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**Steve Cunningham and Michael Lavalette**

*Schools Out! The Hidden History of Britain's School Strikes*, London, Bookmarks, 2016, ISBN 9781910889178, £12.99, paperback.

Most years in Britain, since 1880 when schooling became compulsory, state school students have gone on strike. The longest of all strikes in British history was by students at Burston village school. Politicians, journalists and school teachers dismiss the protests as excuses to play truant, children's mindless copying and fussing about trivial matters, or young people playing at politics that they cannot understand. Striking children are assumed to be ignorant and in need of protection from being misled by sinister forces. The view that young people "cannot yet understand" justifies excluding politics from the broad school curriculum. Yet if that view were true, it is hard to see how school students can understand maths, physics, history, literature or any other complex subject. That view also supports rigid schooling with "zero tolerance" punitive discipline and strict uniform "dress codes". Young people must be firmly controlled and obey adults for their own good until by some biological magic, certainly not through practical learning at most schools, they are mature enough to cope with "adult" freedoms, such as forming and expressing political views. Many schools seem to aim to instil lifelong passive compliance in their students rather than to nurture critical, vigilant, democratic citizens.

Schools strikes have often been against the schools' impositions: violent physical punishments and "strapping" that sent some children into hospital for weeks though the authorities did not challenge the teachers; unjust petty rules; uniforms; onerous homework. There were also strikes against poor teaching, cuts to education budgets and damaging school reorganisations, as well as strikes in support of popular teachers who were unjustly sacked. The war waged by political and education authorities from the 1880s onwards against the school students they see as mindlessly rebellious is carefully documented and analysed in *Schools Out!* Right up until 1986, when at last physical punishment was banned in state schools, authorities derided school students' protests against violent assaults as delusional. It is now agreed that the authorities were wrong and the students were correct on this point. How long will it take for students' good sense and their other rights to be taken seriously?

Steve Cunningham and Michael Lavalette show how the strikes have also ranged well beyond school concerns. Students protest against wars, inequalities, closure of local industries, political corruption, and global warming. Well into the twentieth century, many students attended school part time and worked part time, when they joined with adult workers in strikes about the poor pay and conditions that kept the children as well as their parents in dire poverty. Famous strikes were led by children and young people such as the Bryant and May strike of 1400 match-girls in 1888, most of them aged under-15. They learned firsthand about techniques such as picketing, and could then transfer these into school strikes. Unrest and strikes in schools have tended to increase during times of greater poverty and social unrest, such as 1910-1914; schools strikes often align with local workers' strikes.

Strikes around the world reveal children's informed passion for justice and their immense courage, such as the youth movements that continued to campaign against Hitler despite some members being imprisoned and executed. In Birmingham Alabama in 1963, Martin Luther King called from his prison cell for public protests against racial segregation across the city and against the ban on peaceful demonstrations. There was little response until, on Thursday 2 May, 50 teenagers walked out of a Baptist church singing 'We shall overcome'. Thousands of children joined them, and 6,000 were arrested, some as young as 6-years-old. Next day thousands more joined in, facing water cannon and German shepherd dogs while the prisons were overflowing. On the third day, while the police waited outside the Baptist church, children marched out of churches around the city. By Monday, children were singing and dancing into the police wagons. On Tuesday they invaded shopping centres. Within nine days, shamed by international TV reporting and pressured by business leaders whose profits were affected, the city authorities began agreements to end segregation.

In contrast to most of the children's rights literature, *Schools Out!* repeatedly reports the political insights, courage and actions that many children share with adults, overcoming children's disadvantages of relatively less average experience, strength and organised support, such as adults have in trade unions. Through the numerous cited examples, up to the recent Scottish referendum, children and young people themselves demonstrate the urgent need for change in the formal and informal school curriculum towards realistic respect for children's ability to take part in properly informed political education. The book should be required reading for everyone involved with children's rights and education, and it offers valuable material for discussions in classes, staff rooms management and policy meetings.

Priscilla Alderson, University College London