

Students and staff oppose suspensions following Middlesex University occupation

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Around 200 students and staff protested at the Hendon campus, Middlesex University, on May 27 against the suspension of professors and students campaigning to save the Philosophy Department.

Three professors and four students were suspended on May 21, after a second occupation had ended, this time of the library on Trent Park campus. Around 50 students and staff from the School of Arts and Education participated in the one-day sit-in. The occupation occurred despite a High Court Injunction imposed after the previous occupation of the Mansion building. Additional security guards and police were called, but no action was taken as the injunction only applied to the Mansion House.

Two professors, Peter Osborne and Peter Hallward, were notified of their immediate suspensions. This was followed by a third member of staff, Senior Lecturer Dr Christian Kerslake, who was notified over the weekend. The four students received their notice from the Head of Student Support Services, typically responsible for the welfare of students. The Head warned that more suspensions would be forthcoming.

These suspensions have been served pending investigations into any potential illegal activity. Professor Hallward told our reporters, “No clear allegation has been made against me.... It is the sort of action one would expect in allegations of harassment and sexual aggression”.

The suspensions bar staff and students from access to university premises and violate their right to freely associate. Despite the suspensions, the lecturers are expected to carry out their normal teaching duties, but

under strict supervision by management.

Management has also banned the professors from attending the monthly session held by a group of professors who oppose the planned cuts, in addition to the University College Union (UCU) emergency meeting held on May 28 and the annual general meeting of the UCU on June 2.

These suspensions are being enforced before any evidence has been found to convict anyone of illegal activity, which is how democratic protest is now viewed. In response to criticisms by students that the suspensions are an attack on democratic rights and legitimate forms of protest, management claimed that legitimate forms of protest consist only of writing letters and signing petitions.

Academics protested against these suspensions with letters and emails condemning management and calling on the board of governors to take action against the decisions. There is also an international petition calling on academics to boycott the university. External examiners have expressed their intention to boycott the upcoming assessments, delaying graduations and the general functioning of the university.

At the rally, Clare Solomon, president elect of the University Lecturers Union, meekly called on managers to reconsider their six-figure salaries instead of closing courses. Various speakers from the UCU, including Jane Hardy, of UCU National Executive and a supporter of the UCU Left, gave no official condemnation of the suspensions from the UCU and spoke only in a personal capacity. UCU speakers had little to offer other than appeals to management to reconsider its decisions.

Alex Callinicos, the theoretical leader of the Socialist Workers Party, spoke as a professor at King’s College. “What we have to do here and elsewhere in the

universities, throughout British society, is to build a movement...to assert power and force the barbarians back”, he declared.

Paul Gilroy, a professor of cultural studies at the London School of Economics, urged an appeal to the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government and figures such as London Mayor Boris Johnson, as fellow “scholars”.

Parallels were made with Sussex University, where six students were suspended but later reinstated as proof that the Stop the Cuts campaigns, which the Save Middlesex Philosophy campaign emulates, can achieve success on the basis of “local resistance”. Six students were found guilty of disruption and fined after a hearing held May 18. The National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts cynically called this a “slap on the wrist” and a victory for the campaign.

Following the rally, Alfie, a first year undergraduate student in philosophy, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that philosophy at Middlesex was under attack for ideological reason—because what was being taught was “more left” and was part of a nation-wide attack against humanity-based subjects.

“The campaign has got to win to show that management isn’t free to make financial cuts in the future.... It’s the management and bosses against workers and students”.

Yaiza, a philosophy student from Spain, expressed her concerns that universities are turning into businesses in which the “means and the ends are completely confused.... Defending the notion that there is a worth to education in itself is a mission of high urgency and responsibility”.

Christina, a philosophy lecturer at Middlesex, believed the department was being closed down because the “university believes it should be run for profit”. She explained how colleagues in philosophy have had a history of questioning the market-orientation of Middlesex management. She felt the campaign was important for the whole of education in Britain, as it showed how deprived education is when departments are shut down and how “nasty things can

become at university. What is happening at Middlesex is the shape of things to come. I believe the campaign can win, and we will give a bloody nose to anyone who attempts to force policies like these”.



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