

Britain's National Union of Students targets opposition to Gaza genocide amid growing movement for disaffiliation

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The National Union of Students (NUS) has moved to punish student officers for demanding it oppose Israel's genocide in Gaza. Over 180 elected sabbatical officers from 52 campuses delivered the NUS an ultimatum: condemn Israel's genocide of the Palestinians, or face mass disaffiliation.

An open letter to the NUS Board of Directors on July 11, protested: "For over 20 months, Gaza has been subjected to the apartheid state of Israel's relentless and indiscriminate military violence.

"Homes, hospitals, schools and entire communities have been reduced to rubble, with no universities left standing. The true scale of death and devastation remains unquantified, with the *Lancet* scholars, *over one year ago*, estimating the actual death toll could be over 186,000.

"NUS, this is not a conflict, or a 'crisis'. This is the systematic destruction of a people. This is genocide."

The NUS claims to represent over 4.5 million students across the UK. But a resolution adopted at last year's NUS National Conference in Blackpool, refused to define Israel's military onslaught in Gaza as a genocide.

The open letter from sabbatical officers protested:

The NUS routinely invokes its anti-racist legacy, priding itself on its historic opposition to South African apartheid and its leadership in campaigns such as "Boycott Barclays". Indeed, within its own values, NUS professes—as indeed it should—to uphold the principles of anti-racism, solidarity, collectivism. However, over the last 20 months, in the face of an ongoing system of racialized violence, apartheid, settler-colonial domination, and "genocidal acts", the NUS has demonstrably failed to act in accordance with these commitments, instead adopting a posture of "neutrality"—a strategy that obfuscates state violence, sanitises atrocity, and shields the oppressor.

NUS's shameful refusal to denounce the Gaza genocide stands in defiance of the sentiments of millions of students and young people. More than 74 percent of 18–24-year-olds support Palestine against the Israeli state in "the current conflict" according to polling published by YouGov in July.

The July 11 letter placed eight demands on the NUS leadership:

- Recognise the assault on Gaza as a "plausible genocide"
- Call for an immediate and permanent ceasefire
- Condemn Israeli apartheid and occupation in line with international law
- Rescind the IHRA definition of antisemitism
- Lead a national ethical divestment campaign

Defend students' right to protest, including against Zionism

Investigate Islamophobia and anti-Black racism within NUS structures

- Disclose any institutional ties to regimes complicit in apartheid and genocide

The open letter affirmed: "An organisation that refuses to stand with students in the struggle for justice cannot claim to represent us".

NUS reprisals

On July 16, NUS President Amira Campbell and NUS CEO Kat Stark wrote to student union CEOs directing them to instruct elected sabbatical officers (sabbs) to "withdraw their signatures" from the July 11 letter and to cease their support for the "Not my NUS" Instagram account. Failure to do so would place them in breach of the NUS Code of Conduct, resulting in their banning from NUS's three-day residential Lead and Change conference scheduled for July 28.

Without providing a shred of evidence, NUS alleged that sabbs were guilty (through their involvement with the letter and Instagram account) of "direct and veiled antisemitism and hostility towards Jewish people and Jewish organisations".

Under the heading "Discussing this matter with your Sabbs", NUS provided a suggested script to CEOs aimed at gaslighting pro-Palestinian students. It instructed them: "With clarity and confidence, explain why elements of the letter, and the activities of the associated Instagram account, constitute antisemitism and harassment. Explain the impact of these actions on a) individuals being harassed, b) Jewish students on your campus, and c) damage to the overall goals of the pro-Pal movement."

CEOs were instructed to tell signatories, "Harassment is unlawful, and discriminatory harassment is a serious breach of the Equalities Act." Moreover, having signed the letter in an official capacity, there would be "ramifications" under the Charities Act—a veiled threat to sabbs who are employed by their respective student unions.

Sabbatical officers were given seven days to remove their signature and to unfollow the Instagram account, or they would be in breach of the NUS Code of Conduct.

Antonia Listrat, Guild President at Birmingham University SU, described the NUS threats as "an unprecedented attack on our student movement". She told *Canary*, "Not even the government has targeted us in such a direct way, simply for our beliefs and political expression".

While some sabbatical officers withdrew their signatures out of fear, NUS's baseless and outrageous accusations provoked an immediate backlash. NUS was forced to cancel its annual Lead and Change

conference after students occupied the venue in Birmingham for three days.

“Not My NUS” challenges antisemitism slander

On July 23, “Not my NUS” replied with a 12-page letter to NUS UK comprehensively rejecting its allegations of antisemitism and harassment. The letter shredded NUS’s pretence of “impartiality” and “objectivity” exposing the student body’s collusion with Zionist lobby groups aimed at repressing pro-Palestinian student activism.

In response to NUS UK’s allegation that signatories were guilty of “direct and veiled antisemitism”, the letter writers noted NUS’s complete failure to acknowledge the many Jewish students and organisations who had signed.

“At no point have our concerns targeted — nor intended to target — Jewish identity or communities,” the letter stated, making clear that their focus “has been entirely on Zionist organisations that are deeply invested in advocating for Israel.”

The letter writers rejected NUS UK’s “deliberate conflation of Jewishness with Zionism” as enshrined in the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism adopted by NUS in 2017, as part of broader efforts to criminalise left-wing and pro-Palestinian activism. The definition asserts it is antisemitic to claim that “the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavour”. As “Not my NUS” notes, the IHRA definition has been subject to “extensive critique from legal scholars, academics and human rights experts”.

Instructing sabbatical officers to sign a code of conduct upholding the IHRA definition “forfeits [sabbatical officers’] own rights to freedom of expression and political belief.”

In response to NUS accusations that sabbatical officers had pushed “antisemitism conspiracy theory” by suggesting that Solutions Not Sides is “Zionist backed”, the letter documents how SNS was founded by pro-Israeli lobby group One Voice to provide educational tools to help combat the Boycott, Divestments, Sanctions (BDS) movement and to “normalise the State of Israel and its policies of genocide and apartheid.” The letter exposes how NUS has officially partnered with several organisations funded and backed by the Israeli state.

In its July 16 letter threatening sabbatical officers, CEOs were instructed to recommend signing them up to “free antisemitism training from UJS [Union of Jewish Students]”. In reply, “Not my NUS” makes clear that UJS is a Zionist lobby group with a constitution that affirms “enduring commitment to Israel”. In May 2024, as part of its “Israel engagement”, a UJS delegation visited Israeli President Herzog “who has been on record in a speech saying ‘there are no innocent civilians in Gaza’ — justifying their mass slaughter.”

Authors of the July 23 letter strenuously rejected accusations of “harassment” toward NUS officials. It was a “fundamental principle of democratic accountability” that individuals holding public or representative office are subject to scrutiny. The exposure of NUS UK board member Noah Katz’s affiliations to Zionist organisations (including UK Lawyers for Israel, the World Jewish Congress and the Board of Deputies), was an example of such “reasonable and necessary” scrutiny.

A similar assertion that “tagging the NUS President’s official work account in two Instagram stories —which depicted the suffering of Palestinian children and called attention to the NUS’s silence — constitutes ‘harassment’ is both legally and factually unfounded.” This was “protected political expression, as affirmed by Article 10 of the Human Rights Act 1998... To categorise these posts as ‘harassment’ would amount to a dangerous conflation of political accountability with

personal targeting, thereby trivialising genuine cases of harassment and silencing dissent.”

NUS’s banning student sabbatical officers from NUS events based on their opposition to genocide “may constitute a breach of the Equality Act 2010, particularly under provisions relating to protected beliefs and freedom of expression.”

In its concluding section, the letter argues: “By choosing repression over meaningful dialogue, NUS risks alienating the very students it claims to represent. Such actions only deepen disillusionment and will inevitably accelerate calls for disaffiliation, many of which are now already in motion.”

For a socialist student movement!

“Not my NUS” is appealing to NUS UK “to reconsider its approach” and to engage with students “in good faith”. But NUS stands exposed as a tool of repression against students. The task is not to reform it, but to build a socialist movement against it.

NUS has long existed as a hollowed-out organisation, entirely divorced from the concerns of students. Average turnout for student elections at 76 of the 150 NUS affiliated student unions in 2023 (the most recent year for which figures are available) was just 13.14 percent. Fewer than 400 students voted on the main resolutions at last year’s NUS national conference.

Long a training ground for Labour Party careerists—Neil Kinnock, John Prescott, Jack Straw and Wes Streeting all began their political careers there—NUS has morphed during the past decade into a direct adjunct of the security and intelligence agencies. A succession of political witch-hunts over this period saw two NUS presidents ousted based on manufactured claims of “antisemitism”.

Malia Bouattia, the union’s first Muslim president (2016-17), was elected on a manifesto committed to transforming the NUS into a “fighting, campaigning union” to oppose tuition fees and reverse education cuts. A member of the “Liberation” faction of the NUS, focused on identity politics and pro-Palestinian causes, Bouattia’s public criticisms of British imperialism and her support for the anti-Zionist BDS movement provoked a political furore and demands for her removal. She was smeared as a terrorist sympathiser and an anti-Semite, coinciding with an identical witch-hunt against then Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn.

An undercover investigation by *Al Jazeera* later revealed that Labour’s Richard Brooks, outgoing vice president of NUS, led backroom manoeuvres in collaboration with the Union of Jewish Students (UJS) to undermine Bouattia and promote Zionist sympathisers to leading positions in the union. The Qatari broadcaster exposed that Brooks worked closely in this endeavour with Shai Masot, a senior political officer at the Israeli embassy in London. Labour’s Shakira Martin took the NUS presidency as a direct product of these intrigues.

Just five years later, the NUS sacked its own president Shaima Dallali, following a KC-led “investigation” headed by Rebecca Tuck that resembled a kangaroo court. Not a shred of evidence was presented to justify Dallali’s summary dismissal, with NUS declaring it would “not be sharing any further details on the investigation into the President.” Once again, UJS played a key role, helping to draft the investigation’s terms of reference, based on the IHRA. The Tory government and Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer received copies of the investigation’s findings before Dallali, who learned of her sacking via Twitter.

Tuck’s antisemitism report of January 2023, and subsequent NUS UK Antisemitism Action Plan, have been used ever since to enforce a reign of censorship, bans and reprisals on campus against students and staff

opposing complicity with the Gaza genocide, including the expulsion and exclusion of student activists, and threats and intimidation against sabbatical officers and other elected officials.

Political conclusions must be drawn. NUS functions as an arm of British imperialism and the state. It cannot be reformed. Instead, students must build a movement turned to the working class, the sole revolutionary force in society. The working class has the power to end genocide, war and all forms of exploitation and oppression through the overthrow of the capitalist nation-state system and the fight for world socialism. To fight for this, join the International Youth and Students for Social Equality!



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