

Thousands of student nurses, midwives and junior doctors demonstrate in London

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Students of nursing, midwifery and Allied Health Professions demonstrated in London Saturday against the introduction of tuition fees and the scrapping of bursaries. They were supported by junior doctors, other health workers and members of the public.

The Conservative government announced the plans in the autumn spending review, as part of a general intensification of austerity attacks on the working class. The government claims that the introduction of student loans instead of the current financial support from the National Health Service for these students will create more places in the universities. The real aim is to slash the budget of Health Education England. The government is demanding huge “efficiency savings” from the NHS budget, which will have a crippling impact. Junior doctors are striking tomorrow against the imposition of inferior contracts to cut down the wage bill of the NHS.

There was a notable absence on the demo of the National Union of Students (NUS) and National Campaign against Cuts and Fees (NCACF), which purport to be fighting against the attacks on University students. The Socialist Equality Party and NHS Fightback distributed their statement, “Oppose introduction of student nurse tuition fees and scrapping of bursaries” and spoke to several of those who attended.

Johanna, a student of Mental Health Nursing said, “I am here today because I could not do my studies without the bursary. It should be there for the other students in the future. We are very lucky to have this wonderful health service. I am here to defend the NHS. It supports me and the people who I care for.

“With these plans each student can end up with over £50,000 of debts. On a potentially starting salary of £23,000 a year it could take them 25 to 30 years or

longer to pay the debts. I think it’s immoral. Why are we charged for choosing a career in caring?

“If I didn’t have my bursary I couldn’t afford to live. Our universities do not allow us to work more than a certain number of hours a week. With the hours we have to do with our course, which is 37.5 hours a week, we are allowed to work an additional 12-hour shift. On a bank [staff resource pool] shift pay, that would give us around £60 to live on. To live in London on that is completely impossible.”

Ally, a Speech and Language Therapist (SALT) student at City University, said, “Without the bursary it is impossible to move to London and train as a SALT. It is not much but it helps. I want to stand by all other health care workers and show a united front. The NHS is such an important part of our society. I support the junior doctors in their struggle. We all need to come together and fight against the austerity attacks.”

Lucy, a post graduate SALT at University College London, said, “The majority of our students wouldn’t be able to do the course without the bursary. It is ridiculous for the nurses and midwives to have to pay to work.

“SALTs change the lives of many young people. If you don’t support children very early on, they risk not going on to access education, creating much worse issues in the long run. I am member of the NUS, but I haven’t seen any representation from them today.”

Georgie and Olivia explained, “We are here to fight against these attacks and to raise awareness among people. People need to work together. We need a unified voice.

“The government is giving huge concessions to corporations while imposing huge austerity on working people. A few years ago junior doctors were not treated like that. They were not considered as part of the

traditional working class. Things are changing. They have to go on strike against unfair salaries now and the majority of the society is affected by austerity. They will have to take up the fight at some point.”

Jack, a student nurse at Middlesex University, said, “I calculated what I need to take as a student loan. It would take me 111 years to pay at the rate they are setting the interest at.

“They cap it after 30 years. That is a massive debt bubble which is being formed. Our education is not very good compared to international standards. Now we are going to be asked to pay for it. We already work 3,200 hours over the 3 years of our course and we are not paid. We work nights, days, weekends and holidays and most of us end up working our own time to supplement the bursary, which has been slashed over the years.

“It is now means tested. I’m lucky to have a full bursary because I am fully self-supportive. Even with that to rent in London, to travel from placement to university as well as just living, I have to work on the side. So you end up struggling, which is unsafe for patients so you have to tell yourself ‘I can’t work tomorrow.’ So you have to cut back your finances again.

“I have to say that the unions are not doing enough. They said they weren’t engaged in the discussions about this before it was announced, but they knew about it. Why didn’t they tell the students and their own members? They go to the same meetings with the same politicians constantly. They all are friends. As students we have emailed the NUS and asked for their support. They have not even responded.

“When you look at how these unions work, they are businesses now. Their headquarters are huge. When you see the amount of money they’ve got from us, from their members, see what they have brought here. They have brought a few facts, a sound system and a tent. They only advertise themselves. What is the purpose of being a member of a union if they are not going to fully back what their members want? I think it’s disgusting.”

Sophie and Ally, student nurses-Kings College London, said, “We are not happy about the bursary cuts. We are here to show our solidarity with the people who are fighting these attacks. Tax the rich and fund the NHS!”

Sarah, a GP trainee doctor, explained, “I am taking part to support my nursing colleagues. Cutting down bursaries of student nurses is very shortsighted and idiotic. We are very short of staff in general and particularly short of nurses. To cut bursaries, we are going to be even more short of nurses in the future because they are going to make it more difficult for people to become nurses. They are going to directly discriminate against people who are coming from poor backgrounds.

“It is deliberate policy by the current government to attack the NHS workforce. It part of a bigger plan to pull apart the NHS.

“These attacks have been happening for years. We work too hard to pull our heads up and notice what is happening. I am planning to go on strike Tuesday with a very heavy heart. This is our last resort.”



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