

Dr. Kalbir Shukra

Speaking for In Defence of Youth Work

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Thank you for this opportunity to speak to you as a London based activist in the In Defence of Youth Work Campaign. I would like to use this time to contextualise youth resistance to the government's austerity agenda and then you will hear directly from one of the young activists.

The seriousness of the situation is clear from the fact that youth services are being destroyed. Indeed, the youth service may be the first public service to completely disappear, with 3000 youth service jobs expected by unions to be lost by June. In some areas, whole youth services are being closed down or bought out, which means that any future services for young people are likely to be commissioned to private enterprise, mutuals or voluntary sector. The first commissioning has been for the new National Citizens Service. It is being piloted this summer as an eight week programme to turn 16 year olds into responsible, engaged citizen volunteers in their local areas. It is similar to the new community organising programmes aimed at turning adult volunteers into community activists ready to train up yet more volunteers.

At IDYW we have been critical of how youth work changed under New Labour, but are horrified that existing community and youth work jobs and services are being replaced by these schemes. What we support is the participation and growing activism of young people in a defence of their services and reshaping their worlds in opposition to austerity.

We saw a resurgence of youth activism in Britain towards the end of 2010. It was largely a reaction to the Coalition's austerity budget. The activism placed young people and their political engagement centre stage and blew away the idea that young people are not interested in politics. We saw a whole raft of university occupations, College demonstrations, school student walk-outs and campaigns to defend youth facilities. The campaigns hurtled young people into the headlines as the new civil rights activists and defenders of hard won rights and services.

Side by side with these depictions, young people were dubbed 'anarchists' and 'criminals'. Media images of falling fire extinguishers, breaking glass and flying metal barriers were accompanied by descriptions of young people out of control and hell bent on wreaking havoc on the streets and disrespecting establishment figures. We saw young people demonised for

raising their voices against tuition fee hikes, the end of the EMA and closure of specific youth centres.

So, at the same time as complaining that young people need to be more engaged as citizens, the establishment was threatened when those voices took to the streets. So much so that young people were prevented from protesting.

Especially when young people asserted their rights to occupy public spaces such as the roof of Millbank Tower, the Green outside Parliament, university campuses, city banks and the streets around us. And especially when they were organising outside of official NUS, TUC and other agency parameters.

When they did so, young people were obstructed and prevented by police officers on horseback, with dogs or batons. When the young people left, many took away souvenirs in the form of bruises and blood soaked clothes. One of them was dragged out of his wheelchair and another ended up undergoing brain surgery.

Buildings had to be protected and – to be fair - senior police officers did issue advance warnings on the television to parents that if they allowed their young people to demonstrate, they might find them hurt or arrested. Police were able to deliver on that promise and so we saw both collective and individual punishments meted out to those who took to the streets.

Now in youth work, we are all for outdoor education. But some young people got a bit more outdoor air than they were anticipating when they were ‘kettled’ and the police insisted on hosting them longer than the protestors wanted to stay. Other young people got to learn just how fast horses can charge – especially into crowds.

Kettling was highly criticised and this week we hear that the courts have deemed kettling to be illegal unless used as a last resort. No wonder at the demo in March we saw the introduction of targeted kettling. The TUC led march was hardly policed at all but young people occupying trafilgar square were beaten and those in Fortnum and Masons arrested. As a result, mobilisations have become highly charged experiential crash courses for today’s young people and their families.

But young people are smart! They drew on their familiarity with digital technology to outwit the police. Twitter and Facebook allowed people to get networked into what has been called ‘open-source activism’. This is when social networking is used to mobilise loose networks of activists. Some university occupiers set up a software (SUK) that helps you avoid getting kettled or arrested by transmitting information about police deployment. Young people threw out the stale methods of the

old left, introduced new tactics to avoid being kettled, revamped old methods like occupations and built new people's coalitions in the face of the coalition government.

Some of the most exciting activities have been the spontaneous acts of solidarity. At one London anti-education cuts demo in January, the demonstration that was due to finish at Millbank continued seamlessly on to join the protestors at the Egyptian Embassy.

The large scale informal political education that young people and their families are undergoing echoes much of the concurrent spontaneous student activity across other parts of the world and may yet produce a broader youth social movement in the UK.

One of the big questions for us is how do we engage with it and what can we do to support it?

As far as IDYW is concerned we came together over New Labour's transformation of youth work from open ended conversations on young people's terms with the young person's interests in mind into short term targeted programmes with set outcomes. Now, under the coalition cuts, of course, short term programmes are about all that will be left. So in our opposition to austerity and cuts we are interested in

1. supporting critical perspectives that challenge the idea that austerity measures are the only answer
2. opposing the demonisation of young people and the idea that they and families should be expected to bear the brunt of the crisis.
3. supporting actions of young people, communities and youth workers to defend jobs and services
4. promoting solidarity eg. supported strikes, occupations and protests

Our struggle has been an ideological one

- its meant thinking about the sort of youth work/training that we want to be involved in.
- I think that as youth work and youth work training is inherently ideological, the political perspectives we hold informs the youth work we do
- The perspectives help us define whether we want to be about delivering social policy in management frameworks **OR** about allowing young people to think freely about the sort of world they want to live in and encouraging them to see themselves as creators of that world.

**We have taken some steps towards developing alliances and solidarity**

1. tried to counter isolation and encourage collectivism by arranging events to allow youth workers and young people to come together to identify and discuss the cuts and consider what might be done in the light of their shared experiences
2. joined a coalition led by CYWU unite that organised the Choose Youth conference in solihull in february that allowed 1000 young people to talk about how the cuts were affecting them and what they might do to resist.
  - choose youth organised a bloc for the march demonstration
  - some members of Choose youth have gone onto encourage greater lobbying of councillors and MPs
3. supported local anti-cuts campaigns as they arise such as those in Haringey and Oxford where young people have organised against youth club closures (see In Defence of Youth Work website coordinated by Tony Taylor)
4. Encouraged our supporters to organise teach-ins, local meetings and events wherever possible to bring people together

Of course, we've reached a point where after expending so much energy mobilising for the demonstration, organising

lobbies against council cuts and supporting parliamentary interventions, we're now left reflecting on next steps.

## **WHAT NOW?**

1. How do we build the social movement that is developing ?
2. What forms of organisation and activism can we support?

In my view, we have no choice but to keep up the ideological battle and step up the resistance to support all who engage in the broad social movement against austerity.

We have to keep up the battle of ideas and make it clear that there is an alternative to austerity.

1. Firstly expose the lies – over the cuts being fair and necessary.
- Make sure that blame is pinned on the causes of the problem and not the victims (migrants, young people , the unemployed, incapacity /child benefit claimants, people wanting a pension or a bus pass, trade unionists who want to defend their conditions )

**Many demons are being constructed and many more will follow.**



2. it's a matter of pinning responsibility back where it belongs – on the irrational economic system and the political system that protects it.
3. its about naming the real benefits cheats as the politicians with their expense claims, the financiers who benefited from bail outs and the corporate tax dodgers.
4. show individual problems to be the public issues that they are  
eg. when people are made homeless or jobless its not because of their personal failures in finding a job, saving up to pay rent or a badly chosen font for their CVs  
- its because of govts are making them pay for a crisis created by bankers, corporations and govts here and abroad.

### **The organisational front**

Already many unions have strike actions planned over job cuts, pensions and service cuts.

- we can engage and link those up with the experiences of young people and communities in the localities

Part of building solidarities has to involve refusing to condemn independent groups and campaigns and refusing to treat young people such as those that occupied trafalgar square as crazed hooligans.

It's impossible not to respect UK uncut for refusing to condemn the black balaclava people and for respecting their autonomy and right to protest, whether they agree with the methods or not. Especially when the authorities are terrified of a social movement they can't influence through the TUC/Labour Party

The movement's strength is its plurality and diversity but there is still a case for links between the campaigns and bringing different groups together to support each other. As people involved in social and youth work we can talk to young people about how we can best support them:

1. they might need a meeting place, or help with organising events locally and regionally where they can talk to each other about how the cuts are affecting them.
2. they might need access to information and critical perspectives
3. in any event, there is room for solidarity in the form of an old style youth work in the form of open conversations with young people together with a transparency about our own ideological standpoints.
4. One aspect that is becoming increasingly clear that we can facilitate, is help with young people knowing their legal rights and having access to sympathetic lawyers and adults who understand the issues.

Eg. There was one 12 year old who tried to organise a rally in Witney against closure of his youth club and found himself being interrogated in school by anti-terror police and no sympathetic adult present.

Eg. students occupying campuses have had to deal with university management taking them to court

Eg. job centre occupiers in Deptford have had to deal with bailiffs

5. If as trade unionists we are involved in disputes we need to ensure our struggles include and engage our service users, local communities and young citizens.
6. keep suggesting that another way, another world is possible
7. challenge any stories intended to alienate the public from the protestors .
8. We also have to speak out in opposition to the brutal treatment of people by police at the protests.
9. The hardest part is getting people to move from sentiments of solidarity to organising actively:
  - We know we have the power to transform the way the country is run because we have seen the power of uprisings in the middle east
  - I am still inspired by these and also by the activities of young people who are prepared to throw out some

of the old ways of thinking and organising that most of us have probably been a part of in the past

- in their spontaneity, young people are questioning hierarchical forms of organisation, centralisation and a single form of action
- but we still need to win the minds of many more people than we have done so far.
- And in doing so, as we move forward we need to make sure we encourage a movement that is democratic, collectivist and anti-oppressive.
- That is already happening in student occupations
- operate on democratic and participatory lines
- decisions taken in a collectivist form ensuring consensus is achieved in open meetings after deliberation
- beauty of the open meetings is that dissenting voices are heard and compromises can be reached if they are agreed to
- out of these approaches, creativity and experimental forms of protest have emerged eg. turning public places into spaces for art and education

I have heard youth workers talk about possibly occupying youth centres as they are closed down. Or occupying their MPs offices.

- While I haven't seen this happen yet, just the talk of it suggests that youth workers and communities may be driven to activism by the cuts.

Certainly lines are being drawn. Conditions are very bad and are about to become severe indeed. It's the young people's activism and the solidarities between students and lecturers at the university where I work that keeps me positive. So I urge you all to find out what is happening in your locality, youth club, student union, trade union and support the young visionaries of today.