

National Union of Students complicit in British government attacks on students

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At the end of February, the National Union of Students (NUS) launched a fraudulent campaign in an effort to rally increasingly disaffected British students behind them. The “Bring Back EMA [Education Maintenance Allowance]” campaign is centred on the call for an “early day motion”—a proposal submitted for debate in parliament—and a combination of petitions, online lobbying and social media action.

Such pressure politics and virtual campaigning are an insult to the hundreds of thousands of students for whom the allowance was a lifeline.

EMA was a payment of up to £30 a week that helped over half a million students by funding the cost of transport, school supplies and the like. Its cost to the government was small, about £560 million, but in 2011 and in the face of widespread opposition from students, the fund was abolished.

In an attempt to justify this assault on the right to an education, the Conservative/Liberal Democrat government originally cited a study it said had reached the conclusion that EMA failed to achieve good value for money. However, it soon claimed that this was only one of a number of studies when numerous organisations and individuals—including the author of the cited study—spoke out against plans to scrap the scheme.

The first of those speaking out against the government’s plan was the Institute of Fiscal Studies, which noted that previous research conducted by them had found that EMA “significantly increased participation rates in post-16 education among young adults who were eligible to receive it.” Following this, a group of economists sent a letter to the *Guardian* expressing similar concerns about the scrapping of the scheme.

The originally cited study was based on 2,029

students who were questioned, of whom 838 said they received EMA. Those 838 were asked whether they would have remained in education or training had they not received EMA, to which 88 percent replied “yes” and 12 percent “no”. Such is the evidence base for the destruction of a lifeline for hundreds of thousands of students. If only 838 recipients of EMA were questioned, then that in no way was representative of the 643,000 who received it in the year 2009-10.

Furthermore, if 88 percent answered “yes”, that did not mean that EMA had no impact on their lives, but merely that they were committed to continuing their education. One who was able to grasp this point was Thomas Spielhofer, who led the study and said that the government had “misinterpreted” its findings. The other pieces of research the coalition government claimed to have based its decision upon have yet to be revealed.

It is obvious that the scrapping of EMA had nothing whatsoever to do with inefficiency or “wastage.” Its removal was part of the government’s determined drive to shut working class youth out of further education.

The supposed representatives of British students in the NUS have nothing to offer in opposition to this, apart from worthless appeals to politicians and an online petition drive. Moreover, this is not the first betrayal in relation to this issue.

The abolition of EMA was a significant factor that encouraged thousands of students to take part in demonstrations in late 2010. At the largest such protest in November of that year, over 50,000 students marched through London. They were confronted with brutal police repression, including attempts to criminally prosecute students deemed to have acted violently. The NUS lent its support to the police, releasing a statement in which they denounced the

student protesters and blamed them for causing the disturbance.

In January 2011, the NUS National Executive Committee voted against supporting a national day of action, organised for January 26, to oppose the cutting of EMA and took the same position toward a London demonstration on January 29.

In the second case, then NUS President Aaron Porter put forward the motion against backing the protest. Instead, he advised that students to attend a Trades Union Congress rally in Manchester on the same day. That event highlighted the bankruptcy of the trade unions. Not only did the NUS move action away from the capital city, they then sought to line it up—in a form of sham support—behind other organisations in a meek and futile demonstration.

The consequences of these betrayals have been revealed. A survey of 182 colleges by the Association of Colleges in 2011 found that over half (52 percent) of colleges were topping up government bursary funding with their own. The bursary itself, the government's replacement scheme, offers a smaller grant of £1,200 per year to the 12,000 they deem the most vulnerable—out of the 650,000 who had previously received the allowance. Worse than that, the bursary can only be applied for after enrolment, leaving thousands of students in limbo, knowing that most likely they will not receive the funding they need.

Perhaps as a result of this inadequacy, the survey also found that 56 percent of colleges were spending more on subsidising transport, under conditions where these institutions were already struggling with the consequences of budget cuts.

A growing number of college students are unable to afford meals. There are anecdotal reports of students fainting in classrooms and a survey of 300 college teachers by the ATL (Association of Teachers and Lecturers) found a fifth had offered to buy food for some of their students. Considering the small number surveyed, this raises questions as to the actual extent of students foregoing food. Students who attend sixth-form colleges or further education colleges are not eligible for free school meals. In school sixth-forms only students from families with a joint income under £16,000 a year are eligible.

As a result, the number of so-called NEETS (not in education, employment or training) has been

consistently rising, with tuition fees and the scrapping of EMA cited as key reasons in every case. According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, the United Kingdom now has one of the worst dropout rates among the economically developed countries.

The NUS offer no serious or principled opposition to these attacks. In every instance of aggression against students carried out by the government, they have only blocked, diverted or apologised for any real resistance shown. Students must reject this false leadership and instead form their own organisations for struggle in defence of their basic rights. Only under the guide of a determined revolutionary programme and with a turn to the working class can students oppose the crippling measures imposed upon them.



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