

Motion for Imperial College Union to say no to Islamophobia and Denounce 'Student Rights'

Proposed by: Hazem El-Turk, Nida Mahmud

Seconded by: Marissa Lewis

The Union Notes:

1. That *Student Rights* is an organisation claiming to support '*freedom from extremism*'^[1] on UK university campuses and mostly criticises speakers it sees as '*extremists*' who have been invited by Islamic and Palestinian societies^[2, 23]. However, they have in the past expressed opposition to a no-platform policy for the BNP^[3].
2. That *Student Rights* was established in 2009 as a reaction to what it calls '*increasing political extremism*'^[1] on campus – which Director Raheem Kassam is reported to have said is a reference to a wave of peaceful occupations that took place on UK campuses in protest of Israel's bombing of Gaza in Operation Cast Lead^[2].
3. That *Student Rights*' Director Raheem Kassam was also the Executive Director of the controversial right-wing website *The Commentator* until recently^[4] – known for publishing disturbing articles such as this^[5]. He is the founder of *Trending Central*^[6], another controversial right-wing "news" website, and has held various positions in the controversial neoconservative think-tank *The Henry Jackson Society*^[7]. Press reports that he was setting up a UK arm of the Tea Party have so far failed to realise^[8].
4. That *Student Rights* has only recently admitted that it is a project of *The Henry Jackson Society* – a neoconservative think tank whose associate director, Douglas Murray, has argued that "*conditions for Muslims in Europe must be made harder across the board*" and "*all immigration into Europe from Muslim countries must stop*"^[9] – but is not transparent about its origins or funding on its website or materials.
5. That *Student Rights*' most recent report on gender segregation^[10] focusing on Islamic society events has been shown to be deeply flawed in its methodology^[11], and failed in almost every case to determine whether separate seating was enforced or if people were voluntarily choosing to sit where they want to, and presented the phenomenon as '*part of a wider, discriminatory trend*' on campuses^[10] which resulted in headlines in the mainstream media associating separate seating with '*extremism*'^[12].
6. That the *Institute of Race Relations* has noted with concern^[13] that *Student Rights*' work and reporting has been used by far-right groups to target a Muslim student event^[14], which led to reported threats of violence and the event subsequently having to be cancelled by the university^[15].

7. That seven Student Unions – LSE, Goldsmiths, Birkbeck, UCL, Queen Mary, King's and Kingston – have voted in favour of condemning *Student Rights* for its overwhelming focus on Muslim students, the way its approach tends to bypass students themselves and its lack of transparency about its links to *The Henry Jackson Society*^(16, 17, 18, 19).
8. That NUS President 2011-13, Liam Burns said that we need to “*challenge the right wing bile that is spouted by groups like Student Rights and people like Douglas Murray*”; and that NUS VP Welfare 2012-13, Pete Mercer, condemned *Student Rights*' approach as a “*witch-hunt*”^[20].
9. That the grassroots student campaign *Real Student Rights* which aims to expose and oppose *Student Rights* is supported by NUS Black Students Officer (2013-14) Aaron Kiely; ULU Black Students Officer (2013-14) Maham Hashmi-Khan; NUS VP Welfare Officers for 2012-13 and 2013-14 Pete Mercer and Colum McGuire; and ULU President (2012-14) Michael Chessum among others^[21].

The Union Believes:

1. That the claims *Student Rights* makes to the press have often been sensationalist and misleading, designed to grab alarmist headlines about so-called ‘extremism’ on campus, regardless of the impact on students; and *Student Rights*' director Raheem Kassam – who called students who voted for the *Real Student Rights* motion in SUs voicing concerns about his organisation ‘fools’ – continues to show disdain for students^[22].
2. That whether intentional or not, it is deeply damaging that *Student Rights*' approach – which tends to bypass students themselves – should lead to a situation in which far-right groups come onto a campus, creating a climate in which students feel persecuted and threatened and potentially endangering students' welfare.
3. That *Student Rights*' activities fuel Islamophobia, by disproportionately and unfairly targeting Muslim students, contributing to their marginalisation and ostracisation, damaging campus cohesion and feeding into a growing trend of Islamophobic discourse in wider society which should always be challenged.
4. That sexism, racism and homophobia are problems not confined to certain sectors of society and should, like all forms of discrimination, be challenged and opposed without contributing to the marginalisation of particular groups.
5. That *Student Rights* legitimacy is wholly questionable given its limited or non-existent links to actual students, inconsistency on the issue of no-platform policies, creation in reaction to peaceful pro-Palestinian activism, and in particular its lack of transparency about its origins,

funding, and links to *The Henry Jackson Society* – a think tank which has been widely criticised for comments made by its staff perceived to be Islamophobic^[9].

6. That it is not the place of any external organisation – particularly one as non-transparent and dubiously connected as *Student Rights* – to undermine ICU's autonomy or interfere with the co-operation between ICU and College in their work to ensure that pre-existing guidelines regarding external speakers are followed.

The Union Resolves:

1. Imperial College Union release a public statement/open letter addressed to *Student Rights* criticising their lack of transparency, sensationalism, divisive and counter-productive activities and disproportionate preoccupation with Muslim students, and calling on them to drastically change their approach and mentality. The statement should also outline ICU's commitment to challenging Islamophobia along with all other forms of prejudice and discrimination, and should be circulated to students so that they too are aware of the stance and feel reassured if necessary.
2. Imperial College Union to write to Imperial College management, making explicit students' concerns about the effect *Student Rights'* activities have on students' welfare, campus cohesion and freedom of speech on campus, as well as reiterating the Union's desire to maintain its autonomy in determining guidelines on external speakers in co-operation with College, without outside interference.
3. Imperial College Union to maintain ongoing communication with College regarding any developments, including asking College and the Press Office to inform ICU of any future attempts by *Student Rights* to lobby them regarding any student group's activities. In the instance that the latter occurs, ICU is to keep the concerned societies' leadership informed about the situation without delay.

-
- 1) http://www.studentrights.org.uk/about_us
 - 2) <http://www.studentrights.org.uk>
 - 3) <http://content.yudu.com/Library/A1nkge/LondonStudentissue10/resources/index.htm>
 - 4) http://www.thecommentator.com/author/raheem_kassam_executive_editor/6
 - 5) http://www.thecommentator.com/article/2076/why_there_are_no_bomb_shelters_in_gaza
 - 6) <http://www.trendingcentral.com/about/>
 - 7) <http://henryjacksonsociety.org/people/professional-staff/>
 - 8) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01s4sbj/profiles/raheem-kassam>
 - 9) http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/mehdi-hasan/douglas-murray-edl-dodgy-videos-me_b_3675193.html

- 10) http://www.scribd.com/fullscreen/141019975?access_key=key-8swxo6lwrun6wnxkqm9&allow_share=true&view_mode=scroll
- 11) http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/hilary-aked/student-rights-campus-extremism-study_b_3277503.html
- 12) http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/hilary-aked/student-rights-claims-media-mistakes_b_3303703.html
- 13) <http://www.irr.org.uk/news/far-right-targets-islamic-events/>
- 14) <http://casualsunited.wordpress.com/2013/01/04/he-reckons-does-he-i-think-this-retreat-is-gonna-run-into-a-few-problems-edl-casualsunited/>
- 15) <http://www.reading.ac.uk/news-and-events/releases/PR490014.aspx>
- 16) <http://llesu.tumblr.com/post/68783866301/ugm-motion-llesu-says-no-to-islamophobia-and-calls>
- 17) <http://goldsueeducation.wordpress.com/2013/12/18/why-we-wont-work-with-student-rights/>
- 18) <http://www.birkbeckunion.org/representation/2013-14/papers-for-december-2013/CDecember2013MotionStudentRightsandIslamophobia.pdf/view>
- 19) <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/students-unions-hit-back-at-group-monitoring-campus-extremism/2010074.article>
- 20) <http://realstudentrights.wordpress.com/quotes/>
- 21) <http://realstudentrights.wordpress.com/who-supports-rsr-motions-passed/>
- 22) <http://realstudentrights.wordpress.com/2013/12/18/students-branded-fools-by-director-of-student-rights/>
- 23) <http://electronicintifada.net/content/how-front-group-student-rights-undermines-palestine-solidarity/12991>