

Repression of British students presages explosive class struggles

Zach Reed

22 November 2010

The witch-hunt and arrest of student protestors accused of involvement in the occupation of the Conservative Party headquarters at Millbank Towers, London on November 10 must serve as a warning to all working people.

The 55,000-strong demonstration against education cuts and a potential trebling of tuition fees saw minor acts of vandalism that are now being portrayed as a mortal threat to civil order. Absurd claims are being made that the police “lost control” of the capital’s streets, with the aim of rushing through repressive measures. Initial reports suggested that a handful of police had received minor injuries in the course of the occupation, but this figure was subsequently inflated to over 40.

The media and the police have whipped up a frenzied atmosphere, centred on the one potentially serious incident, when a fire extinguisher was thrown from the roof of Millbank Towers. Accounts have changed repeatedly, but there is no evidence that anyone was injured.

Despite this, Police Federation Chair Paul McKeever called for the individual involved to be charged with attempted murder. A 23-year-old student was initially arrested and released before an A-Level student handed himself in. Edward Woollard is just 18 and faces charges of violent disorder and a possible five-year prison sentence.

So far, at least 61 people have been arrested over the Millbank incident, including 12 youths who are under 18. The police trawl is being widened to include any individual who was in the vicinity of the protest. The media has published CCTV photographs of alleged offenders, calling for them to be turned in for prosecution.

The purpose of this hysteria is to provide a rationale

for the police taking a no-holds barred approach to future protests. An unnamed senior police figure told the *Observer* that the student protest would help end criticism of the police “for being too provocative,” particularly after police violence at the G20 demonstration last year resulted in the death of newspaper vendor Ian Tomlinson. He gloated that “during the next demo no one can say a word,” against police actions.

Daily Telegraph columnist Matthew D’Ancona gave vent to the authoritarian impulses now gathering momentum, declaring, “I suspect most viewers will have seen the rioters as spoilt brats who would benefit from a bit of waterboarding.”

D’Ancona’s vile sentiment is not so far removed from reality. The *Observer* has revealed that defence firms have been working with the UK armed forces and the police on a “militarisation” strategy to counter civil disorder. Police officers are to receive SAS-style training in the use of heavy weaponry. The government has placed orders for armoured vehicles, more surveillance equipment and body scanners, and there are plans for the introduction of unmanned spy drones in UK airspace to provide intelligence on future demonstrations.

Last week, in a further attack on civil liberties, the Metropolitan Police’s public order CO11 branch forced the Fitwatch web site to close. The site had been giving advice to students threatened with arrest for their involvement in the Millbank occupation. Fitwatch was set up in 2007 in opposition to the provocative close-up filming tactics used by Forward Intelligence Teams during demonstrations.

The *Observer* cited police sources that have been involved in the monitoring of left-wing groups and claim to have identified an increase in “politically

motivated disorder.” The newspaper listed a plethora of covert spying institutions that most people will never have heard of.

The office of the “National Coordinator for Domestic Extremism (NCDE)” was “feeding information” to Scotland Yard’s “National Public Order Intelligence Unit,” which “in turn works closely with the Confidential Intelligence Unit that monitors political groups throughout the UK.”

The Labour government created the National Public Order Intelligence Unit in 1999. That same year, the Association of Chief Police Officers created the Confidential Intelligence Unit. Together they have built up huge databases on various left-wing political groups.

The incident at Millbank is being used as a pretext to implement measures prepared over a long period by the state to counter the growing threat of working class resistance to austerity measures and the resurgence of revolutionary socialist ideas.

The student protest showed how real this danger is for the powers-that-be. Not only did it involve academics, staff and university students, but it also mobilised many working class youth in further education colleges. Almost all of those arrested are between 18 and 24—the very age group that has borne the brunt of the economic crisis, with high levels of unemployment.

Commenting on the protest, the chairman of the Metropolitan Police Federation, Peter Smyth, stated that the UK is heading towards a “winter of protest.” “If the British are not going to protest now, they are never going to do it,” he said. More serious disturbances would occur, he added, saying, “It’s inevitable.”

It is not the student protestors that should be prosecuted. The £85 billion-plus austerity measures being imposed by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government are a crime against society. They will devastate the lives of millions of working people and destroy the futures of the younger generation. While jobs, education, health and vital social provisions are being destroyed, billions continue to be handed over to the banks and the super-rich continue to reap enormous bonuses.

The ruling elite have already ensured that the legitimate anger of working people can find no means of political expression within the parliamentary

framework. All the official parties are the political representatives of financial oligarchy and are agreed that working people must foot the bill. Now, like their counterparts across Europe and internationally, Britain’s ruling elite is intent on criminalising every extra-parliamentary form of opposition to their class war agenda.

This situation points to the major political problem confronting workers and young people as they seek to develop resistance to these measures. Nowhere do working people have a political party that represents their class interests against those of big business and the global financial elite.

The National Union of Students’ siding with the media witch-hunt in condemning the student protestors only underscores the perfidious role being played by all of the organisations allied to the trade unions. The Trades Union Congress speaks vaguely of a plan to organise a demonstration sometime next year. Meanwhile, trade unions in both the public and private sector are helping to impose wage freezes, pay cuts, “rationalisation” and layoffs. To the extent that they make any nod towards the broad-based anger, it is to advise the government that it must “draw some conclusions” and “change its mind.”

This is wilful deceit. Faced with a systemic crisis of the capitalist profit system, the bourgeoisie intends to destroy all the social gains won by working people. To do so, it must resort to violence and repression. Against this, workers and youth in Britain and internationally face a struggle for political power against the big business parties and the repressive forces of the state, which necessitates the formation of workers’ governments pledged to socialist policies.

Zach Reed



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact