

Crackdown on UK student protests

Joe Mount

24 December 2013

A wave of UK student protests in the wake of the December 3 national higher education strike was met with victimisation and police repression.

On December 4, around 70 students occupied part of the University of London headquarters, Senate House. That evening nine police vans arrived, with five from the elite Territorial Support Group. Aided by private security staff, over 100 police officers armed with batons violently evicted the occupiers without a court order. Four students were arrested and another was detained for questioning.

The *Guardian* newspaper published video footage of a police officer punching a student in the face, knocking him to the ground. Tee Jay, aged 24, from Hackney in London, explained, “Nothing was said. The police were trying to clear the crowd of people. I turned my back to [the police officer] to kind of walk away, he pushed, I kind of turned round to see who it was.”

Jay asked, “Why are you pushing me?”

“The punch came and I went straight to the floor, then I got up and left,” he said.

Another woman was filmed being dragged screaming to the ground by officers.

The following day, around 200 students joined a previously-organised demonstration against heavy-handed police tactics. Several vans of police officers arrived, some carrying Tasers, a potentially deadly weapon. Police filmed the demonstration to identify protesters.

Police forcefully dispersed the crowd, with violent clashes spreading to nearby streets. Youth responded by chanting “Who killed Mark Duggan? You killed Mark Duggan!”

Duggan is the young man whose murder by police provoked the 2011 UK youth riots.

A Metropolitan Police spokesman claimed a further 36 students were arrested.

More footage of police brutality emerged, including

of police striking students with batons.

The University of London then obtained a draconian six-month injunction banning “violent and intimidating” occupations on campus. Many students’ bail conditions ban participation in public gatherings of five or more.

Opposition rapidly spread, with national “Cops off campus” rallies held the following week. Over 3,000 youth assembled in London and protests occurred at various universities including Manchester, Birmingham, Sheffield and Cardiff. These marches passed peacefully, with little to no police presence.

In other incidents, five Sussex students were suspended and excluded from campus for demonstrating against university privatization earlier this month, after management secured a court ruling banning protests on campus. The students’ victimisation prompted a defence campaign that forced the university to back down. The Sussex Five now await disciplinary action after their suspensions were rescinded.

In Liverpool, a student teach-in was broken up after being served a court order and barricaded with metal fencing. Birmingham University also obtained a court injunction against students, with some facing prosecution.

The immediate cause of the protests was a series of national strikes by staff and academics to defend their pay and conditions from the effects of government spending cuts. These strikes were isolated to the higher education sector and limited to single-day actions by the trade union bureaucracy, who are collaborating with the government to impose austerity and stifle working class opposition.

Students are increasingly aware that their own issues, such as cuts to teaching budgets and rising tuition fees, are connected to attacks on academics and staff. At both Sussex and London universities, the privatization

of services were major factors fuelling student dissent.

Underlying the protests is the deep-rooted social crisis facing youth, including students, who face massive debts and a stagnant job market upon graduation. The situation is causing deep resentment.

These social tensions are driving the ruling elite to escalate their crackdown on youth dissent. The past two months have seen two students' union leaders arrested. Michael Chessum, the ULU president, was arrested for organising protests and Vice President Daniel Cooper was arrested for questioning police officers over a potential racial motivation for the stop-and-search of a black student.

At the same university this summer, a female student was detained by 16 police officers and subsequently strip-searched for chalking slogans on a university building.

This follows the publication by the *Guardian* of footage documenting police infiltration of political organisations on campuses. (See: "Hidden-camera footage shows police attempt to spy on UK students").

The ramping up of state repression is part of a coordinated effort to stamp out political opposition amongst youth. Police are deliberately provoking violent confrontations to discredit protest and are being mobilised on an unprecedented scale to intimidate dissenters on campuses.

The violent suppression of the 2010 student protest movement, which saw kettling (outdoor imprisonment by ranks of riot police) and mass arrests, was the beginning of a concerted turn towards the use of state force against youth on behalf of the British ruling class.

Both the 2010 student protests and the 2011 youth riots threatened to spark a wider working class movement against austerity. The ruling class knows that rising social inequality and political alienation will inevitably provoke mass political opposition to the capitalist social order.

The National Union of Students (NUS) responded to recent events with nothing but platitudes, with Vice President Rachel Wenstone urging the use of "non-confrontational and proportionate tactics when policing student demonstrations" and calling for university vice chancellors to be "held to account when their decisions are questionable."

In 2010, the NUS attacked student protesters who faced new, aggressive "total policing" tactics. Then

NUS President Aaron Porter denounced the student occupation of Conservative Party headquarters at Millbank Tower in London as "disgraceful" and the action of "troublemakers."

The NUS is entirely discredited in the eyes of students and their national demonstrations draw dwindling numbers. Organisations such as National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts (NCAFC) have emerged to fill the political vacuum. However, they offer no alternative to the politics of the NUS and are dominated by representatives of fake-left tendencies such as the Socialist Workers Party (SWP.)

Despite their radical posturing, they refuse to break with the union bureaucracy, seeking to pressure them to fight the ruling class. After token criticisms of the government, they quickly shift their criticism to the specific vice chancellor at each separate institution

However, the pseudo-left tendencies' rotten politics have broadly undermined their influence amongst students. The SWP, previously the dominant group on campus, is further discredited after it exploded into factional warfare in the aftermath of a scandal over an alleged rape.

This has cleared the way for various anarchist and feminist tendencies to gain ground and to shift student politics to the right. Unlike the SWP, who disguise their right-wing line with socialist terminology, these tendencies are based on explicit anti-communism. Their promotion of identity politics, which entirely accepts the framework of capitalist society, and their rejection of Marxism leaves students politically disarmed before impending social upheavals.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact