

# Oppose repression of UK university students protesting Israeli war on Gaza!

International Youth and Students for Social Equality (UK)  
20 October 2023

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) condemns the British government and university institutions' clampdown on students protesting the Israeli government's genocidal assault on Gaza.

The most serious attack on the right to protest and free speech on campus is the suspension of several students from London's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS).

The suspensions followed a rally October 9 in the aftermath of the October 7 Palestinian uprising and the Israeli government's barbaric response. Over 4,000 Palestinians have since been killed by Israeli rockets and bombs and over 12,000 wounded, with much of Gaza laid to waste.

The rally held "in solidarity with the people of Gaza and their struggle against the occupation" was organised by the SOAS Palestine Society and supported by hundreds of students. The society explained what took place:

"The rally began on the steps of the main building, where rallies have historically been held at SOAS, and later safely moved to the green space opposite the main building, when a fire alarm sounded and the main building was evacuated. Needless to say, no Palestine Society member was in any way responsible for the alarm sounding."

Three days later, on October 12, some students were suspended. The following day, members of the Palestine Society who were not even present at the rally were issued with formal disciplinary warnings by the university, in what was defined as a "targeted act of political repression against the Palestinian Society."

The Palestine Society have published a petition, stating, "We extend our full solidarity to the thousands of Palestinians killed in Gaza. The violence they are being subjected to is incomparable in scale and severity to any sort of state repression or violence that we may face in the UK. Therefore, we feel a moral imperative to organize

against the imperialist and Zionist forces on our campus. We call on the students, academics, and workers to stand in solidarity with the people of Palestine and defend freedom of speech and the right to express solidarity on campus."

The petition demands, "SOAS must 1) Drop all disciplinary proceedings against those involved in the protest; 2) Revoke the formal warnings given to Palestine Society Committee members; 3) Re-establish the right to protest on the steps of the main building, the historic center of activism on campus".

In a statement to *Middle East Monitor*, the society said that SOAS was attempting to use alleged health and safety code violations as a pretext to clampdown on "dissent within the university and silence those who have been most active in amplifying pro-Palestinian voices on campus."

SOAS management claimed that the suspensions were not a breach of democratic rights, saying, "Like all British universities we have a legal duty to protect freedom of speech". They told the *Daily Mail* "that this suspension pending a further investigation is being imposed on a small number of students not because they engaged in solidarity action, but because they violated an agreement with the executive, *supported by the Students' Union*, which disrupted our teaching, learning and wider activities and led to a significant breach of health and safety policies and procedures." [emphasis added]

The Student Union at SOAS, affiliated to the Labour Party dominated National Union of Students (NUS), has not made a statement on this issue and neither has the national NUS.

The same week the Student Union at University College London (UCL) suspended the UCL Marxist Society —affiliated to the International Marxist Tendency (IMT). A statement by the Marxist Society said that on October 11 it "received e-mails from UCL SU demanding we take

down posters and social media posts for our meeting tonight as they could be construed as ‘inciting violence’. By refusing to comply they have now told us that our society has been suspended pending investigation.”

The Marxist Society added, “Our posters show a Palestinian flag with the slogan ‘Intifada until victory! The fight for a free Palestine’. Intifadas are mass uprisings against the Israeli state by the Palestinians.”

The University of Manchester has launched a “formal investigation” that “will be led by a senior University academic” into comments made by law student Dana Abuqumar, president of the Manchester Friends of Palestine student group. Her “crime” was to express support for the Palestinian uprising in comments made to *Sky News* on October 8. Abuqumar’s told the BBC that 15 of her relatives were later killed when an Israeli “missile was dropped on their three-storey residential building”.

The assault on the democratic rights of students follows hysterical demands from the Conservative government that any opposition to the Israeli government must be viewed as “anti-Semitism” and as support for terrorism—to be clamped down on utilising the raft of anti-democratic legislation piled onto the statute book over the past several years.

On October 11, *the day before SOAS issued its suspensions*, Tory Education Secretary Gillian Keegan and Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education Robert Halfon wrote to vice-chancellors in the higher education sector demanding they act “swiftly and decisively” to stamp out support for the Palestinian cause .

This was followed by Home Secretary Suella Braverman demanding—as protests grew against Israel’s war against the Palestinians, and just days before the 150,000-strong national protest in London last Saturday—that police consider whether chants such as “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free” constituted a “racially aggravated section 5 public order offence”. They should also consider arresting protesters for waving the Palestinian flag on the grounds that it may be “intended to glorify acts of terrorism.”

Some university vice-chancellors were already clamping down straight after the Palestinian uprising. Adam Tickell, vice-chancellor of the University of Birmingham, told the *Daily Telegraph* October 9, “Anybody behaving to support an illegal organisation will be subjected not only to discipline from us but discipline from the police.”

The newspaper reported, “Prof Sasha Roseneil, vice-chancellor at the University of Sussex, and Prof Sir Chris Husbands, vice-chancellor of Sheffield Hallam University, also both said that students who express support for Hamas could face criminal action.”

Significantly, in light of the subsequent attacks on the democratic rights of the students at SOAS and UCL, the newspaper added, “Palestine societies at the University of Warwick, University College London and the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) are among those to have expressed praise on social media after the attack [Palestinian uprising].”

The ruling elite and its institution resort to repression as their only answer to rising opposition to their policies of militarism, war, and austerity. The vice-chancellors’ threats were responding to a powerful and ongoing wave of support for the Palestinians across British and internationally.

On October 17, around 1,000 students at the University of Glasgow—facing down the threats of the government, Labour Party leaders and university vice-chancellors—held a march around the university before organising at sit-down on the main Byres Road, blocking traffic.

On October 12, a protest of 100 students was held at the University of Manchester. A demonstration was held in Edinburgh University’s Bristol Square, October 13, attended by 300 students. On October 18, 200 students protested outside the Senate House at the University of Bristol.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) calls for protests and demonstrations on every campus in opposition to the genocidal attack being carried out by Israel, with the backing of Britain and all the imperialist powers, and organising a campaign directed to the main workplaces urging solidarity action by the working class.

Join the IYSSE today and build a society at your campus.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**