

Part 2: The reactionary origins of the incoming National Union of Students executive

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The full significance of Labour's threats only became clear earlier this year with an undercover investigative report published by *Al Jazeera*, revealing that Labour's Richard Brooks, the outgoing vice president of the National Union of Students (NUS), had led backroom manoeuvres in collaboration with the Union of Jewish Students (UJS) to undermine NUS National President Malia Bouattia and promote Zionist sympathisers to leading positions in the union.

The Qatari broadcaster exposed that Brooks had collaborated closely in this endeavour with figures close to the Israeli embassy in London, including Shai Masot, a senior political officer at the embassy.

According to *Al Jazeera*, this was part of a far broader, ongoing mission by the Israeli security and intelligence agencies "to build support for Israel among all levels of the Labour Party," and was run in parallel with intelligence gathering on members of the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement. Jeremy Corbyn acquiesced entirely to the campaign, expelling a number of his closest allies from the Parliamentary Labour Party for criticising Israel, and an all-party Home Affairs Select Committee inquiry into anti-Semitism officially condemned Bouattia for "outright racism."

Labour's Shakira Martin's successful bid for the NUS presidency was a direct product of these intrigues.

According to *Al Jazeera* sources, the youth section of Labour Friends of Israel is in daily contact with Masot, who has also arranged trips to Israel for young members of the Fabian Society, an influential Labour Party think-tank. This much was confirmed by a recent article in the *Telegraph* by Daniel Sugarman, boasting that the "UJS has developed a relationship" with the incoming NUS president, in the course of "a trip to Poland...as well as a trip to Israel and the West Bank in January."

"Ms Martin's open mind is to be commended," Sugarman declared.

With the NUS under threat, and given the slavish allegiance of the pseudo-left to the Labour Party and the trade union bureaucracy, it is highly likely that a crucial number of "left" delegates gave their support to Martin in order to salvage the reputation of the union as a dependable instrument of the British bourgeoisie.

The SWP's *Socialist Worker* described Bouattia's defeat as "a

setback for the left," but insisted, "the right haven't won." It gave a glowing review of the NUS conference, reporting that "speech after speech" had "repeated the need to challenge austerity and racism."

"The last 12 months," the same article concluded, "underlines the potential for anti-austerity, anti-racist and pro-Palestinian policies to win wide support among students."

In her own account of her year as president in the *Huffington Post*, Bouattia presented Martin's victory as that of "a single mother and a black woman from a further education background," which had vindicated her own racist perspective. This is a "testament to how far our union has come" in breaking down "barriers to participation," she attested.

This is a combination of political stupidity and outright lies.

One of the first motions passed by the NUS after Martin's victory was a UJS resolution against anti-Semitism, which included a provision allowing "Jewish Students to define their own oppression." This policy has the most sinister of political implications, not least the potential proscription of any individual or organisation critical of the Israeli state at the 600-plus universities and colleges where the NUS has a presence.

It is perhaps because these developments represent no great departure from the usual conduct of the NUS that the pseudo-left consider it as no significant setback. NUS officials regularly ban individuals and organisations from hosting meetings and delivering speeches on campuses across the UK, in line with the student union's long-standing policy of providing "no platform" for offensive speakers in the name of securing campuses as so-called safe spaces.

The British pseudo-left pioneered this policy in the early 1970s as a means of lobbying the institutions of the capitalist state to proscribe speakers from the far right. It has since been expanded to target any speaker deemed to cause "offence," regardless of the context or their intention, to one of the selected identities based on ethnicity, gender or sexuality, defined by the pseudo-left as "oppressed groups." The NUS defends the right of such groups to "define their own oppression" as a matter of principle.

This arbitrary and anti-democratic policy has already been exploited for highly reactionary ends. Most grievously, WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange was "no platformed" by NUS officials in 2012, in solidarity with the phoney rape allegations concocted by

US imperialism and its allies to silence his exposure of their countless war crimes.

Indeed, identity politics has emerged as a major prop of class rule, particularly for the bourgeoisie of the imperialist countries. Not only does it serve as a decoy for social counter-revolution, war and the evisceration of democratic rights, it augments and reinforces the traditional mechanisms used by the bourgeoisie—nationalism, racism, religious prejudice, gender and intergenerational disputes—to divide the working class.

Its most truculent proponents are to be found among the privileged upper middle class, which aggressively exploits both the real and, more commonly, imagined grievances of these “oppressed” identity groups—that are always undifferentiated by class—in pursuit of a more favourable distribution of wealth among the richest 10 percent of society.

This explains why the “no platform” and related policies have been used predominantly to settle scores between adherents of rival strands of identity politics. Both Germaine Greer, a feminist writer, and gay rights activist Peter Tatchell have been “no platformed” based on preposterous accusations of advancing “transphobic views” (prejudice against transsexual and transgender people). In a similar vein, an absurd motion was passed at the 2015 NUS Women’s Campaign conference, demanding that “white gay men” stop acting like they have an “inner black woman” because “they benefit from both white privilege and male privilege.”

It would be easy to dismiss this petty factional wrangling as little more than a bad joke. This would be a mistake, however. The increasingly bitter conflicts between and within rival identity groups reflect definite social interests and are bound up with fundamental tendencies in the unfolding breakdown of world capitalism. The colossal concentration of wealth in the top 1 percent, particularly the top 0.1 percent of society—a process that has accelerated rapidly in the wake of the global financial breakdown of 2007-2008—has produced an internecine struggle for career recognition and social advancement among the upper middle class, which has assumed ever more malignant and right-wing forms.

A significant component of the moves to oust Bouattia, on which she and her pseudo-left allies have been silent, emerged from among her comrades in the Black Students’ NUS Campaign.

At its conference in May 2016, an utterly debased dispute erupted over the use of the term “politically black.” A motion put forward, which ultimately fell, demanded that “The NUS Black Students Officer should be ethnically black or the ‘title’ for the position should be changed.” Calls resounded for delegates to prove their African ancestry, and those who are not “ethnically black” were accused of hijacking black identities and of anti-black racism. Priscilla Mensah, president of the Cambridge University Students’ Union, objected to the “excessive praise of Malia Bouattia” and the “conspicuous absence of similar appreciation for [then] Vice-President for Further Education Shakira Martin,” who happens to qualify as “ethnically,” as opposed to “politically” black.

Bouattia is no stranger to such racist feuds. She is a leading figure in the “Why Is My Curriculum White?” movement. Under

the rubric of “decolonising education,” it recently called for the removal of “White” philosophers from the curriculum and for positive discrimination in favour of black and ethnic minority academics at the School of Oriental and African Studies—an elite University in London where Bouattia completed her master’s degree.

In other words, Bouattia has been hoisted on her petard of reactionary identity politics.

There is nothing remotely progressive or left-wing about this. It is no exaggeration to point out, as the *World Socialist Web Site* has repeatedly warned, that these ideas belong firmly to the tradition of irrationalism and anti-Enlightenment thought, which, in the twentieth century, found its most devastating expression in the crimes of Hitler and the Nazis.

Martin has dishonestly exploited popular disgust with lifestyle and identity politics to present herself as a unifying figure against the divisive politics of the “left.” At the same time as stressing her commitment to identity politics and her respect for “Jewish students and black students being able to define their own oppression,” she cynically made a pitch to “white, non-disabled, straight” working-class men, who are completely excluded from this agenda, other than as a euphemism for misogyny, backwardness and “white male privilege.”

Inadvertently revealing the true interests represented by the NUS, Martin told the *Guardian* following her election: “I definitely think we have not recognised the class barriers that prevent loads of students getting involved in their unions and accessing education.”

Far from establishing its credentials as a viable opponent of austerity, war and racism, as Bouattia and her pseudo-left allies would have us believe, “the past 12 months” have once again exposed the NUS as a discredited right-wing husk. Both its “left” and right wings are absolutely saturated in retrograde racist conceptions, manifold forms of identity politics and hostility to the working class.

Concluded



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