Thousands march in London in defence of science

Our reporters
24 April 2017

Up to 10,000 scientists and academics marched in London Saturday, alongside many undergraduate and post-graduate students, as part of the global March for Science. Workers employed in the science industry also attended as did concerned members of the public who are opposed to attacks on science and funding cuts.

Many brought homemade banners protesting the attacks on science. Others referred to the danger of UK scientific institutions suffering major losses in funding due to Britain leaving the European Union (EU) following last year's Brexit referendum.

The march assembled near the Science Museum and National History Museum, adjacent to one of the world's most prestigious scientific institutions—Imperial College London.

The route of the demonstration, which ended with a rally in Parliament Square, passed renowned scientific institutions such as the Royal Society. Satellite marches were held in other UK cities including Manchester, Bristol, Cardiff and Edinburgh.

Socialist Equality Party members distributed copies of the *World Socialist Web Site* perspective article headlined "Science and Socialism," and WSWS reporters interviewed a number of those attending.

Hundreds of those marching brought homemade placards. Jules, who lives in London, brought a homemade placard reading, "Galileo was innocent." Asked why she made the placard, Jules said, "My sentiment is that Galileo's persecution was a long time ago now and we should know better. I thought we were a democracy, not a Florentine principality ruled by the rich. I think Galileo's story is still relevant. That's why I have this banner today."

Asked for her response to claims by march organisers that the defence of science was not a political issue, Jules said, "It is political now. It's been made political. I don't think scientists would choose to be out here marching. I know lots of people involved in science and all of them are worried about their funding and worried about the impact of Brexit. All of them are worried about the paucity of students coming here. I think we are losing a lot of the big science agencies, the big space agencies. The atomic research institute is under threat."

Jules explained that the University of Manchester had recently produced two Nobel Prize winners for the development of graphene, "and they [the winners] were not English, were they? Where would they be if we had this total introspection and who would want to come here?"

She said she opposed recent attempts to slash projects at the Jodrell Bank Radio Telescope, which is run by the University of Manchester. "One of my friends who works at Imperial College worked at Jodrell Bank, and they said they were working with fine colleagues all around the world and science needs to be above nationalism."

Asked about the source of nationalism, Jules blamed "those at the top", adding, "I think they are greedy and short-termist."

Sam, a structural biologist who did his PhD at the University of Oxford, joined the march with Michael, a biochemist, who also graduated from Oxford, with a £21,000 debt. They brought a placard comparing their salary with that of Members of Parliament—who earn more than three times their income, plus expenses.

Sam said, "I was 'lucky' as courses were £3,000 a year at the time, so I have about £15,000 in debt. Now you would have about £15,000 a year debt on a course.

"We scrape by on £20,000 a year after seven years of education. You have these MPs on a lot more doing very little. What they are doing on cutting immigration

© World Socialist Web Site

is preposterous. We rely as scientists on immigration. There are European Research Commission cuts. They fund a lot of projects that we will lose out on here. We are currently funded by the ERC."

"We take these crappy salaries but now we've got the prospect of having to leave the thing we love doing and have worked so hard to get."

Michael said, "There's been a lot of cuts in science post-Brexit and it's one of the reasons we are here. These ERC grants are worth £1.5 million pounds per researcher who then splits the money between his department and to workers like us. It's a lot of money.

"One of the worst things over the last year with Brexit is the whole denigration of scientific views. We are here to oppose that and I think everyone is too."

Sam said he was opposed to a huge amount of the budget of society going to military spending. "It is just ridiculous what is wasted by the military. I don't even know the science budget figure as it is so small."

Jim is an engineer and a psychologist from Manchester. He said, "I came to the London protest because I want to celebrate science because science is the area of life you're encouraged to ask questions in, and through asking questions you can be free."

On the subordination of science to war, Jim said, "It's definitely present. This issue goes beyond science and into what we see as valuable as a society. In a capitalist structure, you always need to justify things by profit and that relates to war as well."

Jim said, "I think a discussion of science in terms of socialism is necessary and we need some real debates about what kind of political model fits science best."

Asked his thoughts on the Trump presidency, he said, "Donald Trump, like all of us, is a social animal and operates within a capitalist system. Trump is a symptom of a bigger problem rather than the problem itself. If we want change, we are going to need to change more than the president of the United States."

Manchester

The March for Science in Manchester drew around 300 people, who assembled in the city's main Albert Square to listen to speakers prior to a march. Among those in attendance were scientists and students from the city's two main universities and various colleges. A worker from the Manchester site of the IT conglomerate Fujitsu, who is currently on strike, also attended.

Andy, an analytical chemist, spoke to the WSWS. He said, "I see there are a lot of challenges in Britain and around the world today. There's a big gap between the rich and poor. That is a worry. I had a grant when I was growing up and studying. That's no longer available for younger people now."

Andy said he was concerned about the danger of global war, "With Trump in the White House… It's a worrying time, probably the most worrying, politically, in my lifetime."

Ross said, "I'm actually a physicist from St. Andrews [in Scotland] on my way to Croatia. I wanted to join in with this march to show its importance across Britain, Europe and the world. To show how important science is for all of us, our livelihoods, for all our collaborations with people across the globe."

Ross added, "It's quite frightening at the moment, with Trump and Brexit and the general election just being called. It's hard to know what's going on from day to day."

Natyra, 16, and Hafsa, 17, attend Xaverian College where they study a number of subjects, including the sciences. Natyra said, "Trump is ignoring the whole thing about global warming and I am concerned about Brexit because so many science projects are funded by the EU." She said only international collaboration had made so many discoveries possible, including "the particle accelerator and the genome project."

Hafsa said, "Science is about improving life, not dropping bombs."

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site