

UK students and lecturers protest education cuts

A reporting team
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Up to 15,000 students and lecturers marched in London Saturday, in opposition to government attacks on Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE). Students marched several miles from Park Lane, with the protest concluding with a rally at Millbank, near Parliament.

The protest was called by the National Union of Students (NUS) and the University and College Union (UCU) under the heading “United for Education.” Most of those protesting were young people, with many bringing their own homemade banners such as “Education not Bombs,” “No fees, no cuts, no debt,” “Drop Fees Not Bombs” and “Education, not Deportation.”

In August, the ruling Conservatives scrapped maintenance grants worth around £3,500 for the UK’s poorest students, replacing them with additional maintenance loans that students have to pay back once they are in employment. Theresa May’s government is pressing ahead with its Higher Education and Research Bill, under which universities will be ranked according to “quality.” Those at the top of the table will be allowed to raise tuition fees well above their present level of £9,000 per annum. The Bill also makes it easier for new institutions, including for-profit companies, to gain university status.

Over the last decade, the UCU has barely lifted a finger against FE and HE cuts, closure of educational institutions and the casualization of lecturers’ jobs, terms and conditions. University staff have seen pay fall in real terms by 14.5 percent since 2009. In May, lecturers struck to protest a pay increase of just 1.1 percent.

Likewise, the NUS have done nothing to oppose the hike in tuition fees, which began under the 1997 Blair Labour government. Despite it being a joint NUS/UCU

protest, neither organisation proposed any joint action. All that was urged from the platform was for students to boycott the National Student Survey (NSS)—an annual census of universities—with the NUS claiming this was required to stop the government carrying out its plans of ranking universities.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to some of those attending the demonstration.

Emily and her friend came from Leeds. She said she was concerned about the election of US President Donald Trump:

“This has happened before in history. It happened in Germany and it happened in Italy. The thing is today the world is internationally more connected and we can fight against it in different countries and the people in America can fight it with us too,” she said.

Emily had heard about the mass protests of students and young people in the US against Trump’s election. She said Trump “got all his support” due to the disillusionment of many in the policies of US President Barack Obama during the two terms of his presidency.

She was worried about the danger of new wars, saying, “I think Britain has to get rid of nuclear weapons. At the moment, it doesn’t feel like the world is going to be here for my lifespan. My friends are really worried too. I have an American friend and she was so distraught because she did a few months’ teaching in Laos and saw the effects of Agent Orange. She saw the horrors of what it had done to people in the US bombing of Laos. She had seen children who were still suffering. And the company that made Agent Orange backed Hillary Clinton. Because of that, she did not want to give any support to Clinton, nor did she support Trump. They say America is the home of democracy, but I don’t think it has been that for a long time now.”

As the rally reached its destination, an open microphone was made available for those in attendance. Socialist Equality Party member Tania Kent told students that the election of Donald Trump in the US “marked a watershed and had implications for the entire globe. Just like you, who have marched and taken up protest today, tens and thousands of youth and students across the US have participated in daily protests across the country on the election of Trump and the dangers that are posed.

“Trump, in the week since his election, has restated his determination to ban abortions, carry out mass deportations and pursue extreme right-wing policies across the board. ... The election of Trump signified the move by the American ruling class to a policy of authoritarianism and state violence against social opposition.

“The election of Trump was not inevitable, however. It is the product of a protracted process, the lessons of which must be drawn.” She called on students to attend a December 17 meeting in London on the significance of the election of Trump, which will be addressed by David North, a leading American Marxist and author of the new book, *A Quarter Century of War : The U.S. Drive for Global Hegemony 1990-2016* (details to be announced shortly).

Prehan told the WSWS he came to the protest “because I don’t think the NSS is a good metric to standardize how well a university teaches. The NSS will influence elitism in the universities that already exists. It will put universities into three ranks of bronze, silver and gold. Gold universities, which I’m guessing includes the University of Manchester where I study, will charge £12,000, which is not good.”

Prehan said, “I think the election of Trump will be bad, but I don’t see any difference between him and Hillary Clinton. I don’t think any less countries will be bombed. They both support war. I’ve always been a socialist. It’s just logical to me that if you can help people then you just should.”

Stephanie, a lecturer at Kings College in London, was protesting with her husband, also a lecturer, and child. She said, “I have been teaching here for three years. I’ve been horrified with the increasing of monetisation, measurables, the increasing casualization of staff, the rise in fees. My husband is on an insecure contract as a lecturer, so we see every side of it to some extent.

“I think something in the order of 50 percent of lecturers are now on casual contracts. It’s disastrous for students, disastrous for the culture of universities. I’m really glad these students are really pushing back.”

Stephanie said, “Trump does not have a popular mandate. I do not support Clinton but she won the popular vote by more than a million votes. Trump was elected by an outmoded electoral college. This is not the majority’s desire. He is now trying to run America as a business ... he is not a politician. This is not helping the interests of the working people.”

Asked what she thought about the Democratic Party, Clinton and Obama, she said, “In the general media and among the elite, they have lauded the Democratic Party. There was an escalation of wars under Obama and there was an escalation of a lot of the Republican Party policies during his two terms ... We can’t forget how disastrous the foreign policy has been under Obama and that’s how foreign policy would have been under a Clinton administration.”

Alan graduated from university last year with student loan debts over £54,000. He said he was disgusted with all the political parties as “none of them talk about the student loan debt crisis.”

Alan said he knew “many graduates that cannot find suitable employment in relation to their studies and are now working in low pay zero-hour contracts just to survive. ... Private debt collectors are being used to chase after outstanding loan payments, which is costing far more than the debt.”



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