

More student bodies disaffiliate from UK National Union of Students

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Two more UK universities, Hull and Loughborough, have voted to disaffiliate from the National Union of Students (NUS).

Student unions at these universities have joined those at Lincoln University and Newcastle University, who chose to leave the NUS in May. Ballots held at 11 other UK universities (Exeter, Surrey, Cambridge, Warwick, Worcester, Oxford, York, Bath Spa, Essex, Nottingham and Durham) on the question of whether to remain in the NUS, all narrowly returned a “Yes” vote.

The campaigns to disaffiliate follow the election of Malia Bouattia to the position of NUS president at the union’s April conference in Brighton, ousting incumbent president Megan Dunn by 372 votes to 328.

Since her election, Bouattia has been attacked by politicians and the media as an anti-Semite, in reference to comments she had previously made on the subject of Zionism. The condemnations of the former Birmingham University student have largely been based on her description of her alma mater as “something of a Zionist outpost” and referring to “Zionist-led media outlets.”

The media has also been quick to jump on the fact that Bouattia voted in 2014 against a motion condemning Islamic State (ISIS), using this incident to brand her as a terrorist sympathiser. Bouattia has strongly denied both allegations, recalling that her opposition to the ISIS motion was on purely terminological grounds. According to Bouattia, she criticised the motion for using “language [that] appeared to condemn all Muslims, not just the terror group. Once it was worded correctly I proposed and wholly supported the motion.”

Similarly, she stressed her comments on Zionism were directed against support for the Israeli government’s onslaught against Palestinian civilians, and not against the religion of Judaism.

The allegations of anti-Semitism levelled against Bouattia have run parallel to similar attacks against

Labour Party members, such as former London Mayor Ken Livingstone and Bradford West MP Naz Shah. In the interests of defending NATO and British imperialism, the ruling elite have sought to repress criticism of Israel, one of NATO’s principal allies in the Middle East, and to conflate such criticisms with anti-Semitism.

That these charges of anti-Semitism are far from the principal motivations behind the attacks on Bouattia has become increasingly apparent as the disaffiliation saga unfolds. Student groups at universities across the UK campaigning for a vote to leave the NUS have unashamedly made clear that the election of Bouattia was merely the pretext they had long been searching for to act on their hostility to the NUS.

According to a report by the Jewish Chronicle Online, the leading figure in the disaffiliation campaign at Nottingham University, Blake Purchase, criticised the “direction” that the NUS has been taking for a long time, stating that opposition to the NUS had been growing amongst the student body since before Bouattia’s election.

Purchase, who is general secretary of the university’s Conservative Association, denounced the NUS for “focusing on things which aren’t relevant to students, like Israel or condemning ISIS. Students care about things like tuition fees, and they’ve had enough of the NUS imposing things on them which they shouldn’t be ...”

These condemnations of the NUS from the right are at the heart of the attacks on the union. Under the disaffiliation campaigns, even the vaguest and most empty criticism that the NUS makes of British imperialism is a step too far. Right-wing critics such as Mark Wallace, editor of the Conservative Home blog, characterise the union as a “bastion of the loony left” and denounce it for focussing on anything that is not related to specific issues for students on campus.

The right-wing nature of the disaffiliation campaigns is

plain to see from the heavy involvement of the Conservatives. Conservative Party student organisations have submitted or supported calls to leave the student union at universities such as Cambridge, Manchester, Birmingham and King's College London, while the "No to NUS" campaign at Hull University was led by the president of Hull University Conservative Future Society, Dehenna Davison.

Last year, Davison, who stood in both the 2016 local council elections and the 2015 General Election as a Conservative Party candidate, announced her engagement to Tory councillor John Fareham.

Along with other leading individuals calling for disaffiliation, Davison has couched her arguments in terms of issues facing ethnic minority and LGBT+ groups, condemning the NUS for being "detached ... from unique issues gay men experience," and celebrating the achievements of Hull University Students Union for implementing unisex toilets on their campus. These right-wing critics of the NUS have done their utmost to divert students' attention away from the very real political threats that face them, and to instead direct political opposition into the dead-end channels of identity politics.

The NUS itself, however, is hardly a stranger to the use of identity politics for these ends. Under its widely hated policies of "Safe Spaces" and "No-Platforming," speakers who are deemed to have views that may be offensive to minorities or selected "oppressed groups" are denied the opportunity to speak. Speakers who have been refused a platform include feminist activist Germain Greer, who the NUS considers to be "transphobic," and WikiLeaks whistleblower Julian Assange on the grounds that he is "rape denier."

"Safe Spaces" and "No-Platforming" have alienated many students from the NUS, as they rightly view these policies as a suppression of freedom of speech. This disillusionment with the union has been clear to see in the low turnout in the disaffiliation referendums so far. Referendum campaigns have barely been able to muster the votes of a 1,000 students, with turnouts ranging from a high of 30 percent to the more common 6 to 8 percent. The referendum at Bath Spa University, which returned a Remain vote, had the participation of only 388 students.

The election of Bouattia has been celebrated as a turning point for the NUS by pseudo-left groups such as the Socialist Party (SP) affiliated Socialist Students, who have called for students to take part in the referendum campaigns to "Say yes to a fighting NUS."

Despite criticising its previous "failure ... to offer a lead

in organising resistance," Socialist Students insist that with the new "left-wing" leadership of Bouattia, students will be able to put pressure on the NUS to "use its resources and authority to organise mass action to defend students."

Socialist Worker, newspaper of the pseudo-left Socialist Workers Party (SWP), has joined in the adulation of Bouattia, labelling her an "anti-racist and left wing activist." Bouattia, whose election is touted as a great victory for the left by the SP and SWP—due to the fact that she is the first black Muslim woman to occupy the presidency—is a prominent advocate of identity politics. She has played an active role in campaigns such as "Why is my curriculum so white?" and "Black Lives Matter," which seek to portray race, gender and sexual orientation as the central issues underpinning global political life.

Bouattia's election, as well as that of Shelly Asquith, Shakira Martin and Sorana Vieru to vice-presidency, has been proclaimed by *Socialist Worker* as marking "a shift towards turning the NUS into a campaigning organisation." In an article for the *Guardian*, Asquith also attempted to portray the NUS as being at the dawn of a new, more radical era, celebrating the "proud campaigning history" of the union, and declaring that "[that] campaigning spirit is now back at the forefront of the NUS."

The NUS, in an attempt to regain support from students angry over its constant refusal to fight education cuts and tuition fees, was forced to organise a demonstration in the autumn against the government's proposed hike in fees set out in the Queen's Speech in May.

This is the same NUS that has routinely collaborated with successive Labour and Conservative governments to impose higher student fees, cut maintenance grants to students and scale back, sabotage and wherever possible end student protests. No matter how "left-wing" the rhetoric of its incoming leaders, the function of the NUS as a political safety valve to contain students anger, and divert it back into dead-end channels, remains unchanged.



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