

Oppose the witch-hunt of student protesters in Britain

Socialist, International Students for Social Equality (Britain)
13 November 2010

The Socialist Equality Party and the International Students for Social Equality call on working people and students to oppose the vicious witch-hunt of those involved in the anti-education cuts protest at Conservative Party HQ. Its aim is to criminalise any serious manifestation of dissent and opposition to the government's brutal austerity measures.

The events of November 10 at Millbank Tower were relatively minor instances of vandalism and trespass. The damage is nothing in comparison to the real economic vandalism being carried through by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government. Through its austerity measures it has set out to destroy the livelihoods and essential social provisions on which working people depend, while filling the coffers of the banks and super-rich.

Yet those arrested—and potentially hundreds of others who will now be hunted down by the police using CCTV and news footage—are now portrayed as a major threat to “law and order”. Young people—many of them taking part in their first protest—are savaged by the media as violent thugs and hooligans.

The *Daily Mail*, for example, denounced the “Riot rabble who targeted Tory HQ” and claimed to have “Unmasked, the hardcore leaders of the student mob”. It printed a series of pictures of those arrested alongside biographical details designed to portray them as privileged and ungrateful upstarts. This and numerous articles in rival publications focus on allegations that the incident was “orchestrated and inflamed by a number of far-Left groups.”

Reports on the night of a handful of police officers injured, had, just 24 hours later, increased exponentially to 41—apparently “none seriously”. Given that most of the protest was filmed, there is no evidence to substantiate such wild claims. Indeed one of the main complaints of

the political establishment and the media is that Superintendent Roger Gomm, the gold commander in charge of policing the protest, at first deployed just 225 officers and this figure only doubled even after reinforcements from the Territorial Support Group (TSG) were brought in.

What in fact happened is that protesters were largely picked off for arrest once they were away from Millbank Tower and the glare of TV and press cameras. In total 54 arrests were made, including 10 children, and 250 others searched and photographed.

The government is now baying for blood, with Prime Minister David Cameron calling for “a very violent group of people” to be hunted down and subject to “the full force of the law”.

The scale of repression being planned is indicated by the statement by Paul McKeever, the chair of the Police Federation. He said that the search for protesters is centred on a man who threw a fire extinguisher from the roof of the Millbank building, who he says should be charged with “attempted murder”. A 23-year old Cambridge student has now been arrested.

A parallel campaign is under way focusing on an internal inquiry into complaints by politicians, riot police and “rank-and-file officers” that policing was “too softly-softly”—the result of concerns not to be seen batoning and kettling demonstrators after last year's G20 protest and the police murder of newspaper vendor Ian Tomlinson.

The Millbank protest is being used as an excuse to legitimise police brutality against broad layers of workers and youth, now being moved into political struggle against the government and the employers.

A chorus of politicians, police and hack journalists are insisting that, faced with widespread hostility to government cuts that can erupt at any time, there is no place for such “restraint”. Police Minister Nick Herbert told Parliament, “The police have to strike a balance

between dealing promptly and robustly with violence and unlawful activity on the one hand, and allowing the right to protest on the other. Clearly, in this case, the balance was wrong.”

The Metropolitan Police Federation said it was “decision time” on how the country wanted protests to be policed, asking, “Are the police to enforce the law and be given the resources and tactics to do so, or is the plan for them to stand back and keep their fingers crossed?”

Those denouncing the protest as unacceptable are the very forces that have systematically closed down every democratic mechanism through which working people can make their voices heard. It is the indifference of the political elite that has convinced young people that the only way forward is direct action. From the mass protests against the Iraq war, to the imposition of the latest austerity measures, all the official parties have made clear their utter contempt for the wishes of millions of working people.

The planned clampdown on protests is backed by the Labour Party, which supports the programme of austerity and spent billions bailing out its backers in the City of London. As for the trade unions, they have made clear they will not lift a finger in defence of jobs, working and social conditions and democratic rights. This is the significance of the immediate denunciation of those involved in the occupation of Tory HQ by the National Union of Students, which was the first to claim that the demonstration had been “hijacked” by troublemakers.

This cannot be allowed to pass unopposed. The working class must defend its own, particularly when young people defending the elementary right to an education on which their futures depend are targeted. Protests must be organised to demand that all charges are withdrawn and there should be a policy of non-cooperation with the police trawling operation. Such a principled stand is essential to the forging of a mass social and political movement against the Tory-Lib Dem government.



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