head is not an answer when communities and workers are under attack.

More importantly we need to consider how critical learning and action can assist those that wish to respond. A starting place for this educational project is recognising the complexity, and the clarity, of the situation we are in. Britain's biggest trades union, Unite, tells us that 'cuts kill communities'. Our prime minister tells us that cuts will liberate our communities and 'the Big Society' will ensure that we get through these hard-times together. There would appear to be a contradiction here. It is this contradiction that community workers should be focussed on. This article discusses how we might respond. The possibilities are considered in the context of devolution and the Conservative/Liberal Coalition's austerity plans. All those that think that community education is not a political endeavour should look away now.

Why would some avert their eyes? It is important to acknowledge that there has been a systematic attempt to dilute, ignore and reject community work's role in progressive social change. Some using the language of non-directive 'neutrality' have suggested that those that use Marxism, feminism or environmental justice as methodological tools to understand society and their work are at best misguided. Others simply think we should be locked-up. This ideological onslaught from teachers and practitioners, who would characterise themselves as non-ideological, if they used such language, has been relentless. Our profession has all but been reduced to a process. Critical thinking is thought of as quaint or dangerous, so for some it might be an up-hill struggle just to get started. But I think we should give such community workers the benefit of a 'second chance to learn'. The reality of endless measurement of pointless outcomes has the potential to get through to anyone. New managerialism's constant attempts to turn us all into accountants, mini-managers and customer relations operatives can actually politicise us. But that is if we have somewhere to go.

So, what is to be done? Some will suggest that resistance needs to take place at a British, European or even global level because of the nature of the economy. This part of the picture should not be ignored. 'Cross border' forms of solidarity that address austerity afford valuable learning, encouragement and support. This article does not wish to ignore these aspects but concentrates more local starting points. Like the

Scottish Parliament and its elections in May 2011, for which community workers have a role in supporting political awareness. Who people vote for is a matter of importance and personal choice, although it is not simply a matter for sitting around waiting for the polls to open.

Action to resist particular cuts to services in specific communities is important. But this cannot be divorced from winning the battle in wider society. Otherwise one geographical area will be 'saved' at the expense of another; older people will be reprieved at a cost to recovering addicts; the language of the deserving and undeserving poor will be employed. This does not mean that defensive campaigns should not be undertaken. They are essential and can give inspiration to others if the experience is shared in the spirit of solidarity, rather than competition. But beyond the immediate and the local who are the potential allies?

### **Finding a Party**

Will the political parties help? New Labour in Scotland appears to have already sorted out this potential conflict. They will support the needs of 'those that play by the rules' and 'hard working families'. This is not about working class respectability it is about demonising parts of society and a large part of a generation that continue to be on the receiving end of policies initiated by Labour and taken forward by the Tories and their friends.

For Ed Miliband's Labour in Westminster, opposition does funny things. A calculation will be made on how reliable public sector workers and service users are as potential voters in the next UK general election. This will be measured against the voting potential of other societal constituencies.

In Scotland Iain Gray's lackluster leadership will attempt to exploit links with communities, real and imagined. Campaigning sharpened by Jim Murphy and others may have a draw-in for some, particularly in the west. But in Glasgow and Lanarkshire it is Labour that is making the cuts. Many during the Blair years grew away from the communities and workplaces that have traditionally supported them. Voters may continue to look to Labour to ward off the spectre of Thatcherism in Cameron guise. But in the run-up to the Holyrood election will 'the natural party of government' be anything more than a superficial advocate of resistance?

At present many voters seem unsure that the Nationalists are the best defence against the London Coalition. The potential for greater fiscal powers may come just in time to make things close. The SNP Government initially called for cuts to be delayed. This is not enough, if their motivation is only to hold-off the onslaught until after the election. Continued public expenditure could ensure Scotland moves towards sustained recovery. But the SNP's record is mixed, 'neoliberalism with a heart'. SNP has been arguably better than New Labour on welfare provision, but holds a similar liking for the banks. The SNP have sought greater economic levers to create a more business friendly environment. Strong public service provision is not automatic if we end-up with another SNP government after May.

The Tories of course, are using the crisis as a cover for cuts; their prejudice towards the public is inherent. Their Liberal partners look like doing little to stop the carnage.

Their role in providing constitutional cover for the Tories in Scotland needs to be exposed. The Coalition has nothing to offer any progressive alliance that promotes social justice despite the rhetoric of the big society. Thatcher turning-up on the steps of Downing Street and Cameron announcing 'life-changing' cuts was not just a symbolic gesture to the Tory right. It is an indication that David plans to employ the language of civic patriotism in a similar way to Margaret's authoritarian populism. Time and again we will be told 'we are all in this together'. Community education needs to use stories of real lives to challenge this unreality. We are not all in it together. Have you tried chappin' on the door of the super-rich and asking for a shot of a pint o' milk.

### **Building alliances**

The importance of 'institutional sponsors' (those that get into governmental 'power') in defending public services should not be understated. Communities and public service users need to be aware of the dynamics of their relationships to all political parties. But they need to assert their own vision of society first. This requires the building of alliances not just for the immediate interests, important as this is, but for all that oppose a world of speculation, debt and inequality. Those that put people, planet and place before profit are potentially formidable if united. Viable working class communities need to be understood as central to our society: one that benefits the majority and not just an acquisitive and uncaring minority.

The problem is that, by their nature, alliances, including alliances within and between communities, are difficult to keep together. Particularly given the dominant narrative that tells us individualism is good and collectivism is bad, or at least a bit sad and outdated. This argument is powerful. The reality however is more complex. People do make use of community assets and rely on local public services. People's experience of these services however is not always positive. Managerialism and consumerism have undermined an ethos of quality provision and participation. For this reason any serious alliance needs to involve the users and participants not as a tactic but as an essential part of challenging the mythology and impact of the Coalition's plans. Many public services are essential to people's lives and well-being. Drawing out people's experience of collectively resourced quality services is part of challenging an ideology that only values things that can be individually bought and exploited. Here again, critical community work has a role to play.

Opposition to the budget saw union members demonstrate, with or without the backing of their union's leadership. In some places this included community workers. However actual resistance the cuts and requires the building of local networks that can organise in and across work-places, communities and different parts of the country. Actions like this, draws together trades unionists, voluntary and community groups. But we also need to describe the kind of public services we need in the kind of communities we want to see. This means organising discussions with people about what roles they want to play in this. It means working with the voluntary sector in a way that is complementary and avoids it becoming the repository of shifts in responsibility without shifts in resources. Public accountability must also be retained. By definition, 'co-production' - the joint design and running of services by workers and users - needs to be on a human scale. This sort of radicalism can challenge the 'big society' of weak welfare, low taxes and high inequality. But winning will require

more than being self-righteous. We need to make services popular and responsive in working class communities and to the diverse range of people that use them. Reminding all that public services provide the back-bone of a sustainable economy. Defending the public needs to be seen as part of a culture of resistance.

**There is a better way**

It looks like being a long campaign. There is not, as yet, an adequate infrastructure for the alliances of unions and those that support public services, although anti-cuts alliances are starting to organise in several cities. The economic crisis that is propelling the cuts agenda has national, European and global dimensions. But without descending into competing localism; the region, the city and the community are places where the fight back needs to be built. The defence of community centres, schools and health centres are obvious mobilising points. Defending the jobs of PCS Civil Servants based in large offices can be done by highlighting the impact on the local economy. More difficult is responding to the non-filling of posts, the impact of 'voluntary' redundancies and the withdrawal of grant funded projects. Here it is down to the unions which resist the onslaught. Joint shops stewards committees and the role of Trades Councils, where they retain local strength, are once again becoming important. The STUC is now developing its campaigning role, this is hugely welcome. Action to build trust and co-operation needs to be ongoing.

Cameron and his allies will attempt to enlist consumers and the voluntary sector to undermine the defence of public services. Experience of inefficiency or unresponsiveness will be employed to justify change. Arguments will be deployed that suggest that there is no alternative to making cuts without raising taxes. This mobilisation will be connected to an articulation of the future that suggests the 'natural' order of a society based on huge inequality. Of course the Coalition will use the language of international competitiveness and growth: a return to business as usual.

We need a country where citizens are participants in public services. With taxes used to fund quality services and promote redistribution. But to achieve this we need to be realistic about our strengths and the challenges. Putting together 'No to Cuts' banners may be easier than building a network of connected alliances across Britain that force the Coalition to retreat. We need to do both. Strikes, stoppages and occupations should be employed as tactics that involve users, rather than alienate them, in a campaign that includes huge numbers of people. The task is enormous but the alternative is the increasing barbarism of the market. Alliances that work towards a different sort of world are essential. And who knows, we may find a better way.