

London: Students protest huge hike in tuition fees

Our reporters

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Bearing placards that read, “Admission impossible: fight for free education,” several thousand students took part in a militant demonstration in central London on October 29 to protest against a massive hike in tuition fees.

The government introduced a new scheme in September which means this year’s intake of students are paying more than twice as much as in previous years. Universities can now “top up” their tuition fees from £1,200 a year to a maximum of £3,000 a year. This cap will be lifted later, enabling prestige universities such as Oxford and Cambridge to charge tens of thousands of pounds.

In order to pay the fees students can take out a loan that they have to start paying back once they start earning £15,000. Estimates suggest this year’s students will end up leaving college with debts averaging £33,000.

The National Union of Students (NUS) is demanding Education Secretary Alan Johnson reverse the policy. Gemma Tumelty is the pro-Labour Party NUS president who makes her criticisms of the government, but never calls for anything other than appeals for a change of course—backed up by urging students to look to the Trades Union Congress (TUC) for support. That the demonstration was not larger in fact testifies to the dwindling authority and standing of the NUS, after the failure to oppose the attacks of successive governments on education by various leaderships of a Labourite character.

Tumelty told the demonstrators that the government had betrayed them. “Students are angry, and calls for the £3,000 cap to be lifted are making them angrier....We believe the policy needs to be reversed. Any attempts to persist with it and to lift the cap on fees will mean that some students can afford the best,

and others will be forced to make do with the rest,” she said.

“A market will enter education where the rich get to go to the richer universities and poor students are going to poorer universities,” Tumelty warned. “Today thousands will say no to soaring levels of student debt, no to lifting the cap and no to the marketisation of higher education—but yes to free education and access for all.”

She then paid tribute to the Labour MPs she said had stuck to their “principles” and resisted the government, as well as to the Liberal Democrats who have promised to scrap tuition fees. She also welcomed the “wholehearted solidarity” from the Trades Union Congress.

Former Labour MP Tony Benn told the rally that “the dismantling of the welfare state must not be allowed to happen” and “if people are in debt they are slaves and we must see that does not happen.” He linked the issue of tuition fees with the waste of resources used in fighting the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. Although Benn pointed out that the issue of tuition fees is one of “political decision and action,” he offered no alternative to students apart from waging their struggle through the NUS.

Most of the students who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* thought the union should take the fight further.

James from Cardiff University said that “education is a right, not something we should have to pay for” and that “ideally, tuition fees should be scrapped.” Adam from Bishop Grosseteste University College in Lincoln said that the NUS’s demand was “a step forward,” but added that “fees should be scrapped completely.” Nikki from the same college said that some of them were second year students and thought it unfair that they

would pay lower fees than their younger counterparts if the cap were lifted. Simon from Warwick University was more critical of the NUS leadership, saying its policies were “defeatist.”

The NUS has been far from defeatist. It has been an active participant in the Labour government’s overturning of the right to free education in Britain, to the point that the British higher education system is now more expensive than that of almost every other nation. Even the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher during the 1980s could not contemplate such an outcome. An initial plan to replace student grants with loans was delayed for years due to popular opposition.

The NUS supported the initial introduction of tuition fees, which opened the door for the application of market principles in the provision of higher education. And although Education Minister Bill Rammell rapped the knuckles of Tumelty and company about their current “ideological campaign against post-graduate repayment,” he paid tribute to their support, which had been “very welcome” for help “in the communication campaign to get the facts across about the new system.”

The government has portrayed the fees and loans systems as the only “fair” means of financing higher education. It has used populist attacks, aided by the media, on “middle class” students in order to rubbish the concept of access to higher education being a universal right. The choice, it declared, was either between the “dustman financing the doctor” (raising education spending by raising general taxation) or students repaying part of their education costs upon graduation, in exchange for supposedly higher earnings in the future.

Blair presents the issue in this manner in order to detract from the real issue—that the cost of ensuring higher education should be borne by big business. The truth is neither option is necessary. Education has been deprived of vital finances over the past two decades as successive governments sought to provide lucrative tax breaks for the super-rich and the major corporations. Raising the top rate of tax on all those earning above £100,000 per annum, for example, would raise the necessary revenue in one go. Cutting back on military spending by drawing an immediate end to Britain’s occupation of Iraq, moreover, would release hundreds of millions for vitally needed public services.

But such measures, the only viable ones in terms of providing for the lives and welfare of millions of working people and their families, have been explicitly ruled out of bounds.

With working class and lower-middle-class youth particularly affected by the privatisation of education the institutions of British academia will become ever more the preserve of the sons and daughters of the social elite.

Already, an ICM survey for the NUS found that three quarters of the public believe the escalating cost of a degree will put off students. Figures from the university admissions system, UCAS, suggest this is already happening—about 15,000 fewer students began courses this September compared to last year. The fall in numbers was especially pronounced among students from poorer backgrounds.



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