Britain: Six University of Sussex students suspended following occupation

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Six University of Sussex students have been suspended by Vice-Chancellor Michael Farthing for allegedly taking part in a peaceful occupation in Sussex House on March 3. Farthing informed the students of their suspension via e-mail.

The occupation was part of a national day of student action against education cuts.

When students gathered to demonstrate in support of the occupation, university management called fully armoured riot police, armed with CS spray, Tasers and attack dogs. Officers from the Forward Intelligence unit filmed the demonstrators. Two students were arrested, and some were physically attacked and detained without charge, despite acting entirely peacefully throughout.

The purpose of the suspensions is to intimidate any students considering political activity on campus. A statement by the University's management makes it clear the suspensions are being used as a "precautionary measure" against future "disruptive" occupations.

The six students deny being ringleaders of the occupation. No evidence has been presented to them and no opportunity given for them to challenge the suspensions. The suspensions forbid the targeted students from coming onto campus, attending seminars and using the library. Access to computer facilities is also withdrawn—jeopardising studies so close to assessment deadlines. The suspensions will hold for 30 working days, at the end of which they could be renewed.

University management has also obtained a High Court injunction that has no time limits, prohibiting any "protest actions" lacking its written consent. According to the student newspaper *The Badger*, the injunction means "further protests and occupations can be dealt with under criminal law rather than civil law meaning that protestors may be more easily charged with a criminal offence."

Every effort was made to portray the students as criminals "disturbing the peace" in "illegal occupations." Registrar and Secretary John Duffy declared that staff had been taken "hostage" by students. The claim appeared in the court injunction, despite police at the scene saying no such thing had happened and students from the Stop the Cuts campaign making it clear that "staff within the building were given leaflets explaining why the occupation was happening and were allowed to leave safely." According to police reports, only five members of staff were in the building during the occupation. Some witnesses claim that it was the head of Sussex security that locked members of senior management, including Duffy, in a room inside Sussex House.

The authorities are attempting to drive a wedge between students and staff, many of whom have acknowledged how important student support has been for the fight against cuts at the University. Farthing claimed more than 200 members of staff will have to forgo a week's pay due to disruptions to the payroll, as a result of the occupation. There are also reports that management are actively discouraging staff from attending student-organised events.

Farthing's actions have only provoked further anger amongst staff threatened with department closures and the loss of 115 jobs, amounting to 10 percent of academic staff. A record 81 percent of University and College Union (UCU) members voted last week in a ballot against the cuts, with 76 percent backing strike action. A packed extraordinary general meeting this week voted for a one-day strike on March 18

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Despite this overwhelming result, the UCU bureaucracy is repeating its commitment to negotiations and putting forward its “Unique Solution” proposals to “deliver savings through more flexible working.” It is pleading with Sussex management to agree to talks at the arbitration service ACAS and to remove its threat to implement compulsory redundancies.

The UCU extraordinary general meeting also passed a motion about the suspension of the students, calling it a “a disproportionate response, serving to inflict significant harm to the education of the students concerned and restricting their civil liberties.” While it calls for the vice chancellor to lift the suspensions immediately, it then says he should “expedite any disciplinary procedures that may be pending.”

As for the National Union of Students, the president of the Sussex students’ union, Tom Wills, has only called for the six students to be allowed back on campus. The Stop the Cuts group, with members of various petty bourgeois groups such as the Socialist Workers Party in its leadership, through its “I occupied Sussex House” campaign, is encouraging students to provide a photo and statement to management identifying themselves as occupiers on the gravely mistaken basis that this will pressurise management because it cannot suspend all the students involved.

What has occurred at Sussex is meant as a warning by the authorities and the police against anyone seeking to oppose cuts and closures in education. There is, moreover, evidence that such a clampdown on student activity has been pre-sanctioned by government. An article on the *SchNews* website claims students found a letter in Farthing’s office from First Secretary of State Peter Mandelson warning about the rise of “domestic extremism” in the university. Ostensibly targeting Islamic fundamentalism, any measures brought in on such a basis will be used more broadly against both students and academic staff.

Videos showing the police response can be found at:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7xIKzVMorcg&NR=1

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hRgZVtySiQw&NR=1

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