

UK students protest education cuts

By Ben Trent
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Thousands of students took to the streets of London last week to protest continuing cuts in education and the abolition of grants for poorer students.

At present, full-time UK students from families with annual household incomes of £25,000 or less qualify for maintenance grants of £3,387 a year. Beginning with the new academic year, these grants will be replaced by loans that students would start paying back when they earn more than £21,000 a year.

Since the introduction of tuition fees by the 1997-2010 Labour government, the cost of education has soared, resulting in the exclusion of the UK's poorest students from moving into Higher Education (HE). Tuition fees are currently capped at £9,000 per year for HE students, which came into effect under the previous Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition. Now that the Conservatives hold sole power, they are moving rapidly towards the consolidation of a two-tier education system.

In the July budget, Chancellor George Osborne declared that universities deemed to be of a "higher quality" would be able to increase charges over the £9,000 cap in line with inflation. The change will be imposed in the academic year 2017/2018. It is welcomed by the Russell Group (the UK's 24 elite universities) and allows them to price out all but the wealthiest of prospective students.

A green paper released by the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) on November 6, entitled "Higher education: teaching excellence, social mobility and student choice," proposes further attacks on education.

Launching the paper, the universities minister, Jo Johnson, said its aim was "to drive up teaching quality and deliver greater value for money for students and for the taxpayers underwriting the system."

The real purpose of the universities, he made clear, is to serve the requirements of capital. The intention was

to produce "a pipeline of graduates who meet the demands of our businesses and of our economy."

The consultation paper discusses the abolishment of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (Hefce) and Office for Fair Access (along with potentially any other of the nine associated operational bodies).

Their respective roles are to be absorbed into a new Office for Students (OfS). This streamlining has the intent of cutting the costs of running the organisational bodies, which the report pegs at £60 million per annum for HE providers and £40 million per annum for taxpayers.

A new US-style Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) is to be established to rate universities according to measures such as student satisfaction, student retention rates and graduate job prospects. The paper states that education institutions that fail to meet expectations would risk losing additional fee income.

A key part of the paper is the fast tracking of applications for organisations and institutions to achieve university status, allowing private bodies to come forward and gain quicker access into the increasingly lucrative Higher Education market.

The move threatens the closure of many established academic institutions. Asked by the *Financial Times* if he would support new institutions putting "bad, old ones out of business," Johnson replied, "In any market, for it truly to function properly, you have to have the scope for market shares to shift and for people to choose to stop offering courses and ultimately also, if they decide so, to quit the sector altogether."

The paper was timed for release just two days after the November 4 student protests.

The protests, organised under the banner of "grants not debt" by the National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts (NCAFC), reflect growing hostility against the government and its savage austerity measures being

implemented across swathes of fundamental services, including education. The march also protested discrimination directed at international students.

The full force of the state was mobilised against the student protest in London, with the Territorial Support Group (TSG) riot police, who are tasked with dealing with terrorism, called out to confront demonstrators.

In line with a record of police brutality against student demonstrations, in particular the example of Alfie Meadows (the student who had to have emergency brain surgery in 2010 after being attacked by police officers), police rapidly enacted repressive measures—setting up cordons, “kettling” protesters and making arbitrary arrests. At least 18 protesters were arrested for supposedly pelting police officers with eggs and smoke grenades.

While students have repeatedly shown their willingness to fight the education cuts, the organisers of the demonstrations have no interest in organising a genuine offensive to defend the right to education.

The National Union of Students (NUS) has done nothing apart from making calls to hold meetings with MPs and to tweet them to apply pressure. The NCFAC in turn is calling on student unions nationally to apply pressure on the NUS to call a limited and token strike.

The NUS responded to the green paper with a statement declaring, “NUS will be outlining our recommendations to the green paper following our full analysis and consultation with students unions.”

The NUS long ago dropped even the pretence of fighting for free education, merely declaring it would “oppose further rises in tuition fees.”

The main party hoping to benefit from the event was the Corbynite faction of the Labour Party, Momentum, the network spawned out of Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership campaign, supported by various pseudo-left groups, that seeks to bring youth and students back behind Labour.

John McDonnell, the shadow chancellor and closest supporter of Corbyn, was present at the demonstration and made a speech aimed at enticing disaffected young people into supporting the Labour Party.

The Labour Party, trade unions and pseudo-left groups all promote Corbyn as the defender of youth and students from the Tories. They are hoping to divert the anger of youth and students into isolated protests, petition signing and the like.

Labour is formally pledged to cut tuition fees to £6,000 should it come to office in 2020 and says nothing about university funding. Supporting Labour is an essential means by which the trade unions and the pseudo-left oppose any struggle against the attacks being waged now against students and universities alike.

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