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Irish student struggles against austerity and fees

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Over twenty thousand students demonstrated in Dublin today against the introduction of student fees and the cutting of student grants. The main demonstration organised by the Union of Students in Ireland (USI) also included a Free Education for Everyone (FEE) bloc comprised of rank & file students in disagreement with the passive lobbying tactics of the USI leadership. USI stewards formed a line with Garda to prevent FEE rejoining the demonstration after they led a breakway protest at Fine Gael HQ.

Last years USI students protest saw a savage attack by Garda on a breakaway student bloc that occupied the Department of Finance. The cowardly actions of the USI leadership this

evening exposed their own members who took part in the FEE bloc to further police violence or arrest. At the time the FEE bloc was being shadowed by a number of secret police (known in Ireland as the Special Branch). Some were wearing USI issued t-shirts raising questions as to where they had obtained them?

FEE had marched as part of the USI demonstration from its meet up point at the Ambassador cinema at the Parnell monument. The bloc had only broken away on reaching Merrion square to travel the short distance to the Fine Gael HQ on Mount street where a sit down protest was staged. On winding up that short protest and trying to return to the rest of the student body FEE discovered its way was blocked by three lines of USI Stewards intermingled with uniformed Garda. This shocking act of betrayal by the USI leadership of their own members comes almost a year to the day after the brutal Garda attack on students occupying the Department of Education left several students injured.

It is no secret that FEE are highly critical of the USI leadership and its failure to offer any sort of effective resistance to the cuts on Education being imposed in this period. Indications that the leadership were going to respond to these political disagreements with a section of their membership in a physical manner emerged early in the protest when a group of 12 or so black clad private security were seen at the front of the march. It was also clear that the Garda were prepared to great effective protest with a violent response as they had brought along both mounted police and van loads of riot police. One WSM member overheard one young guard say to another: *“keep an eye on this crowd with the black and red flags.”*

A contingent carrying the #OccupyDameStreet banner joined the FEE bloc and went with them to the FQ Head Quarters on Mount street. This evening USI are staging a fake Occupation outside the Department of Education, one they have agreed in advance with the Garda to end at 10am

tomorrow morning. The top down methodology of the USI leadership and their betrayal of their own membership today is about as far as you can get from the spirit of Occupy.

William Hederman, who took the photograph on the right, told us *“USI were planning to do an Occupy-style camp outside the Dept of Education overnight, “weather permitting”. RTE described this as “in the spirit of the global Occupy movement”. A USI steward told me that the FEE & ODS group were not allowed to rejoin the march because they had “different aims” to USI.”* (Photo: William Hederman - USI Stewards form 3 lines to prevent #OccupyDameStreet banner joining demonstration).

In a stunning lack of awareness USI tried to defend this action under the ‘Health & Safety’ excuse. This is the same excuse that has been used in city after city to stage violent evictions of Occupy Camps, as cops baton and tear gas Occupiers to protect their ‘Health & Safety’. USI told The Journal this morning that *“the group was simply trying to join a protest through a fire exit – and that the other groups would have posted a safety problem if they came in from a side and forced other students to push backward.”* None of the students we have talked to who found there way blocked by the stewards recall this health & safety excuse being offered at the time. Several recall being told it was because of who they were with.

After the militant student demonstrations and occupations of the late 1980’s and early 1990’s won the abolition of fees the government introduced an once off 190 euro registration fee that was supposed to pay for student services. However in the 15 years after 1996 that fee was increased no less than 13 times – a reintroduction of fees by the back door. In last years budget that registration fee was replaced with a 2,000 euro ‘student contribution and the government has not ruled out reintroducing fees in this years budget. In mid-August, Labour Minister for Education Ruairi Quinn announced both further increases to the “registration fee”, which currently stands at

€2000, and the return of tuition fees, which will be payable at point-of-entry.

In addition to this USI calculates that the Higher Education Grant has been cut by 8.8% since the capitalist crisis began with some students seeing cuts of up to 60% due to changes in criteria. The government has announced that it intends to cut grants for all new postgraduates. These increases are having the effect of excluding huge numbers from higher education.

Despite the scale of these attacks the USI response is one of passive lobbying of TD's with the traditional once off large scale march to demonstrate that they have the support of students. Their arguments against the introduction of fees and cuts in the grant are all couched in the language of the neo-liberal offensive, rather than arguing for free education as a right for all they are trying to convince the 1% that it is good for the economy.

In an article on the FEE site in advance of the march Aidan Rowe warned that *“Similarly, we mustn't fall into the old lobbying pattern favoured by USI, where student mobilisations are of secondary importance and only serve to demonstrate the organisational credentials of the USI leadership in advance of “negotiations”, which serve little purpose other than to boost the egos and build the political portfolios of student politicians. Political lobbying is a terrain on which establishment politicians are comfortable – an empowered, energised and militant grassroots student movement is considerably more difficult to handle. We must also recognise the class-based nature of the struggle for free education. We must reject the sectoral politics of the USI, in which students are simply another “special interest” group demanding that the pain be imposed on someone else, which allows the government to divide and conquer, and instead embrace a class-based anti-austerity politics of solidarity with ordinary people resisting attacks on their lives and livelihoods.”*