Riot police used against students in East London

Vicky Short
11 June 1998

Two to three hundred policemen in full riot gear were sent to the University of East London (UEL) on Tuesday, June 2 to evict students occupying parts of the building in a protest against cutbacks.

Lecturers had earlier warned students of their impending eviction, so that by the time police arrived at 7.00 a.m., only a token protest involving six to ten students was left, with the remainder demonstrating outside. Other students not involved in the occupation had also left the campus when a fire alarm was sounded.

Despite this, police dispatched 32 riot vans to the university. Roads were blocked and traffic stopped for several hours. Police broke down the gates and evicted the handful of students. Later, when private security guards employed by university management attempted to prevent lecturers and students re-entering the campus, scuffles broke out. One lecturer, who had been trying to leave the building, had his shoulder dislocated and was taken to hospital.

The two-week occupation was held in opposition to a £2.4 million cut in next year's budget, which will mean the loss of 80 jobs and the closure of several departments.

University management had hoped that by timing their announcement to coincide with students' preparations for final exams in June, they could avoid any protest. The university responded to the occupation by closing down the library and the rest of the campus, adversely affecting students' preparation for exams.

An information bulletin issued by the university management justifies the cutbacks by citing the Labour government's imposition of a 1 percent "efficiency gain" on all higher education institutions, together with a fall in student enrolment. This fall is largely due to Labour's decision to introduce tuition fees and the elimination of grants for living expenses for all but the poorest students.

The management bulletin stated, "The outlook for next year is uncertain: students from South-East Asia, where there has been an economic crisis, will be fewer, while some home students may be put off by the introduction of the Government's tuition fees and loan scheme." The bulletin also announced the planned closure of a specialist Maths degree and the one-year Nursing Studies course. It ended with a denial that the UEL's vice-chancellor earns the fourth highest salary of all vice-chancellors nationally, "he is well down the list—about 25th." The vice-chancellor earns £110,000.

The students insisted that there be no cuts and suggested that the university recruit more students to cover rising expenses. At all stages those involved offered to negotiate with management on how to resolve the university's problems and, in the later stages, scaled down the action. A mass meeting on May 28 voted to form a negotiating committee to open a dialogue with management. The meeting also decided to inform the police that they would be prepared to renegotiate over the conduct and future of the occupation on June 1.

The use of large numbers of riot police against the protest is clearly intended as a warning to others contemplating similar action. Labour's introduction of £1,000 per year tuition fees will take its full toll from next September. The Teaching and Higher Education Bill, which abolishes maintenance grants of up to £2,000 a year, currently paid to 900,000 students, passes its final stages in Parliament this week. These measures will force students to take out loans of £13-20,000 during their university stay and work part-time jobs to survive.

The National Union of Students (NUS) initiated the

© World Socialist Web Site

occupation as a token protest. But once students occupied the administration block and management threatened that the NUS budget would be sequestered, the NUS withdrew support.

The NUS is led by Labour supporters who endorse the imposition of tuition fees and the abolition of maintenance grants. The NUS advocates a further increase in corporate sponsorship, ensuring ever-greater control by big business over individual students and education in general.

Many lecturers saw the occupation as a means to unite teachers and students in the defence of jobs and education, but the National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education (NATFHE) has done little to oppose attacks on education at the university.

In an open letter to the Governors of the UEL, the Barking Branch of NATFHE noted their record of collaborating with job losses. “It is not the case that we have a chief executive officer with a plan for the future which he is having to drive through against a conservative staff group who are unwilling to embrace change.” The union notes that it has agreed to voluntary redundancies for the last three years.

NATFHE’s answer to the university’s problems is to mount an aggressive marketing campaign to promote UEL as “a place of academic excellence and diversity.”

Their agreement with the commercialisation of education leads naturally to the promotion of competition between universities for funding and students. Their letter notes that, “Staff are extremely frustrated and disillusioned that innovative ideas and initiatives are hamstrung or ignored by management. For example, the idea to run advertisements in tube-train carriages (as do all of our key competitors) was grudgingly accepted but then not carried out.”

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site