Labour Party and trade unions seek to bring UK education cuts protests under control

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The British Conservative/Liberal Democrat government's decision to scrap the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) is part of an assault on education, which includes the slashing of college and university budgets and a tripling of university tuition fees to £9,000.

Starting in January, EMA will be closed to new applicants, and it will be ended completely at the end of the 2011 academic year. The benefit was introduced by the previous Labour government in 2004. The program costs £560 million a year and provides financial assistance to 674,000 college and sixth-form students in England, aged between 16 and 19. Students receive £30 a week if they come from households with an income less than £20,817 or £10 if below £30,810. The allowance is used by students to pay for necessities such as travel, stationary or course books.

The loss of EMA will mean many poor students will be unable to afford the attendant costs of college, particularly as more working families are hit by the economic crisis and wider government cuts. Many others will face a threat to their educational success as they resort to more part-time work—at a time when competition is increasing drastically for university places.

Over the past two months students, lecturers, sixth former and school children have protested nationwide against the education cuts, including the withdrawal of EMA, at demonstrations in many cities and towns. A feature of the protests has been the active participation of many school children and sixth form students.

The protests began in opposition to the National Union of Students (NUS), who from the outset had refused to organise any struggle to oppose the cuts. It was only when it became increasingly apparent that the protests were escalating out of the control of the NUS, that its leader Aaron Porter—a supporter of the Labour Party—made a show of supporting the protests. It was under these same conditions of a growing alienation of young people from the NUS, the Labour Party and the trade unions, that the official "Save EMA" group was formed.

The Save EMA campaign is not an oppositional movement, but a vehicle designed to promote illusions in the Labour Party and the trade unions. Its aims, as listed on its web site, are based exclusively on making calls to the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats to retain the EMA and writing letters to MPs.

Despite the stated intention of the government to abolish the benefit, Save EMA states its desire to "Get every party to be as clear as possible about where they stand on EMA" and to "Get those parties who oppose EMA to change their policy".

Save EMA's boast of providing "a voice to over half a million of the poorest young people in Britain" is a fraud. What credentials does it have to make such a claim?

The Save EMA campaign is wholly a creation of the Labour Party. It was set up by Labour Party member and staffer James Mills.

Mills, a member of the Hammersmith Constituency Labour Party in London, was a former chair of the Labour club at the University of St Andrews. He then became a parliamentary researcher to Margaret Curran, a current Labour Party MP and former Member of the Scottish Parliament. Mills is now employed as the parliamentary researcher to another Labour MP, John Robertson. Prior to this he was a member of the Ed Balls Labour leadership campaign team. Balls was a critical architect of the entire right wing New Labour formation. As a former secretary of the treasury, he worked closely for over a decade as an adviser to former prime minister and chancellor, Gordon Brown.

According to his Labourlist blog profile, Mills also interned with "the Fabian Society and Progress". Both of these are pro-Labour Party think tanks that provided the Tony Blair/Gordon Brown Labour governments with the "intellectual" justification for their right wing, pro-capitalist agenda.

Save EMA is backed by prominent Labour Party figures, including leader Ed Miliband, 2010 leadership contest candidate Andy Burnham, MP Hazel Blears and former MP and Major of London Ken Livingstone. Another supporter is

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Polly Toynbee, a *Guardian* columnist and long-time supporter of New Labour.

Save EMA's attempt to portray Labour as champion of education is an exercise in cynicism. It was the Labour government under Prime Minister Tony Blair, elected in May 1997, which abolished the student grant system and introduced tuition fees. Under the Teaching and Higher Education Act of September 1998, the student grant of £1,710 was abolished and replaced by student loans.

In 2004 Labour introduced the Educational Maintenance Allowance. This was partly to facilitate its declared goal of increasing the numbers of young people going to university to 50 percent, on the basis of creating a "knowledge economy". It was able to do this at a time when the economy was still growing, based on a massive credit bubble, largely facilitated by increasing house prices. However, even as Labour introduced EMA it was escalating its attacks against higher education. The Higher Education Act 2004 enabled the introduction of variable tuition fees. From 2006-07 higher education institutions in England began charging new students variable fees of up to £3,000. In 2009-10 this rose to £3,225.

These attacks laid the basis for the Conservative/Liberal coalition government to triple tuition fees earlier this month.

Among those who voted for the increase in tuition fees in 2004 are backers of the Save EMA campaign, Andy Burnham and John Robertson. Both MPs also enthusiastically supported the war in Iraq, endorsed Labour's dictatorial "anti-terror" laws, ID cards, and the introduction of other anti-working class measures including foundation hospitals.

For her part, Polly Toynbee is on record as being an opponent of the student protests against the coalition. In a November 5 *Guardian* article, she called for the EMA to be retained, whilst opposing student protests against the trebling of tuition fees and other attacks on education. Toynbee said, "There is a limit to how many protests can be heard", adding, "My own view is that graduates come quite low in that pecking order of pain".

This attempt to divide students from lecturers, other education workers, sixth formers and school children who are seeking to oppose all education cuts, provides grist to the mill of the Conservative/Liberal austerity programme. The filthy record of those such as Burnham, Robertson and Toynbee should be thrown back in their faces by young people seeking to oppose these measures.

But Save EMA's attempt to present the Labour Party and trade unions as the last line in the defence of education has actually proved more effective at demonstrating how little opposition these deeply discredited and bankrupt organisations are now able to muster.

The self-proclaimed "Save EMA Day", held by the Save EMA campaign on December 13, was set up in opposition to the ongoing protests, occupations, and strikes by student and sixth formers and came just days after the December 9 tuition fees legislation vote in Parliament. It was best described as a day of inaction.

With the backing of eight trade unions, including the NUS, National Union of Teachers, University and College Union and Unison, the day was confined to events held at lunch-time at schools and colleges. Requests were made for university students and others not to attend. Each small protest was limited to waving banners, while those in attendance were forced to listen to platitudes from Labourites and trade union functionaries seeking a photo-op. The only "action" put forward on Save EMA Day was for protesters to contact their local MP and to queue up to sign a petition.

That evening a nationwide protest to defend the EMA was held by the UCU, other unions and the Education Activist Network outside the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills in London. This managed to gather just a handful of students and a total of fewer than 100 assorted trade union officials.

The Save EMA campaign has in addition been careful to ensure they are not in any way identified with the ongoing struggles of students, which they denounce as violent. In an article on the Save EMA site, posted November 12, Mills said violence by students was "evil and wrong". He studiously ignored the systematic brutal violence that has been meted out against protesting students, dutifully lining up behind the self-serving propaganda of the government and the police.

The constant refrain of the fake left groups such as the Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party is that the further development of the student protests demands above all accepting the leading role of the trade unions. This is routinely equated with students linking up with the working class. The opposite is the case. The Labour Party and the trade unions are as bitterly opposed to the interests of working class youth as they are to those of the working class as a whole. Far from a way forward, accepting the leadership of Labour, the unions or a front such as Save EMA would be the kiss of death.

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