

**Where Education is a Luxury Option**

**By**

**HTUN LIN**

(News & Letters, USA)

**With a Foreword:**

**Terminator of Educational Dreams and Aspirations?**

**By**

**Glenn Rikowski**

(University College Northampton, UK)

**Forthcoming in**

***Information for Social Change***

**Issue No.19**

**Summer 2004**

**<http://libr.org/ISC/>**

# Where Education is a Luxury Option

Htun Lin

## Foreword: Terminator of Educational Dreams and Aspirations?

Glenn Rikowski

*Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger's approach to funding the state of California's public universities shows all the hallmark of Terminator (Margaret Kubicek, I'll be broke, 2004).*

When Arnold Schwarzenegger took over as Governor of California last year he was faced with a state budget deficit of £7.8billion (\$14billion) (see Kubicek, 2004, p.18). As part of his budget reduction strategy, Schwarzenegger moved quickly to slash higher education funding. This paved the way for university administrators to impose fees hikes, increases in student accommodation charges and other 'campus-based miscellaneous fees' which the University of California (UC) and the California State University (CSU) felt compelled to bring in (Silicon Valley & San Jose Business Journal, 2003). Administrators at CSU put up their student fees by 30 per cent last academic year, and the UC by 25 per cent 'because of cuts in state funding' (Ibid.).

However, although Arnie might appear to be at the forefront as Terminator of educational dreams and aspirations, he is not alone and is merely following the herd. As a number of commentators on the higher education scene in the US have noted, many other states have pursued similar strategies for higher education to California's (see Marcus, 2003a and 2003b). As Jon Marcus notes, 'more than 1,300 of the 1,800 US universities and colleges have raised their prices by at least twice the rate of inflation in the past three years' (Marcus, 2003b). Furthermore, most US higher education institutions have been raising their fees above the inflation rate for many years.

The outcomes of this fees trend are no surprise: increased student indebtedness, the creation of a vicious market in higher education based on ability to pay, and the hardening of social class and ethnic divides. As Jamie Merisotis (2003) has pointed out, where US student fees vary from \$1,000 to \$30,000 a year student 'choice' of course and institution is significantly determined by ability to pay and ability to finance debt. Merisotis notes that 'US students are indebted at levels unthinkable on an international scale: they borrow more than \$50 billion a year' (Ibid.). The UK government's introduction of top-up or variable fees for 2006 is but a stepping stone towards the full development of a higher education fees free-for-all. The US higher education fees experience is therefore most instructive in relation to what is happening in England in particular, and increasingly for other European Union countries that are starting up a higher education fees regime.

Jon Marcus (2003b) notes that the US Congress is seriously concerned about the consequences of states attempting to shift ever-higher burdens of higher education financing onto students and their families. Republicans in the House of Representatives started working on a Bill that would limit the powers of universities to draw on Federal higher education aid funds if they increased their fees more than twice the level of inflation (Marcus, 2003b). The Senate is also working on legislation to curb higher education fees increases over double the inflation rate (Ibid.). What this

shows is that when the law of money is let loose into a public service, as with US higher education, it becomes increasingly marketised, commodified and capitalised, and then crises of various kinds develop. Higher education in the US, and increasingly England, is faced by a crisis of student debt and increasing resistance to pay the cost of higher education amongst students and their families. One student response is to work ever longer hours during term time to minimise loans and debt and to finance everyday life and study needs (see Rikowski, 2000). Some UK higher education students resort to drug dealing, stripping and prostitution to stave off debt and complete their studies, whilst others move onto depression and Prozac (see examples from Rikowski, 2000). The UK Conservative Party's policy is to limit higher education provision in absolute terms with fewer places available for entrants, which is another way of limiting educational dreams and aspirations.

The higher education fees and student debt situation in the Land of the Terminator is therefore part of a much wider, and global picture of students drawing on their own labour-power to finance their courses, both while on course and post-course when paying back loans. They are subordinated to, yet struggle against, capital in its money form for many, many years.

The dramatic student fees increase in 2003/04 in Californian public universities has been widely reported in the pages of the *Times Higher Education Supplement*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (USA), the *Guardian Higher Education* and the *Financial Times*. However, what has received much less reporting in the educational press in the UK is what effects the Terminator's budget cuts are having on high schools and libraries. Thus, Htun Lin's (2004) article on what is happening in these public services is instructive and disturbing. It is also heartening, as Lin points towards resistance to high school and library closures in Contra Costa County in California that heralds a future where information and education exist within a realm of freedom outside the orbit of capital.

Htun Lin's article first appeared in the April 2004 edition of *News & Letters* (Lin, 2004).

## **Where education is a luxury option**

**Htun Lin**

Contra Costa County in California is multi-ethnic and culturally diverse overall, yet separated into communities stretching from predominantly white conservative Concord to white affluent Walnut Creek to poor working-class ethnic minority Richmond. But the one thing all these disparate communities share is the loss of health care and schools from disappearing city budgets due to our nationwide epidemic of state fiscal crises.

Hospital and school closures follow plant closures. In Richmond, the city's budget office announced that all school libraries and sports and music programs would be eliminated because of the city's mounting debt. The Bush gang's American dream of a booming economy is turning out to be our nightmare of a jobless recovery. Productivity increases while health care and other social resources workers need such as schools, libraries, and day care, decrease or disappear.

Economists express consternation at this seemingly contradictory and "disturbing" trend. But we workers are not surprised. Why should anyone be surprised that the capitalists' gain is workers' pain?

Workers produce everything that is created under capitalism. Not just all the contents in the house, the goods and furnishings that are stolen from us, but the house itself, the governmental

institutions we use like schools, hospitals and public utilities and infrastructure. Neither government nor private companies “provide” workers with these public goods. It’s the other way around. Workers provide all these goods, public or private, by producing them with the sweat of our labor.

When they tax our income, they are taxing us for something we produce. We have already been “taxed” before the government steps in. The first real tax is when the capitalist extracts our surplus labor each work day, with each and every product we make.

Felix Martin, *News & Letters* Labor Editor for many years, once wrote that it takes less than the first hour of his work day to produce all the value needed to pay for the worker’s livelihood – to pay for his food, shelter and other expenses – to keep the worker sustained, as Marx wrote, “so that he can return to work another day.” After the first hour, after producing enough to pay for the worker’s sustenance, what the capitalist likes to call “variable cost” of labor, the rest is surplus labor.

Part of this surplus goes to the state coffers as income tax to pay for public institutions. The rest goes into the capitalist’s pocket as profit, what Marx called surplus value.

## **LEAVING WORKERS WITH ZERO**

It has turned out not so strange after all that they choose to use the strange term "variable cost" to describe our living expenses. The more they “vary” that cost of labor down, as close as possible to zero – either, for example, by speeding us up, laying us off, or taking away our health care – the higher are their profits. There is an inversely proportional relationship between our poverty and their wealth. All surplus value comes from living labor – living and breathing human workers. Machines don’t create capitalist value. People do.

In an attempt to stop the hemorrhaging of school budgets and programs, many parents who can afford to, like parents in affluent Walnut Creek, have reached into their own pockets to pay for what has already been paid for, but will otherwise disappear if we don’t pay again. It’s quickly becoming education’s version of “co-pay” burdens put on workers’ backs for health care. But poor minority working-class Richmond is in no position to use private funds to save their public schools.

## **SCHOOLS UP FOR BID**

Some school officials have even resorted to allowing commercial advertisers on school property in order to pay for sports programs. It’s a kind of hostile takeover of public sector assets by the private sector. One school principal said, “We have to think outside the box. The days of state-guaranteed educational resources are over.”

The Contra Costa Times reported that high school students demonstrated “violently” following the devastating news of the disappearance of their libraries and school programs. Many of the students’ signs read, “You cut our budget, we cut classes.” It was reported that many students then took their anger out by stomping on parked cars and looted a nearby store.

The Richmond Police Chief stated that he sent his officers with video cameras to “identify the looters and to pursue criminal prosecution against those students who committed these crimes.” He said, “We simply cannot permit this kind of behavior to continue.”

But who will investigate and identify the looters who took off with our public schools? Who will pursue the thieves who have stolen not only all the goods and furnishings in our house, but have

destroyed our house by deliberately and methodically dismantling our public schools and hospitals and other publicly owned institutions and state resources? Who will look for the criminals who have stolen from our community's past and our future?

## References

- Kubicek, Margaret (2004) I'll be broke, *Guardian Higher Education*, 20 January, pp.18-19.
- Lin, Htun (2004) Where education is a luxury option, Workshop Talks, *News & Letters*, April, Vol.49 No.3, ps.1&3. Also at: [http://www.newsandletters.org/Issues/2004/April/wst\\_April04.htm](http://www.newsandletters.org/Issues/2004/April/wst_April04.htm)
- Marcus, Jon (2003a) US tuition fee rises spark threat to aid, *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 19 September, p.14.
- Marcus, Jon (2003b) US politicians take aim at soaring fees, *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 7 November, p.10.
- Merisotis, Jamie (2003) Top-up fees are neither our saviour nor Satan, *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 19/26 December, p.16.
- Rikowski, Glenn (2000) The Rise of the Student-Worker, in: K. Moti Gokulsing and C. DaCosta (Eds.) *A Compact for Higher Education*, Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Silicon Valley & San Jose Business Journal (2003) *Fees jump for California students*, 17 July, available from: <http://www.bizjournals.com/sanjose/stories/2003/07/14/daily33.html>

**Acknowledgements:** Many thanks to Peter Hudis, News & Letters Committee, Chicago, and Chris Ford, London Corresponding Committee, News and Letters, for permission to reprint Htun Lin's article. Chris Ford is also on the editorial board of, *The Hobgoblin: A Journal of Marxist Humanism*, see: <http://members.aol.com/THEHOBGOBL/>

This article first appeared in *Information for Social Change*, Issue No.19, summer, 2004. The ISC web site and back issues of the ISC journal can be found at: <http://libr.org/ISC/>

The *News & Letters* web site can be found at: <http://www.newsandletters.org>

**Glenn Rikowski** is a Senior Lecturer in Education Studies in the School of Education at University College Northampton. His latest book, an edited collection with Dave Hill, Mike Cole and Peter McLaren, is *Marxism Against Postmodernism in Educational Theory* (2002, Lexington Books).