

communist students

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For a united revolutionary student organisation to fight back and win!

Today will see activists from across the country come together for the National Convention Against Fees and Cuts hosted by University College London Students for Free Education. The organisers have written that the convention “aims to strengthen and broaden the campaigns against cuts, and for free education. Like fees, cuts are a national issue. The cuts taking place on each campus are part of a national picture, with 6,000 jobs at 45 campuses under threat. With this and the threat of increased fees after the election, students need to organise a national, political voice against cuts and fees.”

With University and College Union members at UCL, Sussex and Leeds considering industrial action against cuts, and students and workers at many other institutions facing similar scenarios, the task that this gathering has set itself is certainly an important one.

The convention has the support of a number of student unions, including UCL,

SOAS, Queen Mary’s, Reading, Sussex and Hull. Various local anti-cuts and free education groups are also promising to attend, as are the assorted student sections and fronts of the British far left. So we can expect this to be the biggest dedicated gathering of student activists of this academic year - though, given the state of our student movement, that is not saying much. There exist, within the student left itself, a number of barriers to the fulfilment of the aim the convention organisers have set themselves: “to organise a national, political voice against cuts and fees”.

In the last few years it seems to have become a bit of a ritual for the best part of the student left to come together for an ‘activist conference’ at least once a year, yet avoid making any hard political decisions and walk away just as disorganised and programmatically bereft as when they arrived. For sure, some useful networking, generalisation of tactical lessons learnt in campaigns, and a spot of sect recruitment has been achieved at these events. But attempts to begin the process of forging lasting unity on the student left around principled Marxist politics have invariably been met with incredulity or derision - mostly coming from the ostensibly Marxist left groups such as the Socialist Workers Party, Alliance for Workers’ Liberty and Workers Power.

Of course, all of these groups are able to talk until the cows come home about ‘unity’. But what they

mean by this is the creation of a broad front, around a completely insufficient political platform (if it has one at all), from which recruits to *the real* Marxist group can be fished for. Not only is this dishonest, but it is entirely counterproductive. Hence we have Another Education is Possible, Education Not for Sale, and the Socialist Party’s Campaign to Defeat Fees - all based upon almost identical political positions, yet insistently maintaining their own separate existences. Not only do they make themselves look silly, but through their disunity they positively undermine the ability of students to develop effective resistance to the cuts and other attacks being imposed upon us.

A far more logical unity would be the unity of all Marxist students in a common revolutionary student organisation (of course, with democratic space to openly debate out their different perspectives and analyses). Such a force would really be able to educate, agitate and organise to deepen and politicise those students who are prepared to take a stand against cuts and for free education. It could link these struggles with those against imperialist war and occupation, against the capitalist destruction of our planet, against all forms of oppression, and in solidarity with workers in struggle - both in Britain and across the globe. More than this, it could pose a positive alternative - that of self-emancipation, and a world based on democratic planning and freedom for all - in a word, commu-

CS proposal to the Convention:

“This convention agrees to convene a meeting dedicated to the discussion of a united left slate in the NUS elections. All groups, networks, student unions and individual activists should be able to attend and participate”

nism.

NUS elections

In a strange and deformed way this logic appears to assert itself through another annual ritual of the student left - the attempt to cobble together a 'united left slate' (read, temporary electoralist lash-up) in time for the elections at the National Union of Students conference later this year. There is no doubt that even when this is achieved it is wholly insufficient in itself. However, at least once a year the left groups realise that they are actually stronger when they fight together, as opposed to when they stand apart. This realisation alone does not ensure that the left always stands together in these elections. Indeed, for the best part of this past decade the left has failed to achieve even a temporary get-together for NUS elections. The experience of the united left slates between 1998 and 2002, when we actually gave the NUS bureaucracy a run for its money, is a memory that can only be recalled by perennial or recurring students.

This year, failure to put forward a united left slate is again a very real possibility. It is known that some people have been having discussions about pulling something together, but it is hard to tell exactly what the state of play is because, as is all too often the way with these things, all direct negotiations that have taken place so far have been behind closed doors. This kind of secrecy not only displays a risible disdain for ordinary student activists, but makes it all the more likely that the negotiations will produce nothing worthwhile.

What we do know, thanks to Chris Marks of the AWL, is that ENS was "approached by Daf Adley (NUS lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender chair) about standing a united left slate involving ENS, AEIP and Daf and Bellavia Ribeiro-Addy [NUS black students chair] at NUS conference."

Comrade Marks also reported that Daf Adley wanted to arrange a meeting to discuss these plans so that they could propose a slate to the February 6 convention. Creditably comrade Marks argued against the process being based upon "factional 'well-knowns' meeting in a darkened cafe to do horse-trading over votes and manifesto points" and stated: "I hereby invite all student activists to this meeting." Unfortunately since then (I write on February 3) we have heard nothing concrete about any meetings or other organisational plans.

ENS had previously written 'A call for a united left challenge to the leadership of NUS', which it sent to AEIP and published on its website on January 20. In this 'call' ENS argued that "the activist student left should build the greatest possible unity in action at every level, and that a united left slate in NUS can be a useful part of this, helping to inspire and organise student un-

ions and activists".

Yet when CSer Dave Isaacson replied to Chris Marks's report on the potential upcoming talks about standing a united left slate - arguing that Communist Students and other left groups and activists should be involved - the AWL's Daniel Randall certainly was not advocating "the greatest possible unity in action" in his response to him. Comrade Randall replied that, "given that what we're talking about here is some very immediate, very specific collaboration



between ENS and AEIP within a particular framework and around particular elections, I don't think CS (which is not part of either organisation and vociferously hostile to one) has any particular 'right' to be involved." Talks should be open to "ENS and AEIP supporters", he argued, clearly implying that those on the student left not in these two groups were not welcome.

But perhaps Daniel's comments were nothing more than the off-the-cuff remarks of an irate individual and not a thought-out AWL position, as Chris Marks later returned to the discussion to inform us that "you are more than welcome to come to any meeting" and that "the invitation is open to everyone, as far as I'm concerned." Other members of ENS have also backed this position.

For our part, we in Communist Students have written to both AEIP and ENS explaining that we "view it as positive that comrades from across the student left are once again considering the issue of left unity - which is vital if we are to have a serious impact upon NUS conference and within the student movement generally."

Out in the open

As well as requesting to be involved ourselves, we also urged "that any discussions are conducted in as open and inclusive a manner as possible in order to facilitate the maximum involvement of all left student activists". We also emailed Daf Adley to try and find out more. Other than an acknowledgement

of receipt from ENS, we have had no replies to these communications.

Given that we will have student activists from across the country coming together at this weekend's convention, it seems blindingly obvious to us that this is an ideal place to discuss how we can best put forward an effective left challenge to the supine NUS bureaucrats at their annual jamboree and beyond. Student activists deserve more than a bit-part in voting for, or rubber-stamping, such a challenge. They must be central to the debates over its platform and candidates, not presented with a *fait accompli* drawn up behind closed doors.

The convention is an ideal place to thrash these kinds of issues out, and it is a shame that there will not be time to seriously do this. Communist Students is proposing to the convention that it vote to call an *open* meeting dedicated to discussing the creation of a united slate at the NUS elections (see opposite).

This is vital. After all, the question of forging a united revolutionary organisation is the most pressing issue the student movement faces. Our disunity is the main obstacle to a serious and successful fightback.

Such a revolutionary organisation could give a lead to the disparate, spontaneous struggles of students, begin to link them together, and win real mass support for the project of self-liberation. A united left slate for NUS elections is not a united revolutionary student organisation, but it could be a step in that direction.

If it is argued for and won openly and democratically, without the fudging of important political differences, but with a genuine attempt to discuss and resolve them while uniting around agreed actions, then we might start to get somewhere.

Karl Marx once explained he was for the "merciless criticism of everything existing". Debate and criticism are vital. That is why we encourage the fullest debate and expression of differences within our own organisation as well. Only with a democratic culture can the working class fashion itself into a class that can bring about the emancipation of humanity: i.e. communism.