

# Britain: Middlesex University authorities close down student occupation

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Middlesex University authorities have closed down a 12-day-long occupation of the Mansion Building by students on the Trent Park campus. The students have been demanding the university's internationally renowned philosophy department is kept open. The occupation was ended May 15, after a High Court injunction was obtained.

The closure of the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy department was part of the previous Labour government's first set of cuts to education budgets, amounting to £500 million. The management of educational institutions across Britain began forcing workers and students to shoulder the burden through pay and job cuts, the closure of whole departments and even entire institutions.

The philosophy department at Middlesex is internationally recognised as one of the most important centres of modern European philosophy and rated amongst the top third of all philosophy departments in the UK. The subject is the most highly rated for the university, is largely research driven and provides the largest MA programme in the UK.

In spite of its academic excellence, on April 26 management suddenly announced the closure of the entire philosophy department, informing students and staff that new recruitment had been terminated, effective immediately. The dean and vice-chancellor justified the closure by claiming the department made "no measurable contribution" to the university. Management believed that greater returns could be realised by focusing resources on more profitable courses.

Professors at Middlesex have exposed management's claims, pointing out that the department already contributes almost half of its income to the university's "centre" and that the six philosophy lecturers bring in 5

percent of the research income for the university—well above the average for the 733 lecturers employed. Other subjects promoted by the management such as Business and Management actually receive a significant proportion of the philosophy's research income from HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council for England). The timing of the closure—at the beginning of the five- to seven-year financial cycle—means the almost £1 million HEFCE grant to the philosophy department will still be paid to the university after the department's closure.

More revealing still, administration staff outnumber academics at Middlesex 890 to 733 and private consultancy fees have rapidly increased.

The decision for closure was completely arbitrary, as management had not even followed established procedures.

The closure of the philosophy department and the suspension of recruitment of Modern Languages academics follows the closure of the history department in 2006. This is a recurring pattern in other universities. This goes beyond purely financial considerations and expresses a determined ideological assault on subjects that contain an element of social criticism, including some addressing of Marxism and Enlightenment thought. These are being replaced with subjects orientated towards business, defence and the security industry.

Students decided to occupy the Mansion Building after management cancelled, at short notice, negotiations planned for May 4 about the department's closure. When the students marched to the dean's office to demand an explanation, security guards blocked their access to the dean. Sixty responded by remaining in the building overnight. Police were called the following day, but soon left stating that the students

were not in violation of any laws. Additional students joined the occupation, which extended to the entire building.

During the weekend of May 8 and 9 the students organised a full programme of lectures covering subjects such as Marxism, student activism, university politics and thinkers such as Spinoza, Lacan and Proust.

A statement by the occupying students condemned the subordination of education to the interests of profit and called for a broad movement to defend humanities subjects in particular and education in general, proposing Middlesex become a central point for this struggle.

Police were called May 11 and 12 after claims security staff were assaulted, but left within 30 minutes without charging anyone.

In addition to the occupation, 30 Middlesex University professors have signed a letter protesting the closure. An online petition calling on management to reverse its decision and commit to widening access to education and raising excellence has since received over 16,000 signatures worldwide. Some 60 internationally renowned academics, including Noam Chomsky, have written a letter of protest to the dean.

In contrast, the executive of the Middlesex University Student Union (MUSU) refused to support the occupation.

On May 13, occupying students believed they were about to start productive negotiations with the university authorities after correspondence showed they had agreed to review the decision to end recruitment to the postgraduate programmes. However, the following day, the students received an email from lawyers saying a High Court injunction was being sought to end the occupation and impose legal costs on the students. This notice was followed by a letter from management, condemning the occupation as an “illegal student occupation” and referring to the students as “occupiers” who “forced” entry into the building. The letter emphasised that the MUSU had condemned the occupation. Management named specific people, many of whom insisted they were not actively involved in the occupation, to generate an atmosphere of fear amongst students and staff.

On May 15, the students ended the occupation and held a final rally.

*World Socialist Web Site* warned at the time the occupation at Sussex University earlier this year, the criminalisation of active elements amongst the student body is now the standard response of the authorities. The ruling class intends to use the full force of the state to attack all spheres of social life and force through the massive transfer of wealth to a parasitic minority.



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