

Scottish police break up anti-cuts protest at Strathclyde University

Stephen Alexander
8 June 2011

Last Thursday, police arrested two protesters among a peaceful demonstration against plans by Strathclyde University management to withdraw degree courses and axe jobs.

The peaceful protest by 100 teachers and students took place on the steps of the McCance Building on Richmond Street, which houses university principal Jim McDonald's office. Following the initial arrest of 20-year-old architecture student, Mahmoud Mahdy, for alleged obstruction, students surrounded the police van where he was held.

Reports suggested police were targeting individual protesters.

The situation escalated when the police attempted to move protesters sitting down in the road on each end of the van to prevent its departure. Students surrounded a number of the 18 police officers present, calling for Mahdy's release. At this point, 20-year-old care assistant Adam Hughes was wrestled to the ground and arrested for allegedly spitting at an officer. His girlfriend, 22-year-old psychology student Richelle Fraser, told reporters that she was shoved in the face as she tried to reach him.

Around 30 students continued to protest outside of the Stewart Street Police station, where the men were later taken. Both men have now been released, but will face court hearings at a later date.

The march was the latest in a series of protests organised by students and teachers in response to the university's "cost saving" plans worth £750,000. Under the plans, degree courses in geography, sociology, and community education are to be withdrawn from the faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, while applied music, axed last year, will not be reinstated. The university has announced that it will shut the Ramshorn Theatre and Collins Art Gallery.

The restructuring will initially see the loss of 25 jobs, while management is already in process of cutting 140 other posts this year through a voluntary redundancy programme.

Strathclyde University management argues that the subjects are no longer core to its strategy of becoming a leading European Technology University, as they are underperforming in research and not financially viable. In other words, the subjects are not attractive to private investors and as such do not generate enough revenue through research projects.

The restructuring at Strathclyde follows the announcement of similar plans at the University of Glasgow, the University of Dundee, and the University of Stirling, and is part of the assault on further and higher education being imposed by the Scottish National Party government. Similar cuts are being implemented in countries across Europe, provoking protests by students and youth who have grim job prospects and little money to shell out for rising tuition rates.

This year, universities have had their funding cut by £63 million, or 6.4 percent, while colleges have incurred an average 10.4 percent reduction in their funding. According to the projections of the Centre for Public Policy for Regions at the University of Glasgow, as part of the £3.5 billion to be slashed from public spending by 2014-2015, further education colleges and university budgets will be slashed by an additional 15.7 percent.

Seeking to prevent any effective defence of jobs, conditions and education standards, the trade union bureaucracy is diverting all opposition behind localised appeals to management and a campaign to reform the governance of universities and colleges.

On May 24, the University and Colleges Union

(UCU) and the Education Institute of Scotland (EIS), Scotland's largest teaching union, organised a lobby of the Holyrood Parliament and issued the SNP government with a petition demanding an enquiry be launched into the governance of further and higher education.

At Strathclyde University the UCU has made clear that it accepts that cuts to education must be imposed, simply registering its concern for "the institution's future status, financial sustainability, reputation and integrity."

The union is limiting opposition to lobbying management for a longer consultation process to allow proper scrutiny of the universities financial and academic justification for "why they have selected particular" departments.

Providing a smokescreen for the SNP, Mary Senior, the head of the UCU's Scotland branch, said, "The university must not put its reputation at risk by making swingeing, short-sighted cuts just as a new Scottish government—committed to funding higher education—starts work at Holyrood."

An equally bankrupt campaign, Save our Subjects, has been organised by the University of Strathclyde Students Association, limited to lobbying management and local politicians. The campaign encourages students to write a letter to their local Member of the Scottish Parliament and sign a petition, and has held separate meetings and e-mail campaigns for each individual subject threatened.

A similar ploy is being used by the EIS at Dumfries and Galloway College, where management has announced a £1.1 million, 10.4 percent funding cut. The plans will see 19 lecturers and 18 support staff lose their jobs, while 60 courses are to be withdrawn along with 647, or 5.7 percent, of student places.

The EIS has limited its opposition to presenting an alternative savings plan to the college, insisting that management take a slightly greater share of the cuts. EIS-Further Education Lectures Association Branch Secretary Steve James said, "We have narrowly avoided industrial action as the 20 percent cut in lecturing staff and 18 support staff has been accomplished through voluntary redundancies. However, the principal has still not agreed to a 'no compulsory redundancy policy' for the next year...."

Across the UK, education unions are working hand in

glove with the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government in the plundering of teacher pension schemes, in line with the recommendations of Lord Hutton's pension review.

The Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS), established prior to 1992, and the Teacher's Pension Scheme (TPS), covering universities established after 1992, are threatened with a 50 percent increase in employee contributions and the replacement of the final salary pension with a career average scheme for new entrants. Under government plans, pensions are to be linked to the Consumer Price Index, which underestimates considerably the inflation of living costs.

The trade union apparatus is again attempting to limit any disruption to the governments' austerity plans by organising separate strike action for each pension scheme.

The Public and Commercial Services Union, the National Union of Teachers and the Association of Teachers and Lecturers are currently balloting members on strike action over the dismantling of the TPS, scheduled for June 30.

The UCU already has a mandate for strike action over the USS, yet called off a strike scheduled for May 24 while agreeing an end to the final salary scheme and its linking to the CPI. In an attempt to present this as a victory to the membership, General Secretary Sally Hunt told the *Times Higher Education* web site that the union had "pulled the employers back from some of their greatest excesses in terms of the proposals at the beginning of the process.... We would have failed if we hadn't tried our best to find a solution."

The UCU has pledged to re-ballot lecturers for strike action over the USS, targeting the new academic year beginning in autumn. The union plans to hold yet another separate ballot if lecturers reject the £100 pay rise, a substantial real-terms pay cut, the latest offer by the Universities and Colleges Employers Association.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact