

Defend the Right to Protest: Stop the Millbank Witch-hunts

Proposer: Liam McCafferty (Non-Portfolio Officer)

Secunder: Danny Keillor (Ethical Issues Officer)

Union Notes:

- The national demonstration on the 10/11/2010 saw 52,000 students and lecturers march through Central London as part of joint NUS and UCU action against rising tuition fees and the slashing of the education budget. This was substantially more than the 10,000 expected by both the NUS and the police.
- After the rally ended, a few thousand students continued to demonstrate outside the Conservative Party Headquarters at Millbank Tower. A large number of students then proceeded to enter the building and occupy the roof.
- The NUS President Aaron Porter immediately issued statements describing those involved in the protest as 'despicable', and an 'extremist minority'. This is despite the fact that many student leaders issued statements defending the protesters, and that most of the people involved were ordinary student members of the NUS.
- The media reporting of the protest was extremely skewed focusing almost entirely on a few isolated incidents, such as the throwing of a fire extinguisher from the roof of the building, whilst deliberately not showing the majority of protesters responding with chants to 'stop throwing stuff'.
- Several newspapers including the Daily Telegraph consequently began running a witch-hunt campaign to have students involved in the demonstration identified and prosecuted.
- Although a few windows were smashed, it has been generally observed that the protesters were angry but good-natured, with many of the demonstrators being FE students on their first demonstration.
- In response to this Goldsmiths UCU initiated a statement in support of the demonstrators signed by over a hundred academics and lecturers. Another statement in defence of those being witch-hunted was initiated by a member of the NUS NEC and signed by over a third of the UCU NEC, including UCU President Alan Whittaker.

Union Believes:

- The rise in tuition fees will create a two-tier education system, with the most prestigious universities charging fees that can only be afforded by the rich. Our union believes that education is a right and not a privilege, and should be available to everyone regardless of their wealth or background.
- That the cuts to education funding will see courses slashed, lecturers jobs axed, and departments shut down. The smashing of a handful of windows

is nothing compared to the devastation to be inflicted upon the education system.

- That occupation is a legitimate form of protest, as affirmed in our policy of supporting all non-criminal direct action. (Emergency Resolution in Support of Fees Action at Sussex and Nationwide 11/2/2010)
- Aaron Porter's condemnation of students involved as 'despicable' and an 'extreme minority' is not only divisive, but put in the context of the witch-hunt campaign is irresponsible and puts students at risk.
- Furthermore, this diverts attention from the real violent minority; the government that wishes to attack our standard of education and the principle of equal opportunity for ideological purposes.

Union Resolves

- To mandate the Student Officer Committee to write an open letter to Aaron Porter expressing our disapproval with his response to the Millbank protests, and reminding him both of his responsibility to students and of his pledge to support occupations against education cuts.
- To mandate the Student Officer Committee to write another open letter to the EDP stating our support for those students and academic staff unfairly victimised for their involvement in the protests, and whilst not condoning violence, defending their right to legitimate protest.
- To adopt the position of, whilst not supporting any acts of violence or vandalism, recognising that events like the Millbank protest are a consequence of the injustice of rising fees and the attacks on Higher Education funding.

1095: Passed 25 November 2010