

Glasgow University student occupation ends

By Stephen Alexander
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The seven-month student occupation of the former Hetherington Research Club (HRC) at the University of Glasgow came to an end on August 31, after a deal was struck with management.

The social club for postgraduates, mature students and staff was taken over in February 2011, in response to a planned redevelopment of the building into offices. Management had previously refused to re-open the popular facility, which had closed the previous February due to financial difficulties. The Free Hetherington, as it was renamed by its new occupants, was occupied and run by a group of approximately 70 students.

As well as the re-opening of the HRC, the occupiers initially demanded an end to all spending cuts at the university, as well as opposing all education and public service cuts. It became a focal point for students and staff seeking to oppose the £3 billion austerity programme being forced through by the Scottish National Party administration in Edinburgh and its Conservative/Liberal-Democrat allies in London, threatening disastrous cuts in all of Glasgow's universities and colleges.

In February, over 2,000 people turned out at a protest organized by anti-cuts groups centred at the Free Hetherington. In March, around 100 police officers, including a dog unit and helicopter air support, attempted to forcibly evict activists. Hundreds of students not directly associated with the occupation blockaded the police eviction force, while over 100 academics signed a statement demanding management leave the occupation alone.

However, the leadership of the occupation and their supporters have been unable to translate this broad support into any effective challenge against the budget cuts at Glasgow University or anywhere else. Instead, in a statement released on August 14, the leaders of the Free Hetherington dishonestly proclaimed, "Principal

Anton Muscatelli conceded defeat in his attempt to impose swingeing cuts on the University".

The statement outlines a seven-point agreement claiming to have secured no further course cuts, no compulsory redundancies, a new post-graduate club, no cuts in student services, and a public meeting with Muscatelli. Those involved in the occupation would neither be victimised, nor, the statement claims, would their details be handed over by the university authorities to the police.

None of the agreement's major points stand up to scrutiny.

The statement failed to mention that management has agreed only that there will be no further cuts "*in the near future*". As management have successfully prepared the ground for a £20 million cuts programme, and no timeframe is placed on "near future", this does not even amount to a delay.

Despite much public anger, the Centre of Drugs Misuse research centre along with liberal arts and social work courses at its Dumfries Campus will be axed. Slavonic studies will be closed down. The Departments of History, Archaeology and Classics are being merged, and the Department of Adult and Continuing Education partly privatised.

Cuts to modern language courses and nursing have only been given a temporary reprieve.

The claim of "no compulsory redundancies" is routinely used by the trade union bureaucracy as cover for their collusion with the employers. Under the pretext of "voluntary" redundancy, workers are pressured and bullied into leaving while the threat of compulsory dismissal is used to force the remaining workforce into accepting poorer wages and conditions. This has been the response of all the trade unions to the 50,000 public sector jobs expected to be eradicated in Scotland by 2015.

Political responsibility for this outcome lies with the

Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP), which have worked to ensure that politically inexperienced young people attracted to the Free Hetherington were drawn into a campaign that effectively functioned as an adjunct of the main university union, the University and Colleges Union (UCU).

Throughout the occupation, pro-UCU banners were draped around the building. At no time did the occupation make the slightest effort to warn students or university staff as to the real role being played by the UCU. Instead, the Free Hetherington became a sort of radical drop-in centre, a “free space” where all manner of discussions and meetings could be held, while behind the scenes, the ex-left groups upheld the interests of the UCU.

The SWP holds a significant number of executive positions in the UCU and the large UCU Left faction. Throughout the period of the occupation, the UCU nationally has sought to limit industrial action to infrequent, token, one-day strikes. The UCU called off strike action scheduled for May 24 over attacks on the Universities Superannuation Scheme—the largest academic pension scheme in the UK.

The UCU conceded to all of the Conservative/Liberal Democrat administration’s demands, including the replacement of the final salary pension with an inferior scheme. The union then cynically agreed to mobilise only a small fraction of its membership for the one-day national protest on June 30.

Equally deceptive are the supposed assurances from the university that it will not volunteer information on the occupants and their supporters to the police. The anti-student spying operation mounted by the ruling elite in response to growing student unrest has relied heavily on a close relationship between bodies such as the Metropolitan Police Counter Terrorism Command and university authorities throughout the UK.

Even if no further action is taken against the Free Hetherington occupiers, nothing at all has been conceded over future relations between the university and the police or MI5.

The Free Hetherington’s assertions only serve to disarm students and university workers, in conditions where police-state measures against dissent are intensifying day by day, as can be seen in the brutal suppression and blanket imprisonment of youthful

rioters in major cities throughout England.

The only university offer that is likely to be fulfilled is the establishment of a new postgraduate club—something the university has always promised on condition that it is a profitable concern.

Nevertheless, the SWP and the SSP are claiming the campaign as a great victory.

Socialist Worker quotes Free Hetherington spokesman James Humphries: “Peaceful direct action and direct democracy work—we’ve proved that and management have accepted it, which in itself is a huge achievement”.

Similar comments could be found in the official media. The *Scotsman* reported sympathetically on a “sit-in victory” and quoted occupation members as being “absolutely just thrilled about this”.

Presentation of the occupation as a victory also rehabilitates Anton Muscatelli. From a hated symbol of education cuts, he is now upheld by the departing occupiers as a man with whom they can do business. This new relationship will be consummated in October, when as part of the deal Muscatelli will be given a platform at a meeting “where students and staff may address their worries”.

Muscatelli is a seasoned representative of the corporate and financial elite, who has personally seen tremendous material gain from the increasing commercialisation of higher education, taking home a combined salary package of £283,000 last year. The former adviser to the World Bank and the European Commission has appeared frequently in front of students to justify the cuts programme.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>