

Local campuses disaffiliate from British National Union of Students

Thomas Scripps
21 May 2016

The Lincoln University and Newcastle University students unions have voted to disaffiliate from the National Union of Students (NUS).

Ballots at Exeter and Sussex universities on the same question narrowly returned a vote to remain. Other student unions planning disaffiliation votes include Warwick, Hull, Cambridge, Worcester, Loughborough, Oxford and York.

Calls for university unions to separate themselves from the NUS became widespread following April's conference in Brighton, which saw the election of Malia Bouattia to the position of president with 50.9 percent of the vote.

Touted by the pseudo-left groups as a “left” candidate, based largely on the fact that she is the first Muslim female NUS president, Bouattia is an advocate of the reactionary identity politics that predominates in the NUS leadership. She is a leading member of the “Why is my curriculum white?” campaign, which seeks to divert philosophical, sociological and historical study away from the central questions of class and objective truth towards a postmodern agenda based on race, gender and sexuality.

The campaign, which purports to promote “inclusiveness,” was initiated by the NUS at the University College London—one of the most selective universities in Britain. It claims that “whiteness” was “fundamental to the development of capitalism” and has “underpinned the development of European science, modernity, and Enlightenment thinking.”

Such ahistorical, irrational and racialised policies have opened the way for an assault on the NUS from the right, based upon demands that universities and student bodies commit themselves unreservedly to the promotion of the interests of British imperialism. Referring to statements Bouattia had made in the past on the issue of Zionism, the media and various politicians have branded her an “anti-Semite.” These attacks were run in parallel with the witch-hunt against supposed anti-Semites within the Labour Party that led to its leader Jeremy Corbyn suspending Ken Livingstone for his criticisms of Israel and Zionism.

Aimed at repressing any critique of the right-wing Israeli

regime and its onslaught against the Palestinians, Bouattia has been condemned for describing Birmingham University as “something of a Zionist outpost” and referring to “Zionist-led media outlets” in the UK. Bouattia has stressed that her comments were directed at support for the criminal conduct of the Israeli government and not the religion of Judaism, but the condemnations continued.

Labour MP John Mann, who played a lead role in the provocations against Livingstone, attacked the NUS for not “doing enough to combat anti-Jewish hatred.”

The Conservative Party is playing a leading role in the attack. The right-wing *Spectator* magazine made claims to the effect that Bouattia had refused to condemn Islamic State in an NUS motion and was closely related to radical Muslim organisations. She was accused of refusing to back a motion condemning ISIS and of working with the Muslim Public Affairs Committee, which was banned from university campuses in 2004 due to anti-Semitism charges.

At Cambridge, Birmingham, Manchester and King's College London (KCL), motions were either submitted or strongly supported by Conservative Party student organisations or individuals closely associated with them. At Manchester and Birmingham, motions were backed by Conservative Future. The disaffiliation campaign at KCL was headed by Joshua Boyle, previous president of the Conservative Society. At Cambridge University, Connor MacDonald, a committee member of the Conservative Association, “criticised NUS for its hard-left political stance, saying that the union no longer dealt with the interests of students, but focused on pedalling a left-wing ideology,” according to a *Varsity* report.

An article on the Conservative Home blog by its editor, Mark Wallace, characterised the NUS as a “bastion of the loony left” and claimed Bouattia's election was reflective of “the increasingly deep sympathy—and sometimes co-operation—between Trotskyists and Islamists, finding common ground under the excuse of fighting ‘imperialism’.”

The suggestion that Bouattia is a Trotskyist—or anything

close—and that genuine Trotskyism has anything in common with reactionary Islamist terrorism is a slander. What Wallace’s comments indicate is a growing concern among such layers at popular opposition to militarism and war, and the accompanying onslaught on social and democratic rights.

For many years, the NUS functioned as a political safety valve for student protest, with many leading Labour Party bureaucrats cutting their teeth in its leadership policing political discontent. Its former presidents include, for example, Jack Straw, the former foreign and home secretary, former home secretary Charles Clarke, right up to the more current crop including Jim Murphy, Wes Streeting and Aaron Porter.

But under Labour’s leadership, the NUS has increasingly operated as a business operation working in close cooperation with the universities, which themselves are now significant corporate entities. An amalgam of self-absorbed non-political individuals, business careerists and political careerists—largely based on gender and racial politics—the body has consistently opposed any broader mobilization against the attacks on education and young people introduced by successive Labour and Conservative governments.

At the same time, policies such as Safe Spaces and No Platforming are utilised to suppress free speech, most notoriously to try to prevent WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange from speaking against the war crimes of US and British imperialism, and their witch-hunt against him.

This has alienated many students from the NUS. It was in an attempt to redress this situation that a number of pseudo-left groups at the April conference presented motions calling on the body to actively mobilise against the government.

Unlike in previous years, the right wing, including the widely discredited Labour Students, were unable to prevent the motions being carried. This meant that the NUS agreed to organize a demonstration against the hike in tuition fees in the autumn and condemned the “marketisation of education.” The NUS has also opposed the bombing of Syria while Bouattia has criticized the government’s Prevent scheme in education, which justifies political and ideological surveillance of students on the grounds of preventing their “radicalization.”

Writing in the *Huffington Post*, final year law student, David Browne, complained that Bouattia had campaigned on the basis that the NUS conference was “not about the NUS; instead, it appeared to be about almost every other group in society (Tories excepted of course), and essentially that the NUS’s job was to be an all-encompassing, marching protest movement.”

“I would submit that there are many far-left protest movements she could lead if she so wishes,” he went on, “a

body that is supposed to represent ‘the definitive national voice of students’ and campaign for their interests should not be one of them.”

This is at the heart of the right wing’s attack on the NUS. It is one that the body is organically incapable of opposing. Turnouts thus far in the campaign have been extremely low—ranging from a high of 30 percent to just 6 percent. Even at Exeter, the vote to remain in the NUS was carried by just 88 votes.

Responding to the Cambridge disaffiliation campaign, Elinor Clapson, chairwoman of the Cambridge Universities Labour Club, stated: “Oh lord I have concerns about Malia Bouattia too but can’t deal with [sic] budding outraged middle class white man crusade to disaffiliate from NUS.”

This is typical of the responses in defence of Bouattia, which confine themselves to celebrating the election of a Muslim woman rather than alerting students and young people to the political motives behind the disaffiliation campaign. The “Yes to NUS” campaign at Exeter chose to list as its five main points for continued participation in the NUS: the NUS Extra card, savings at university shops, commercial benefits for the Exeter Union, training for Exeter Union officials and claims that Exeter has greater political clout as part of the national organisation.

Those arguing in favour of the NUS are motivated by concern that the ruling elite might otherwise lose its grip on student activism. The afore-mentioned former NUM president, Labour MP Streeting, called on “moderate, mainstream students ... to reclaim control of NUS.” Porter, who oversaw the demobilisation of opposition to tuition fee rises and the abolition of Educational Maintenance Allowance, has called on the NUS to restore its close relations with the government established under his presidency.

Young people face a future of war and austerity. To counter this, they require a genuinely socialist organisation—one that bases the fight against militarism and the constant assault on social and democratic rights on the mobilization of the working class for a revolutionary struggle against capitalism. We encourage all students and young people to consider the International Youth and Students for Socialist Equality’s statement of principles and join in the struggle to build this movement.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact