

Students at Manchester University occupy accommodation block as rent strike continues

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13 November 2020

One week after students at the University of Manchester (UoM) tore down fencing erected by management around Fallowfield campus, a group of around 15 taking part in a rent strike began an occupation Thursday morning. They are occupying the Owens Park Tower accommodation block in the large campus in south Manchester.

Despite the hardships the pandemic has inflicted on students stuck in their halls, Manchester University has refused to meet the rent strikers' demands, posted on the @rentstrikeUoM Twitter account on October 22. These are that students be offered no-penalty early release from their tenancy contracts, along with a reduction in rents for the academic year, and better support for students confined to their halls of residence. The rent strikers have posted on social media about the appalling standards of some of the university accommodation, including flooding from burst pipes and lengthy waits for repairs. The UoM website states that rents in Owens Park start from £155 per week.

The *Daily Mail* reported the comments of a first-year student, Ben McGowan, who said that up to 200 other students have refused to pay their full rent for the autumn term. "We want a discount on the rent because of what's happened this term, in terms of that facilities that are meant to be covered by rent, things like common rooms—we've not got access. I think December should be wiped off when we're not in. The entire campus is shut down, the cost of uni upkeep must be down, there's no justification for the full fees." Manchester University, he continued, "has essentially just ignored us. They said they were going to fine us 3 per cent extra per day that we didn't pay the rent. Then they sent this email saying they could kick us off our course, although they can't. We've tried to have a meeting and they've just refused."

The action was taken against a background of increasingly hostile treatment and financial exploitation by university management, who responded to last week's protest against the fencing by increasing security patrols on the campus.

The student group, Student Action for a Fair Educated Response (SAFER), was threatened with police action if

they went ahead with a protest planned for Thursday evening. Despite having been reorganised to meet lockdown restrictions, the protest and occupation were met with a draconian response from university security and police squads.

Security and police blockaded the entrance to the tower to prevent food being delivered to the occupiers, and parked riot vans remained near the peaceful demonstration. As police arrived on campus students chanted "9k for what?" in reference to the exorbitant cost of tuition.

Videos posted on social media show police filming students moving about the campus and seizing one student's music system from an adjacent campus without giving any explanation or receipt, in a clear attempt at intimidation. A comment from legal observers of the police filming footage read, "Police evidence gather[ers] appear to be filming students who are going about their lawful business @rentstrikeUoM. Students are being targeted by large groups of police having being filmed. Keep masks on, stay safe."

The UoM Rent Strike twitter account posted a series of photos of the large-scale police presence sent to the campus to monitor the students. One read, "There's been a lot of police presence inside the Fallowfield campus at University of Manchester today. These are students' homes and it all seems a bit too much. The tactical aid units are really unnecessary."

One of the occupiers, Mattie Shannon, said, "We could see from our windows there were a lot of police—an unreasonable amount of police for a protest that wasn't happening. There were riot vans parked up, from what we saw. We had messages from people saying it had triggered anxiety and worsened their mental health. It scared a lot of students that weren't even going to be part of the protest."

After having sent out misleading emails clearly intended to give the impression that rent strikers were endangering their ability to graduate, the university cut off the internet access to the occupied building on Thursday evening, with compulsory online lectures taking place on Friday morning.

This was a blatant attempt to manufacture a pretext for victimising the students taking part in the occupation, particularly for international students whose visa status can be revoked for "non-engagement" in their course.

Before the internet was restored on Friday, the cut-off was widely denounced on social media, with one of the occupying students tweeting, "For @OfficialUoM to claim to care about students wellbeing and then treat us like this is pathetic".

As is the case with all institutions, UoM is responding to the concerns of students not with the resources necessary to protect their health and wellbeing, but with authoritarian interventions. The university spent £11,000 on the attempt to fence-in the Fallowfield campus and deploy additional security measures against students last week.

After the fences were torn down, the "9K 4 WHAT? MCR" group, organised by students occupying Owens Park Tower, tweeted, "Students have been left behind in this pandemic: Forced into cramped overpriced accommodation, blamed for our government's failings, and paying extortionate uni fees for substandard online learning. We demand more..."

The university's actions are driven by the desire to extract as much money per student as possible, in an increasingly marketised higher education system. In contrast to the refusal to provide adequate care for students, UoM spared no expense in convincing young people to travel to the campus for the new term.

This week it emerged that the University of Manchester, as part of a group of seven prestigious "Russell Group" universities in the North of England, have already helped arrange 31 charter flights for over 7,000 Chinese students—who pay enormously inflated tuition fees of £18,000 to £46,000 per annum—to attend universities in the north next term. Having travelled from a country in which COVID-19 has been almost entirely eradicated, they will be thrust into an environment in which the virus is raging and in which students are living in intolerable conditions—locked down in substandard accommodation with security and police surveilling their every move.

UoM was the first university in England to announce that teaching would take place entirely online after a surge in virus cases among students. Young people had been encouraged to come to the campus for the new term with promises of a COVID-secure environment, the "full university experience" and something resembling usual social activities. But when cases of COVID-19 began to spread rapidly in the universities, many students found themselves stuck in self-isolation away from their families and support networks.

The demands raised in the occupation go beyond the

reduction of rent and release of students from tenancy contracts, and include a call, in a declaration of solidarity between students and university staff, for no staff redundancies to be made during the pandemic. In this struggle, the students are in conflict with the University and College Union (UCU) leadership who at a growing number of institutions are collaborating in the imposition of job losses—as long as they are not classified as "compulsory".

The Manchester University Students Union has entered into talks with university management about the rent strike and occupation but made no public statement about the content of these discussions. Instead of mobilising other students in support of the Owens Tower protest and demanding a non-negotiable end to the atrocious conditions that have sparked it, the local National Union of Students (NUS) tweeted, "Solidarity to students occupying Owens Park Tower. Your SU officers are meeting with university leaders daily to negotiate the demands our students have presented as well as a host of other things which have been prioritised by many students".

The NUS responded to last week's anti-fence protest at Manchester by describing it as "an opportunity for students and SU [Student Union] officers to join forces and lobby the government together".

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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