

Trade unions seek to politically disarm opposition to UK education cuts

Stephen Alexander
8 February 2011

The latest demonstrations against the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government's wholesale assault on education, held January 29 in London and Manchester, were the outcome of a concerted campaign by the trade union bureaucracy and various loyal pseudo-left formations, to bring the student opposition under control and strangle it.

The London demonstration was organized by the Socialist Workers Party's (SWP's) Education Activist Network and the Socialist Party's (SP's) National Campaign against Fees and Cuts, and was supported by the Universities and College Union (UCU) and the Public and Commercial Services civil servants' union. The National Union of Students (NUS), the Trades Union Congress (TUC) and the UCU organized the Manchester demonstration.

The scale and nature of the demonstrations is testament to the utter malignancy of the trade unions, which, from the outset, have sought to subordinate all opposition to the pressuring of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government.

Turnout was small—5,000 in London and 2,000 in Manchester—and was largely dominated by trade union functionaries and ex-radicals. This stands in stark contrast to previous days of action, which drew tens of thousands of students, school children and lecturers, and saw the occupation of numerous colleges and university campuses across the country, as well as the Conservative Party headquarters in London.

Proceedings were carefully orchestrated, in close collaboration with the authorities, to make as little impact as possible. A Metropolitan Police spokesperson, said, "the majority of protesters kept to what had been discussed and agreed."

In Manchester, the march led demonstrators two miles outside the city centre, flanked on all sides by a heavy police presence, to a rally at Platts Field Park. Here, they were greeted by insipid and condescending speeches from trade union bureaucrats and local Labour MP, Tony Lloyd, who chairs the trade union group of Labour MPs.

All speakers put forward an identical line, placing the blame for public spending cuts wholly with the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition, while seeking to exonerate the previous Labour governments' rightward shifting big business agenda

that laid the groundwork for the current austerity programme.

Unconvinced of the display, increasing numbers began to leave the park, and by the time the last speaker was introduced no more than a few hundred remained.

Kay Carberry, a career bureaucrat who is now TUC assistant general secretary, dishonestly asserted, "We will not let young people pay the price for the government's reckless gamble with the economy." But all that was offered up was the TUC's "March for an Alternative" to be held on March 26.

Sally Hunt, general secretary of the UCU, encouraged protesters to "organize for the 26th of March." Underscoring that orientation of this event will be the promotion of an orderly transfer to a Labour government at some distant point, she pledged to "make sure that this government has three-years left, at the most..."

NUS leader Aaron Porter chose not to speak at the rally, due to hostility from the majority of protesters. Porter has repeatedly voted against student action on the National Executive Committee. He was given a police escort away from the demonstration meeting point, after being heckled for his treacherous role.

His substitute, NUS vice president of further education, Shane Cowen, fared little better—having to cut short his contribution due to the opposition from a large section of the crowd, some of whom threw eggs and fruit.

The Student Broad Left (SBL), an SWP-dominated faction of the NUS, is attempting to exploit widespread opposition to the students union to promote the rest of the trade union apparatus. SBL member Mary Robertson wrote in the *Guardian* last month, seeking to valorise what she claimed was broad trade union support for the January days of action, calling it "a clear sign of how out of step the NUS leadership is with its members and the rest of the union movement ... students need a fighting union."

This is a fraud. Since the demonstrations at the end of last year, which escalated quickly out of the NUS's control, the trade unions have been working all-out to politically disarm the movement and bring it under official control in intimate collaboration with the NUS.

On January 8, the TUC sponsored the Netroots UK Conference—out of which the January demonstrations

emerged—bringing together online activists, student leaders and union officials.

Partner sponsors of the conference included Labour List, a pro-Labour Party weblog, and Blue State Digital, the US-based Internet strategy and technology firm that was instrumental in Barack Obama's 2008 US presidential election campaign, for which it raised \$500 million. Its work for the TUC was somewhat less successful.

Netroots panel member Sunny Hundal, editor of the Liberal Conspiracy blog, laid bare the character of the organisation in an article published January 7, in the *Guardian*. He said, "Our plan isn't to have long-winded discussions, but create useful spaces where people can discuss strategy... First, we cannot ignore parliament... There has also to be a concerted effort to influence Westminster on its own terms..." (emphasis added).

On January 28, the day before the demonstrations in London and Manchester, the TUC convened a meeting of all the major trade unions, and once again made clear that they plan to mount absolutely no opposition to the government. General Secretary Brendan Barber said, "Today's meeting was to consider the appropriate industrial response... No one is talking about a general strike, but of course these attacks on our members could well give rise to industrial action around specific disputes."

Barber's role will be to oppose any effective struggle against cuts, to prevent strikes when possible and limit them to isolated, sporadic and ineffectual one-day protests where necessary.

The TUC recently negotiated an agreement with Chancellor George Osborne to delay, until June, the introduction of public sector pension reforms that will see a hike in employee contributions and a drastic reduction in entitlements. It is hoped that this will give the TUC time to wind down public sector opposition and avoid unrest broadening.

Speaking to the BBC's "Today" programme on January 28, Cabinet Office Minister Frances Maude said, in reference to European trade unions who have been instrumental in imposing government austerity measures and, in Spain and Greece, complicit in the deployment of military forces to do so, "I would like to see unions moving from the looking-for-a-fight approach to one that exists on the Continent, where they see themselves as public partners."

The trade unions have been looking to avoid a fight for decades. Like those throughout Europe and internationally, they are implacably hostile to the interests of the working class and students alike.

In the face of a brutal state offensive aimed at intimidating and criminalising student protesters, the trade unions have refused to mount a single action in their defence.

The Greater Manchester Police alone spent around £100,000 on the police build-up for the January demonstrations. It funded a considerable police presence, including mounted police, surveillance helicopters and Forward Intelligence Teams, which

photograph and film protesters.

On January 13, Scotland Yard's MPS Counter Terrorism Command officer contacted London universities to request information on future campaigns and demonstrations, to help "address possible occupations".

A statement from the Metropolitan Police said of such collusion: "the officer ... works with a number of different communities and groups, including university staff and students, covering a range of policing and crime issues and keeps his contacts informed regarding such matters on a regular basis."

On January 31, the *Scotsman* reported that police have been monitoring students involved in the protests and have attempted to cultivate some as informants.

Bryan Simpson, a 22-year-old law student at Glasgow's Strathclyde University, was arrested after a police raid on his home and later released without charge. He said, "It was quite a scary experience. They told me they'd been doing reconnaissance on us for a while. They were naming names, trying to get any information out of me."

Other students have had their Facebook accounts monitored, and their family and friends approached by the police.

Earlier in January the judiciary joined the offensive. Edward Woollard, an 18-year-old student, was sentenced to 32 months in jail for dropping a fire extinguisher from the roof of Conservative Party headquarters during its occupation in November. Judge Geoffrey Rivlin QC referred to the politically motivated judgment as a "deterrent sentence."

While his actions could have potentially injured or killed fellow demonstrators, they did not. As the *Guardian* reported, "His early plea of guilty will have brought his sentence down by a third, under sentencing guidelines ... the lack of forethought, the lack of injury, the previous good character, the remorse, all of these amounted to eight months."

That the organs of the state have been able to operate with impunity against students is the responsibility of the trade unions and their pseudo-left apologists. These organisations function as an adjunct of the capitalist state.



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