

London student protest: Defend education with class struggle methods

International Students for Social Equality (UK)
9 November 2011

Students and young people are protesting today against the ongoing attacks on public education by the Conservative/Liberal-Democrat government. These include last year's tripling of tuition fees to £9,000, major cuts at universities and colleges, including the slashing of teaching budgets, and the scrapping of the Education Maintenance Allowance of £30 per week for young people from low-income families in post-16 education.

There is justified and widespread anger among working people against the government's austerity measures, which are hitting young people hard. Unemployment has risen to almost 1 million amongst those aged 24 and under. Denied decent jobs, many young people are now being priced out of higher education. Proposals in the Education White Paper will vastly expand this assault, with plans to privatise universities and reduce the numbers of places on courses.

Today's protests takes place in the context of a growing wave of struggles internationally—from Egypt and Tunisia, to the resistance to austerity measures in Greece and throughout Europe, and the worldwide spread of the Occupy movement opposing social inequality. There is a growing recognition that the capitalist profit system is destroying the lives and futures of tens of millions of working people, so as to safeguard the interests of the super-rich.

Under these conditions, the defence of education and all the democratic and social rights of working people requires a new political perspective and leadership—one that understands that opposition to the government must be part of the fight to overthrow capitalism and re-organise society on a socialist basis.

This is opposed by the National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts (NCAFC) that organised today's protest.

While calling to “defend education, fight privatisation”, the NCAFC claims that the government can be forced to make a “U-turn” by sufficient numbers on the streets. Writing in the *Guardian*, Michael Chessum stated that “if vice chancellors join students and staff in mobilising against the proposals, the government will simply not be able to make them a reality.”

This disarms young people in the face of the efforts by the political establishment and its state apparatus to threaten, intimidate and repress any opposition to government policy.

It is little over a year since the education protests last autumn were met with coordinated police brutality. Hundreds were forcibly detained in police kettling operations and more than 300 arrested, with some subject to punitive prison sentences. Only last week, at Kingston Crown Court, five young people were jailed for between 8 and 18 months for their involvement in last year's student protests and the March 26 Trades Union Congress demonstration. This follows the arrest of thousands of young people in the aftermath of the August riots in London and other major cities in England.

These actions point to the erosion of democratic rights, as protests are criminalised. Today's demonstration is to be policed by 4,000 police officers. It was reported that the police are prepared to use rubber bullets against demonstrators, should they deem it necessary.

Simon Pountain, the Metropolitan Police commander in charge of the police operation, revealed that the Met now has a “containment officer” to enforce kettling. The *Daily Telegraph* reported that all those on today's demonstration will be given a leaflet warning them “on the consequences of criminal actions. Anyone kettled will be handed a second leaflet explaining the powers

being used against them and their rights.”

The NCAFC have hailed the support of today’s event by the National Union of Students (NUS), the University and College Union and other unions as a great step forward. Chessum claims that the root cause of the attacks on education is the market “fundamentalism” of the Conservative Party, while seeking to bolster the credentials of the NUS and the Labour Party as a force for challenging this.

Only last year, the NUS refused to support the initial protests against the coalition’s education policies, while its former president Aaron Porter, a member of the Labour Party, denounced protesters during the occupation of the Conservative Party headquarters at Millbank Towers. Following his resignation as NUS leader, Porter quickly got on the gravy train and is now employed as a “higher education consultant”, charging universities £125 an hour for his services.

Porter is an ideal representative of the NUS type, which has long been a training ground for Labour Party careerists—the same Labour Party that introduced tuition fees in the first place. Whether on the launching of neo-colonial wars, the dismantling of education and welfare, or the handing over of millions in public funds to the City of London, there is no difference between Labour, Conservative and the Liberals.

The UCU, as with every other trade union, has not organised a single serious struggle against the assault on education. A joint statement by the NUS, UCU, Unison, Unite, the GMB and the Educational Institute of Scotland says that a “partnership between unions and employers to reach a national agreement on job security is essential if we are to defend education.”

There is no avenue for workers, students and young people to articulate their political opposition within the parliamentary system. The complete subservience of all parties to the banks and corporations is expressed in their offensive to claw back every social gain made by workers over decades of struggle.

The social and political opposition that must develop against the capitalist profit system can do so successfully only in opposition to the perspective advanced by organisations such as the NCAFC, which exists only to ensure that any movement does not develop out of the control of the trade unions and Labour.

A new mass movement must be built. The

International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) is the student movement of the Socialist Equality Party and the International Committee of the Fourth International. The ISSE seeks to mobilise the working class and youth internationally against the capitalist system and fights for the establishment of a genuinely democratic, egalitarian and socialist society.

We call on students and young people to take forward this fight and join the ISSE today.



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