

# Police brutally attack protesters as UK parliament backs university fees hike

Julie Hyland

10 December 2010

Parliament voted to triple university tuition fees yesterday, as police brutally attacked student protesters they had trapped outside. Students outside parliament were subjected to repeated charges on horseback and large numbers were arrested. Protesters were detained well into the evening, as skirmishes broke out across central London with students trying to escape the police cordon.

It was the fifth day of action held by students against the hike in fees—much of it directed against the Liberal Democrats who, before the general election, had signed a public pledge to scrap tuition fees. This promise was immediately ditched by party leader Nick Clegg on entering the coalition government with the Conservatives. Liberal Democrats have now signed up to raise fees to £9,000.

The government's majority was cut from 81 to 21, with the move carried by 323 votes to 302. Of the Lib Dems, 21 voted against the hike and eight abstained. Those Liberal Democrats voting against included Mike Crockart and Jenny Willot, who resigned their posts as ministerial aides, and two former party leaders, Charles Kennedy and Sir Menzies Campbell. A smaller number of Tory rebels included David Davies, a former leadership challenger against Prime Minister David Cameron.

The rebellion had the character of a face-saving operation by those within the government who calculated that a protest would serve their interests without endangering the passage of the legislation.

In the days before the vote, Clegg again insisted that the fees increase was economically necessary, given the state of Britain's finances. This is a patent lie. The banks have been bailed out to the tune of billions and not a single measure has been taken to infringe on the wealth of the super-rich. Instead, Britain's ruling elite has seized on the economic crisis to attack the conditions and rights of workers and youth—pushing through an austerity package of £83 billion in public spending cuts.

The hike in fees is being made as the government implements savage cuts in the funding of higher education. October's Comprehensive Spending Review slashed the

higher education budget by 40 percent. The government intends to end teaching grants for all subjects outside of science, engineering and maths—with the result that entire departments and institutions will close.

By increasing fees in line with these cuts, the government is making clear that the full cost of further education will fall on students.

Writing in the *Telegraph* Thursday, the vice-chancellors at a number of universities warned that the measure will decimate subjects such as the arts, humanities and social science while “the overwhelming majority of students” in English universities “will leave university with fee and maintenance loans of between £35,000 and £40,000.”

Thursday's vote was intended as a broader signal—that there would be no retreat from the demands of the financial elite for a devastating assault on the social position of working people. That is why the last days had seen Clegg pledging that all Liberal Democrat ministers in the government would vote in favour of the rise.

The passage of the legislation exposes the political dead end of the campaign by the National Union of Students (NUS), with the support of the fake left groups such as the Socialist Workers Party, that protests alone would force the government to back down. Such claims serve to blind workers and youth as to the true nature of the class offensive now being prepared. Instead of retreating, the coalition has taken up the mantra of Tony Blair on the Iraq war—insisting that the test of a government is its determination to ignore the popular will.

To deal with opposition and intimidate others, it has mobilised thousands of police against the student protests. Earlier student protests in the capital were all subject to police attack, with demonstrators—some of them just school children—“kettled” for hours and hundreds arrested on the flimsiest of pretexts. Much of this was conducted late at night and either out of sight of the media or censored by the major news outlets.

Prior to yesterday's demonstration, a letter signed by 28 “activists” and others, including NUS President Aaron

Porter, pleaded with the police not to again attack the protest. The letter is extraordinary as to what it reveals about the state of class relations in Britain.

“We will be marching in the best traditions of British representative democracy”, the letter stated. “What we ask is that our voices be heard, and that we not be victimised by the police.”

Previous “violent tactics” on the part of the police “actively provoke public disorder”, it stated, and had “imperilled” relations “between officers of the law and the public”. Further “excessive force” could see it “disintegrate entirely”, the letter warned.

Requesting that police “protect the children and young people of Great Britain as we gather to make our voices heard”, it concluded, “we implore the police to respond to our action in a peaceful manner”.

The police and their political paymasters made clear what they thought of such pleas. The scenes outside parliament were unprecedented. In a blatant provocation, lines of riot police trapped demonstrators in Parliament Square and assaulted them. In broad daylight and in full media glare, they launched repeated mounted charges into the crowds. At least one student was caught on camera being carried away unconscious by police, having sustained serious head injuries.

The letter represented a belated attempt by the NUS to restore its tattered credentials, after Porter earned the derision of many students by solidarising himself with the earlier police assaults by denouncing protesters for their “violence”. Behind the scenes, however, it was revealed that the NUS had been in contact with the government to propose “alternative” funding measures for higher education—by attacking the poorest students.

Leaked emails between Business Secretary Vince Cable’s office, Porter and NUS political officer Graeme Wise contained proposals by the NUS for the government to make a £800 million cut in maintenance grants, a £2.4 billion reduction in higher education funding for teaching, and cuts of £300 million and £700 million from various research budgets.

The proposed reductions in maintenance grants and higher education funding would represent a cut of 61 percent and 48 percent respectively.

Having been outed for their colluding in education cuts, Porter claimed that the NUS “were asked by Dr. Cable to demonstrate how fees could be kept at current levels and on the basis of his request we produced modelling to show how that could be done.”

Tellingly, the open letter to the police was signed by just one Labour MP, Jon Cruddas. There has not been a single statement in defence of the right to protest by the Labour

Party, or the Trades Union Congress (TUC). They have no difference in principle with the austerity measures of the coalition government. Labour introduced tuition fees and the review it established into the funding of higher education under Lord Browne proposed to remove entirely any cap on fees. Their pose of opposition now is politicking of the most cynical kind.

The fake left groups function as political defenders of the NUS and the entire Labour and trade union bureaucracy. Where student protesters have called for the removal of Porter and others for their double-dealing, the SWP has opposed such demands on the basis of building “unity”. They are even more hostile to any political struggle against the Labour Party and the TUC and their complicity with the government’s austerity measures. Their talk of building “direct action” and “civil disobedience” simply means allowing students and others to be picked off by the police, and worn down in dead-end protests, in order to preserve their own political alliance with the Labour and trade union bureaucracy.

The actions of the official parties, the trade unions and the police in London are by no means a “British” phenomenon. Across Europe, conservative and labour governments alike are imposing austerity measures on behalf of the financial oligarchy. To the extent that the trade unions have organised even token protests or strikes, it is only to let off steam so as to facilitate this agenda.

In the meantime, the state is preparing its authoritarian response to growing social opposition. In Greece, Italy and France strikes and student protests have been met with police attacks. In Spain, air traffic controllers who struck in defence of safety conditions have been placed under military alert and forced to work by armed police.

In opposition to this, workers and youth must make a conscious political turn to build independent organisations of struggle, directed against the capitalist profit system and its political representatives.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**