UK students join international day of action against war

Our reporters
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Students walked out of schools, colleges and universities across Britain on Friday 20 November as part of the International Youth Strike, under the slogan “Fight for our future, not their wars.” Organisers reported walkouts at more than 350 institutions in over 150 towns and cities.

In London, students gathered in Parliament Square from midday. A separate Stop the War rally in Trafalgar Square drew over 1,000. Outside London, Manchester saw the largest reported turnout, with significant protests in Exeter, Bristol, Glasgow and Leeds.

The strike was endorsed by the National Education Union (NEU) and the University and College Union (UCU), with the National Union of Students (NUS) also participating. The UCU called a national day of action for that day, which Unison and Unite backed.

Speakers at Parliament Square included NEU general secretary Daniel Kebede, UCU general secretary Jo Grady, Eddie Dempsey of the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT), and Ian Hodson of the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers’ Union (BFAWU).

But the anti-war credentials bestowed on the union bureaucrats do not stand up to scrutiny. Britain’s trade union leadership has lined up behind the NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine. In 2022, the UCU and BFAWU, among others, joined a Ukraine Solidarity Campaign demonstration in support of the war. In 2023, the Trades Union Congress overwhelmingly backed it.

Unite’s Sharon Graham has supported Britain’s role in the war while demanding billions more for arms manufacturers in the name of “defence jobs.” According to the Ukraine Solidarity Campaign, Unison and the UCU have since affiliated to it, and in 2025 the NEU conference voted to back Ukraine. These unions campaign for “wages not weapons” while supporting the very war that drives the rearmament they claim to oppose.

The STWC, Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and their allies offered no perspective for a political struggle against the Burnham Labour government which the trade unions prop up. Beyond a call to build “at the base”, the SWP offered only more protest sometime later and a campaign “resisting militarisation.”

There were only occasional references to the NATO-led war in Ukraine, which the union leaders on their platforms support. War was not mentioned at all in many of the speeches.

Interviews with students by members of the Socialist Equality Party and its youth movement, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) revealed sentiment far to the left of these tendencies. Interviews have been edited and abridged for length.

London

Rola, a sixth-form student from Westminster Academy, London, said, “We’re on the brink of another world war, and we’re seeing our politicians take an authoritarian turn towards suppressing student voices, suppressing the working class.”

“Whether it’s Ukraine and Russia, or the war against Iran, the murder of children in Iran, the murder of children in Gaza, the constant threats against Yemen, the funding of the Saudi Arabian war against Yemen, there always seems to be a common theme, and that is authoritarian politicians putting their needs before ours, before the people that they’re supposed to be serving and profiting off war. It must be known that Trump is profiting off war. He’s making money, and so are the billionaires around him.”

Asked for her response to the IYSSE’s call for students to turn to the working class and the development of a Europe-wide general strike against war, austerity and the rise of the far-right, Rola replied, “I think that students of this generation do recognise the need to mobilise as a united left and also with the working class.”

Arthur, a sixth-form student from the same college, said he opposed the government spending “money into warfare, into capitalism, into imperialism and not into education and helping our own people.

“War serves the top one percent, it serves America, it serves Israel, but it’s not for regular people all across the world. And this is the flaw, I think, of capitalism — that it doesn’t help society; it just helps the people in charge.

“I think especially what’s happened in France is really inspiring, and hopefully people across Europe and across the world will see that. Surely if enough people come together consistently across Europe, across the world, we might be able to make some change.

“The working class are the people who keep society running. If you take away the working class from society, the upper ruling class are going to have nothing. These people keep society going, but they get nothing from it.”

Manchester

In Manchester, **Toren**, a physics student, said, “I back the protests in Europe; I back anti-capitalism in general.

“I don’t think that money should ever be put towards killing anyone. I wish that there wasn’t a military. I absolutely don’t think that we should have borders in general. The class of rich people—they need to maintain borders and divisions so that they don’t have any problems with remaining rich. They’re just working for themselves.

Keira said, “We’re here today in solidarity with every single student across the world who are fighting for their right to have a good education. We are fighting for their right for the military to be out of their schools, demilitarised schools. To fight against austerity, to make sure that everyone is in solidarity with each other to fight against those who

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oppress us. There is power above us, and we can fight back with our own power, with our own voices, and when we are together. So that's why I'm down here today to help support all the students who have walked out of their classes to fight back and show the government that we are not scared."

Sheffield

Tom, from the University of Sheffield, said, "It all feels like this is in the spirit of nationalism. That we're expected to defend the state regardless of how the state treats us. Which feels like it's worsening consistently.

"This week Labour announced cuts to disability payments to the under-25s, which I felt quite affected by. It's this constant targeting of vulnerable groups.

"Money is never there for welfare spending. And I think it will continue to go down. We could be heading into a Reform-type government as well. We're seeing a further licence to cut welfare by a Labour Party agreeing to all this."

Ketlina joined the protest from Sheffield City College. She said, "I don't think we should fight their wars. We're obviously a working-class society. We don't want to go fight their wars when it's not our fault. It's the government—it's their fault… These working-class people, they'll get killed. We'll lose more people. And the situation in Germany—I don't think it should be mandatory to be at a certain age and have to go into war… it should be your own decision.

"It's oil. They all just want oil. Like the USA and Donald Trump—he wants oil. He wants to go bomb Iran; he wants to get oil from Iran because he wants to use the oil for money, because Donald Trump is a greedy bastard and he wants money.

"I say we should completely get rid of capitalism. It's not doing us any good, and all it's doing is making our world terrible. So we should get rid of it, definitely… Because if we don't make a change, we're going to be stuck in a capitalist society. We're going to be stuck with the super-rich, the Elon Musks of society."

Zach attended the protest from Sheffield Hallam University, "For me personally, mainly, I see a lot of damage going on with the climate and the environment, especially in the UK. I don't really feel like there seems to be, especially within government, any sort of attempt to bring together ideas to make any sort of solution. It just seems to be like, kick it down the alley.

"I guess with the issue of war as well — the issue of Palestine, and the fact that our government's still arming Israel — is just prevalent. And I guess that's what a lot of people across Europe have in common, in those views.

"What most of those wars have in common is resources. It's a fight to gain and extract resources."

Our reporter told Zach about the Zelensky regime's imprisonment of anti-war socialist Bogdan Syrotiuk, relating this to the regime's rehabilitation of Ukrainian fascist leaders who collaborated with Hitler and the Holocaust during World War II. Syrotiuk has been imprisoned on charges of treason.

Zach replied, "I've seen stuff in Ukraine of them torturing Russian soldiers, and Russian youths, and stuff like that. I can't say I know too much about what you're saying about the fascism side of it. But war — it's never really for the aims that they claim."

Asked for his views on mobilising the working class across national borders to overthrow capitalism and reorganise the world economy for human need, not profit, Zach replied, "I guess that's the only way, really — the people are in number. They're more powerful than anyone in power, really. You look at history — maybe the French Revolution is a great example of that."

Zach's friend Hyrdai responded, "I guess it's always been the only thing that can. It's been the only thing that could ever overpower something like that. And I feel like they've always known that too. That's why there are measures to divide us as well — whether it's war, immigration, gender, anything they can, they weaponise it in a way to stop the majority, the working class, who are really on the same side, oppressed, from realising who's actually oppressing them.

"If they're able to stop people from coming together, and get them thinking they're against each other, then they're able to carry on profiting, growing and oppressing."

Leicester

Edith, a student at Leicester University, said, "I think there is a militarisation of Europe at the moment, where people are focusing more on war rather than things that might be more integral to a civilised society, like free healthcare, free education, and I think people are moving away from a primary focus of people's social life and more on the war aspects…

"People here in the UK and across Europe can't be surviving on the bare minimum, in poverty, and they can't then expect us to go and fight in wars and contribute in a way that is basically unpaid labour for national service."

Of the war in Ukraine, Edith said, "There are so many children and people dying just because governments and people in power have decided to wage war, and I think it's awful. We need to start thinking about human life, because that is infinitely more valuable than any resource or oil or monetary value."

Edith described herself as a socialist, saying that socialism "puts people first". She said the strikes and protests across Europe are showing "there is a large amount of solidarity. I think that a lot of people are joining, and they are finally starting to wake up to the fact that there is power in the people, and we don't have to look at these travesties in the world and move past them as we do in everyday life.

Asked for her response to the IYSSE's call for a Europe-wide General Strike against warmongering governments, and for the United Socialist States of Europe, Edith responded, "Yes, I think that's good—it needs to be widespread, not isolated in individual countries. I think it needs to be a global thing for us all to work towards."

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