British student left with brain injury after police attacks on fees protest

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11 December 2010

Alfie Meadows, 20, a student at Middlesex University, has suffered bleeding to the brain after being batoned by police during the December 9 tuition fees protest in London.

Meadows was hit on the head as he tried to leave the Westminster Abbey area after being "kettled" there by police along with thousands of others. Kettling refers to the police tactic of surrounding and penning in protesters in small areas for hours on end without access to food, drink or toilet facilities. It amounts to the forced imprisonment of demonstrators without due process.

Meadows was attending the protest with friends, including two lecturers, Nina Power, his mother's colleague, and Peter Hallward, a philosophy lecturer at Kingston University, the BBC reports.

He called his mother, Susan, an English lecturer at Roehampton University, who was separated from her son during the protest to tell her he was injured. When they managed to meet up, Meadows described his injury as "the hugest blow he ever felt in his life."

"The surface wound wasn't very big, but three hours after the blow he suffered bleeding to the brain," Meadows' mother told the BBC. "Basically, he had a stroke last night. He couldn't speak or move his hand."

Meadows underwent a three-hour operation at Charing Cross Hospital and is now recovering, "talking and doing very well," his mother explained. She added, "Alfie said to me before this happened, 'Somebody is going to get killed'… The policeman offered to get him an ambulance, but he was in shock and didn't know how serious it was."

Britain's media yesterday issued an entirely predictable collective howl of outrage directed against the protesting students. Newspapers centred their wrath on an incident in which a few dozen protesters threw paint and broke the window of a car carrying Prince Charles and his wife, Camilla.

The *Daily Mirror* spoke of "thugs" fighting "pitched battles with police." *The Telegraph* wrote of 30,000 students having "laid siege to Parliament Square." It assembled a gallery of photos of vandalism, asking its readers, "Do you know the student rioters? Send in pictures and video."

The *Herald* quoted uncritically a Scotland Yard spokesman saying, "This had nothing to do with peaceful protest." Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir Paul Stephenson was cited dismissing claims that the police had exacerbated problems by containing the protesters. "I think that is, frankly, utter nonsense," he stated.

The aim of such slanted reportage is to conceal the fact, nearly tragically illustrated by the fate of Alfie Meadows, that the chief source of violence during the December 9 demonstration was the police.

Fully 2,800 police were employed to kettle peaceful protesters for hours on end. They responded venomously to any manifestation of civil disobedience, however minor, and with unwarranted attacks against anyone they could reach with their truncheons and shields.

The *Guardian* was one of the few mainstream news sources to even mildly question the police tactics, noting that demonstrators were still being kettled on Westminster Bridge as late as 11.30 pm, having been denied access to food, water and toilets for hours in freezing temperatures. It added, "The atmosphere for much of the afternoon had been relaxed and almost cheerful," until news of the vote in favour of the fees hike came in at 5:40 pm. Despite such observations, the *Guardian* fell into line by suggesting that student anger was the source of the conflict.

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There are scores of eyewitness accounts and filmed evidence of police laying into peaceful protesters and charging at them with horses. The BBC cited the comments of one student, Mike, who explained how he was "forced up against a van by police—and struck repeatedly in the face… We were penned back against the other line of police, who were blocking us from the square. They crushed us into a tiny space, hundreds of us, tighter and tighter. It was painful."

The aim, as with previous media-backed police provocations, is to criminalise protest—not just by students, but anyone seeking to oppose the austerity measures now being imposed.

The anger among protesters over the vote in Parliament was entirely justified. In the end, 21 Liberal Democrats voted "no" to a tripling of fees and five abstained (three were out of the country). Six Conservatives voted "no" and two abstained. But enough supposed dissidents voted with the government to pass the measure, breaking their pre-election pledge to oppose the increase.

It should be remembered that in October the apparently conscience-stricken Liberal Democrats and the handful of Tory "rebels" signed off without blinking an eye on £83 billion in cuts. These included cuts to the education budget that threaten the closure of 49 of England's 130 higher education institutions and the loss of 40,000 teaching posts. They also included an 80 percent cut in funding for higher education teaching.

Collectively, these cuts are to be made up by increasing fees along the lines now agreed. Yet none of the fees "rebels" proposed withdrawing the cuts—a clear indication that their stance was merely an attempt to save their political careers while continuing to back austerity measures against the working class.

In a further example of political cynicism, Labour leader Ed Miliband, when asked on ITN news about whether he would reverse the fee rise when in government, said he would not "make the same mistake as the Liberal Democrats" and commit himself to cutting fees.

The Liberal Democrat "rebels," Labour politicians, et al make a show of opposition to hiking fees only because the students have, unlike workers, managed to break out of the straitjacket imposed by the trade union bureaucracy and made clear their anger at the government's austerity measures. Outside of the protests of students, which took place in a rebellion against the National Union of Students, no national protest has been organised against the government. The Trades Union Congress has refused to call such actions, while the handful of strikes that have taken place--on the London Underground and by London fire fighters—were betrayed as soon as humanly possible. A TUC demonstration is scheduled for March, but could be called off at any point—either by the TUC itself or by the police.

The ruling class has responded to a perceived loss of control by its industrial policemen over the students with state repression of an increasingly brutal kind. The only political answer that working people, students and youth can give is the development of a unified political movement, organised independently of the trade union apparatus, to bring down the Tory/Liberal Democrat government, with the aim of establishing a workers' government pledged to socialist policies.

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