

Statement of the International Students for Social Equality (Britain)

The defence of democratic rights based on a socialist perspective

23 September 2008

The following statement is being distributed by the ISSE during Freshers' Week at university campuses across the UK.

The new university term begins amidst an unprecedented assault on the democratic rights of students and academics.

Since the terrorist attacks in the United States in September 2001 and particularly the London bombings in July 2005, campuses have been officially targeted as “breeding grounds” for terrorism and extremism by the Labour government.

Under the guise of the war on terror, the Labour government has curtailed democratic rights with the passage of the Prevention of Terrorism Act 2005, the Terrorism Act 2006, and further “counter-terror” legislation introduced in 2007 and 2008. The latest legislation, the Counter-Terrorism Bill 2008, increased the maximum period a suspect may be held without charge from 28 to 42 days, removed the prohibition on post-charge questioning, and also removed the right to silence protection. Within this legislation, habeas corpus—no imprisonment without trial—has been abrogated.

In September 2005 Professor Anthony Glees, the director of the Brunel Centre for Intelligence and Security Studies (BCISS) at Brunel University, co-authored a report published by the Social Affairs Unit entitled “When Students Turn to Terror: Terrorist and Extremist Activity on British Campuses”.

Glees is a prominent academic in his field of national security and intelligence, and his work is studied closely by the Labour government.

His report states that a number of British universities “may have become, and may still be, safe havens for terrorist ideas and recruits”. Of some 195 incidents cited in the report in which a “terrorist” or “extremist” threat was detected on campus, over 100 of these citations are based on sensationalist newspaper reports. And it lists a number of cases where students were ultimately not charged with any crime or were acquitted of all charges.

Spuriously, virtually all political activity is lumped together under the heading of potential terrorism—from the activities of Islamic fundamentalist groups, the fascist British National Party, and animal rights groups.

It specifically targets left-wing, socialist ideas, asserting that “Instead of encouraging students to reflect on the values and

virtues of liberal democracy, universities may be teaching them subjects or theoretical tools for understanding the world—Marxism, for example—which could encourage them to believe Britain and other western states are in terminal decline. Moving from campus to mosque, students convinced by their dons might gain further inspiration from radical mullahs”.

The report also recommends that universities “review all courses which appear to extol or glorify violent revolution”.

The proscription on political discussion is not merely ideological. It is accompanied by the vetoing of democratic freedoms. In October 2006, Glees wrote, “Academics should think the unthinkable. We should not be blinkered by political correctness. People need to speak up.” Britain is a “country that’s at war”, he continued, arguing that the European Convention of Human Rights should be junked and internment re-introduced: “Internment needs to be talked about. There shouldn’t be things that shouldn’t be considered—if they can help”.

The government has obliged. With the release of Glees’ report, then Education Secretary Ruth Kelly declared that universities now “had a duty” to inform the police where they believed that students or staff were breaking the law or committing “possible criminal acts”.

A 2006 the Department of Education and Skills guidance document stated that higher education institutions had a responsibility to report on and contact Special Branch regarding “terrorist related activity”, adding: “Special branch are aware that many HEIs [higher education institutions] will have a number of concerns about working closely with special branch. Some common concerns are that institutions will be seen to be collaborating with the ‘secret police’.”

At the end of 2007, the government issued an amended document on how universities should work with the police to “root out terrorism” on campuses. The document stated, “If a university or college suspects that an offence has been or is likely to be committed then a report should be made to the police. Educational providers should have a policy on the release of student information which should be followed”.

Arrests of students and university staff

The result is that universities are now intimately involved in routinely spying on and monitoring of the political activities of student.

It is Muslim students who have been the immediate target of this surveillance. Many Muslim students have been arrested under section 41 of the Terrorism Act—on suspicion of the “instigation, preparation and commission of acts of terrorism”.

Such language is deliberately open-ended and has been used to arrest scores of “terror suspects” on the flimsiest of pretexts. This year Hammaad Munshi was the youngest person to be arrested under the Terrorism Act. Munshi was just 16 and taking his final year school examinations when he was arrested after police found a guide to making napalm on his computer.

The most high profile arrests were those of Rizwaan Sabir and Hitcham Yezza. University of Nottingham student Rizwaan Sabir and staff member Hicham Yezza were both arrested on May 14, 2008 under the Terrorism Act 2000.

Sabir is a politics student planning to complete an MA on Islamic extremism and international terrorist networks. He was researching his dissertation on “the American approach to Al Qaeda in Iraq.” As part of his preparation, he downloaded, from a US government web site, a copy of an Al Qaeda training manual. The document can be purchased at Amazon.com.

Sabir could not afford to print it himself, so he e-mailed the document to his friend Yezza. Sometime after, a member of university staff contacted the police stating that the manual had been seen on Yezza’s computer.

The police arrested Sabir and Yezza and they were held for six days without charge before being released. Yezza was interrogated in prison for nearly 20 hours. He was then immediately re-arrested on immigration charges and held for a further 31 days in detention. He is currently being threatened with deportation to Algeria and is awaiting trial.

University of Nottingham authorities have consistently refused to defend or even apologise to either Sabir or Yezza and have repeatedly stated their support for the police actions. Vice Chancellor Sir Colin Campbell stated that further arrests on the same pretext were likely to continue to take place at universities. “There is no ‘right’ to access and research terrorist materials,” he said. “Those who do so run the risk of being investigated and prosecuted on terrorism charges.”

The defence of democratic rights based on a socialist perspective

The International Students for Social Equality ISSE is the student organisation of the International Committee of the

Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement. The ISSE aims to build an international socialist movement of students and workers opposing militarist violence, social inequality and attacks on democratic rights.

The ISSE calls for an end to all of the “anti-terror” legislation, and the state-sponsored spying, persecution and arrest of students and academics on campus.

This wide-ranging assault on civil liberties is directly bound up with the unprecedented transfer of wealth away from working people to the super-rich, and the related agenda of militarism and new colonial-style wars of conquest.

Labour under Prime Minister’s Tony Blair and Gordon Brown has already plunged Britain into three major military adventures—in the former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Iraq. Today it is actively conspiring with Washington in its escalating confrontation with Iran and Russia. These wars are to secure control of oil and other essential resources for the global financial elite.

Domestic policy is also dictated by that same super rich layer and its demands that national governments impose wage cuts, speed-ups, slash corporate taxes and gut public services and welfare provisions.

The financial oligarchy, which is politically represented by the main parliamentary parties, is fully aware that such a deeply unpopular agenda can only be implemented through dictatorial forms of rule.

In the next period, passed in the name of fighting terrorism, it will be used against the broader population—in the first place against those seeking to defend their livelihoods against the major corporations and the government.

How is it possible to defend democratic rights and civil liberties? The ISSE insists that this cannot be done by students alone. Rather students must combine their struggles with those of working people.

These fundamental rights were only won after bitter political struggles of the working class stretching several centuries. In all these struggles socialists played a leading role because they understood that the genuine extension of democracy meant the creation of a society free from oppression, poverty and want.

Today the defence of democratic rights demands above all else the building of a new and genuinely socialist party. The ISSE is dedicated to the building of such a movement, the Socialist Equality Party and its international parent, the International Committee of the Fourth International. We call on all students to support the ISSE and to take the decision to join and build ISSE societies at your university or college.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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