

ALL SAINTS TO REOPEN

Three week occupation in '88 vindicated!

Middlesex management find it acceptable to cut the numbers of full time staff by 8% while hugely increasing student numbers, but even they now realise there are physical limits to how many students they can cram in to our decaying buildings.

At Enfield some seminars have had to be held in the corridor and library and many classes break the Health and Safety regulations against overcrowding. Across all the Polytechnics some 18,000 more students have been recruited than last year - that is the equivalent of two new colleges! On top of this it is rumoured more staff will leave this Christmas.

Government plans to increase student numbers have been predicted for years (they hope to double them by 2000). Yet Middlesex insisted on closing one of its largest sites, All Saints in Tottenham, in 1989. Just two years later, having been unable to sell or rent it off, they now plan to reopen it again. The buildings are now in disrepair and it will cost £1000s to reopen, much as it cost £1000s to close down and move courses to Enfield. Staff and students involved in years of protest against the closure have now been totally vindicated.

The most effective protest was the three week occupation in the summer of '88 which came close to forcing a management rethink. The action certainly delayed building work at Enfield and was one reason the move had to be postponed until the next year. Students occupied five Middlesex sites which inspired actions at other colleges and brought considerable publicity; we sent several delegations to Dover where seafarers had spent months on strike against P&O Ferries. The occupations were eventually ended by riot police at 2am but the biggest threat to the action was not so much the police but Middlesex Polytechnic Student Union.

At first the union executive supported the action but once the Polytechnic went to the courts they began to panic. This panic was encouraged by the National Union of Students who brazenly lied to students about the severity of the legal proceedings and did all

they could to try and get us out of occupation. NUS policy was then, as it is now, to stifle any student protests and wait for a Kinnock victory in the election.

MPSU executive used the same arguments that we have heard recently, that confrontation with management risks them losing our block grant and the destruction of the union. This argument always makes me wonder what point there is in having a union if it cannot confront management and defend student's interests. Of course what these bureaucrats mean by "the union" is not students' collective strength but the buildings, staff, ents, bars, catering, shops, welfare facilities etc... All these facilities are quite safe because they are vital to the Poly as it needs to compete with other colleges to attract student numbers.

Suffice to say this argument failed and the MPSU executive resorted to bussing in students from Hendon and Bounds Green, who were misinformed about the situation, in an attempt to force through a vote to abandon the action. After a heated debate they failed and the action continued. That evening was the highlight for me of the whole three weeks. A striker from Dover visited each of the occupied sites and talked about the bitter dispute with P&O.

The P&O Connection

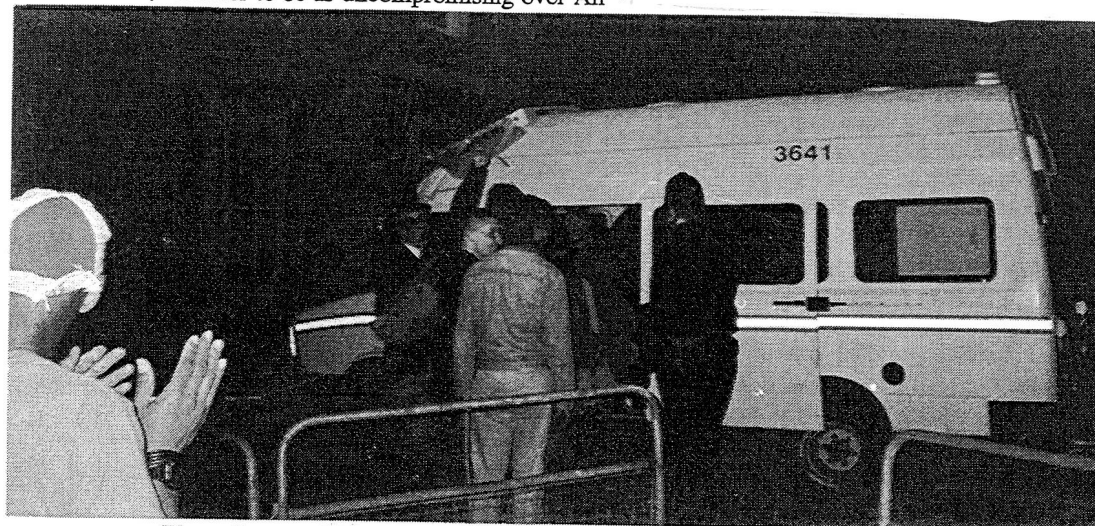
Months after the Zeebrugge ferry tragedy P&O had decided to cut staff and increase their working hours. They then sacked all those who took strike action to maintain safety standards. This dispute was not unconnected to Middlesex as the Deputy Chair of the Board of Governors of the Polytechnic was none other than a director of P&O. It seems very possible that he was advising our director to be as uncompromising over All

Saints as P&O were over the ferry dispute.

However the connections do not end there. The other NUS (the National Union of Seafarers) had tried to scupper their strike because the union was threatened with sequestration. Strikes spread to other ports and inspired action in other industries, yet the NUS called off national action no less than three times; they even hid ballot papers when they advocated all out strike action. Once the dispute was isolated to Dover it was effectively lost.

Meanwhile our NUS continued to perform a similar role as regards student protests against loans. A massive demonstration in November '88 confronted police on Westminster Bridge and brought London to a halt in the biggest traffic jam in its history. Actions such as occupations continued and we were in sight of defeating the loans proposals. However the NUS leadership then refused to call any more national demonstrations in London or to support occupations. NUS stewards repeatedly worked with the police to prevent regional marches from staging sit-downs or breaking from the agreed route. The result was that, with no real opposition, the government were easily able to replace grants with loans.

However things are far from hopeless, the success of the '88 occupation (and of the recent Quicksilver Place occupation) shows that students can break out of the straight jacket of student unions.



Riot police expel occupying students from Trent Park at two in the morning