

Manchester University students tear down 7-foot fence put up around their accommodation blocks

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On Thursday evening, hundreds of students living at the University of Manchester Fallowfield campus protested against their treatment by the university, tearing down fencing which had been erected around the site. That morning, as England entered a new national lockdown, the university had begun to put up seven-foot fences without giving any warning to students.

Most entrances to the campus were blocked, with everybody entering or exiting the campus forced to pass through an ID check. The university attempted to justify these prison-like measures as “a response to a number of concerns... about access by people who are not residents.” The fencing operation reportedly cost £11,000.

The Fallowfield campus houses thousands of students in seven halls of residence in a heavily populated student area a few miles south of Manchester city centre.

Students returned to universities nationally at the start of the term having been promised that everything possible had been done to make campuses “COVID-secure”. They were told that they must not miss out on the “university experience” by staying at home with their families. As soon as they arrived, any promise of a normal experience was shown to be a lie. While students were forced into poorly ventilated lecture halls, classrooms and accommodation, the universities attempted to blame campus outbreaks on parties and other student gatherings, with disciplinary action including fines and expulsion threatened for breaches of social distancing rules.

Campuses have become centres for outbreaks of the virus among students and the surrounding communities, with the University and College Union (UCU) reporting almost 40,000 infections among students and staff in higher education since the start of the academic term. In their irresponsible rush to open campuses in October, many universities had set up no testing infrastructure at

the start of term, allowing the virus to become widespread before students were even aware of it.

When hundreds of students at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) were forced into self-isolation as the virus spread rapidly, they were wrongly told by the university that if they left their accommodation they would be breaking the law. Throughout the UK, students faced similar security measures and intimidation, intended to shift blame for outbreaks from the reckless reopening of campuses to “irresponsible” students. In a move described by the Fire Brigades Union as “dangerous and illegal”, several universities even held shut fire exits with cable ties to prevent students from leaving their accommodation. In blocking most exits to the Fallowfield campus, and restricting swipe-card access to buildings, the University of Manchester has shown the same reckless disregard for fire safety.

The protest on Thursday evening was a response to the fencing-in of students, seen as the last straw by residents fed up with the contemptuous and authoritarian treatment they have faced from university authorities since term began. One sign at the protest read “HMP [Her Majesties Prison] Fallowfield 9k to enter,” pointing to the real reason students were told they should return to campuses: the enormous tuition and accommodation fees the university could extract from them. A student addressing the protesters said, “This morning they put up fences around the entire campus to lock us in. They only decided to do this when they had our money from the rent. This entire term we've been lied to—they promised us a safe campus, they made us come here, yet they continue to blame the students for the spread of the virus.” (A video of the protest can be viewed [here](#).)

Megan, a first-year student, told the BBC that there was no warning from management that the fence was to be put

up literally a few feet from students' rooms. "Morale is really low, we're really disappointed we didn't hear about this beforehand and about the fact it went up without any explanation. They're huge metal barriers, they're connected to one another and there's literally no gaps. There is fencing around the whole outside, we feel like it's completely unnecessary. It makes it feel like we're in a prison."

After the fences were torn down by students, Manchester University stated that they would remove the remaining fences, but that "alternative security measures, including additional security patrols are being put in place."

The draconian move followed the government's announcement that lockdown rules mean students cannot return home to their families during term time. Despite constant calls in the media for campuses and schools to remain open for the sake of students' mental health, periods of self-isolation and constant anxiety over the consequences of becoming infected are extremely harmful to students. One protester said to the BBC, "It's not like living at home, we don't have a sofa, we have a kitchen and plastic chairs... There's no way you can relax there. You're in a completely different city and you do feel lonely there and trapped."

A second-year politics student at the protest commented, "They're ruining our lives after sending out contradictory information, it's against our basic civil rights. People are getting depressed, they sent us back to university, it's well dodgy." A first-year student told the *Mancunion* student newspaper, "We're being treated like prisoners."

Students have begun to take action to defend their own interests as the universities, media and political establishment all insist that young people will not be protected from the virus, with no effective opposition offered from the National Union of Students or the campus education trade unions. The protest of the Manchester students took place in the same week that teachers in France, supported by thousands of pupils, voted to walk out of unsafe schools, and as parents across the UK withdrew their children from schools in action organised by the Boycott Return to Unsafe Schools: Parents United Facebook group.

The Labour Party backs the Johnson government's decision to leave schools and campuses open, with Labour Leader Sir Kier Starmer reiterating on the Andrew Marr Show last Sunday, "Schools must stay open. It's really important. The harm that children are caused by not being

in school is huge, so they must stay open." He declared in August that schools must be reopened "No ifs, no buts, no equivocation."

Students and staff could never have been herded back onto campuses in unsafe conditions were it not for the role of the Universities and Colleges Union. Multiple branches raised serious safety concerns about their institutions in the run-up to campuses reopening but went no further than sending polite letters to vice-chancellors. As infections began to spread like wildfire, UCU members in at least five universities called for strike ballots to be held but the UCU refused to call any coordinated nationwide stoppage, leaving potential industrial action by staff isolated on a local basis.

The National Union of Students (NUS), having done nothing to prevent the reopening of campuses and the imprisoning of students in halls, is now attempting to divert the militant opposition of students into futile appeals to the Tory government. Responding to the action taken by Manchester students, the NUS tweeted, "We need to channel this anger towards the government... This is an opportunity for students and SU [Student Union] officers to join forces and lobby the government together."

This comes after the NUS has already authored open letters and petitions, along with the further and higher education unions, pointing to the atrocious conditions on campus, which have been completely disregarded by the government.

Students and educators opposed to the Tories' policy of "herd immunity" must maintain their independence from these rotten organisations, which have spent decades betraying their members' struggles while incorporating themselves into management structures. The Socialist Equality Party and our youth movement, the International Youth Students for Social Equality, invites all students, university staff and educators to join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, founded to organise and unify the fight against the unsafe return to schools, colleges and universities. Make plans to attend our next online meeting on Saturday November 14 at 2pm.



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