Britain: Student occupations protest Gaza war

Robert Stevens
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During the last two weeks students at more than a dozen universities in the UK have staged occupations of lecture theatres and libraries in protest at the Israeli assault on Gaza. The occupations began in the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London on January 13 (See "Students at two London universities occupy campuses in protest at Gaza attacks") and quickly spread to other universities nationwide.

Occupations have since been held in King's College London, the London School of Economics (LSE), Queen Mary University and at universities in Sussex, Warwick, Newcastle, Oxford, Cambridge, Essex, Birmingham, Leeds, Manchester Metropolitan, Nottingham, Newcastle and Kingston.

Protesting Israel's war and ongoing blockade of Gaza, the occupations have demanded university heads condemn Tel Aviv's actions and for the universities to end relations with companies helping supply the Israeli military.

A number of the occupations have ended with student groups involved claiming that their demands have been wholly or partially met. Others are ongoing, including those at Warwick, Cambridge, Bradford and Queen Mary universities. The latter two occupations began on January 27.

Among the demands being made by the students at Queen Mary are for the university to "publish a comprehensive list of all investments made in public and private bodies. If it is found that any of the shares belong to companies who are involved in arms dealings that perpetuate violence and war, we would demand that all ties be severed and the university amend its ethical investment policy".

Students at SOAS and the LSE have ended their occupations, stating that the universities had agreed to their demands. At Birmingham, however, following a 12-hour occupation of a lecture theatre, on January 22 those occupying the room were forced to leave by a combination of police and security guards. According to a statement released by the students after the occupation, "The University of Birmingham threatened to remove the occupants with force forewarning them that they would be in 'breach of the peace' if they did not leave the building".

It added, "Outside the building there were two police vans and numerous police cars, proving that the University of Birmingham was prepared to use such an extreme level of force against its students conducting a peaceful protest".

On the same day, around 80 students began a sit-in at the University of Oxford's Clarendon Building, part of the historic Bodleian Library. Shortly after they began the occupation, security staff closed the front gates and locked them in. In addition to those demands raised nationally, the students had called on the master of Balliol College, Andrew Graham, to cancel a lecture series inaugurated by Israel's President Shimon Peres on a visit to the university last November.

The Oxford protest ended at 7 p.m. with the university refusing to discuss the demands of the students.

On January 23 students at the Manchester Metropolitan University began an occupation of a lecture theatre that lasted for about 27 hours. Management at the university attempted to isolate the occupation by refusing to allow staff and students into the building without identification cards.

On January 24 more than 100 students at the University of Cambridge organised a sit-in. Students including members of the Cambridge Gaza Solidarity Campaign stated that they planned to occupy the university's law faculty over the weekend.

While students have taken a courageous and principled stand, the National Union of Students (NUS) has refused to condemn Israel's attack on Gaza and the atrocities carried out by the Zionist state. The position taken by Wes Streeting, NUS President and a supporter of the Brown Labour government, is that both Hamas and Israel are equally responsible for the war.

Speaking about whether or not the NUS should take a stance on the war, he has said, "I know there are many students who would rather we didn't. If we're honest, I would hazard a guess that the majority of our members

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would rather we said nothing at all about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict".

In his blog, Streeting claimed that war was too complex for the NUS to make a direct statement in opposition. "Students will--and should be able to--make their own views and voices heard about the conflict in the Middle East, but we shouldn't pretend that NUS can speak with one voice on the complexities of this conflict," he wrote.

Protests have also been held at a number of BBC headquarters around the UK in opposition to the broadcaster's refusal to transmit the Disasters Emergency Committee's Gaza appeal. The BBC has stated that to broadcast the appeal for humanitarian aid for Gaza would compromise its "impartiality".

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Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke to several of the students involved in the occupations at the universities of Warwick and Leeds.

A spokesperson for the occupation at the University of Warwick said, "The occupation began on Thursday January 21. We have a board that people can sign when they come in, and we've had over 150 people sign their names.

"A representative of the university spoke to the *Coventry Telegraph* today [January 23] and said that there were only 14 involved, which is rubbish, to be honest. There are dozens and dozens of people getting involved in things. We have talks and debates and workshops on all day. So the university is rubbishing our campaign basically.

"We get the general feeling that a lot of people are in support of our campaign. The general mood is that the atrocities of the Israeli state should be condemned by institutions across Britain and by the government."

The student said that, "The primary demand is that Warwick University should suspend all relations with companies which supply the Palestinian/Israeli conflict. These include BAE System, MBDA, Kinetic and Rolls Royce. There are many ways in which they are involved on campus. There is their funding, research and their presence at career fairs".

The student also stated the issues raised by the war are not being discussed in any serious way by academics. He said, "A lot of us are in the politics department, and the silence from academics is deafening. There is no debate on the issue, and I think that is irresponsible on the part of these academics. These are people who are aware of the situations of the Palestinians but yet who refuse to initiate debate on it".

The *World Socialist Web Site* also spoke to Richard, one of the organisers of the occupation at the University of Leeds on January 23.

Richard said, "We called the occupation because of the attacks on Gaza by the Israeli state and the refusal of the British government and Leeds University to make any statement or [take] any action in defence of the Gazan people. We specifically called the occupation as an action because it has been used recently at a number of other universities, and they're growing day by day. A number have been successful, and we don't think it will be beyond the Leeds University´s ability or control to meet the demands we've set."

Asked how he thought the crisis in Gaza could be resolved, Richard said, "Speaking personally, I agree with the *World Socialist Web Site* about the need for unity of Jewish and Arab workers and for support from the international working class. It's a question of class unity, to solve the Palestinian question with the unity of Palestinians and Israelis.

"The ceasefire has been called unilaterally by the Israelis, saying they'll pull out when they're ready. That could be next week or five years! It's totally one sided, so unequal and unfair. It will be used when *any* militants, such as Hamas resist. This will be used as an excuse by the occupation forces. They will say 'we offered you a ceasefire and you broke it. Now we've got to crush you!'"

Asked about what he thought about the new US administration of Barack Obama and his position on the war, Richard said, "He stated his position in the middle of the presidential election campaign. He was criticised for not wearing the American flag. So the next time he wore the American and the Israeli flags! He also refused to make any comment on Gaza, saying there could only be one president at a time. So much is tied up with US and Israeli material interests. There's $3 billion a year of arms funding to Israel from the US. So they have to have a close relationship".

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