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Massive student demo shows anti-cuts anger

THE ENORMOUS boiling anger of students and young people against the vicious tuition fee rises and proposed cuts to education was impossible to ignore on the demo on 10 November 2010.

Among the 52,000 students who marched on the biggest student turnout in 30 years, there were major university delegations with matching t-shirts, official placards and flags. But there were also many groups of college and sixth form students, some shouting "Tory scum, here we come!", who had organised themselves to get there.

Some had rung in sick to college, some had simply not attended and at least one group had come on a 'school trip' which the college organised when it was clear that students would be going with or without their teachers' sanction. Many would lose out on the attendance-related Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) payments as a result but knew they would lose more if the cuts go through.

The huge number and creativity of the homemade banners and placards showed how many had come on their own initiative. Most opposed the fee rise and the cuts. But many also apportioned blame – often in quite colourful language.

The Tories are clearly seen as the enemy for many of those on the demo and, while the threat of a return to Thatcherism may not have meant a lot to students before the election, it clearly does now.

But Nick Clegg and the Liberal Democrats, who promised to vote and campaign against any rise in student tuition fees, came in for particular attack.

Brutal and cruel cuts

ONLY SIX months after the general election, this was described by the Guardian as "the largest and most dramatic response to the government's austerity measures". All but the super-rich will be affected by the brutal measures in the comprehensive spending review and the emergency budget.

The education cuts are among the most brutal and cruel. The previous New Labour government commissioned Lord Browne, the millionaire former BP chief executive to review higher education funding. His vicious proposals are acceptable to the Con-Dem government, but to few besides.

Not only will fees be raised from the current £3,290 to an eye-watering £9,000 but 80% of spending on higher education teaching is to be cut. Students were clear that this is the road to 'less for more' and a two-tier education system.

Even a commentator in the pro-Tory London Evening Standard was forced to condemn the cut-throat approach to education expressed in Browne's Review.

Richard Godwin writes that: "Politicians seem to find it hard to conceive of education as worthwhile in its own right. According to Browne's report, it matters principally 'because it drives innovation and economic transformation. Higher education helps to produce economic growth, which in turn contributes to national prosperity'."

Given this onslaught and the widespread anger against the austerity cuts socialists were not surprised at the massive turnout. There was a wide variety of opinions on how education should be funded. However students were open to discuss. One questioned: "how can we afford free education?" Learning of the £120 billion lost in unpaid, uncollected and avoided taxes by the rich each year satisfied her. But a significant minority actively sought a socialist alternative.

Most students were determined that, having felt their strength of numbers, there must be a next step to the campaign. Socialist Students distributed around 10,000 leaflets calling for strikes, walkouts and protests on a day of action on Wednesday 24 November, when the government next discusses fees. Socialist Students has a proud and strong record of opposing fees and campaigning to defend education in the schools and colleges.

Disgracefully a strategy for the campaign was not supplied by the National Union of Students (NUS). Although they co-organised the march with the UCU lecturers' union, full in the knowledge that dozens of coaches were coming from cities and towns across the country, the pro-Labour leadership of the NUS was unprepared for the mass response.

The NUS website predicted the march to be over in 30 minutes, not realising that tens of thousands of people do not breeze through the streets like a Saturday shopper. This also meant that stewarding of the protest was inadequate – particularly at the end.

Having not lifted a finger to fight the introduction of and increases to fees under Labour governments the NUS leadership appears to have little experience of organising and participating in major demonstrations. Furthermore the democratic structures of the NUS have been massively eroded leaving little connection between the leadership and ordinary students.

Outrageously NUS president Aaron Porter, who could not even bring himself to commit to opposing fees in principle on Newsnight recently, has attacked the protesters at Millbank Tower as "despicable".

He calls on students to "move forward" but so far the NUS strategy is limited to a call on students to email their MP and perhaps visit them 'in person' – not just virtual protest but almost!

Given the major attacks on education, the failure of the NUS leadership to provide a strategy for the campaign, and the almost total ab-

sence of stewarding of the end of the demo, it was not surprising that some found the idea of occupying the hated Tories' Millbank HQ appealing.

The Socialist Party sees occupation as a legitimate and important part of building a movement against cuts, alongside other tactics. To be fully effective occupations must be mass actions based on democratic decisions and control of tactics, organised and stewarded with a clear set of demands.

This would prevent actions like that of the one person who mistakenly and potentially dangerously dropped a fire extinguisher from the Millbank roof. Such individual actions would be prevented by the will of the majority, as expressed by the hundreds of students who shouted "stop throwing stuff" at those on the roof. However this was not an organised occupation but a spontaneous protest.

Smashed lives

THE MEDIA has chosen to focus on the occupation rather than the mass action of thousands. Students commented that the bias of the capitalist media meant that it was only the occupation that got them the publicity that the issue deserved.

After all 125,000 marched against the Sri Lankan army's genocidal slaughter of Tamil people in January 2009 and received only an inch of newspaper column space.

Millions of workers and young people who face the Tory axe will feel that, while some of the students went 'a bit far', a few smashed windows are small beer compared to the hundreds of thousands of lives that will be smashed by the Con-Dems' austerity measures, if they get through.

The Socialist Party agrees with the lecturers at Goldsmiths who issued a statement saying: "The real violence in this situation relates not to a smashed window but to the destructive impact of the cuts and privatisation that will follow if tuition fees are increased and massive reductions in higher education funding are implemented."

London Tory mayor Boris Johnson, associated with Oxford University's notorious Bullingdon Club which "used cricket merely as a respectable front for the mischievous, destructive or self-indulgent tendencies of its members", was quoted in the Evening Standard hypocritically condemning "thuggery and violence". He and other leading Tories have been backing up calls for a stepping up of the policing of protests.

With the assistance of right-wing journalists over 50 young protesters have been arrested since the demo. It appears that these victims of both the threat to their future and an un-stewarded demo will be called to a court appearance en bloc in February.

The Socialist Party will continue to actively defend them and to argue for defending the

right to protest to be a key aspect of the development of the campaign against education cuts.

Stewarding of future protests is now crucial. Trade unionists must coordinate so students can access the experience and support of the labour movement. A trade union-led national demonstration is extremely urgent – not only so trade unionists and workers can build their confidence as the students have – but to support the students' campaign and build opposition to all cuts.

In the run up to the May general election chancellor George Osborne predicted that within six months of being elected this government would be "deeply unpopular".

This student demonstration leaves no doubt that his prediction has been borne out. And, as the Socialist Party itself predicted, the anger is going to find an expression on the streets. Working class people, young people, students, benefit claimants, pensioners will respond to a call for action. The majority are sympathetic to the students who have given a lead and made the mass opposition and anger that exists manifest.

The next step that is required in building a mass, sustained and determined movement that can stop the Con-Dem onslaught is for them to be joined by the powerful organisations of the working class.

A glimpse of the power of the working class was shown by a recent strike by tube workers in the RMT and TSSA unions which brought the City of London to a standstill.

The students need to continue to develop their own democratic and mass movement, including building anti-cuts unions in all the colleges, sixth forms and schools as well as the universities. Communication via Facebook etc must be supplemented with democratic debate at general assemblies and meetings on the next steps and the programme of the movement.

But it is particularly important that students link up with the trade union movement and the working class to build a movement powerful enough to stop the Con-Dem cuts.

The Socialist Party says:

- The NUS must set a date in the next couple of months for the next demo if there is no change in government policy.
- Build for action on 24 November as the next critical date in the campaign – strike, walk-out, protest!
- No attack on the right to protest! There must be no victimisation of students involved in the demonstration.
- The trade union leaders must coordinate action between the unions, linking up with the student organisations and the local anti cuts unions to call a national trade union-led demonstration as soon as possible as a step towards a 24-hour public sector general strike.

24 November - Strike against fees and cuts

A MASS MOVEMENT on the issue of fees and education cuts, organised and determined, has the potential to defeat the government and inspire all those who are coming into direct confrontation with the bosses and their cronies in parliament.

Ben Robinson

David Cameron, Vince Cable and education minister David Willetts want to make these brutal cuts as quickly as possible, to limit debate and cut across the developing movement. Willetts has said that he wants university fees legislation written into law by April 2011. This gives the movement a real sense of urgency, and young people are rising to the challenge.

24 November is the date for the

next big series of protests. Students in local areas are organising demonstrations, occupations, walkouts and more. In London Socialist Students and Youth Fight for Jobs (YFJ) are calling for walkouts from universities, colleges and schools to join a demonstration to Parliament, assembling in Horse Guards Avenue at 1pm.

This will build on the spontaneous walkouts by students going to the National Union of Students (NUS) and UCU lecturers' union demonstration on 10 November. We also appeal to all workers who can to join in this protest.

A National Union of Students worthy of the name should be at the head of this movement – it should be calling national action before Christmas, on or around Saturday 11 December – and building for further mass action after the holidays and exam period of January and early

February. It should be organising 'strike pay' for college students who are fighting for their rights and miss out on a week's worth of EMA as a result, and crucially building links with workers on and off campus to fight back.

But instead the NUS leadership have offered no way forward whatsoever. Their despicable attitude to victimised students have done far more to discredit the NUS than even the anti-democratic reforms of a few years ago.

But if they will not fight, we will. Anti-cuts campaigns around the country have sprung up to organise the action locally, and where they do not yet exist Socialist Students and YFJ members should help to initiate them. But both the cuts and the fees are an attack from central government; we need a national fightback to link up and coordinate

these campaigns.

To have your say and take part in building such a campaign, come to the YFJ and Socialist Students conferences on 4 and 5 December.

Youth Fight for Jobs and Socialist Students say:

- Strike against fees and cuts
- Unite the anti-cuts campaigns on a national level
- No victimisation of student protesters
- Build a democratic mass struggle
- Fight for a socialist education system



Defend student protesters!

YFJ AND Socialist Students have initiated a defence campaign for students who have been charged with an offence following the occupation of the Tories' Millbank headquarters on 10 November.

YFJ and Socialist Party members lobbied an east London police station on the night of Saturday 13 November after a college student was arrested.

For information email: youth-fightforjobs@gmail.com or phone 020 8558 7947. Please send donations to 'Students Defence Fund' c/o YFJ, PO Box 858, London E11 1YG