

# Britain: Students mount 24-hour occupation at Sussex University

Zach Reed  
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Over 100 students occupied the Terrace Room at the Bramber House Conference Centre at the University of Sussex on February 8 until the evening of the next day in protest against cuts being imposed by the university management. A further 400 students and staff gathered outside in demonstrations of support. The occupation follows a succession of demonstrations and protests at the university since October.

Sussex plans to cut 115 jobs in order to impose £5 million in cuts. The occupation is the first in response to education cuts in the UK. The plush Conference Centre, which is reserved for private hire by businesses, stands in stark contrast to the under-invested infrastructure used for teaching. The students said they occupied the centre to avoid disruption to students' education and to disrupt a "key part of management's strategy to run the university as a profitable business." The occupation opposed management's refusal "to take away the threat of compulsory redundancies and course cuts" and complained of a "lack of meaningful consultation."

Those leading these demonstrations—the Stop the Cuts campaign—involve students affiliated to the Socialist Workers Party, as well as other groups organised under the banner of "Youths Fight for Jobs." The "flash occupation" was hailed as a victory by the SWP and others, after it was called off and merged into a general campaign in support of the University and College Union's (UCU) strike ballot, with statements issued making no criticism of either the trade union leadership or even the Labour government standing behind the cuts.

The main statement issued explains only that the occupation was "a display of support and solidarity" for the upcoming UCU strike ballot of staff at Sussex. The occupation opposed management's refusal "to take

away the threat of compulsory redundancies and course cuts" and complained of a "lack of meaningful consultation," phrases that are the stock-in-trade of union leaders as they organise job cuts through "voluntary" rather than compulsory redundancies.

A statement from the Socialist Worker Students Society, calling for "one-day walkout strikes of all education workers and students locally and nationally against cuts and fees," states that such action must be "coordinated by trade unions, student unions and anti-cuts campaigns."

But the UCU has opposed any national action against the cuts, keeping any and all protests local in character, divided and therefore easily dealt with by management. The National Union of Students (NUS) operates as a part-business, part-lobbying group under the leadership of the National Organisation of Labour Students. It spends the bulk of its time selling an NUS discount card for £10 a time, while shifting ever further to the right on all issues related to students.

Under its president, Wes Streeting, the NUS has ditched opposition to tuition fees in favour of opposing them being raised. In response to announcements by the government that there would be no additional money to cover a 100,000 increase in those seeking a university place, Streeting declared, "Last year, the government urged universities to expand without providing the funding to match, leading to a serious applications crisis. This year there must be no unfunded expansion, or the situation will be even worse."

His statement is in opposition to additional places, not against government cuts. The NUS has in fact drawn up what it describes as an alternative model for funding universities known as a "progressive graduate contribution." It claims this will double the revenue of the current top-up fees of over £3,225 a year by

collecting a progressive contribution linked to graduates' earnings for 20 years.

Anti-cuts campaigns will have no chance of success unless they act independently of both the UCU and the NUS and seek to mobilise solidarity behind similarly independent action by lecturers and staff. Above all, a way forward cannot be found through organisations like the SWP that insist that workers and young people must remain loyal to the Labour Party. In the latest issue of the *Socialist Worker*, hailing the “cuts fightback,” the SWP also declares that it will fight for a Labour vote in the upcoming general election because it supposedly “is based on the idea that workers can collectively change society” and has not “fundamentally changed.”

“We want the fight against the cuts to be shaped by a confident working class, not one that is on the back foot. If Labour wins, workers will feel a little more confident,” the SWP claims. This craven defence of Labour’s pro-business agenda is why the SWP is opposed to any discussion of a political perspective to defend education and instead states that it may organise one-day occupations every week.



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