

Part 1: The reactionary origins of Britain's incoming National Union of Students executive

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The National Union of Students' (NUS) presidential elections, at its annual national conference in April, marked the culmination of a right-wing campaign by the British ruling class, together with its appendages in student politics and the media, to oust incumbent "radical" national president, Malia Bouattia.

Labour's Shakira Martin secured a clear majority, winning 56 percent of delegates, and will take over as president on July 1.

Martin headed a joint slate submitted by Labour Students, a Labour Party affiliate associated with its Blairite wing, the Organised Independents. One commentator characterised it as being "united by their shared concern to minimise the influence of 'the left'," together with the pro-Zionist Union of Jewish Students (UJS).

Bouattia came in second in front of Conservative candidate Tom Harwood, who managed only a token number of votes largely because the Tory press and student groups rallied behind Martin. The right wing won all but one of the six positions on the National Executive Council (NEC), obliterating the majority enjoyed by "radical" factions.

Bouattia was elected last year on a manifesto committed to transforming the NUS into a "fighting, campaigning union" to oppose tuition fees and reverse education cuts. She was hailed by her supporters as the first Muslim, "politically Black"—a term used by the British pseudo-left to denote all ethnic minorities "of colour"—woman to lead the NUS. Bouattia is of Algerian descent and belongs to the "Liberation" faction of the union, which focuses on identity politics—particularly the social advancement of black and ethnic minority students—as well as pro-Palestinian causes.

Her candidacy was jointly supported by NUS factions linked to the pseudo-left, including Student Broad Left, the Campaign for Free Education run by the Alliance for Workers' Liberty (AWL), the National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts, as well as the student organisations of the Socialist Party and the Socialist Workers Party (SWP).

The primary consideration of these forces in backing Bouattia had been to revive the tattered reputation of the NUS by way of a radical facelift. The union is widely reviled for assisting successive governments in driving through devastating education cuts, including the tripling of university tuition fees and the scrapping of maintenance grants for university and college students. Under the

leadership of Labour's Aaron Porter, the union lent its support to the brutal police repression of mass student protests in 2010-11 and worked assiduously to prevent a nationwide demonstration.

Under Bouattia's "fighting" leadership, however, the role of the NUS in strangling opposition to education cuts, and as a training ground for the next generation of political flunkys on behalf of the capitalist state, has continued unimpeded. Former NUS presidents include Jack Straw and Charles Clarke, both senior ministers in the Labour government of Tony Blair.

Notwithstanding a few protests by its leaders, the main work of the union over the past year has consisted of collaborating closely with the Conservative government in making law the Higher Education and Research Bill. This will open the door to the wholesale privatisation of UK universities and more closely configure research funding to the interests of big business.

Beyond a narrow coterie of careerists, the NUS has not the slightest popular mandate. The average turnout for NUS elections at more than 600 affiliated colleges and universities that elect delegates to the annual national conference was just 17.83 in 2015 (the last available figures). The vast majority of students that sign up to the NUS do so to utilise its on-campus facilities and to take advantage of the student discounts available with a membership card.

Bouattia had attempted to give the Tory legislation a left cover, claiming "crucial concessions" had been wrested from the government. These include "the publishing of data on attainment gaps according to ethnicity" and a small delay (until 2020) in the planned "link between the Teaching Excellence Framework and fees" at English universities. This last measure will create a fluctuating market for undergraduate degrees based on performance criteria for individual universities, meaning fees are likely to rise above the current upper threshold of £9,250 per year at top universities.

These concessions are of a piece with the cynical pledges of Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May to "restore fairness" and "tackle racial disparities in public services outcomes", at the same time as pushing through billions of pounds in public spending cuts.

Despite her assistance in peddling the government's assault on higher education, Bouattia's record of criticising some of the crimes of British imperialism and its major allies, albeit in very

limited terms, provoked a ferocious backlash from the political establishment and the media. This coincided with identical right-wing machinations against Jeremy Corbyn, the nominally left-wing leader of the Labour Party.

In her former role as NUS Black Students' Officer, Bouattia had denounced the UK government's Prevent counterterrorism strategy as a "steady descent into a police state" in a speech before the United Nations. Prevent, which is directed against Muslim pupils and students, sought to turn teachers and other educational staff into informants on any signs of "radicalisation."

Bouattia has also been critical of the involvement of Western powers in the US-instigated Syrian civil war and their exploitation of the atrocities committed by the jihadist Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) as an all-purpose "justification for war and blatant Islamophobia."

However, Bouattia's criticisms have nothing in common with a principled opposition to imperialist war, based necessarily on the international unity of the working class.

Her comments on Syria mirror the hypocritical position broadly upheld by the pseudo-left, of opposing "Western intervention" at the same time as calling for "unequivocal support" for the Kurdish forces fighting ISIS. In practice, this means directly lobbying Britain and its allies to provide better arms and more effective air support for the Kurdish YPG (Peoples' Protection Units), the principal proxy force of the US imperialism in its over-arching strategy of regime change in Syria.

Pseudo-left factions have ruthlessly enforced this pro-imperialist line. Bouattia herself came under fire for opposing the wording of a September 2014 motion condemning ISIS in solidarity with Kurds, which she thought would provoke further state clampdowns and prejudice against Muslims. Daniel Cooper of the Alliance for Workers' Liberty, a member of the NUS National Executive Council, denounced her as a "Stalinist" for putting "flat opposition to everything US imperialism does above questions of democracy, liberation and working-class struggle, in this case the democratic liberation struggle of the Kurds." At the same time, the right-wing press smeared her as an ISIS sympathiser.

The extent of Bouattia's objection to "Western interference" rests solely on the racist perspective that war "all too often...leads to the suffering of Black people"—as if the wellspring of imperialism was white supremacism and not the irrational division of the world economy into feuding nation states and the rival capitalist oligarchies that they serve.

The extreme subjectivist and postmodernist nostrums that underpin identity politics have proven highly adaptable and furnish a plethora of alternative justifications for lending "critical" support to imperialism. In the case of Syria, the YPG's adaptation to gender politics has facilitated the pseudo-left in singling out the Kurds for military support among the multi-sided, ethno-religious and national divisions stoked by imperialism as a means of subjugating the vast oil reserves and strategic advantages of North Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia.

Although Bouattia does not pose a genuine opposition to British imperialism, significant sections of the ruling class oppose any public criticism of its agenda of austerity, militarism and war. Her election was met with a hysterical, state-endorsed witch-hunt,

smearing her as a terrorist sympathiser and an anti-Semite, particularly over her opposition to Israel's brutal persecution of the Palestinians and her support for the anti-Zionist protest movement, Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS).

The establishment media endlessly recycled articles she penned for a student blog back in 2011, in which she referred to the University of Birmingham chapter of the UJS as "something of a Zionist outpost" and criticised reporting by "mainstream Zionist-led media outlets" on the Israel-Palestine conflict.

While right-wing publications such as the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Spectator* and the *Jewish Chronicle* have led the charge, the entire spectrum of the capitalist press, including the nominally liberal *Guardian* and the "impartial" *BBC*, have accepted as good coin the reactionary conflation of opposition to Israel's subjugation of Palestine with anti-Semitism.

On this question, Bouattia can be criticised, at the very most, for the imprecision of her formulations, but she is not an anti-Semite. Her case has not been helped by the Twitter activity of some of her closest NUS allies, however, who have peppered some of their criticisms of Israel with anti-Semitic jibes. This toxic perspective flows directly from the bankrupt protest politics of the BDS, which attributes collective responsibility to all Israeli Jews for the predatory Zionist policies of the Israeli ruling class. In any case, her charges against the media and the UJS have been thoroughly confirmed by the intrigues against her.

In response to Bouattia's election, Conservative student organisations mounted a wrecking operation in conjunction with the UJS, campaigning for universities to disaffiliate from the NUS on the phony pretext of "institutional racism." This stunt failed to attract any significant support among students, with only five universities—Lincoln, Newcastle, Hull, Loughborough, and, most recently, Surrey—voting to disaffiliate on extremely low turnouts. Nevertheless, Labour Students threatened that the NUS would collapse altogether—i.e., Labour would remove its support—unless the union were "reclaimed by moderates."

To be continued



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