

A socialist programme needed to defend education in Britain

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This article is being distributed at today's national lobby of parliament to defend education and jobs, organised by the University College Union.

Following spending reductions in December totalling £398 million for 2010-11, it is estimated that total education cuts over the next three years in Britain will be around £900 million. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, the cuts may reach £2.5 billion.

Reductions on this unprecedented scale will affect all universities and colleges, impacting on the futures of hundreds of thousands of staff and students. According to research by the Universities and Colleges Employers Association, up to 100 institutions are planning to impose redundancies. Lecturers and staff at two thirds of higher education facilities face job losses, cuts in pay and working hours. Universities UK (UUK), the organisation representing vice chancellors, stated that the cuts could slash outlays on higher and further education by 30 percent. Spending cuts by the Labour government have already reduced university budgets by around 12.5 percent.

Steve Smith, president of UUK, said, "All you can do in such dire circumstances is cut the number of courses, students, staff or pay."

The Russell Group, comprised of the UK's 20 leading universities, has stated that at least 30 universities could disappear and others face possible meltdown. The cuts would send at least 14,000 academics to the dole queue. Up to 7,000 jobs are threatened due to the reductions already imposed. Disputes and protests are under way at a number of universities.

The assault on education is of a piece with Labour's drive to further enrich the elite. Education cuts are part of a wider, systematic assault on all the social programmes and gains won by the working class over decades. They

are designed to make the working class pay for the economic crisis and the multi-billion-pound bailouts handed over to the banks. While cutting up to £1 billion pounds from higher and further education, the Brown government handed over an estimated £850 billion to bail out the banking system up to December 2009. It has also spent an estimated £8 billion on the war in Iraq.

Despite opposition to these cuts from academics and students, they are being carried through with the complicity of the University and College Union (UCU) and the National Union of Students (NUS).

The role of the UCU has been to systematically demobilise opposition. Despite the thousands of job losses and cuts that have been imposed across the country over the past year, there has been no national campaign of industrial action organised by the UCU or any struggle against the government. Neither has there been any attempt to mobilise solidarity with students, a stance which the pro-Labour and state-funded NUS have failed to challenge.

The UCU is on record that it is not opposed to redundancies being carried out as long as they are voluntary. It has worked closely with universities and colleges to ensure cuts have been imposed. Following the University of Sheffield's announcement last August that it was seeking voluntary redundancies, a UCU spokesman said, "We will be working with the university to ensure that there is no need for any compulsory redundancies and advising staff as to their options with the voluntary severance scheme." Three hundred twenty jobs were subsequently lost.

The perspective of the UCU is summed up in its education manifesto. Despite declaring, "We prepare this manifesto in a political atmosphere in which education is under serious threat," the union, with a membership of nearly 120,000, proposes no industrial action to oppose this.

The January 26 “day of action” and lobby of Parliament is not aimed at mobilising those who are willing to fight against these cuts. Instead it is being used to make appeals to and sow illusions in those responsible for the attacks. In announcing the lobby the UCU said it is to “let MPs know what is happening in further and higher education and to make sure the voices of UCU members are heard in the 'corridors of power' in the run up to the general election.” In a briefing to its members, entitled “If you are seeing your MP,” the UCU calls for a fully funded education system but states that it “fully recognises the constraints on public spending during tough economic times.”

For its part the NUS has consistently opposed any unified struggle of students, academics and staff against the massive retrenchment that is under way. At the University of Leeds, the NUS have openly condemned the ballot for industrial action being organised by lecturers. In an email to students, it has urged them to send an anti-strike text to their lecturers.

The crisis of public education in Britain is rooted in the crisis of the existing economic and political system. The fight to defend education is a political question. The attacks that are being imposed can only be fought through a mass political mobilisation of students, in alliance with all those who are employed in education and broad sections of working people.

The International Students for Social Equality is the student organisation of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). The ISSE calls on students to take up the struggle against the cuts based on a turn to the working class. Such a struggle to defend the right of all to a high-quality, fully funded, and free education can only be successfully taken forward as part of the fight for a socialist programme and the building of a new party—the Socialist Equality Party—to carry this through.

Students who agree with this perspective should attend ISSE meetings on their campus, set up ISSE societies, and join the ISSE.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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