

Statement of the International Students for Social Equality (UK)

Britain: Which way forward for the student movement?

International Students for Social Equality (UK)
30 November 2010

As students and school pupils in Britain organise a third day of action against the brutal cuts in education, it is necessary to review the experience so far.

The November 24 student protest in central London was the second such event to be targeted for a pre-arranged state assault. Demonstrators had planned a rally at Downing Street to mark the end of the protest and received prior approval from the police. This was arbitrarily overturned, as police moved in to trap the march as it was making its way down Whitehall. Over the next several hours, officers attacked peaceful demonstrators, some as young as 13.

Video footage shows riot police marching through the mass of demonstrators to divide them into smaller groups and imprison them behind a phalanx of officers—a policy known as “kettling,” in which protesters are gradually squeezed into tighter and tighter spaces. Demonstrators pleaded with the police, warning them, “You’re crushing us into a riot”. Every indication suggests this was the aim of the police tactics.

For up to eight hours, 5,000 predominantly young demonstrators were imprisoned behind police lines, with no access to food, water or toilets. In the evening, those still detained in the open air were suddenly subject to repeated mounted police charges.

The Metropolitan Police initially denied that any cavalry charge had occurred. The banks of media cameras recording every minor instance of student anger or vandalism by the trapped demonstrators had managed to miss the attack. Only after video of the police horse charge—recorded by a film student—was posted online did officials admit the attack—while claiming it was an “appropriate and proportionate

tactic”.

Metropolitan Police Authority head Paul Stephenson defended the police actions, boasting that in contrast to the November 10 protest—when students managed to occupy Conservative HQ at Millbank Tower—this time his officers had “got it right”. He justified the operation as necessary to combat violence being committed by protestors. This turns reality on its head. The police operation was a deliberate provocation—part of a calculated strategy of preparing the ground for the criminalisation of all opposition to the government’s austerity measures.

It confirms the warning made by the *World Socialist Web Site* in response to the witch-hunts and mass arrests that have been carried out since the National Union of Students (NUS) march November 10. A total of 109 arrests of protestors have been made since that first demonstration against the cuts and hike in tuition fees, with the police stating that more are to follow.

Stephenson’s declaration that the UK faces a new era of civil unrest underscores the severity of the measures being prepared. Describing the Whitehall protest as a “crime scene”, he claimed, “The game has changed and we must act”.

Particularly ominous was his insistence that future police action would be carried out on an “intelligence-based model”. It has already been revealed that police are targeting people outside demonstrations and protests, specifically those considered to be on the “radical fringe of the campaign against the government’s education cuts”.

Detective Superintendent Adrian Tudway, the national coordinator for domestic extremism in the UK, said, “It is quite right in our role as ACPO [Association

of Chief Police Officers] goalkeeper to watch where social protests are going and how they are developing.”

The refusal of the National Union of Students to defend the demonstrators has earned it the justified anger and hostility of many young people. NUS President Aaron Porter won notoriety when he rushed to attack the protestors involved in the occupation of Conservative HQ on November 10. This has ensured that the NUS was almost entirely absent from the subsequent protests and occupations of universities. With more than 12,000 students and school pupils expected to participate in national actions today organised independently of the NUS, Porter was forced to apologise for his “spineless” lack of public support for the protests.

His remarks were made as students condemned the NUS and demanded the removal of its leadership, with calls for resolutions of no-confidence in the NUS and Porter during several of the university occupations.

A warning must be made in the face of the police actions and the manoeuvres of the NUS leadership. The perspective of those helping organise the ad hoc demonstrations, such as the Educational Activist Network and the National Campaign Against Cuts and Fees (NCACF), is not fundamentally different from the policy of the NUS. While calling on students to “build the resistance” with further demonstrations and protests, these groups claim the objective must be to pressure Liberal Democrats to vote against the coalition’s hike in tuition fees and/or force a shift in government policy.

In this way, they seek to channel the growing anger of workers and young people behind the official parties and the trade unions in particular. The NCACF holds out a perspective of winning trade union backing for the student protests. But while some trade unions have made vague noises of sympathy, they do so only to divert from the fact that they are doing nothing to oppose the government’s austerity measures.

It is noteworthy that Porter claimed he was not able to participate in the November 24 demonstration because he had been meeting trade union leaders. “I would have liked to have been there, but I think it was more important for me to meet lots of other trade union leaders, to make sure this movement isn’t just a student movement,” he claimed. So, while the police were imprisoning and attacking demonstrators on the streets

of London for up to nine hours, Porter and “other trade union leaders” said and did absolutely nothing in their defence.

The claims of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and other middle class “left” organisations that building up “direct action” and merely getting larger numbers onto the streets is an adequate strategy for defeating the cuts must be rejected.

Placing all the emphasis on greater protest activity by the students is the means by which the SWP cynically attempts to cover up the complicity of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy with the imposition of the cuts and divert students away from a political struggle against those elements. Especially under conditions in which the state is preparing more severe repression against protests, this would mean leaving the students to fight alone, to be picked off by the police and worn down.

Young people cannot look to disaffected Liberals, the Labour Party or the trade unions to fight back against the efforts to impose the global economic crisis on the backs of working people. They are not a solution to the problem, they are part of it.

Students and youth must make a conscious political turn towards the working class. This is the opposite of the orientation to the Trades Union Congress proposed by the SWP and others. It means linking up with all sections of workers facing cuts in their jobs, wages and living standards through the building of rank-and-file committees in a rebellion against the trade unions. The fight against austerity must be based in a struggle against the capitalist profit system, for the bringing down of the coalition government and for a workers’ government based on socialist policies.



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