

SEP member addresses student occupation at the University of Manchester

Our reporter

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On November 26, Jean Shaoul, a member of the Socialist Equality Party and professor at the Business School of the University of Manchester, was invited to speak to students occupying Lecture Theatre B in the university's Roscoe Building. She was one of several lecturers invited to speak about the economic crisis and its implications as part of a "teach-in".

Some 90 to 100 students attended the lecture given by Shaoul, a regular writer for the *World Socialist Web Site*, specialising in Middle Eastern politics.

Around 50 students at the University of Manchester began the occupation of the lecture theatre on Wednesday, coinciding with a nationwide protest against cuts and a fee hike.

In her comments, Shaoul explained that "The right to education for the next generation is under attack. It's not just tuition fees that are going up and all the debts that is going to mean. There are cuts in the teaching budget that will result in the closure of whole universities departments, particularly the humanities.

"The heavy policing of the student protests shows that in future the authorities are going to take a gloves-off approach. What they are defending are the interests of a very narrow financial elite, the super-rich. And they are going to throw absolutely everything against young people who oppose their policies, using every piece of legislation that has been written and introduced by Labour in the last 10 years under the guise of this phoney war on terrorism."

Shaoul said that today, "governments act as the political representatives of the financial elites, never mind their political colouration. The winners have been the bankers, while it has brought ever-greater social inequality in the broad mass of the population....

"If you look at the banks today, just the four big UK high streets, their assets, their loan books, are worth

four times the UK's GDP. So where are they going to get their money back? It cannot be sustained, and if these banks go under, it would bankrupt the British government.

"In 2008, Lehman Brothers was allowed to go to the wall. And that created the possibility for the banks to stampede the government to bail them out and to control directly the treasury in each and every country. In Britain, Prime Minister Gordon Brown said 'we will do whatever it takes,' and they pumped nearly £1 trillion pounds and pledged £1.2 trillion to prop up the banks. But as the International Monetary Fund said, nearly a year ago, only 40 percent of Britain's bad debts from the banks have actually been highlighted. There is worse to come. And the banks have demanded austerity programmes to pay for it....

"The question that all of us face is: which social class is going to control the economy? In whose interests is it going to be run?" Shaoul explained that drawing the lessons of recent political developments was critical. "What lessons can we learn from the big mass movements that we've seen in the last period, such as that in 2003 against the war in Iraq, when nearly 2 million people in Britain went out on the streets to oppose it?

"That movement failed and the movement against austerity faces the same danger, because the trade unions, the leaderships, put forward no policies to take the movement forward. They are absolutely tied to a capitalist perspective, to the existing political set-up and have collaborated for decades with this neo-liberal free market agenda".

Students must turn to the working class, she insisted, in Britain and internationally: "The struggle is one against international capitalism, against the owners of

the means of production, and what we are calling for on the *World Socialist Web Site* is the reorganisation of society on the basis of economic need, not profit. What is required is an international perspective, a socialist perspective—for the banks and very big industries to be taken over under workers control.

“It means bringing down the coalition government and the fight for a workers’ government pledged to socialist policies.... It means building a new socialist party.”

Shaoul received a warm round of applause after her talk, and the meeting was opened for discussion. The first student to speak said the meeting should call for the resignation of the local National Union of Students (NUS) leadership, as they had refused to give any support to the occupation: “They have done nothing for us and will do nothing for us and are more united with the university top brass than they ever will be with us students.”

A member of the Socialist Workers Party immediately opposed this call for the resignation of the NUS leadership, “because actually they do represent a lot of people and we don’t want to reject them completely”.

Several in the audience who identified themselves as SWP members made no criticism of the NUS, the trade union bureaucracy or the Labour Party who support the austerity measures being imposed by the government.

One SWP member said that the building of a new political party was “not realistic” and that “parties were extremely hard to form”. Opposing any perspective of linking the occupations and the broadening anti-austerity movement to a struggle against capitalism, he added, “The situation is that in this movement we don’t have the time to dedicate the resources needed to create a new party as it would not create that much publicity.”

Robert Stevens, a member of the SEP, also spoke in the discussion. He said that the WSWS had extensively covered the Greek debt crisis and the imposition of austerity measures over the past year. This has been implemented “by PASOK, a Labour government”. As a result, “living standards have fallen by 30 percent, and it was recently reported that millions of people can no longer afford utility bills.... However, what workers face in Greece is that the unions will not fight any of it.

“The main trade union leaders in Greece are members

of PASOK. We interviewed the spokesman for the private sector union and other high-ranking union officials. They said that as the austerity gets deeper, they would not be opposing it. They said that the unions were not about bringing the government down.”

The unions in Britain play the same role, he added. “The Trade Union Congress has said there will be no action at all, except a march, to be held in March, nearly a year after the cuts came in.”

The student occupations in Britain were taking place because the NUS and the unions had done nothing to defend education. “Workers and young people, students will have to organise independently in rank-and-file committees, occupations, sit-ins, etc.”

An SWP member responded to Stevens, stating that to make an analogy with the Greek situation was incorrect. “In Ireland, the workers didn’t fight back successfully, in a coordinated way, and they are really paying for the crisis now,” he said. “In Greece, where the workers did start to fight back, we can see there is a real material difference as to how workers are faring in that country.”

“The lessons we need to draw out of this is not about the role of the bureaucracy and how they try to put down the struggle, but actually how you can fight back on a national level,” he concluded. “A lesson we can learn from Greece is that of organising a general strike.”

This was another overt defence of the trade union bureaucracy. The general strikes in Greece have been called by the unions every few months, not to carry forward a struggle against the government, but precisely to contain such a movement and ensure that PASOK remains in power.

The response of the SWP to Shaoul’s talk is instructive. It makes clear that they are opposed to the development of a genuinely socialist party while insisting at every juncture that the political monopoly of Labour and the TUC must not be challenged.



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