

HIGHER EDUCATION:  
**FIGHT THE CUTS!**  
**DEFEND  
OVERSEAS  
STUDENTS!**

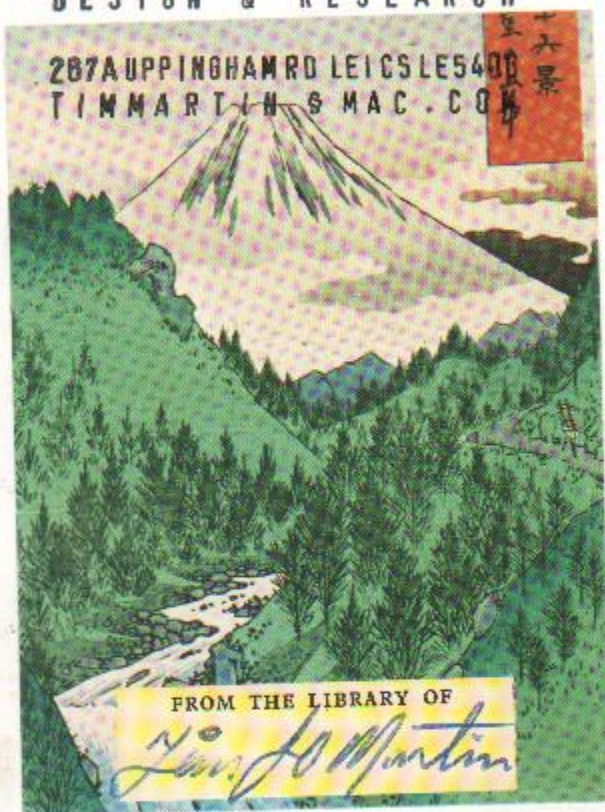
**NATIONAL ORGANISATION OF  
REVOLUTIONARY COMMUNIST  
STUDENTS**

# Revolutionary Communist Pamphlets

No 6

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PUBLICATION OF THE REVOLUTIONARY COMMUNIST TENDENCY



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Printed and published by Junius Publications Ltd

ISSN 0141-8874

## HIGHER EDUCATION:

### FIGHT THE CUTS — DEFEND OVERSEAS STUDENTS

#### INTRODUCTION

Early this year hundreds of students at Sussex university climbed the steps to the campus administration block and occupied the authorities' conference rooms and offices. They were protesting at the university's decision to cut back the intake of overseas students to Sussex through the imposition of a quota system. This was not an isolated incident: last year overseas students at North East London Polytechnic led an occupation of college premises in protest at quotas, and in early 1977 quotas and discriminatory tuition fee charges stimulated a wave of sit-ins and other forms of direct action at about 30 colleges.

Quotas and discriminatory fees have, however, met with only limited opposition in most colleges. The paid dignitaries who staff the executive of the National Union of Students (NUS) have had better things to do than defend the union's overseas members. The NUS conference of Easter 1979 spent most of its time ruminating over methods of cutting down on union paperwork; overseas students only appeared as an afterthought — in an emergency motion on the last day of the conference. Still, though newly-elected president Trevor Phillips had to be bound hand and foot to agree to it, the conference did resolve to launch a national campaign on overseas students. It was to include a mass picket of the Department of Education and Science (DES). But somehow the executive wasn't around to organise the campaign and was pre-occupied with office work on the day of the picket. Students continuing the occupation at Sussex were left to face threats that they would be expelled and that the police would be called in. Inevitably their struggle collapsed.

In 1976-77 there were some 83 000 overseas students in Britain. Some 34 000 are at universities, 14 000 at polytechnics and a further 33 000 at other colleges. Most come from areas traditionally oppressed by imperialism — areas in which educational facilities are even more inadequate than those in this country. Most are black. Overseas students form the most vulnerable part of the student body. That is why they have been singled out for attack.

Today the NUS paper *National Student* and its more grown-up equivalents in the bourgeois press carry scare stories about small private colleges which rip off overseas students by charging them enormous fees for second-rate education. But overseas students don't just face problems from maverick institutions like these. Throughout the 'seventies they have been the target of an offensive pursued at every level of government. From Trafford, Manchester, where the local authority charges foreign students thousands of pounds for the same 'A' level courses which British students receive free, to Whitehall, London, where the DES has recently imposed outrageous increases in the national level of overseas students' fees, the story is the same. The state is out to get overseas students.

Why? The Revolutionary Communist Tendency believes that state attacks on the rights and conditions of overseas students are designed to make them pay for the economic crisis of British capitalism. Cutting the grants and subsidies given to foreign students is one way by which the state can reduce its expenditure on education. It also happens to be one of the easiest ways. Because many are black, overseas students remain isolated from the rest of the student movement. They can be picked off almost at will.

It isn't too hard to pass militant motions against the cuts. But, when cuts are implemented, it isn't too hard to turn a blind eye to their vicious impact on overseas students either. At the moment, only a racist would come out and argue that overseas students should be the first to go. Yet every time an attack on overseas students passes unchallenged, the racists' position is strengthened. And so is the position of those intent on more cuts. Any struggle against racism and any struggle against the cuts must be based on an uncompromising defence of overseas students. This pamphlet shows how that defence can be built.

To understand the situation in which overseas students are placed today we must have a clear grasp of the development of higher education in the British economy.

## THE CRISIS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Spending on education is not directly profitable for capitalism. The workers employed in colleges, be they lecturers or cleaners, do not produce profits for the capitalist system. The funds that the state lays out on wages and on 'capital' expenditure (new buildings, offices, laboratories and so on) are generated from tax revenues. But taxes ultimately come out of profits, so the amount of money available for education is constrained by the profitability of the economy. Nevertheless expenditure on higher education in Britain grew very rapidly in the 'sixties - for very specific reasons.

Firstly, along with other imperialist powers British capitalism underwent a period of expansion after the Second World War. World trade and industrial production boomed. In this prosperous period even the relatively weak British economy made some progress. So there was a sufficient mass of profits around to finance an increase in educational facilities.

Secondly, however, the underlying structural weaknesses of the economy were becoming more and more apparent to the bourgeoisie. The productivity of industry lagged way behind that of British capitalism's competitors abroad. In these circumstances a Labour government, led by Harold Wilson, backed by employers' journals like *The Economist* and touting phrases like 'white heat of technological revolution', came in in 1964 to revitalise Britain's manufacturing base. And it enlisted the services of higher education for the task.

New sectors of production, like computers, aerospace and nuclear power, were expanding; in older ones, like mechanical engineering, the labour process was becoming more complex. People began to change jobs more frequently and, on the whole, jobs demanded a higher level of skills. As a class, the bosses therefore required workers with wide-ranging talents and varied aptitudes, and they needed them to be trained more thoroughly than ever before. New colleges were accordingly built to provide them with the labour-power they needed. More higher education was necessary for capital.

Thirdly, redundancies in industry started to multiply as a consequence of the business mergers and rationalisations that characterised the Wilson years. The state thus pumped money into the public sector to create enough jobs to keep unemployment down to levels which were politically acceptable. The branch of the public sector which enjoyed the fastest growth was higher education - and it is easy to see why. It equipped students with the skills demanded by the burgeoning social services: it trained teachers, social workers, administrators and so on. But more importantly it kept school leavers off the streets. The expansion of higher education was seen as a solution to growing social problems.

The Robbins report of 1964 was the signal for a massive programme of construction of universities, polytechnics and colleges of further education. The number of full-time students in higher education has since doubled to about half a million. But today British capitalism has educational requirements very different to those which were established in the post-war boom.

Crisis permeates through every factory and town hall in the country. Its origins are clear. Over the years capitalists have introduced more and more machinery into industry. They have done this to raise productivity and thus remain competitive. Now, although each worker produces more profit for the capitalists than ever before, this profit is measured against an ever-

increasing outlay on plant and machinery. The size of the exploitable workforce has contracted relative to total investment. As *The Economist* puts it: 'over the past 20 years or so there has been a steady shift from labour to capital in the ratio of industrial inputs...' (*The Economist*, 25 August 1979, p61). The outcome of this process has been a dramatic fall in profit rates, particularly among the weaker capitalist countries such as Britain. As *The Economist* notes, 'the net rate of return of British manufacturing industry has tumbled from an average of 17.5 per cent in the mid 'fifties to 5.5 per cent in the mid 'seventies' (*The Economist*, 1 September 1979, p75).

British capitalism is wracked by a crisis of profitability. It must mount an assault on the jobs, conditions, wages and welfare of the working class if it is to survive. For workers in industry this means the staggering redundancies now planned for British Leyland, British Shipbuilders and the British Steel Corporation; it means productivity deals and speed-up. For workers in un-productive social services it means staff and equipment shortages and the enforcement of a rigorous policy of wage restraint through the imposition by central government of 'cash limits' on current expenditure. For the working class as a whole it means threats to basic trade union rights: to the right to vote by mass meeting, to the right to picket, and to the right to the closed shop. And it means longer queues for council houses, the closure of hospital after hospital - and ruthless cuts in education in general and higher education in particular.

The late Labour Government instituted cuts in education which brought capital expenditure down from £1200m to £500m over its five year period of office. But that has not proved sufficient, so deep is the plight of British capitalism. Greeted by a succession of forecasts predicting zero economic growth for months and months, the new Thatcher administration has had no choice but to redouble the attacks on education begun by Labour.

Higher education has not escaped the axe. In a year when applications for university places have risen by six per cent, universities have been directed to reduce admissions in 1980-81 by six per cent. Polytechnics will turn away more than 5000 applicants in 1980-81. As the *Financial Times* noted, this is 'the first time since the war that the engines of academia have had to be put in reverse' (*Financial Times*, 25 August 1979). The latest government White Paper on public expenditure shows that university spending was £700m in 1978-79 - an 18 per cent drop on the level for 1973-74. At £1000m, spending on further education and teacher training was down by more than 10 per cent.

The results of the cuts are only too obvious. Because some 70 per cent of current expenditure in higher education goes on salaries, economies have been made by 'freezing' teaching posts. Class sizes are rising as a result. College authorities scrimp and save on repairs, allowing buildings to become still more dilapidated. Libraries are crowded and books are scarce. In short, 'the expansionist ambitions of universities have been repeatedly throttled

back during the past five years' (ibid). And what is true of universities is true throughout higher education.

The three specific reasons why higher education expanded in more prosperous times make for a sharp contraction in the system today. First, more higher education is not possible: capitalism cannot afford to maintain expenditure on unprofitable sectors at the levels of the past. Second, Britain is entering a technological 'revolution' very different to the one invoked by Harold Wilson. There are almost no new sectors of production springing up in the way they did in the 'sixties. The only important one that has emerged is microelectronics; and, while it will require a few thousand skilled personnel to man it, it will deskill or eliminate the jobs of millions when its products work their way into tool shops, offices and the retailing sector. So more higher education is not necessary. Students are destined for mentally stultifying drudgery, or for the dole - not for the high-powered managerial posts they were promised 10 or 20 years ago.

Third, the public sector can no longer be used to keep the lid on unemployment. The Treasury is broke. More than that, the setbacks imposed on the working class by the last Labour Government - and in particular the success of its reactionary Social Contract with the trade unions - have meant that a figure of 1.5 million unemployed is now politically 'acceptable' in a way that it was not in the 'sixties. Indeed capital needs a large reserve army of labour to force workers to moderate their wage demands. Why then train another generation of teachers, social workers and administrators? This is the question Minister for Higher Education Dr Rhodes Boyson has posed in his call for cuts in university arts courses (social sciences, the humanities) and a closer gearing of higher education to the needs of British industry. And why spend £10m to pay 16-year olds a miserable grant of £6 a week in the hope that it will persuade them to stay on at school rather than swell the ranks of the unemployed? Why indeed, answered Chancellor Geoffrey Howe in his June budget, as he announced that Labour Education Secretary Shirley Williams' sop to sixth-formers would be scrapped. Not only is more higher education not necessary, but 'A' level education is becoming redundant.

Howe's budget did not stop there. In authorising a £55.5m cut in the DES funds, he lopped £14m from capital spending and £8m from grants to universities. But he did something else too: he saved £6m by increasing tuition fees for overseas students.

## HOW THE STATE TREATS FOREIGN STUDENTS

'To any government anxious to curb public expenditure, the £100m spent annually on subsidising overseas students must appear eminently suitable for sacrifice' ('Putting the squeeze on foreign students', *Financial Times*, 10 August 1979).

The *Financial Times* is right. Capitalist governments, Tory and

Labour, have shown increasing anxiety about state subsidies to foreign students. Now Education Secretary Mark Carlisle has published plans to abolish them altogether.

In the 'sixties there was no such term as 'overseas students'. Yet then, as now, few foreign students received the subsistence grants that British ones did, and none received grants to the same level. Then, as now, foreign students had to pay for tuition fees out of their own pockets, while British students had them met by the state. By 1967 a government circular gave overseas students special status - and empowered the Ministry of Education to charge them specially higher fees.

### Higher fees

It was left to a Labour government to do the dirty work. Late in 1976, Shirley Williams reduced home undergraduates' fees from £650 to £500 but maintained overseas undergraduates' fees at the higher level. It was, she announced, only a temporary expedient and for this reason would be subject to later review. But the capitalist crisis has not proved temporary at all. The promised reviews have proved only too necessary: each year's has widened the gap between British and overseas students' fees. Since the academic year 1977-78 the differential for undergraduates has been stretched to almost £200 and, in July 1979, the DES issued an edict requiring all overseas students to pay the full cost of their courses in 1981-82 - nearly £2500 for undergraduates and a blackmailer's £3000 for postgraduates.

The latest jump in fees was implemented by the new Tory Government. But Labour wasn't exactly slow off the mark when it was in power. Contrasting the immediate rise in overseas students' fees instituted in Howe's April budget to those made by the previous administration, a recent *Financial Times* noted:

'The average increase imposed for 1977-78 was 60 per cent. By comparison, the increase this autumn will be 33 per cent.' (*Financial Times*, 10 August 1979)

Putting up fees to cover the full cost of courses is not a new policy. Labour toyed with the idea throughout its period of office. But it was rejected for another means of repressing overseas students - quotas.

### Tighter quotas

There are all sorts of ways of pricing foreign students out of the country. Upping their tuition fees is one; making specific provisions allowing halls of residence and hostels to charge them higher rents is another. Labour made those provisions in 1977. But that was not enough. In the same year it broadened the definition 'overseas student' to embrace all those resident in Britain less than three years. And it told colleges not to admit foreign students above a certain intake.

The intention was to reduce the number of new overseas students so that 1981 levels would not exceed those for 1975-76. But again that has proved insufficient. A recent DES circular called for 1981-82 intakes to be pushed seven per cent below 1975-76 levels. Sure enough, the ruling class and its state have been quick to take their numbers game one round further. That means one thing: immigration control.

### Tougher controls

In the capitalist crisis the bourgeoisie steps up its oppression of blacks - overseas students not excepted. An overseas student cannot enter Britain without documentary proof that he has a college place and enough money to finance his studies. As a consequence a whole number of students are turned away. Many of those who do manage to stay have to pay regular visits to their local police station. College authorities now report to immigration officials on the status and behaviour of their students, and in turn officials 'advise' colleges on the 'suitability' of overseas applicants for their desired courses. Many overseas students have to receive written consent from the Department of Employment before they can work to subsidise their studies. Once their courses are finished they can be deported for overstaying.

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Higher fees, tighter quotas and tougher controls are not merely designed to attack the most vulnerable section of the student body. The imposition of the cuts is only one aspect of the bourgeoisie's strategy. Overseas students are not merely students - they are also 'aliens', many of them black. As a result they are subjected to the same state assaults faced by Britain's black population. These assaults, when coupled with an ideological offensive that pushes the 'national interest' to the forefront, enable the bourgeoisie to exacerbate chauvinist sentiments and suppress class antagonisms.

More and more overseas students find that immigration officials treat them in a manner previously reserved for black workers. Immigration authorities now use a 'test of future intention' as a way of barring students from the country. A student who fails the test and files an appeal against it can be refused entry if the authorities consider that he has no intention of returning home after completing his studies. And their deliberations are marked by the cruelest logic. Refusing entry to a student from the Indian sub-continent, one adjudicator argued 'given the appalling economic and social problems of Bangladesh there was no apparent incentive for G. to return there'.

The oppression that overseas students suffer from the state shows that there is much more at stake than ruling class attempts to prune spending on higher education. *The cuts are inherently racist in character: their most devastating effects are on overseas students.* The struggle against the cuts can only be successful if it is built through steadfast opposition to racism - through a forthright defence of overseas students' interests. Let us see how the various organisations of the student movement match up to this task.

## THE DISMAL RECORD OF THE NATIONAL UNION OF STUDENTS

 Students, British and foreign, look to the NUS to fight for their rights. Unfortunately the executive of the NUS is unable to do this. It is dominated by a coalition of Communist, Labour and Liberal Party members that goes by the name of the Left Alliance - formerly the Broad Left. The Left Alliance/Broad Left has consistently accepted the capitalist premise that the cuts are necessary; it has merely opposed the way in which they have been carried out. Likewise the leadership of the NUS has accepted the chauvinist arguments that underlie immigration controls and has opposed racism only in its extreme forms.

In a letter to the *Financial Times*, NUS deputy president Alan Cristie has reassured the bourgeoisie that NUS members 'are well aware of the financial limitations facing Government and educational institutions and have sought as a consequence to propose policies which take account of this unfortunate dilemma' (*Financial Times*, 17 August 1979). Cristie does not object to cuts as such; he merely wants 'policies' that will make the cuts more tolerable. The NUS leadership justifies this flabby approach by maintaining that the state has been misguided in its actions. It argues that 'government action during the past decade has betrayed the lack of a comprehensive policy or any clear sense of priorities' (NUS, *An end to expediency*, no date, p2). On the contrary, policy has been all too comprehensive, the sense of priorities all too clear. It is the NUS executive that lacks clarity. It accepts the need for cuts, but cannot accept the consequences of this.

The NUS leadership's approach to the attack on overseas students is equally scandalous. It fails to defend the right of overseas students to free higher education. Instead it upholds the terms of the discussion set by the bourgeoisie, differing only in its contention that overseas students are good for Britain. This is how the NUS executive tries to convince the DES that it is 'doing the wrong thing':

'It has been reported at Leicester Polytechnic that some overseas students control major export orders when they leave the UK and if the intake of future overseas students is cut, this could well cut international trade of industries such as textiles and shipping...if present

policies continue they may cost British students their education, British workers their jobs, and will do an inestimable damage to our international relations.' (Ibid)

Rather than challenging the bourgeoisie's chauvinist offensive against foreign students, the NUS leadership protests that 'they' are good for the nation. What would it say if it were proved that most overseas students do not grow up into powerful, Anglophile capitalists? It would point to the benefits they provide British capitalism while still at college:

'Board of Trade figures in 1976 showed that overseas students studying for longer than one year accrued gross foreign earnings of £70 million and a further £58 million was accrued for students studying less than one year - giving a total of £128 million. This placed overseas students higher than Tate & Lyle, Dunlop and Cadburys as earners of foreign exchange.' (NUS, *Overseas students: action - fees*, no date, p2)

Here the NUS leaders tot up the fees, rents and other payments that overseas students make into British coffers. Overseas students will be glad to know that their most valued contribution is the one they make to Britain's balance of payments.

With politics like this it is not surprising that the NUS leadership sold out the struggles of 1977. Its conduct during these revealed that, ultimately, it has no political independence from the bourgeoisie. Always responsible, it conceded that, while quotas were unpleasant, 'in the long term, some mechanism for planning student numbers is clearly required' (NUS, *Tuition fees bulletin*, October 1977). And if this wasn't enough, it diverted NUS members into debating how to make the attacks on overseas students less painful. Referring to a DES circular, it said:

'The statement from 1/77 indicates an area of flexibility, at least in the short term, which makes it possible to win concessions at a local level. The DES is asking that these cutbacks be made but the level of the cutback will depend in part on the ability of COs (Constituent Organisation, Ed) to oppose them.' (*Overseas students and quotas: briefing document and questionnaire*, no date, p1)

Predictably the NUS executive was reduced to bargaining over the level of the cuts instead of opposing each and every one.

None of the political parties in the Left Alliance opposes all immigration controls. In *The proposed change in the grants regulations and the definition of overseas students* - under a subsection headed 'Administrative problems' - the NUS bureaucracy quarrels with the growing state harassment of black students on the grounds that it would 'obviously be a further strain on Local Educational Authorities' (p4). The NUS executive only dislikes controls on overseas students because they cost too much.

The radical nationalism of the NUS leadership offers no alternative to the programme of the ruling class. By conceding that the state has a right to govern the movement and numbers of foreign students, the NUS executive divides and weakens the

student body as a whole. That it views overseas students as a source of export orders and foreign exchange indicates that it is prepared to mount a defence of them only insofar as this is consistent with the interests of capitalism.

### The loyal opposition in the NUS

 The NUS executive is lucky enough to have been blessed with an opposition completely ineffectual in its politics. The two main forces that are critical of its leadership are the Socialist Workers Students Organisation and the Socialist Students Alliance. The first is politically inspired by the Socialist Workers Party (SWP); the second is a front for the International Marxist Group (IMG).

Both of these organisations genuinely want to defend overseas students. Both take the NUS executive to task for its feebleness on this issue and continually demand militant action. But despite their good intentions both are unable to present a way forward different to that proposed by the Left Alliance. Their reprimands for the NUS leadership are made solely on the basis that it is not as aggressive in its tactics as it should be. In 1978, for instance, when the fight against quotas was intensifying, the IMG complained that 'the major problem in organising a response to these racist measures has been the absence of any coordination of activity at an all London level' (*Socialist Challenge*, 2 February 1978, p5). But while coordinated action is always necessary the real problem was and remains the political domination exercised by the Left Alliance/Broad Left over the membership of the NUS. It is not that the NUS executive does not go far enough. Its reactionary politics leads students in entirely the wrong direction.

The opposition in the NUS has become a radical pressure group on the NUS executive. It represents little threat to the Left Alliance.

### THE NATIONAL ORGANISATION OF REVOLUTIONARY COMMUNIST STUDENTS

 The National Organisation of Revolutionary Communist Students (NORCS), the student wing of the Revolutionary Communist Tendency, is committed to an all-out campaign to defend overseas students. The onslaught they face cannot be seen as a narrow economic question. It is part of a consistent chauvinist strategy pursued by the ruling class. In the crisis the bourgeoisie tries to rally all classes round the Union Jack. That way the struggle between labour and capital can be transformed into one in which workers see foreigners as their main enemies.

Up till now the British labour movement has failed to resist state attacks on ethnic minorities. As a result the bourgeoisie feels confident that renewed blows against the black community

will provoke little protest. In factories and colleges alike, the bourgeoisie concentrates its attention on 'foreigners'. Its purpose is to reinforce divisions in the working class, to isolate one section of workers from another and to undermine the strength of the labour movement as a whole.

The defence of overseas students and the struggle against the cuts in higher education can only be pursued from an anti-capitalist perspective. For the National Organisation of Revolutionary Communist Students there are two fundamentally antagonistic interests at issue: the right of the capitalist state to subordinate society to the criterion of profitability and the right of everybody in society to free and decent higher education. It is not our job to make capitalism work; nor is it our job to negotiate how best to tailor higher education to the current rate of profit.

We oppose all forms of discrimination against overseas students because we reject the right of the bourgeois state to establish a category of second-class students. Our attitude to these measures is not only elementary to any solidarity with overseas students but also vital to the struggle against the degrading influence of British chauvinism. Overseas students are the main victims of racial oppression in higher education. But if British students acquiesce to racial discrimination they will find themselves ideologically paralysed when the state turns its fury on them.

Above all, a consistent defence of overseas students will lead to the emergence of a class conscious section of the student body - a section able to show that universal higher education runs counter to capitalist rationality and that the problem is not foreign students but the existing system of production.

To fight the cuts and defend overseas students it will also be necessary to expose the policies of the NUS executive. In its battle to oust the present leadership of the NUS the NORCS will call for resolute opposition to any negotiations over cuts and for a determined campaign against all forms of racial discrimination. In contrast to the NUS executive's plans to make the cuts more palatable we say more, not less, resources for higher education and more, not less, places for overseas students.

A LIVING GRANT FOR ALL

FREE HIGHER EDUCATION FOR ALL

NO QUOTAS OR CONTROLS ON OVERSEAS STUDENTS

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If you are interested in participating in the activities of the National Organisation of Revolutionary Communist Students contact the Revolutionary Communist Society in your college, or write to BM RCT, London WC1V 6XX.

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REVOLUTIONARY COMMUNIST PAMPHLETS  
No 4 RACIAL OPPRESSION: HOW TO FIGHT IT

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The attacks on overseas students are one aspect of the racial oppression meted out by the British state. A previous Revolutionary Communist Pamphlet looked at the oppression of the black community resident in Britain and put forward a strategy of defence against the racist attacks of the state. It argued that this strategy must be based on working class politics: its key elements are workers' defence and the rejection of all immigration controls.

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REVOLUTIONARY COMMUNIST PAPERS  
No 5 THE BATTLE FOR AFRICA

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In this pamphlet we have argued that the attack being launched on overseas students in British colleges arises from the crisis of British imperialism. A recent journal of the Revolutionary Communist Tendency examines in greater detail the attempts of imperialism to resolve the crisis at the expense of the working class. 'The battle for Africa' explains how the imperialist powers are forced to compete ever more fiercely for control of raw material sources, markets and areas for investment. Frank Richards' analysis of the material forces underlying the new scramble for Africa is complemented by articles on imperialist rivalry in Zaire and on the struggle for the liberation of Zimbabwe.

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