UK students protest prior to parliamentary vote on increased fees

Julie Hyland
9 December 2010

A day of action by student protesters was held Wednesday, ahead of today's parliamentary vote to raise tuition fees.

The Conservative/Liberal Democrat government's move to lift the cap on tuition fees, currently set at ?3,000 per annum, will see them triple to ?9,000.

Crowds of several hundreds gathered in Birmingham, Manchester, Bournemouth, Bristol, Coventry, Exeter, Gloucestershire, Leeds, Sheffield, Worcester and Warwick. Protests were also held in Glasgow and Edinburgh, while in London, students staged "teach-ins" outside universities.

Occupations were under way at 23 universities and there were reports of sit-ins at the central London branch of HSBC bank and a branch of Santander bank at a Leeds campus.

The day of action was part of the build-up for today's national demonstration and lobby of Parliament. It is the fifth day of protest held so far against the measures. In addition to university students and some academics, schools students and those at further education colleges were prevalent in these protests, denouncing plans to scrap the ?30 per week Education Maintenance Allowance paid to the poorest students.

Each of the previous demonstrations in London were brutally attacked by police, employing "kettling" techniques—enforced detention of street protesters for hours at a time—and mounted police charges. On Wednesday, as before, there was a large presence of police officers at virtually all the demonstrations.

The earlier demonstrations were attacked by the National Union of Students. NUS President Aaron Porter denounced the occupation of Conservative HQ at Millbank Tower, London by some 200 students on November 10 as "disgraceful" and the work of a small minority of "troublemakers".

The NUS also implied that it would not be involved in any future student protests. This was because the November 10 action had cut across its strategy of attempting to pressurise the coalition government into retreat. In particular, it had sought to "influence" Liberal Democrat MPs—all of whom had pledged to scrap tuition fees in the run-up to the May general election—into voting against the increase.

Subsequently, the NUS was as good as its word—absenting itself from the last weeks of demonstrations and occupations and remaining silent as these were again subject to police intimidation and mass arrests.

Concerned, however, at a potential radicalisation of the movement—especially under the impact of open state brutality—Porter last week issued a statement apologising for his "spineless" statement on November 10, as the NUS sought to regain control over the movement and signed up to today's lobby. The NUS then did another volte face Monday, when its national executive committee voted not to take part in the planned march to Parliament Square and hold a "candle-lit vigil" on the banks of the Thames instead.

In another attempt to demobilise opposition, a last-minute "concession" was announced by the government, i.e., that the ?21,000 salary at which graduates start to repay fees will be raised in line with inflation annually from 2016, rather than every five years. The announcement was made as deputy prime minister and Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg announced that all his party's ministers would vote in favour of the fee increase.

The Liberal Democrat pledge to oppose raising tuition fees had won the party sizeable student backing. But, immediately upon entering a coalition with the Conservatives, that pledge was jettisoned. Clegg has subsequently cancelled a number of public appearances, including a talk at Oxford University. Only last week, the Liberal Democrats cancelled their London conference in fear of protests.

Clegg has justified his party's turnaround on the grounds that the economic recession and Britain's perilous state finances meant there was no alternative to charging students more. This is the same refrain that has seen the government implement the most severe austerity measures since the 1930s. Some ?83 billion in public spending cuts have been announced, including hundreds of thousands of job losses, cuts in welfare benefits and social provision and a hike in the retirement age.

At the same time it is hiking up tuition fees, the government is slashing funding to the universities. According to a study for the University College Union, one-third of England's 130 universities are "at risk" from the cutbacks with several facing closure. The report identified Sheffield Hallam University as an example. It made a surplus of just ?1.9 million in 2009, but the withdrawal of state-funding for "non-priority" subjects will lose it around ?47 million a year. "If it fails to recover at least 96 percent of this lost income, presumably through higher fees,

© World Socialist Web Site

it will be forced into deficit and will need to consider reducing provision," the report states.

The Liberal Democrats have emerged as zealous advocates of these cuts. On Wednesday, Clegg said that students had to live in the "real world" and that "to govern was to choose".

Liberal Democrat ministers would vote as "a team", he said, in favour of the increase in tuition fees. Recognising that some party MPs might not be prepared to "walk through the fire" with him, Clegg said that those who could not "live with" the increase should follow the coalition agreement to abstain in the vote rather than oppose it outright.

Last week, business secretary Vince Cable had indicated he would abstain, despite having proposed the increase. That was quickly dropped.

The Labour Party has been scrambling to try and present some kind of oppositional stance, while ensuring that this does nothing to embolden broader popular opposition and undermine the need for austerity cuts, which it supports. It was the Labour government under Tony Blair which first introduced tuition fees in 2004, and which has defended them throughout. But on Wednesday, leader Ed Miliband called on the coalition government to "think again and come up with a better proposal".

The same day, Shadow Chancellor Alan Johnson told the *Times* that he now believed there was a "strong case" to replace tuition fees with a graduate tax. Johnson, who was responsible for piloting the introduction of fees through Parliament on Labour's behalf, claimed that the coalition's increase was "abusing the legacy I left them".

Only in September, Johnson had written an open letter to Miliband following his election as Labour leader in the *Independent on Sunday* insisting that the party "should be proud of our brave and correct decision to introduce tuition fees." He also warned against the introduction of a graduate tax.

The chief defenders of Labour's tattered credentials are the fake left groups. Leading the pack is the Socialist Workers Party, whose chief theoretician, Alex Callinicos, addressed an occupation at the London School of Economics December 6.

Advertised to speak on the lessons of the struggle against austerity in Greece, he began by stating that he did not want to speak on Greece but on what was "happening here." Greece was cited only in order to urge a one-day general strike, along the lines of the protest stunts organised by the Greek trade unions.

Callinicos urged only pressure to be placed on the government to "drive a wedge" between the Liberal Democrats and the Tories. He concluded by saying that trade union muscle had to be brought into the struggle. Although they were much "slower moving" organisations compared to the students, the only way forward was through their participation.

Addressing the meeting, Socialist Equality Party member Paul Stuart urged students to have no confidence whatsoever in the trade unions and turn instead "to the working class on a new political perspective and build new organisations of struggle. The political lessons of the Greek workers struggle against austerity are central. The trade unions have collaborated with the government to impose every demand of international banks and investors.

"What is the real relationship with the trade unions and the working class? This was shown in the last national strike of lorry drivers. In the face of military strike breaking, the trade unions called it off and lined up with the state. The workers marched, chanting denunciations of their union leaders."

The same role was played by the trade unions in France, Stuart said. "And now we have Spain. I'm in contact with a number of air traffic controllers who have told me what happened after their wildcat strike against the imposition of a massive increase in hours. The PSOE government imposed the military penal code, forcing them to work under military discipline under threat of 10 years in jail. The trade unions have done nothing against this."

Stuart continued, "In Britain the trade unions have sabotaged one struggle after another against the coalition government's austerity... The working class will enter into massive struggles, but it will be in an open rebellion against the trade union bureaucracy."

Callinicos, in response, cynically declared that he could provide a list "as long as your arm" of trade union betrayals. "But they are the only organisations we have." The demonstration organised by the Trades Union Congress for March next year "may seem a long time away," he said, "but after Christmas it won't seem so far away."

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site