

# Salute the Millbank occupation !

## Strengthen the bond between students and workers !

## Break the link with Labour !



In a magnificent response to the government's declared intention to raise the cap on university tuition fees to a new ceiling of £9,000 a year, as many as 52,000 students and lecturers supported a national demonstration in London on 10 November, vastly exceeding the expectations of the organisers, the National Union of Students (NUS) and University and College Lecturers Union (UCU).

The NUS had at first predicted a turn-out of 5,000 and even later only revised this figure up to 15,000. The turn-out was also a shock to the police, who found themselves on the back foot.

The capitalist media and the police have reacted with apoplexy, pretending that an excess of caution in the wake of the murder by police of Ian Tomlinson at the G20 protest last year had made the police a soft touch. The reality was rather that the state failed to anticipate and deal with the overwhelming scale of popular fury, despite the unquenched enthusiasm of the Metropolitan Police (Met) for breaking heads.

In a vindictive reaction to the humiliation inflicted by students who occupied the Conservative Party HQ at Millbank, the police and supporting tabloid press have gone into overdrive, with 50 arrested on the day, photos of numerous other 'suspects' splashed across the papers, and Cameron puffing that the "full force of the law will be used".

The state is jumpy enough now to resort to direct censorship. A website called *Fitwatch*, described as a "street-level response to intimidation and harassment from the forward intelligence teams (Fits)" (ie, police spies), reported to the *Guardian* that the Met had succeeded in getting the site shut down for a year for 'attempting to pervert the course of justice'. The offending post was simply offering advice to students in the aftermath of the Millbank occupation.

### Social democracy terrified of success

The size and the ferocity of the protest caught the organisers off-guard too, with the top leadership of both the UCU and the NUS shamefully rushing to dissociate themselves from the scale and character of the affair. Of particular concern to these gentry was the very effective mass occupation of the Conservative Party headquarters. It was only to be expected that the capitalist media should denounce this bold step as 'mindless violence' led by 'hooligans': defending capitalism is after all their primary function. However, many who were on the march, and many others who supported it, will have been confused to hear the same song being sung by the very people who are supposed to be leading the resistance to the cuts in education and other public services.

The general secretary of UCU, Sally Hunt, at once shot off a letter to her members denouncing the occupation as an "attack on offices in Millbank by a tiny minority" which "must have been terrifying for the hundreds of ordinary office workers – people like you and me – unlucky enough to be at work in the building on that day". This disgusting nonsense was rapidly contradicted by lecturers at Metropolitan and Goldsmiths in London, who hastened to give their support to the direct action.

Meanwhile, the Labour-supporting careerist president of the NUS, Aaron Porter, parroted the same line as Hunt, spluttering: "I absolutely condemn the actions of a small minority who have used violent means to hijack the protest ... if some people think it's appropriate to use violence, it's a total disgrace, and they have completely hijacked this opportunity to make a serious point."

Those in attendance, and those countless others who have seen the video rushes, will know that this is simply a lie. John Harris nailed it nicely: "On the BBC, there was a particularly priceless moment. When Porter once again talked about 'hijacking', the coverage cut to the mass of people outside Tory HQ, the presenter made the point that this was not what 'a small minority' would look like – and Porter seemed momentarily lost for words. You had only to look at the crowd to know that the vast majority of them were not anarchists, but reasonably regular twentysomethings." (*Guardian*, 12 November 2010)

Contrary to some reports, most of the protestors were neither wild-eyed anarchists nor Cambridge students (though it's good to hear that Kings College has a hammer and sickle flag hanging in the student bar) but ordinary young people driven to extraordinary measures by an unprecedented assault on their futures.

## Cuts: state violence against the working class

The truth is that by letting universities jack up tuition fees into the stratosphere whilst simultaneously pulling the plug on the education maintenance allowances (EMAs), the government has blighted the education and career prospects of a whole generation of youth. These attacks on the working class are the real violence, not a few broken windows in Millbank, and the youth are a thousand times right to come out fighting against this class oppression.

As the Cambridge students involved in the occupation told the press, "All the talk about damage to public property – it's kind of a pittance compared to the kind of cuts that lots of people at the march are going to experience ... what the Con-Dems are doing is violence against ordinary people. Raising tuition fees is a kind of violence. Rehousing people and putting them in segregated areas is a kind of violence."

Porter's sectarian attack upon his fellow students has not gone unchallenged. Whilst the official thrust of NUS campaigning focuses on the LibDems' broken promises over tuition fees (helping distract from Labour's threadbare efforts to play down its earlier support for fees and line up behind a graduate tax), Porter is having trouble making his social-democratic writ run in a student body which has been convulsed with anger over the cuts.

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Just in the few days following the Millbank occupation, there was further direct action by students, including the occupation of the finance block at Manchester University by 80 students and of the Fulton building at Sussex University by over 170.

In a statement from Sussex, students declared: "*We reject the media manipulation of the occupation of Millbank. The cost of the damage to 30 Millbank is less than insignificant when set against the damage of lost livelihoods and destruction of public services for future generations. This occupation recognises that Aaron Porter's statements condemning the demonstration are counter-productive and serve only to divide and segregate the movement.*"

The presidents of a number of student unions have also signed up to a statement which rejects "*any attempt to characterise the Millbank protest as small, 'extremist' or unrepresentative of our movement*", and goes on to "*celebrate the fact that thousands of students were willing to send a message to the Tories that we will fight to win. Occupations are a long established tradition in the student movement that should be defended.*"

The divisive leadership in the upper reaches of the NUS is a direct consequence of the stranglehold exercised over the union by the Labour party for decades. Not only was disgraced racist and former Labour minister Phil Woolas once sitting where Porter sits today, but also Charles Clarke and Jack Straw. Reclaiming the NUS for the students will not just be a battle to get rid of Porter, but to uproot the whole rotten social-democratic tradition that keeps the NUS tied to the Labour party and to capitalism.

## Workers and students unite

As the student protests roll forward, we need not busy ourselves with abstract debates about the relative merits of 'peaceful' versus 'violent' tactics, or of 'discipline' versus 'anarchy'. The power of the working class and its allies lies in organisation, so we would surely agree with Hunt when she tells UCU members, "If we are disciplined and work together I am convinced we can win," – *if the discipline in question were one rooted in a united struggle against capitalism, not one imposed by the guard dogs of social democracy. And there's the rub.*

The burning question is this: behind what perspective are we asking people to fight? Are we saying that the cuts are inevitable and that we need to put pressure on the powers that be to administer the cuts as fairly as possible? Or do we recognise that capitalism is deep in a crisis of its own making, and that we need *by any means necessary* to prevent them making workers pay for that crisis? Comrades, we must choose this latter path.

By their spirited resistance, students are making a dramatic intervention in the class struggle, setting a bold example worthy of emulation by workers in and out of trade unions. However, whilst such student actions can set the ball rolling, students need to link with the might of the working class in order to make real and lasting headway.

The inspiring examples of worker-student unity in the recent struggles in France give just a taste of what could be achieved in the future, once the disuniting and disorganising ideas of social democracy have been beaten down.

**No to tuition fees; free education for all!**

**'Fair' cuts? NO cuts!**

**Cut capitalism, cut imperialism, build socialism!**

## Postscript

Since this statement was first issued, the wave of student protest has continued to swell.

On the day of action on 24 November, a dozen or more universities were occupied (including Leeds, Cardiff, Birmingham and three in London). Protest marches erupted in Manchester, Liverpool, Brighton, Bristol and Cardiff, and schoolchildren walked out of lessons in Leeds, London and elsewhere.

Demonstrators who found their path to London's Parliament Square blocked by police were then kettled (BBC-speak: "contained") in Whitehall, resulting in 32 arrests and 17 injuries, including two to police.

Such attempts to stifle popular protest cannot hope for success – unless supplemented by social-democratic weakness within the movement itself.

A fresh example of this weakness came with the official reaction of the local students' union to the occupation of Cardiff Uni. Despite a broad swathe of support for the occupation from the UCU, Unite, Plaid Cymru and the Greens, as well as from a range of left-wing groups, the local NUS responded by wailing that "*the occupation is currently coinciding with students' lectures that they are unable to attend because of the continuing action*" and urging the occupiers "*to leave and work with the Union for a solution*".

With friends like this, who needs Vice-Chancellors?

For more information about our activities, please send this form to the address below, or email [info@cpgb-ml.org](mailto:info@cpgb-ml.org).

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