



# Solidarity Forever

by Griff Foley

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David Head begins his account of his work with doss house dwellers in 1970's London by confronting educators with an unpalatable fact – 'Education is invasion'. The invasion may be well meant but education, especially with disadvantaged and disempowered groups, is at best action from outside (intervention) and at worst a hostile inroad, a cultural imposition. So, should we choose to do nothing? No, says Head. The educator has a social purpose, she seeks to improve the lot of the learner, otherwise why is she there at all?

Drawing our attention to this tension, Head connects us with the tradition of education and learning that is embedded in popular movements rather than dominant institutions. He refers us to Raymond Williams' discussion of solidarity. In his first major work, *Culture and Society, 1780—1950*, Williams examines the development of key ideas in English culture during the industrial revolution. He explores whether there is a distinctive English working class culture. He concludes that there is not, at least in the narrow sense of culture as artistic and intellectual expression - much of this was annihilated or fragmented by industrialisation. But in the broader sense of culture as a whole way of life, there is a distinctive working class culture, crucially different from bourgeois culture, centring on alternative conceptions of the nature of social relationship

The bourgeois notion of social relationship is based on individualism. Society is seen as neutral, each person is free to pursue her own interests. If natural and inherited advantage generate inequality, these can be ameliorated by social reforms and by individual service. One impetus for publicly provided universal education from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century was the hope that it would modify social inequality by giving opportunity to the brightest students from any social class. Such social engineering was supported by the idea of service, 'the great achievement of the Victorian middle class'. This idea also underpinned the view that properly educated professionals and civil servants would subordinate their own interests to the larger good, in England and throughout the Empire.

Williams, coming from the working class yet encountering people who had been formed by the idea of service, tried to understand it. He respected

the altruism of the devoted 'servants' he encountered, yet rejected their conception of service because it maintained the status quo and denied equity to the people who he had grown up with, 'whose lives were governed by the existing distributions of property, remuneration, education and respect'. The 'real personal unselfishness' of those trained to serve existed within an unjust 'larger selfishness' which presented itself as the natural order. Williams found that he could not in conscience, when invited by means of his education and position (he became a professor in English literature at Cambridge University), join an establishment of which he radically disapproved.

And so we come to the contrasting notion of solidarity, which as Williams notes, in the English context was forged in the actions and institutions of the working class. We can add now, fifty years later, that this idea also came alive in other social movements, - in the women's movement, and in struggles for national liberation, for example. To be in solidarity with others is to stand with them, to feel, and act on, a sense of mutual responsibility. Working class culture is social, it is about relationship. At its heart is what Williams called 'the basic collective idea, and the institutions, manners, habits of thought and intentions which proceed from this'.

Which notion one subscribes to, service or solidarity, is partly a result of experience. But it is also a choice. As the old union song puts it, 'Whose side are you on?' Williams could have repressed his conscience and joined the academic establishment. Or in a radically different context, at roughly the same time in history, Amilcar Cabral, an agronomist in Guinea-Bissau, could have enjoyed the benefits which accrued to him as an indigenous civil servant in a Portuguese colony. Instead, Cabral and other educated middle class indigenes chose to, as he graphically put it, 'commit suicide as a class' and stand with their people against the coloniser, first going to gaol for their commitment, then fighting a successful war of liberation.

It is this popular tradition of solidarity that many adult educators continue to articulate, some in inchoate and indirect ways, others more explicitly and coherently.