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The students are revolting - report on the occupation of Millbank Tower

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Yesterday saw one of the largest and most vibrant protests in London in recent history. Over 50,000 education workers and students took to the capital not only to protest against the rise in tuition fees but reforms in education in general and to protest for a fairer, free higher education system. The Anarchist Federation was among them forming a "radical workers' and students' bloc" which, along with London Solidarity Federation, argued that capitalism is the cause of this crisis, that the Left and the union leaders cannot be trusted to fight our battles (a point NUS president Aaron Porter later so aptly demonstrated) and that we need united, grassroots direct action as part of a sustained fightback.

Contrary to the corporate media commentaries, a significant portion of the march also involved itself in the property destruction and occupation at Millbank tower, home to the Conservative Party HQ. Direct action was not limited to this either, with the London School of Economics going into occupation shortly after the end of the protest, a sit-down protest in Parliament Square and some limited property destruction at Liberal Democrat HQ. Students and education workers have not only demonstrated their anger at the wave of attacks in store for a whole generation of young people, but their lack of faith in parliamentary democracy and the need to take the struggle into their own hands.

The media and official union response to this has hardly been surprising. Commentators were quick to denounce the actions at Millbank tower as that of a "militant minority", "the Socialist Worker Party" or "anarchists", to quote Harry Mount from The Telegraph "perhaps with a student card, from a third-rate institution they never visit, that cloaks their criminal violence with the figleaf of principled protest". Aaron Porter quickly lined himself up behind his future employers joining the Labour Party in its denunciations. Cameron, for his part, has been quick to criminalise the protesters talking once more of ramping up policing in the capital - this is while the death of Ian Tomlinson at the hands of the Met lingers strong in the minds of many of us. None of the assessments of the Millbank protesters as a "militant minority", "the Socialist Worker Party" or "anarchist alone" is accurate. Such a claim is made even more ridiculous by the rolling 24-hour news coverage that not only showed a clear diversity of students and education workers (yes, we were there too) taking great pleasure in smashing windows, office equipment and scuffling with the police, but the interviews with the occupiers themselves who often admitted this had been their first protest.

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Yes, the anarchists were also involved in this action, of course we were. But what is this notion of the "apolitical" student and education worker that is being promoted by the media? Does the fact that we are anarchists preclude us from being "normal people", from acting in solidarity with our fellow workers and students? We reject such a paralysing construct. It is designed to suffocate us, to force us into the image of the respectful, peaceful and, ultimately, obedient and ineffectual protester. We, like many of our fellow students and workers, recognise that only direct action will bring about meaningful change. That in order to fight the cuts we need to be not only fighting on the streets but building communities in our campuses, pushing for occupations, sit-ins, walkouts and the inclusion of those often excluded and marginalised in these struggles (the cleaners, porters, administrative and security staff who quietly labour in our universities under minimum wage).

Media pundits and politicians have also argued, and continue to argue, that students are somehow privileged or self-interested. This is the same divisory tactic being used against all public sector workers. In reality, as many students explained through TV interviews, this protest was not so much for themselves but for their younger brothers and sisters or even for their future children who otherwise wouldn't be able to go to university. This is similar to the concern that many public workers have for service users, who will undoubtedly also suffer from cuts to services. We cannot allow these strong ties of solidarity, across generations and between service providers and service users, to be undermined. The rhetoric that certain workers/students are a privileged group implies they should not be supported by others. We need to recognise this for what it is - a divide and rule tactic.

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We also affirm our commitment to supporting all those victimised/arrested as the result of their actions at Millbank towers. We encourage all education workers and students to do the same.

Yesterday was a sign of things to come. The students and education workers have been the first to speak in response to the austerity attacks, we encourage the rest of the working class to follow.

The Anarchist Federation