

The Bow School Campaign A few of us were intensively involved in this campaign from its inception for a period of 6 months to its (temporary?) demise. We were seen in the campaign as individuals, as teachers, students, as 'nice people', as hotheads or hard workers or mediators - sometimes even as socialist individuals. We had no context in which we could work out the politics we were bringing to that situation, so we were often confused on a number of levels. We were taken up with the weekly developments and didn't have to explain what we were doing to a larger group. This might have made us think more about our involvements and made us clearer about the kinds of things we could do in the situation.

The campaign was regarded as a complete loser from the beginning. This has advantages because it meant that local councillors and CP couldn't make any capital out of it. The parents had to do everything themselves and were told they were fighting a hopeless campaign. The campaign regularly involved about 30-50 of the most active and militant parents. The weekly meetings were very open. This was easier to maintain because no councillors or teachers would really identify themselves with it. (originally some IS people were involved as part of a group called 'people concerned with better education in East London' - they were all for having a committee. People got pissed off with them, especially when they did a lot of the talking at the meetings, but did little of the work. They assumed it would be a good idea for them to be the 'officers' - it was partly in reaction to this we retained an open and democratic campaign.)

Only by going to the labour party headquarters did people realise how condescending and useless it was to work through the labour party. This experience was more important than anything we could have said. Though for some parents this meant we had to 'go to the top' and appeal to Mrs Thatcher. It was through the experience of the campaign that the more militant parents felt pissed off with the 'self-appointed' leaders - the parents who were more in with the school and more convinced that it was important to 'put a good case' to Mrs Thatcher. This came to some kind of crunch when the kids wanted to organise some kind of strike in the school. The more militant parents went along to give their support, while others stayed away and even informed the school of what was planned.

Often we who were working in the campaign, while sympathising with the more militant parents, got trapped into playing a mediating role, feeling we had to 'hold the campaign together'. We were afraid of taking sides too openly. Because we were not part of a political group we lost sight of who we were as revolutionaries - 'saving the school' became all important, especially as we came to feel what this meant to parents - more important than developing the contradictions of the situation. We were diffident about pushing some direct actions, because it was parents and kids who would 'suffer the consequences'. Our lack of clarity and analysis about the kinds of demands and actions that could best develop the struggle. We knew the East End was under attack as people are being pushed out.

But we were confused about what it means to 'save' this school, with its authoritarianism, its shitty buildings etc, beyond the idea that the people of Bow wanted their own school and didnt see why it should go because the ILEA said so. We were surprised that the kids were ready to fight for it and by their attachment to it. This had something to do with it being a small school, where kids knew each other.

As part of a group we could have been making our total perspective clearer from the start. People would have challenged us more readily and we would have said more about who we were - why should kids need to slog through this shit to get the kinds of jobs they get under capitalism? - What are these schools for - our needs or the bosses? etc) We could talk more confidently about the attack on the working class. We could have been a lot clearer about our support of the most militant parents and the kids and ~~more~~ put more effort into their struggle (though it is always going to be difficult to work with parents and kids at the same time?). We tended to think we had to support reformism where it was voted on - we'd have had a better basis for backing out of it if we had explained more clearly what we were doing in the campaign. This is easier if our involvement in the campaign was a part of a more general involvement in the politics of the area. We could have more confidently challenged the idea of 'asking' the ILEA for what we wanted - and posed the question of taking it - eg by occupying the school during the holidays.

Whether the campaign 'failed' or 'succeeded' in terms of keeping the school open was not the question - rather the question is the ability of the people in the campaign to carry out organising together and to develop their autonomous struggle - to refuse to be schooled where and how they tell us and then to take the campaign beyond the school. It was hard to build upon the campaign and to generalise it because people saw us as 'interested in education' - so wouldn't naturally think of contact -ing us in other struggles. If we had presented ourselves as more of a political grouping, then we would have been more able to develop the relationships we had built up. A group that more militant parents may have wanted to come to could have helped parents and kids talk things out - to deepen their own understanding of the situation, to help them see the struggle in all its fronts and in a historical context and help them spread the struggle to other areas (this was only done on a personal basis by bringing people from the Schools campaign to the Roplar Hospital Campaign). It isn't so clear how this all might have happened - what is clear is something about the politics of 'campaigns'. So easily you get drawn into the groupings and it becomes hard to ask more general questions. So easily you slip into accepting reformism because this is what the 'majority' tend to be thinking in terms of. It becomes hard to work and develop with those parents who felt the need for something different, because there is no easy context to get together.