



## NATIONAL CAMPAIGN AGAINST FEES AND CUTS

# DEFEND THE RIGHT TO ORGANISE AND FREE EXPRESSION ON OUR CAMPUSES

As a left-wing movement, our goal is to transform the world – to take power from the few to the many and use it to create a better society. One of the key struggles for us is on the battlefield of ideas. It is, in part, through ensuring the dominance of certain ideas that the status quo is maintained. Therefore, to confront the rich and powerful, we need to counter their ideas with ours, and change hearts and minds.

That's one reason why the fight for education is so important. Democratising access to, and the development of, ideas and knowledge, isn't just about equalising job opportunities: it's also about empowering more and more people politically.

It's also why freedom of expression and freedom of discussion are as vital as oxygen to any progressive, liberatory movement. If we can't even discuss and spread radical ideas, any attempt to change the world is suffocated before it can even begin. And beyond expression and discussion of ideas, we also need the ability to organise together around those ideas, and act on them. Historically, these freedoms have been most denied to the left, the oppressed and the exploited – precisely in order to stop us challenging the powers that be.

This is why the current threats – which come from many different sides – to these basic political freedoms on campuses should be so concerning to education activists. NCAFC is committed to opposing all these threats in a joined-up, consistent way, to defend and extend political freedoms.

## PREVENT

Under the Prevent policy, schools, colleges and universities are now legally required to monitor students considered “at risk” of being drawn into “extremist ideas” and protect them from being “radicalised”. In practice, this policy leads to the targeting, surveillance, harassment and stigmatisation of Muslim students disproportionately, as well as radical left-wing

activists, with a potential chilling effect on the expression of radical ideas. In addition, the government wants universities to ban speakers that would be quite legal elsewhere.

## EDUCATION BOSSES CLAMPING DOWN

The senior managers of schools, colleges and universities are going above and beyond their legal duties to restrict free expression. Many are uncomfortable with speakers and events that might draw controversy, and still more are preventing or discouraging political postering, leafleting and campaigning in order to maintain a sterile, squeaky-clean corporate image – and the smooth running of for-profit businesses on our increasingly commercialised campuses. In other cases, student voices have been suppressed from countering particular speakers – for example, in the intimidation of students at King Edward's Camp Hill School for Girls who wanted the opportunity to express critical questions and dissenting views when the Israeli ambassador was invited to speak at their school.

In recent years, senior managers' responses to protest and organised dissent on campuses have become particularly draconian. They have mobilised antidemocratic laws against us and victimised individual students and workers who are activists, protesters and organisers. From the suspension of student occupiers to the use of legal injunctions and police violence to control campus space, and from the blocking of workers' strikes on antidemocratic technicalities to having troublesome trade unionists deported or made redundant, these attacks require robust responses, including full solidarity with those victimised.

## COPS OFF CAMPUS!

Not only do the police pose a threat to individuals – in particular harassing and assaulting black people and other those of other marginalised groups – they also

play a repressive role against left-wing political activity. Protests have been violently attacked, and students and workers taking action have faced surveillance and harassment. In many countries, the police cannot enter campuses without special permission. This has made campuses beacons of free thought and political expression in those countries. We aspire towards achieving the same thing in the UK!

## **ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND THE MARKETISATION OF EDUCATION AND RESEARCH**

Successive governments have sought to turn students into consumers, and academics into producers of market-oriented teaching and research. The range of courses available, especially to students with less financial means, is narrowing, with politically and socially critical teaching – from trade union studies and heterodox economics, to feminist and black liberation studies – being squeezed out. The higher education reforms currently in progress will only make this worse. In research, narrow-minded metrics combined with competition for limited funding and jobs are more and more tightly restricting academic enquiry, to suit the needs and interests of the government and the owners of industry.

## **BUREAUCRATISED STUDENT UNIONS**

Many student unions are run like businesses, with positions taken by people who want to boost their CVs. Their culture is politically opposed to student organising and debate – particularly if left-wing politics are in the mix. Many unions go along with rules or pressure from their institution, or go above and beyond the call of duty in their attempts to avoid argument and controversy. For example, Teesside Student Union shutting down discussion on free education and quashing independently-organised political debates, and UCL Union sabbatical officers trying to bar Macer Gifford, who had fought with Kurdish forces against ISIS, from speaking on campus. Organising societies, meetings, events and public activity is generally getting harder.

## **RESTRICTIONS ON OUR UNIONS**

The strictures of the new Trade Union Act add to the constraints imposed by decades of anti-union laws against workers trying to organise and defend their rights. The UK's trade unionists face some of the most draconian laws of any democratic capitalist country. Our student unions, too, are subject to restrictions on their actions and the political scope of their activity that have been imposed by successive governments keen to head off organised opposition to their policies. What's worse, many of our student unions'

bureaucracies have internalised the anti-political, service-provider model of student unions pushed on them from above. They often implement over-zealously implement excessively conservative interpretations of these laws – for instance, UCL Union's trustees (including unelected non-students) recently ruled that the union was not allowed to vote to do something as modest as raise awareness of the repression of Palestinians.

## **NO PLATFORM AND THE LEFT**

On top of these external threats, within the student left and the wider student movement there is a political current that advocates bans to shut out speakers with bigoted, right-wing and disagreeable views. We want to fight those reactionary politics, but in general, we think that instead of no-platforming the people who hold them, we need to actively engage, counter and defeat their ideas through argument and protest. You can read more about why we think this by going to [anticuts.com/righttoorganise](http://anticuts.com/righttoorganise).

## **INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY**

Around the world, education activists are facing repression – in many cases much worse than that in the UK. For instance, Indian students protesting the far-right Modi government have been arrested for “sedition”, US students were pepper-sprayed while sat still in a non-violent protest, and Turkish academics were rounded up for signing a petition against their government's massacre of Kurdish people. While campaigning for political freedom on our own campuses, we stand in solidarity with those around the world fighting for the same.

## **TAKE ACTION!**

NCAFC wants to spark debate about political freedoms and a culture of open discussion on campuses, and to push back against these encroachments in order to create an environment in which students' and workers' organisation and campaigning can blossom. Join the debate and join the campaign on your campus!

For more information on NCAFC's campaign to defend and extend freedom of organisation and expression on campuses: [anticuts.com/righttoorganise](http://anticuts.com/righttoorganise)