

Scotland: Aberdeen University students oppose spending cuts and tuition fees

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Scottish students face spending cuts, as well as the introduction of tuition fees, which will have a devastating impact on their education and future following graduation.

On March 17 around 25 students occupied an office in one of the main buildings at Aberdeen University. The move was in response to the expected announcement of spending cuts for all departments, and the massive 17 percent pay rise awarded to Principal Sir Duncan Rice.

The Aberdeen Defend Education Campaign (ADEC) was behind the occupation. It gathered 1,500 signatures on a petition opposing cuts to departmental budgets, condemning the privatisation of campus services and calling for the university to make a statement opposing the reintroduction of tuition fees in Scotland. This latter demand was raised after Rice had made statements to a national newspaper that he would support the introduction of charges for higher education. Asked by a television interviewer whether he could imagine Aberdeen University being privatised, Rice responded, “Its certainly something about which I’ve speculated a great deal.”

When the petition was presented to Senior Vice-Principal Stephen Logan, he refused to sign on behalf of the university and some of the students took the decision to occupy one of the main university offices. The students released a statement declaring that the occupation would continue “until management answers our demands.”

The university’s unwillingness to oppose the introduction of fees reflects the growing consensus within ruling circles that they are necessary. In recent months, a large number of university principals and education policy makers have raised their voices in

favour of a review of the current system, which sees the fees of Scottish students who attend a university in Scotland paid by the Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS).

While students showed their strong opposition to budget cuts and the imposition of tuition fees, the leadership of the protest sought to arrive at a resolution with the authorities as soon as possible. The Students Association began immediate negotiations with the university when the occupation started, with President Robin Parker commenting, “Whilst we fully support the occupation, we and the University are hopeful that a shared resolution can be made quickly.”

Sure enough, within a day the occupation was called off on the basis that the university had given a vague assurance to consider the issues raised by the students at the next court meeting. According to a statement from ADEC, the occupation was being temporarily suspended because the university court had been given “strong guidance” to “support the spirit of our demands.”

The campaign promoted illusions in the ability of university management to compromise and avoid budget cuts, with ADEC’s statement claiming, “Our demands are very simple, and there is no reason why the University couldn’t have supported our requests. These demands are in no way radical... We are in a situation where there is no reason at all why the University can’t lend its support to something as simple as the ruling out of the reintroduction of tuition fees in Scotland and the opposition of the increase of fees in England.”

A further statement several days later urged “all the anti-cuts groups” to “unite and work together in order to fight this. We are calling for a meeting to be held next week for a national coordination of students in

Scotland to organise actions at the Scottish level.”

Confining the issue to efforts to pressurise politicians at the Scottish parliament in Holyrood perpetuates divisions between students in Scotland and those in the rest of Britain, where fees have been in operation for years. What is really required is a united struggle to defend education against the onslaught being prepared at all levels of government.

The Labour government at Westminster has put forward plans which will see the education budget for universities in England and Wales decline by almost £1 billion over the coming three years. This is part of a massive reduction in public spending in order to pay for the multi-billion pound bailout of the banking system launched in 2008.

Similar cuts are on the way in Scotland, where the Scottish National Party has already reduced teacher training places by 40 percent for next year, and further cuts are inevitable. It is anticipated that there will be a £2.5 billion reduction in Scotland’s overall budget by 2013, which will result in devastating attacks on public spending across the board.

The report into tuition fees in England and Wales due later this year is almost certain to advocate sharp increases, with the cap being raised to at least £7,000 per year from its current level of £3,000. The complaint from many education leaders in Scotland is that this will place Scottish universities at a competitive disadvantage.

Faced with this, students must defend the basic principle of a free education system for all. This involves a struggle against organisations like the University College Union (UCU), which have played a critical role in collaborating with universities across the country to prepare the way for cuts. This includes the destruction of over 6,000 of its own members’ jobs. While declaiming “compulsory” cutbacks, the UCU has lent its services to management to impose “voluntary” redundancies. The UCU has also worked to ensure that when protests do develop they are kept isolated, with no appeals made to staff members at other institutions, let alone other sections of workers who face a similar struggle in defence of their jobs and livelihoods.

The International Students for Social Equality unequivocally supports students who seek to oppose the current assault on education by launching protests and

occupations. The ISSE warns students, however, that this struggle must be guided by a clear political perspective if it is to succeed. The vast cuts being launched on education take place internationally and are a manifestation of the general assault by governments globally to make working people pay for the crisis of the profit system.

To combat this, students must seek to unite their struggles with broader sections of working people, who confront the prospect of job losses and cuts to vital public services. This can only be achieved by a conscious break with the trade unions, who work tirelessly to isolate and betray struggles as they develop, and the adoption of a socialist programme.



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