

Britain: Student beaten by police finally found not guilty

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Last week, student Alfie Meadows was finally found not guilty of violent disorder during student demonstrations in 2010.

Meadows was beaten with truncheons to within an inch of his life by riot police during the December 9, 2010, protests against the tripling of university tuition fees in London. He had been helping demonstrators protect themselves with temporary fencing from police wielding truncheons and riot shields when he was hit on the head as he tried to leave an area “kettled” by police. Kettling involves police surrounding and penning in peaceful protesters in small areas for hours on end without access to food, drink or toilet facilities and subjecting them to constant video surveillance. Anyone who tried to get out or protested was at risk of police violence.

There were scores of eyewitness accounts and filmed evidence of police laying into peaceful protesters and charging at them with horses during the fees protest. The aim, as with previous media-backed police provocations, was to criminalise protest and make an example of anyone seeking to oppose the austerity measures the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government was then introducing.

Lawyers have pointed out the increasing use of the violent disorder charge. Matt Foot, who has defended some of the 58 demonstrators charged with the offence, explained: “It started with a protest against George Bush, the last time he came to this country, and a whole number of people some months afterwards were suddenly charged with violent disorder.

“They suddenly started using Section 2 of the Public Order Act, violent disorder, in an aggressive way since then.... People used to be offered cautions, or tickets, fixed penalty notices, and then suddenly the penalties have gone up and up and up, for very similar facts. I

think the fact that we’re using violent disorder on that large scale, against large numbers of students, almost all of good character, is an attack on protest.”

After the court verdict, Meadows said, “Today’s result is a vindication of the right to protest and all those who have been subjected to police brutality. Those who are struggling against cuts and austerity should not live in fear of criminalisation. It’s unforgivable that we and our families have had to wait two years and endure two trials to clear our names. I’m very grateful for the solidarity I’ve received from so many....”

Despite the traumatic injuries inflicted on Meadows, the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) vindictively pursued the badly injured student, charging him with “violent disorder”, the second most serious public order offence, which can result in a sentence of up to five years imprisonment.

The first trial took place at Kingston Crown Court last year and resulted in a hung jury. The CPS refused to drop the charges. The second trial was abandoned in November of last year due to illness. Meadows spent the last two years out on bail, unable to continue with his life and suffering from the threat of a long prison sentence.

The aim of the prosecution was to prove that the police officers only struck Meadows as a last resort because he was indulging in “violent behaviour”.

Giving evidence for the prosecution was Superintendent Woods, a “Bronze Commander,” on December 9. He had no problem defending the use of head strikes. After being shown footage of a line of police lashing out at protesters, who were simply walking past them, he praised the officers for showing “superb restraint”.

Woods’s comments are a clear sign of how the state

would really like to deal with protesters. When pressed on whether the use of batons was a last resort, he replied, “The absolute last resort is getting a machine gun out, but in this instance, yes, a baton strike or horses.”

The 2010 protests mobilised tens of thousands of students and academics opposed to tuition fee hikes, as well as school students and those at further-education colleges opposed to the scrapping of the Education Maintenance Allowance paid to the poorest students. They rapidly became a rebellion against the Labour Party-dominated National Union of Students (NUS), which had organised the first demonstration on November 10.

The aim of the NUS was to put pressure on the coalition government to reverse its decision on tuition fee hikes, in particular the Liberal Democrats who had made an election manifesto promise not to increase them. This begging strategy was not enough to contain the genuine anger felt by the tens of thousands of students who responded to the calls to protest.

When some 200 students occupied the Conservative Party HQ at Millbank Tower, London, NUS president Aaron Porter denounced them as “disgraceful” and a small minority of “troublemakers”. The NUS was deliberately absent from all further demonstrations, including the December 9 march, instead holding a candle-lit vigil on the bank of the Thames while students were being kettled and beaten. For months afterwards, students and youth were hunted down and given criminal records for simply being present at a protest. Of the 58 charged with violent disorder offences, 12 have ended up in prison. The NUS failed to defend any of those arrested, many of whom are under 18, and only announced its support for Meadows in an attempt to claw back some credibility.

The failure of the NUS to defend youth against police violence had far-reaching consequences. What was experienced at the student protests was a prelude to what would be unleashed a few months later on youth after the riots that swept across England.

The NUS refused to call another demonstration for two years. The low turnout at last November’s march indicated recognition among students of the fact that the NUS does not represent them. It has since launched its hypocritical “Bring Back EMA” campaign. After refusing to defend this vital financial assistance for low-

income students two years ago, the NUS is now asking students to lobby MPs begging for EMA to be considered for debate in Parliament.

The NUS has devised an equally toothless letter-writing campaign in response to the government’s plans for a 24+ Advanced Learner Loans scheme, which means that adults aged 24 and over will be expected to pay the full cost of any A level or Level 3 courses they enrol on.

No faith should be put in the NUS to carry out any genuine defence of students or youth. Its sole aim is to whip up support behind the Labour Party and trade unions and to oppose any genuine defence of education.



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