

Students and academics condemn witch-hunt of anti-Tory protesters

Our reporters

20 November 2010

This week the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) distributed hundreds of copies of the statement, “Oppose the witch-hunt of student protesters” at three universities in southern England—Southampton, Bournemouth and Winchester.

The statement received a warm response from both academics and students for its principled defence of those being targeted for arrest. The aim of the arrests is intimidation of all those seeking to oppose the government’s austerity measures by criminalising dissent.

The arrest of two 19-year-old men in Yorkshire this week brings the total of those facing criminal prosecution for occupying Conservative Party HQ at Milbank Tower during a November 10 protest against student fees to 61. Operation Malone, with the police trawling through CCTV and news footage has led to the arrest of seven people, on top of the 54 arrests on the day. Twelve of those arrested are under the age of 18. Edward Woollard appeared in court after admitting throwing a fire extinguisher from a seventh floor rooftop during the protest. He only turned 18 last month and is studying for his A-Levels. He is charged with violent disorder.

The police clampdown has also extended to acts of censorship that have major implication for free speech and freedom of the press. On November 15 Scotland Yard forced the closure of an anti-police blog, Fitwatch, on the pretext that it was offering advice to protesters photographed and filmed during the demonstration. Its hosting company complied with a demand from the Metropolitan Police’s public order branch, CO11, which stated that the blog was “being used to undertake criminal activities”.

Students and academics interviewed by the *World Socialist Web Site* denounced the government and

media campaign against students. Maria, an engineering student at Southampton University, said, “I think the vicious media campaign against the student protesters is unjustified. The government is repressing students and their views and they are using the media as a way of doing that.”

In an inflammatory comment, *Telegraph* columnist Matthew D’Ancona had attacked the protest claiming that most people “will have seen the rioters as spoilt brats who would benefit from a bit of waterboarding.” Maria responded, “I think it is ridiculous even to suggest water-boarding against students, or anyone. The protest was actually peaceful, but there was tiny little minority who caused violence. The media is focussing on that and blowing it out of proportion and considering the use of violent methods against future protests. They are trying to repress us, so that we cannot speak our views.

“I study engineering, but I don’t know specifically what is going to happen in my faculty as a result of these cuts. Everyone supports the protest against higher tuition fees. It affects everyone. Some smaller departments of the university are to be shut down.”

Another student, Thomas, added, “I was thinking they purposely did not have enough police. They were wanting something to go wrong, so next time they can use more brutal methods. I think that’s their intention.”

A medical student at Southampton University, who wished to remain anonymous, expressed her anger over the education cuts. “We have massive problems as medical students,” she said. “We have a five-year degree. So we have additional debts to pay, which are far more substantial than three-year degrees. This is wrong, especially considering the fact that we

eventually do an invaluable service.

“I think the media campaign against the students is outrageous. The media’s stance on this incident is not at all helpful to the vast majority of students who very amicably and peacefully wanted justice. It is being exploited.”

Another student was reluctant to give his name, as he had been at the demonstration and could be targeted despite not being directly involved. “Many students went on the protest out of deep anger, because we are not listened to. Plus there is intense hatred towards the Conservatives amongst students.”

He didn’t think the purpose of the protest should have been to pressure government, or merely campaign for lowering fees as the National Union of Students put forward: “At first I did not understand why the media response was so hysterical, but I now realise that it was part of a police campaign to justify further repression.”

Anger was not just limited to students but affected the majority of population. “More protests will come,” he concluded.

A visiting academic to Southampton University said, “I support the students’ protests against education cuts. The scale of the media campaign shows what sort of oppression will come. I will read this statement and visit your web site.”

Bournemouth University student Jazz, who also took part in the London demonstration, explained, “I thought the demonstration definitely was needed. I feel the media portrayal—they believe all the students had some part in the violent attack on the Tory HQ—is unfair.

“I think there is more to come. This can’t be the last one. People have to stand up against the cuts. The National Union of Students should do more to argue against these cuts. This government is more Tory-based and they do not really represent the working class. I do agree it’s a good idea to have a socialist programme for the working class and students, as you said, to overthrow this government.”

Another Bournemouth student added, “I agree that students have a right to protest. This is a democracy in which we are living. Everyone in the country has a right to protest. The government and the media are tarring every student with the same brush. This is totally unacceptable.”

At Winchester, Students’ Union President Seb Miell and the Students’ Union manager reacted aggressively to our leafleting, claiming that it was illegal and that the NUS was the sole representative of students and any campaigns or protests had to be approved by it. They called university security officials, but retreated after seeing the support campaigners received from students who condemned the undemocratic intervention of the union. One student, who is studying journalism, said the NUS president “has no backbone and will do whatever university management tells him. He is there only for popularity. He does not represent students and does not fight for any students’ concerns.”



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