

Sussex University students and staff oppose privatisation

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Following a demonstration of over 300 students and staff at the University of Sussex February 8, a conference centre was occupied to oppose the outsourcing of more than 230 non-academic jobs to privately owned companies.

A further demonstration took place involving approximately 500 people on February 13.

The attacks on catering and other workers follow several rounds of cuts to funding for teaching and support services at the university in recent years. Mass anger exploded after a series of fake consultations with university management, who aim to carry out the changes by autumn this year.

The university vice-chancellor outsourced cleaning services at his previous post at University College London to a company paying below the London living wage, according to the campaign web site. The “living wage is the hourly rate”—currently set at £8.55—that sections of the trade unions and others agitate for employers to adopt voluntarily.

Despite management assurances, no guarantees prevent mass layoffs after the outsourcing. Workers’ conditions, job security and pensions will be sacrificed to the profits of investors and huge executive salaries, all in the name of “efficiency savings”. Over 31 managers at the University of Sussex earn six-figure salaries.

As it stands, university staff are divided between three trade unions. All three refuse to wage any struggle against privatisation measures that will open a further gulf between university-hired staff and those working for various private companies. Students are being opposed to the workers, with claims that the changes will improve services and allow for increased teaching budgets.

Approximately 60 students are taking part in the

occupation, which demands an end to the privatisation program, student-worker consultation with management and an end to intimidation of those voicing their opposition to the cuts.

The University of Sussex has seen many similar protests in recent years against education cuts and in support of students suspended for taking part in occupations that were brutally attacked by police.

As during previous Sussex occupations, the trade unions involved—the University and College Union, Unite and Unison—are limiting the campaign to protest marches and petitions aiming to put pressure on university management. While several Q&A sessions with management were organized, as is the norm their conclusions were ignored.

The cuts at the University of Sussex are part of nationwide turn to privatisation of higher education as indicated by the Education White Paper of 2010. The ruling class aims to transform education into a commodity and extract huge profits from young people seeking an education.

Student accommodation is a lucrative asset; the value of the market soared by 50 percent during 2011 to £1.1 billion. It has been the UK’s most profitable investment for the past two years, mainly due to a lack of supply during an influx of international students.

A National Union of Students/Unipol survey found that the average rent in the private sector is £140 per week, rising to £157.48 per week in the capital city. The survey highlighted a sharp rise in rents, up 25 percent across institutional and private halls of accommodation in the three years since the previous NUS survey (2009/2010).

The number of courses offered by private institutions with fees covered by the state-funded Student Loans Company increased from 157 in 2010 to 403 last year,

according to data obtained using the Freedom of Information Act by *Times Higher Education*. This means the government channelled £100 million into private universities last year, double the 2011 figure.

Nearly a quarter of this money went to the Greenwich School of Management, owned by Sovereign Capital, a private equity firm. The company was established by two major donors and advisors to the Conservative Party and has benefited from £73 million in government contracts, including workfare schemes for the unemployed.

The 2012 UK budget introduced plans to exempt for-profit institutions from VAT—placing private universities on an equal footing with non-profit, state-run universities.

Last year saw the granting of full-university status to the privately owned College of Law, which has campuses around the UK. This is the first instance of a for-profit institution being turned into a university. Currently, five other private institutions in the UK can award degrees but lack full university status.

The turn to private provision is being accompanied by attacks on the state education system. There are 11,000 fewer university places this academic year, according to the official funding body, due to 34 percent cuts to teaching budgets.

Courses in the arts and humanities have dropped precipitously due to 40 percent cuts to teaching budgets enacted in 2010. London Metropolitan University shed 70 percent of its courses in 2011.

Demand for less-employable subjects has fallen for two consecutive years due to the dire jobs situation facing graduates. Applications to philosophy degrees fell by 17.4 percent during this period.

The pseudo-left groups such as the Socialist Workers Party and the Socialist Party create illusions in and raise no criticisms of the trade union bureaucracy that has systematically betrayed and isolated every expression of opposition to the ruling class offensive against public education in Britain in the recent period.

In Sussex, local MP and Green Party leader Caroline Lucas refused to oppose the privatisation, saying “it is deeply concerning that the decision to outsource university services has been made with so little transparency or consultation—making it impossible to know whether these plans are either sustainable or good value for money.” She merely criticises management

for failing to involve the unions in the planned attacks on workers.

Similarly, UCU General Secretary Sally Hunt complained that the university administration was attempting to “unilaterally” push through its measures, “without proper consultation or assessment of alternative solutions.”

Her trade union called limited one-day strikes against previous job losses at the University of Sussex and agreed to voluntary redundancies during a dispute in 2010. The union justified its actions claiming they position “unions in the centre of future processes for addressing funding” and that its “new industrial paradigm” is “transferable to other campuses.”

The Socialist Party’s youth organisation, Socialist Students, issued a statement calling for union involvement in the running of the university. They are urging workers to rally behind organisations that are collaborating nationally with the austerity agenda of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government.

The Socialist Students group plays a leading role in the National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts (NCAFC,) a protest organisation that came to prominence during the mass UK student movement of 2010. They support Councillors Against Cuts (CAC), a group of Labour councillors mouthing opposition to cuts, even as Labour councils across the country implement government-mandated austerity measures.

Writing in the *Guardian* last week, NCAFC leader Michael Chessum opposed the privatisation of education and bemoaned the evaporation of the student movement. But the treacherous politics of the NCAFC, who lent credence to the promises of the Liberal Democrats to repeal tuition fees, led the student movement into an impasse.



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