

Left-wing students barred from King's College London during royal visit

Thomas Scripps
28 March 2019

At least 10 politically active students at King's College London (KCL) were barred from accessing the university campus on March 19 as part of security arrangements for a visit by the queen and duchess of Cambridge. The activists' names were also passed along by the university administration to London's Metropolitan Police.

This deliberate intimidation of left-wing students is a grievous attack on democratic rights and the freedom of association. There was never even an indication that the students had any intention of protesting against the queen's visit, which they would have been entitled to do in any case. The university and the police have given themselves the power to exclude individuals from campus solely based on their political beliefs.

All the students in question are involved with KCL's Action for Palestine and Justice4Cleaners protest groups. Action for Palestine is a registered society at the university and campaigns "to end our own institution's complicity in the illegal occupation of Palestine, serve as a platform for students to learn about social justice, and to educate the wider community about the situation in Palestine."

Justice4Cleaners has carried out a years-long campaign to end the university's use of heavily exploited, outsourced labour for their cleaning staff.

The first the 10 knew of the ban was when their university ID cards failed to grant them entry to classes, the library, work shifts and exams. One barred student was told by a KCL staff member, "We were under instructions from the Metropolitan police to refuse access to Bush House due to the event that was taking place. That is all I can say to you." Others were informed, "There are a number of protesters who have been visible at a number of protests over the last year, two years. You're identifiable because you were on

CCTV."

This statement suggests the illegal use of video surveillance for political purposes.

Over 400 current and former students and professors have since signed an open letter protesting the university's despicable actions. The letter explains, "This constitutes an alarming securitization of campus and an act of profiling of students based not on any evidence that they are guilty of wrongdoing, but rather a suspicion that they might potentially commit harmful acts at some point in the future. None of the students subject to this exclusion have any record of university misconduct. Such profiling of students is based on the political viewpoints and racial and national identities of students, and violates the commitment of KCL to providing a safe and inclusive academic community and campus for all..."

"This spurious use of 'security' encourages a culture of fear, suspicion, mistrust, and functions as a blanket reason for all kinds of repressive measures."

The signatories demand "an explanation of the process by which this decision was taken, an apology from the KCL administration to these students, and a commitment not to engage in such acts of unjustified profiling and exclusion again."

KCL refuses to even acknowledge that specific students were targeted. A spokesman commented, "We had an event which demanded the highest level of security and we had to minimise movement through buildings for security reasons. At times some of our buildings were not accessible."

The university administration laughably offered to carry out a "full and independent review" into how its own decisions were made.

These events must be placed in the context of an ongoing assault on progressive politics being carried

out by the government, through the Office for Students (OfS) and Prevent scheme, and the right-wing media. They have sought to use accusations of left-wing “authoritarianism” and “extremism,” coupled with the attempt to brand anti-Zionism as a form of anti-Semitism, to outlaw socialist thought and to suppress popular protest against the reactionary figures who are ever more frequently invited onto university campuses. The barring of the KCL students is only the latest stage in this campaign.

Last November, an essay by academic Norman Geras on the “ethics of revolution”, listed as recommended reading in a course on “Justice and Injustice” at Reading University, was flagged as dangerous by the government’s counter-terrorism Prevent scheme. Students were required to submit a form explaining why they were accessing the Geras article, warned not to access it on personal devices, told to read it in a secure setting and not leave it somewhere it might be seen “inadvertently or otherwise, by those who are not prepared to view it.”

This was on the basis, as their lecturer explained, that “The University understands its responsibility to require it to control access to security-sensitive material, which includes but is not limited to material which might be thought to encourage the commission, preparation or instigation of acts of terrorism; material which would be useful in the commission of acts of terrorism; and material which glorifies acts of terrorism.”

Now students themselves are being labeled as security threats, reported directly to the police and denied access to their own university.

It is especially significant that the barred individuals were active protestors against the Israeli state’s vicious treatment of the Palestinians. A massive campaign of slander is being carried out by the British ruling elite to criminalise political opposition to Zionism and to brand Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn and the political left as anti-Semites. This found sharp expression on the campuses late last year, when now suspended Labour MP Chris Williamson had a public meeting at Sheffield University cancelled by Sheffield Labour Students. The decision was prompted by the Metropolitan Police’s announcement of an investigation into allegations of anti-Semitism in the Labour Party. Williamson had been a vocal critic of this Blairite-led witch hunt.

The WSWS wrote, “The ban is profoundly anti-democratic and has serious consequences for freedom of speech.” Meetings “can now be ‘indefinitely postponed’ on university campuses—and beyond—until Scotland Yard gives the go ahead!”

That warning has been confirmed. Students who protest in defence of the Palestinians are now targets for censorship and police controls. The pretext in this case was a visit by the queen, but there is nothing to stop the same argument being employed in the case of any member of government, army general or right-wing ideologue.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) strongly support the fight against KCL’s anti-democratic actions.

The political policing of UK campuses is escalating rapidly. Universities are crucial centres of ruling class strategy and propaganda, and KCL itself is a prime example. The institution hosts a 2,000-student strong “War Studies” department, the front page of its Policy Institute’s website features a report titled “How Russian State Media Weaponises News” and 19 of its alumni currently sit in the House of Commons. With British imperialism facing an unprecedented crisis of rule, these functions of the universities become ever-more vital. At the same time, the ruling class feel seriously threatened by growing anti-capitalist sentiment among young people and its solution is a crackdown on left-wing ideas and action.

Not a single instance of political censorship on campus can be seriously fought without an understanding of these deeper causes. By coming to grips with these issues, students must recognise that their basic democratic rights can only be defended based on a socialist struggle against capitalism.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact