Oppose university tuition fee hikes

Simon Walker (SEP candidate Sheffield Walkley)

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The Socialist Equality Party opposes the decision of the University of Sheffield and Sheffield Hallam University to charge the near maximum tuition fees for students starting their studies in 2012.

The University of Sheffield has announced it is tripling its charge for tuition fees to £9,000 a year. Students starting next autumn will face fees of £27,000 for a three-year degree, after the university's ruling body decided to charge the maximum amount—up from the current annual cap of £3,290.

The University of Sheffield is a member of the Russell Group of leading research intensive universities. It is ranked amongst the top 20 universities in the UK and Europe. Sheffield has followed the lead of other elite universities, including Oxford and Cambridge, that have also chosen to charge the top figure for student tuition fees.

The city's former Polytechnic (traditionally with a student intake from a lower socio-economic base), Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) is proposing to set a tuition fee of £8,500 a year for undergraduates starting degree courses in 2012. SHU is the fifth most popular University in the country in terms of applications, and it has been one of the UK's largest providers of placement courses.

The fees increase comes after the government withdrew almost all direct state funding for university teaching from 2012, leaving universities to raise the level-cap on fees to cover the shortfall.

Despite pledges by the University of Sheffield to support poorer students financially, almost two-thirds of future students are expected to have to take out loans or pay the full amount. With perverse reasoning, Vice-Chancellor Prof. Keith Burnett, said, "We now face a real challenge not of our choosing, but one which we owe it to future students to accept…. We will not do this by underestimating what this investment [by students] will mean to graduates, but rather by championing an education which is worthy of that investment".

In justifying the fee hike, the SHU website said simply, "Sheffield Hallam understands that the changes to fees means that choosing University is a serious decision, but we believe that it is a choice that will pay financial, social and personal dividends throughout each student's life".

A recent study commissioned by the mutual society/insurance firm, Liverpool Victoria, suggested that some university cities, such as Sheffield, could see their student populations halve in the next decade as the rise in tuition fees forces more young people to live at home. *Student Towns* states that, "[P]arts of Newcastle upon Tyne, Lincoln and Sheffield, which rely heavily on university populations to boost their local economies, could become ghost towns as non-local students abandon them for cheaper study closer to home. The areas worst hit will be those with large student populations such as...Broomhill and Sharrow (Sheffield) ...".

According to the report, 2010 to 2020 could see a collapse of student numbers by around 42 percent, or 18,500.

The survey of 1,000 students and parents showed that half of the youngsters planning to go to university will choose a local institution and stay at home. The number of students living at home is projected to exceed 50 percent by 2030, placing an additional burden on cash-strapped and often crowded families.

With a population of 547,000, Sheffield is England's third largest metropolitan authority. In the wake of the decimation of Sheffield's traditional steel and engineering industries in the 1980s, a central plank of the official "regeneration" of the city consisted of investment and development in various sporting facilities and in the two universities.

A Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion (CASE) report in 2007 made the following point:

"It is clear that Sheffield cannot compete on the same

footing with nearby regional capitals such as Leeds and Manchester, which have become the dominant marketplaces for professional firms. The main innovation in terms of Sheffield's economic strategy has been to work more closely with the city's two respected universities, the University of Sheffield and Sheffield Hallam University.

"The current policy is therefore to develop the commercial potential of Sheffield's knowledge base, rooted in its history of technological innovation and fuelled by the two universities…".

Proportionally more students came to study in Sheffield than almost anywhere else in Europe. Sheffield University now has almost 25,000 students and over 5,500 staff. SHU has 33,000 students and 3,274 staff. The turn to regeneration through marketing Sheffield as a student city led to a huge development in student accommodation, bars, clubs and retail outlets.

The knock on effect of the drop in student numbers will have a devastating impact on the city, spelling the end of such regeneration schemes.

Commenting on the rise in student tuition fees, David Blunkett, former education secretary and Labour Party MP for Brightside and Hillsborough in Sheffield, said the University of Sheffield was "between a rock and a hard place", adding that the fee increase was an "inevitable outcome" of the government's decision to cut funding. Sheffield Central, Labour MP, Paul Blomfield, said, "The government has given them very little alternative".

This is a cynical toying with the public's intelligence and memory. Labour presided over the economic devastation and social polarisation of cities such as Sheffield. Under Tony Blair and then Gordon Brown, from 1997 it took over from where the Conservative Thatcher and Major governments left off. It has now passed the baton to the present Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government.

Popular resentment at its policies led to the loss of control of Sheffield City Council by Labour in 2007.

The deceit of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy over tuition fees was further highlighted on the website of the Sheffield Hallam Union of Students. While claiming that it had "campaigned heavily" against the new fees, it continued, "whilst we still fundamentally disagree with this new structure, we do understand the rise in fees is a necessity brought about by Government policy and changes to funding streams".

The issue of student fees is particularly raw in the city, which is home to the parliamentary constituency of Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg. Before the last election, Clegg pledged to abolish tuition fees and called for investment in education to be maintained. As a result many students in Sheffield voted for the Liberal Democrats.

Now Clegg is imposing the fee increases as deputy prime minister in the coalition government, while students who oppose and protest the hike are "kettled" and beaten on the streets of London.

The ruling elite and its accomplices in the NUS are seeking to make university education the exclusive domain of the sons and daughters of the privileged and wealthy once again. The only way to defend and expand a free modern education system for all is through the fight for the socialist re-organisation of society, based on production for social need not private profit.

As the SEP election manifesto makes clear:

"The Socialist Equality Party calls for the formation of rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade union apparatus, in every workplace and community. They must be at the centre of an independent movement of the working class to bring down the coalition government and replace it with a workers' government committed to socialist policies.

"Only the reorganising of economic life to meet social needs, not private profit, can put an end to war and guarantee secure jobs, decent living standards, education, health care and a future for young people".

This is the programme that I am standing on in the Walkley Ward of Sheffield. I urge all students to support and participate in the SEP campaign, attend election meetings and join the SEP and its youth organisation, the International Students for Social Equality.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact