

What is Respect?



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Defend muslims

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War and revolution

December 2-3, University of London Union, Malet Street. Weekend school organised by the Communist Party of Great Britain. Sessions include 'Marx and war', 'The New American century and ultra-imperialism' and 'The failure of the anti-war movement and the SWP'. All welcome, lots of time for debate.

For more info, see www.cpgb.org.uk



communist students

issue no 1
November 2006

Keep the cap?

No, scrap the fees!

The October 29 student mobilisation against attacks on the right to education should be just the beginning of the campaign to beat off the government. More of the same sort of timid gestures from the NUS leadership will be worse than useless. Unless the fight against fees armed with a fundamentally different political approach, it simply will not win.

The narrowness and lack of vision of the NUS apparatchiks is revealed in the main slogan they used to mobilise for October 29 - 'Keep the cap'. Of course, the fact that government ministers and uni-

versity bureaucrats are pushing for the scrapping of the cap on tuition fees is worrying - it would signal the entrenchment of market forces in the higher education system and allow universities to charge fees only the rich and privileged could afford. And, yes, the situation is already dire, with 15,000 less university applicants this academic year - a situation the abolition of the cap would inevitably exacerbate.

However, we must be clear that the cap was always going to be ditched if the government got its way: transparent-

ly, it was *temporary*, a sop to allow spineless Labour Party backbenchers to vote for the Higher Education Bill back in 2004. The main political battle has to be fought and won by engaging with the ideology that lies *behind* the concept of fees - and by providing students with a fighting programme that can inspire and draw in the allies we need to win.

At present, the NUS bureaucrats are talking tough about "free education and access for all", condemning the "soaring levels of debt" and "any attempt

to lift the £3,000 cap". But for them, the "main battlefield" is the pseudo-democratic institution of parliament - a hopeless project. NUS president Gemma Tumelty demands that the government "rethink" its policy and that we "keep up pressure" on parties like the Liberal Democrats.

A successful fight against top-up fees is - according to her - dependent on the party that introduced them in the first place "rethinking" or a party that will never be in power and whose opposition to fees is weak and opportunistic.

We need a different approach.

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Going, going, gone: 15,000 disappeared students in 2006

Who we are & what we fight for

- Communist Students is an autonomous organisation established by members and supporters of the Communist Party of Great Britain - but you do not have to be a member to join us. It exists to promote the ideas of Marxism, campaigns for democracy in all spheres of life and fights to replace capitalism with communism.
- Communists have no interest apart from the working class as a whole. This class consists not only of those in employment, but everyone who does not own or control the means of production. The majority of students in a country like Britain are therefore part of the working class.
- The education system, women's equality, combating racism and chauvinism, and the struggle against war and for ecological sustainability are just as much working class questions as pay and trade union rights.
- Communists oppose the commodification of education and the turning of schools and universities into teaching factories. The entire education system needs to be radically transformed from top to bottom.
- Education must be democratised, free and aimed at developing fully rounded human beings, not exploitable office dolts. The situation where students are burdened with massive debts and forced to take paid work to get themselves through college must be ended. Students need time to think, argue, experiment and enjoy the experience of full time education. Grants must be set at a level that allow students to live a decent life.
- Communists recognise the importance of Marxism as a guide to practice. Our theory is no dogma, but must be constantly added to and enriched.
- There are many so-called 'parties' on the left. In reality they are confessional sects. Members who disagree with the prescribed 'line' are expected to gag themselves in public. Either that or face expulsion. We reject all such practices as anti-democratic and alien to the method of Marxism.
- Capitalism in its endless search for profit puts the future of humanity at risk. Capitalism is synonymous with war, pollution, exploitation and crisis.
- The capitalist class will never willingly allow their wealth and power to be taken away by a parliamentary vote. They will resist using every means at their disposal. Communists favour using parliament and winning the biggest possible working class representation. But the working class must prepare itself to make revolution - peacefully if we can, forcibly if we must.
- Socialism is the first stage of the worldwide transition to communism - a system that would consign wars, exploitation, money, classes, states and nations to the history books and bring about general freedom. Socialism requires the active support of the mass of the population and represents victory in the battle for democracy. It is the rule of the working class. Socialism is either democratic or, as with the abomination that was Stalin's Soviet Union, it turns into its opposite.
- Communists are internationalists. Everywhere we strive for the closest unity and agreement of working class and progressive parties of all countries. We oppose every manifestation of national sectionalism and fight to abolish all borders.
- As a global system capitalism can only be superseded globally.
- All students who accept these aims and principles are urged to join us.

Join Communist Students

Name _____

Address _____

Postcode _____

Email _____

Mobile _____

Uni/college _____

Return to c/o BCM Box 928, London WC1N 3XX or email your details to info@communiststudents.org.uk

Honesty and Openness

The left in the student movement needs a cultural revolution. That is what Communist Students is in business to fight for, writes **Ellie James**

The lead-up to the October 29 student demo against fees in central London has seen the NUS left busying itself with the usual sort of petty factional squabbles that discredit it in the eyes of many.

Arising from a meeting held on October 14, a number of left organisations including the Socialist Worker

Student Society/Respect and Education Not for Sale (with the Alliance for Workers' Liberty centrally involved) provisionally agreed on a united left contingent for this march. Why on earth they agreed to that is a mystery. Surely the left could agree a set of common slogans ... around student grants, around democracy, around

getting UK forces out of Iraq. But on the day it should seek to win the entire demonstration to them, not seal itself off as a league of the pure. The AWL certainly wants to wall themselves off from Islamic student societies such as Fosis. But this organisation is pro-imperialist and proudly calls itself Zionist!

Not surprisingly, after this outbreak of madness was reported to the SWP leaders, their hapless student organiser (Rob Owen of Manchester student union) - who agreed to the 'initiative' - was instructed to attack the proposal and state that he was now against any separate left contingent.

But will any of this be honestly and openly be reported in *Socialist Worker*? No, the left sects have a rotten record when it comes to telling the truth especially about themselves. A Sheffield Communist Students meeting on October 11 was given a classic lesson in this by a comrade from Socialist Students (the student wing of the Socialist Party in England and Wales). Replying to a CPGB speaker who argued for full transparency in such matters, he told the meeting that any such thing would "confuse people".

As if the working class and students are too thick to understand that leftwing politicians, as well as denouncing capitalism, can tell the truth about arguments that are happening on the left. Now, we can quote chapter and verse from some of the giants of the Marxist movement about the need for full openness - but it is more important to grasp the thinking that lies behind this patronising approach. It explains, for instance, why much of the left produces such deadly dull papers that practically no-one reads and why despite their best intention these comrades constitute a barrier to the socialism they espouse.

Essentially, they view politics as *conspiracy* - something that happens behind the backs of the movement that the left is supposedly in business to serve. For us socialism must be democratic and an act of self-liberation from below - only possible through the training, education and knowledge provided by openness.

What is Respect?

Given the fact that that Respect confidently announces on its website that the 2006 NUS conference could see it mount "a serious challenge for the presidency", this organisation should matter to students.

Its flamboyant MP, George Galloway, claimed that "10,000 students" had "joined" Respect during the recent round of freshers fairs. A huge exaggeration, of course. Nonetheless, Respect has made an impact on some campuses and is well positioned to made headway at the national level in the NUS. So what is it and what does it stand for?

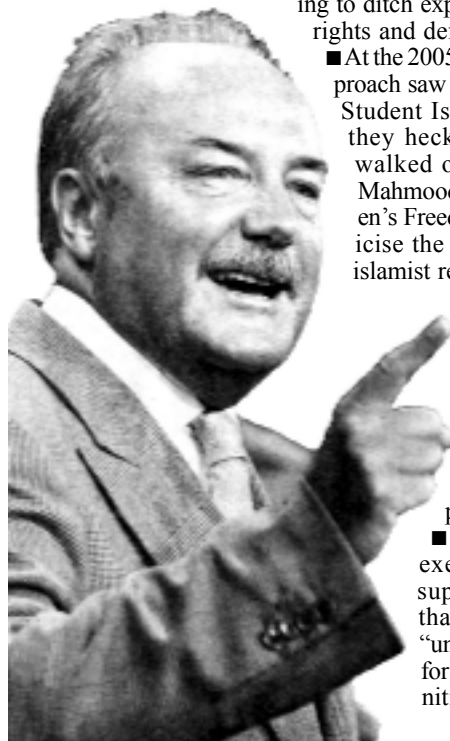
■ Respect is meant to be an alliance between the "secular socialists" of the SWP and "muslim activists". In fact, the muslims are pretty few and far between - they largely make up Respect's phantom rightwing.

■ This has not stopped the SWP being willing to go wobbly on basic socialist principles - or "shibboleths", as one leading members contemptuously put it - in order to bring 'the muslims' on board. Specifically, she was offering to ditch explicit commitments to women's rights and defence of gays.

■ At the 2005 NUS conference, this tailist approach saw the SWP trail the Federation of Student Islamic Societies (Fosis) when they heckled, slow hand-clapped and walked out on guest speaker Houzan Mahmood of the Organisation for Women's Freedom in Iraq. Her crime? To criticise the anti-democratic nature of the islamist resistance in Iraq.

■ According to the London *Evening Standard* of October 20, the leading spokesperson for Fosis, Amar Latif, told journalists that "homosexuality is impermissible in Islam, and there is no room for homosexuality to become permissible".

■ At the 2006 conference, SWP executive member Suzie Wylie supported a motion that argued that religious schools provide a "uniquely" beneficial environment for children from 'minority communities'.



Launch conference

The idea of Communist Students first saw the light of day at an informal gathering of student members and sympathisers of the Communist Party of Great Britain, together with other comrades, back in August.

Since then, we have signed up hundreds of people at freshers fairs round the country, got this first broadsheet out, held public meetings on a number of campuses and launched a website. All pretty modest, but not a bad start for an organisation that is starting from scratch.

Now we have this initial work under our belt, we need to get the

organisation on a firmer political footing.

We are planning a launch conference of the national organisation at Sheffield University on Saturday December 9. This will be open to all members of Communist Students as well as observers. At the conference we will debate:

- our political platform and what our priority campaigns should be
- how to develop our *Communist Student* broadsheet
- what sort of constitution we need and what our relationship to the rest of the student left should be

We will also elect a national coordinating body and finish the day with a

social event. All members of Communist Students are urged to attend. Invited observers who are not members are also welcome to take part in the debates, but, of course, without voting rights. We will do our best to arrange free accommodation in Sheffield for those that need it. If you are interested in coming along, please email info@communiststudents.org.uk

(A CommStu supporter in Leeds has kick-started the debate by submitting a number of amendments to the draft founding statement - read them on our website).

Some people took considerable umbrage at one or two of the points in my manifesto. A few even phoned me - I put the number on my election material - and gently suggested I was a drug-addled kiddy-fiddler totting an AK47. Which I am not, by the way. On one level, I'm pleased to have provoked a reaction! But there are serious politics here that need to be explained ...

Abolish the age of consent!

The one that caused the most outrage, of course.

Whenever I have the chance to have a calm conversation with people about this, I emphasise that what we were actually talking about is the sexual rights of *youth* - a separate and distinct category, even if it is hard to establish precise age parameters for it. We are in favour of *children* being protected and of government legislation to enforce this.

Society has an obligation to protect those people - children in particular - whose level of emotional comprehension limits their ability to understand the meaning and consequences of sexual activity. They must be shielded from exploitation by people with a dysfunctional sexuality and urges that drive them to seek gratification without meaningful consent. The notion that the age-of-consent laws do this in today's world is just nonsense.

In effect, all they do is criminalise *youth* sexuality. The idea that the state should stipulate an arbitrary age when everyone becomes emotionally equipped for sex is absurd - we are all individuals and develop relationships at our own pace. All these laws do is give legitimacy to the idea that the state should have a right to say what goes on in people's bedrooms, to police consensual sexual acts between informed people who are aware of what they are up to and why.

As a consistent democratic - a communist - I am totally opposed to that and said so in the election campaign.

Legalise all drugs!

We used the Communist Party's *Draft programme* quite a bit in the campaign and this demand was picked out by a number of people. Initially, a lot of students who took me up on it couldn't understand the importance of the question. OK, drugs are illegal, they said - but, as everyone does 'em anyway, so what?

I found the historical example of the prohibition on alcohol in 1930s America made most sense to people. When you ban massively popular recreation-

al drugs, all you do is make a gift of their supply to gangsters. That's a good way of guaranteeing that their quality will be totally unmonitored and potentially dangerous to users, that society will be afflicted by huge levels of crime and that people with addiction problems will be driven to despair and destitution. Not generally a good idea, is it?

Of course, it suits the state to have large numbers of people - the millions who use drugs every week - criminalised. Similarly, panics around drugs

legitimise a more repressive society, a more strictly policed population - something that all democrats should oppose.

Our alternative is simple. It is for the complete legalisation of all drugs and the *socialisation* of their use. This position is based on the understanding that the *whole phenomenon* of drug consumption in our society, with all its malign manifestations, stems fundamentally not from the nature of the drugs themselves, but from the way they are distributed, produced

and monitored. In other words, the most harmful thing about drugs is the fact that they are illegal.

We can look at heroin as an example. In 2003, it claimed nearly twice as many lives as cocaine, methadone and MDMA/ecstasy put together - but these statistics are only half the story. It is true that heroin, as it can currently be bought, kills more than other drugs; but this does not make a case for its continued illegal status or even stricter 'control'. Quite the opposite. Street



Standing as a communist

In January of this year, Carey Davies stood on a communist platform for student union president at Sheffield University. He won 78 votes and got a lot of stick for parts of his platform - including from some comrades on the left of the Education Not for Sale campaign. He explains the reasoning behind some of his more controversial policies

heroin is cut with a mix of substances that bring their own risks: sometimes powdered milk and talc; other times foul poisons. The drug itself can range in purity from 3% to 99%. In other words, users never know what they are getting: their fate is in the hands of the criminal cartels and gangs that mix the stuff. The incentive for them to produce a dangerous substance comes from the drug's very illegality - who is going to stop them mixing in shit to make a bigger profit?

The irrationality surrounding the use of drugs tells us that the ruling class has no rational programme for society as a whole any more - all it proposes in response to these real social problems are increased measures of authoritarian social control that actually make the problem *worse*. The 'war on drugs' is totally unwinnable.

Arm the working class!

Again, something that is in our *Draft programme* and caused a degree of merriment.

After I had reassured students that we were not talking about the right for individual nutters to revenge themselves on society - like I was giving the nod to the two blokes who shot up Columbine - the logic is a pretty inescapable one.

We are for socialism, a social system that will take the social privileges and wealth away from today's ruling class. That class has ruled for hundreds of years, is wrapped up with the state and its armed components, is massively rich and has connections with other ruling classes across the world. Do we really expect them to simply let us take everything off them?

In fact, by spreading the idea of the need for the working class - collectively, not individually - to arm itself, we actually *decrease* the likelihood of ruling class violence against any democratic movement. Especially if we combine this agitation with demands for democracy in the army and trade union and democratic rights for soldiers - a way to open them up to wider political influences and actually *win* them (they are overwhelmingly working class, after all) to the cause of socialism and liberation.

Why a communist programme?

This was an odd question. 'Ordinary' students expected me - as a communist - to stand up for things I believed in. Lefty students told me I was making a mistake and said I shouldn't stand on a "full communist platform", as they put it.

I wonder why ...?

Scrap the fees

continued from page 1

Fight for a real 'living grant'!

The call by Education Not For Sale to unite in a bloc around the demands 'Tax the rich' and 'For a living grant' is good. This bloc should also look to campaign, run meetings, organise sit-ins, occupations and so on across British universities and colleges in the struggle against fees.

But any united campaign must also openly debate what exactly is meant by a "living grant". Communist Students say that everyone in study over the age of 16 should receive grants set at the level of the minimum wage. And not the slave labour rate the current minimum wage is set at by New Labour.

We say that a minimum wage - or "living grant" - must be based on the social category of human *need*. This is not what the government tells us the

system can afford: it is the amount of money students actually need to live full lives in contemporary society - to have time to study, discuss and enjoy themselves to the full in this important formative period. Under present conditions, this would be set at a minimum of £300 per week.

The current situation - where students are forced into run-down accommodation and many are burdened with exploitative 'McJobs' in order to keep their heads above water - is an affront to human dignity.

We say that any society that treats its youth in this way does not deserve to continue. If capitalism cannot afford to give us "living grants", then we can't afford capitalism any more!

For genuine democracy

One reason why students appear apathetic and uninterested in politics is the highly bureaucratise nature of the NUS. How can we expect students to

take seriously the notion of challenging and beating the government when their own organisation is so remote, unaccountable and is clearly little more than a career ladder for wannabe establishment politicians?

So, let's start with our own union. Abolish the direct election of the NUS president and other officers, who should be elected and recallable by the executive. Salaried officials should receive no more than an average skilled worker. There must be full transparency - especially in *all* dealings with government ministers and commercial concerns.

No wonder the NUS leaders tell us that the real fight is to be fought in parliament and we should leave our fate in the greasy hands of career politicians. They want to *be* those career politicians in years to come!

Democracy must extend wider and go deeper. We argue that the students, staff and all university workers are the people who should democratically run educational institution, not the vice-chancellors, state bureaucrats or purveyors of pseudo-market imperatives.

And what about that hallowed institution, so beloved of the NUS leadership - parliament? What about fighting for some *more* democracy there?

We argue for a democratic republic in Britain - meaning a federal republic of England, Scotland and Wales. That requires the abolition not only of the monarchy, but the whole system of checks and balances against democracy: ie, the presidential prime minister, the House of Lords, the standing army, the MI5 and MI6 securocracy, the privileging of the Church of England, etc. We fight for MPs on a worker's wage; for recallability of all elected representatives; for annual parliaments and PR.

Education is not an 'investment' in 'speaking tools' in order to reap profits a few years down the line. We need a programme for a free education system that doesn't aim at making us white-collar office dolts, but rather aids the full development of each individual as a rounded social being. Necessarily, that will mean making inroads into the logic of capitalism itself, a system that exists only to expand and exploit.

The fight for free education - genuine education - is necessarily wrapped up in changing the world from one dominated by the needs of profit to one where the needs of humanity take priority and where everybody can develop their respective individual talents.

We demand:

- Students over the age of 16 should receive grants set at the level of the minimum wage.
- Compulsory education up until the age of 16 and from then on within a fully democratic system. Education should be free and of a polytechnical nature: that is, rounded to include technical, as well as academic, skills.
- No religious schools, no private schools.
- The right of every young person on leaving education to either a job, proper training or full benefits.

communist

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The leaked document from the department for education and skills proposing that university staff spy on "Asian-looking" or muslim students and inform special branch of anyone who might be involved in islamic extremism underlines that one of the main causalities of the 'war on terror' is civil liberties.

Thankfully Paul Mackney, joint general secretary of the University and Colleges Union, has condemned the suggestion, warning against getting "sucked into a kind of islamic McCarthyism". He also points out the implications for academic freedom and democratic rights. "McCarthyism" is right. These suggestions are all too reminiscent of the cold war and its attacks on democratic rights in the name of fighting the red 'enemy within'.

They are made in the context of increasing pressure on the muslim 'community'. Since Jack Straw used the issue of the full veil - or niqab - in a bid to boost his chances of becoming the next deputy prime minister, we have seen a marked intensification of islamophobia, with muslim women being stopped in the street by chauvinist bigots and told to 'do as Jack says'.

We have to be clear. Women themselves should have the right to choose what they wear. This goes for those who choose to wear the veil - many do so not just for religious reasons, but also to make a political point. But equally women should be free to choose *not* to wear the veil, whatever imams, elders and (usually male) family members may say.

Many on the left ignore the fact that

the veil, like other forms of clothing, can be both a tool and symbol of women's oppression. For example, following Khomeini's rise to power in the Iranian revolution of 1979, his first fatwa was to instruct all women, of all religions and none, that covering their hair was obligatory. It is not the case that these ideas are entirely non-existent in the UK. Unlike the comrade I listened to on an SWP stall in Leeds recently, we do not call on people to "defend the veil". For us the issue should be defending a women's right to freely choose what she wears.

Salma Yaqoob put it well at the October 14 Respect rally against islamophobia: "Since 9/11 there are pressures from wider society" not to wear islamic dress, she told the audience. But this "doesn't mean that patriarchal pressures don't exist. They do and we also need to deal with them." Women who are in education and in work should not be forced back to the home because of a ban on the hijab or the veil. This "does not help women to be empowered", she correctly pointed out. But she was also the only speaker to argue for the right of women *not* to wear certain forms of dress as well as the right to wear them.

In contrast, the official statement on this question featured on the Respect website goes out of its way to blur the issues involved: "The claim that to

dress differently is to create division is so absurd that it is only given credence over the niqab because of already rampant islamophobia. The Hassidic Jews of Stamford Hill, north London, dress in clothing modelled on the 18th century. Both men and women dress very differently from non-Hassidim. Sikh men dress dis-

tinctively. Punks dress differently. Goths dress differently" (www.respectcoalition.org).

This is nonsense. The Hassidic Jews dress in this manner *precisely* in order to help reinforce barriers against assimilation into the wider society. It is a little like saying that the Amish people of central Pennsylvania, USA, who

shun electricity, telephones and many of the conventions of wider society in order to isolate themselves from the world, just *happen* to dress like mid-19th farmers. Just like goths or punks, dressing this way sends a signal - it is expressive of a particular cultural and social outlook shared by that group.

Clearly, the convention of the veil is rooted in the oppression of women and has been used historically to ensure that they cannot take a full part in society. Thus we should have no fear of saying that we would prefer women to discard it. But this must be an act of *self-liberation*: it must never be imposed from outside for chauvinist reasons.

Nor should we be neutral about religion. Marxists are atheists. We seek to overcome religious superstition and win people to a materialist outlook. We are also secularists and advocate the complete separation of state and church (or mosque, temple or whatever) in order to achieve the full equality of believers and non-believers. As such we are opponents of political islam, a reactionary and repressive political movement.

Communist Students will argue for united campaigns with islamic societies on campuses in order to counter any surveillance or harassment of "Asian-looking" students, or in defence of any of our civil liberties and democratic rights - including organising ethnically (and sexually) integrated physical defence squads when necessary. But we are not in favour of *strategic* alliances with forces whose programme is *opposed* to that of working class socialism.

Defend muslims!

All democrats and socialists should fight against the government's plans to encourage university staff spy on "Asian-looking" or muslim students, says David Isaacson

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Carrot and stick

Why did Jack Straw speak out against the niqab? His comments require a more subtle analysis than simply shouting "racist" at him.

Only a small minority of muslim women wear the niqab (well under 5%). They are a highly visible minority who are commonly perceived to be more 'extreme' or 'fundamentalist'. The government has attempted to divide muslims into 'moderates' and 'extremists' - and holds out the 'carrot' of full acceptance into British multicultural society for the former. It will promote and reward those 'good' muslims that accept its version of 'Britishness' - deference to authority, abstract notions of fair play, the supposed democratic traditions of the British imperial state.

The 'extremist' minority are targeted as a lesson to 'moderates' of what the 'stick' looks like. The 'moderates' are encouraged to police the 'extremists' in the



muslim population - it is not just university lecturers that the government wants to spy on young muslims, but their own parents.

We want the greatest unity of working people of all ethnicities; we do not celebrate divisions for their own sake. We are for assimilation - not forced from above, but voluntarily from below; and not on a national basis, but worldwide.