

UK: students charged rent, threatened with eviction during coronavirus pandemic

Peter Reydt and Laura Tiernan
28 May 2020

Student accommodation companies and private landlords across the UK continued charging rent during the coronavirus lockdown, with many students reporting evictions.

Student Roost, which operates accommodation in 20 cities across the UK, including Belfast, Sheffield, Birmingham and London, wrote to thousands of its tenants on March 25, advising them to “ensure that you are up-to-date with your rent payments up to and including 30 April.”

Students who had moved back home to shelter with family during the pandemic were instructed to notify Student Roost by April 13 of their intention to move out—but were told that rent payments would still be deducted for the month of April.

A few weeks later, students who applied for early release from their rental contracts received a follow-up e-mail stating, “you will need to be moved out by the 1 May” and that “any final charges for damages or additional services, such as removal of belongings and/or disposal of rubbish will be applied after this date.”

Rory Peters, a television production student from City of Glasgow College, was among those affected. He told the WSWS that students in his block “were given the same ultimatum as me: ‘come and travel however many hundreds of miles to get your stuff, illegally, or we’ll bin it.’ All my other flatmates got that e-mail.”

Around 200 students were living at Student Roost’s Buchanan View building in central Glasgow when the pandemic struck, “There were quite a lot of people who had no choice but to stay,” explained Rory, “because they had nowhere else to go. But there were people in the same situation as me, they felt it was safer to go home and stay with their parents.”

Rory moved back to his parents’ home in Inverness just prior to the March 23 lockdown, due to fears over a respiratory illness he had suffered in December.

He said that Student Roost’s actions were illegal and a threat to student safety, “There was one person who came to get their stuff whilst the lockdown was in effect. I guess that person had been strong armed into breaking the law by the student accommodation.”

Students told WSWS they had complained to Student Roost that its actions were illegal.

Student Roost has disputed the students’ claims. A company spokesperson said that Student Roost had operated in accordance with guidance issued by the UK government. It had also been “flexible around collection of belongings”, pointing to an April 16 decision to extend the deadline for collection of belongings to June 1 and a subsequent extension to July 1.

A survey by the National Union of Students (NUS) found that 80 percent of students throughout the UK are worried about how they will cope financially. Even before the pandemic, soaring rents were creating social distress. A survey by Save The Student in 2018 found 44 percent of students struggled to keep up with rent, with 45 percent of respondents saying their mental health suffered as a result.

Rory told the WSWS he pays £500 a month—his entire Student Allowance Supplement payment—for his room in Glasgow. “It’s a tiny room, about 1m x 3m and a bathroom to yourself as well. It’s almost a cupboard, so for the money you pay, it’s ridiculous. We had no hot water for one month.

“It’s just a very basic necessity that people shouldn’t be getting evicted during the pandemic. People shouldn’t be getting evicted at any time and should have homes regardless.”

For thousands of international students, stranded in rented accommodation away from their families, the situation is more dire. “I am a student in the UK and couldn’t travel due to flight suspension on March 19 and been stuck all alone in my uni accommodation for a

whole 3 months,” a student tweeted last week, “please bring me back home to my parents.” Social media has been inundated with messages by students trapped as borders closed and the aviation industry ground to a halt.

Last year, there were more than 400,000 international students in the UK paying tuition fees worth more than £4 billion. Treated as little more than cash cows by universities, many students have literally been left to starve.

The Indian National Student Association (INSA) has so far delivered more than 3,900 food parcels to Indian students left without money for food after their part-time jobs disappeared overnight. International students are not eligible for any form of welfare benefits. In addition to food parcels, INSA has fielded over 2,300 phone calls, 2,800 e-mails, arranged emergency accommodation for 325 students, and has dealt with 65 health-related issues.

Charan Sekhon, chair of Anglo-Indian charity Seva Trust UK, told the *Guardian* it had delivered food parcels to more than 60 Indian students in the Bedford area, saying, “We have had lots of examples where students are actually starving. They haven’t got anything at all to eat.”

This situation has provoked outrage among students. Rent strikes have broken out at universities in Sussex, Warwick, Bristol and Lancaster, with students calling on university authorities to cancel rents and to reimburse students for all third-term rent already paid.

Many of the students’ demands reflect the deep sense of injustice felt more broadly in the working class, including that students be allowed to stay in their accommodation for the duration of the lockdown and to make empty bedrooms available for any students who need them.

An online petition demanding the cancellation of all fees due to the pandemic and strikes by lecturers has gathered 341,407 signatures. The petition notes, “All students should be reimbursed of this year’s tuition fees as universities are now online only due to COVID-19.” More than 1,600 students have signed a petition against Fresh Student Living, which says, “It is categorically unfair and greedy to charge students for rent if they are unable to live in their accommodation.”

Private sector student accommodation has mushroomed in the past decade, largely off the growth of the international student market. Since 2014-2015, the number of students in private sector halls of residence has increased by 36 percent, with the “market” worth an estimated £5.2 billion in 2019—up from £1 billion in 2011—according to JLL UK Capital Living Markets Q4 Report. Some providers, such as Unite Students, have let

students surrender tenancy agreements and are refunding money paid in advance. Others, such as Fresh Student Living—which owns 16,000 studios in the UK and Ireland—have warned that tenants might not be released early from their contracts.

Boris Johnson’s Conservative government has responded to the outpouring of online protests and petitions from students with indifference. A Department for Education spokesperson said it encourages universities and private landlords “to consider students’ interests and fairness in their decisions about rent charges for this period.”

In the midst of a massive social crisis affecting hundreds of thousands of students, the National Union of Students (NUS) does not even mention coronavirus on its homepage. In the news section of its website, the NUS carries an article headlined, “Students can now return to their accommodation to collect belongings,” with a link to the Department for Education’s guidance document for students, issued on behalf of the Johnson government!

The Socialist Equality Party calls for the formation of rank-and-file committees at universities and colleges uniting students and staff. Such committees should formulate demands to protect the health, safety and wellbeing of students and staff, including a living wage for all students during the pandemic. The billions of dollars controlled by private accommodation providers, developers and investors must be seized and used to provide for the needs of students.

We urge domestic and international students affected by the coronavirus pandemic and who wish to share their story, to contact the *World Socialist Web Site*.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact