

British government attempts to stamp out student protests

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A wave of student protests has been met with vicious state attacks.

The protests are in defence of university staff threatened with job losses and pay cuts, the abolition of tuition fees, opposition to the impending privatisation of the student loan book, and an end to universities acting as immigration border guards and cooperating with state spying programmes.

In December, heavily armed police violently attacked peaceful protesters and arrested 41, including students' union leader Michael Chessum in London. Students were also suspended at other universities and strict bail conditions imposed, including a ban on attending future protests or even public gatherings.

At the University of Birmingham on January 29, a meeting was organised by Defend Education Birmingham against the refusal of university authorities to discuss demands for greater democracy, to pay university staff at least the "Living Wage" and rescind their public support for increased tuition fees. Following the meeting, about 300 students took part in a peaceful march that concluded with a brief "occupation" of the university's Aston Webb's Great Hall.

The media sensationalised minor incidences of graffiti, the use of smoke "bombs", reports of damage to doors and allegations of "assault" against security personnel. Witnesses to the scuffles insist that, on the contrary, it was the students who were the victims of unprovoked attacks.

After the occupation ended the students made their way into the courtyard outside, only to find the only exit blocked by a line of 50 police officers. They were subjected to kettling for up to four hours without access to food, water or toilet facilities in the cold and rain.

Students were only allowed to leave in pairs under

the condition of being searched and giving their details to police officers while being filmed. Those who refused were arrested, a practice which Simon Natas of ITN solicitors said was deemed "unlawful" by the High Court last year. It was "very disturbing indeed if any police force was still engaging in this practice," he added.

The West Midlands police have denied that they kettled students. Superintendent Lee Kendrick implied the protest did not constitute a protest at all and that they had been called by university authorities after allegations of students "breaking into buildings, damaging property and assaulting staff."

Describing the police version of the kettling Kendrick said, "Suspects were detained by police and required to give their details ahead of the pending criminal investigation—and any that refused were arrested."

This is all the more amazing in that the police did not encounter any students committing any of the alleged activities before their "detention."

The kettling resulted in two students collapsing, one of whom, Marc Dataro (19), was hospitalised. Dataro was allowed to leave the kettle after suffering a panic attack and severe abdominal pains, but no one else was allowed to accompany him to receive medical attention.

Another student, Andrew Gallacher, says he overheard a conversation on a nearby security radio that police were blocking an ambulance from treating Dataro.

During the police operation, 14 students were arrested and three—Simon Furse, Tomacz Fry-Morgan and Panagiodis Theodoropoulos—were charged with "violent disorder" which carries a maximum eight year prison sentence. The three were remanded in custody after their arrest and only released on bail after being charged two days later at Birmingham's Magistrates

Court, ordered to appear at the court on May 23. Students' Union Vice-President Kelly Rogers said she was arrested after refusing to give her details, held in custody for 27 hours and strip-searched. The other students were finally bailed after 28 hours in custody pending charges, until March 26.

The punitive bail conditions state that the students live and sleep every night at their home address, meaning they are barred from continued study and work on campuses, must not publicly meet in groups of ten or more or with other students who have been arrested or enter any University or Further Education grounds or premises. Six of the arrested students, including Simon Furse and Kelly Rogers, have now been suspended by the university without the right to appeal.

In line with National Union of Students' policy, the Guild of Students at Birmingham has condemned the protest and refused to help arrested students, saying they only support "lawful direct action and peaceful protest."

On February 4, Defend Education Birmingham ended another two-week occupation by 30-40 students at the university's Hornton Grange conference centre, following the granting of an injunction to the university authorities the day before. The injunction also included the potential for imprisonment for those involved if they participated in similar action in the next 12 months.

Five students from an eight-day occupation last year are still being investigated by the university with the threat of expulsion. Another series of protests are due to take place in conjunction with university staff set to strike on February 6.

The stepping up of repressive measures against students follows the summary justice handed out to the young people accused of involvement in the 2011 riots that swept London and other cities, following the police killing of Mark Duggan. Thousands were dragged before kangaroo courts with barely any pretence of due process, held without bail and subject to punitive custodial sentences.



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