Amid COVID-19 disaster on university campuses, students must build campus safety committees!

International Youth and Students for Social Equality (UK)
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The reopening of universities this term has been a disaster, orchestrated by Boris Johnson's Tory government, Sir Keir Starmer's Labour Party and the university administrations.

Students have paid thousands in fees to be exposed to a high risk of infection with COVID-19, placed under draconian quarantines, and delivered highly disrupted courses. They are being treated as little more than cash cows for a marketised higher education system and scapegoats for a programme of "herd immunity".

On September 9, Johnson declared in a national press briefing, "opening universities is critical". A day later, government guidance for higher education claimed "there is no scientific basis that face-to-face teaching is unsafe as long as COVID-secure plans are in place." This lie was used to justify over a million students and university workers returning to campus later that month. The government's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) had warned just six days earlier that it was "highly likely that there will be significant outbreaks" in universities, with a "significant risk" that a mass return to the campuses "could amplify local and national transmission".

The Labour Party supported the government's policy, lamely urging Johnson's government to present a "credible plan" to "ensure that universities are able to reopen safely."

Universities promised "COVID-secure" environments and a practically normal university experience. Reports emerged of staff who raised safety concerns being bullied by their employers into accepting face-to-face teaching.

Within the first weeks of term, infections surged at campus after campus across the country. University infections now stand at over 47,000, including over 900 staff—both are likely underestimates. Some students became seriously ill, with several in Manchester ending up in intensive care. Since coronavirus is frequently asymptomatic in younger people and no screening was in place, many students unwittingly transmitted the virus into local communities, contributing to a national resurgence of the pandemic.

Whole accommodation blocks were eventually quarantined, leaving students forced to rely on online-only teaching after all—while stuck in cramped and uncomfortable conditions. At several institutions, the promise of in-person teaching evaporated. In early October, the University of Manchester, Manchester Metropolitan University, and Newcastle, Northumbria, and Sheffield universities were forced to move almost all teaching online for weeks.

The university administrations and the government, with the ready help of the corporate media, blamed the inevitable consequences of their own policy on "irresponsible" students. This prepared the way for an increasingly draconian response to the unfolding infections crisis. Students were threatened with expulsions, suspensions and hundreds of pounds worth of fines for breaches of coronavirus guidelines. Pictures circulated on social media of blocked fire exits to student accommodation, including one secured with a cable tie.

These repressive actions were epitomised by events this month at the University of Manchester. On the morning of November 5, students in the university's Fallowfield campus woke to find 7-foot metal fencing had been erected around their accommodation. After students tore down the fences in protest that evening, the university vowed to replace them with "additional security patrols".

These were quickly put to use. On November 12, university security and Manchester police carried out an extraordinarily heavy-handed operation at a student occupation and rent protest held in Owens Park Tower, also on the Fallowfield campus. Police swarmed the area, parking riot vans next to the small and peaceful protest, and blocked food deliveries to the occupiers. Students were filmed moving around the campus. A black student, 19-year-old Zac Adan, was pinned to a wall and told he "look[ed] like a drug dealer."

Universities' enthusiasm for policing their students is in marked contrast to their concern for their wellbeing. Some students forced to quarantine have gone days without their administrations providing meals. Many have received low-quality, even out-of-date food or not had their dietary requirements met.

Several institutions shamelessly treated this situation as another opportunity to exploit their students by charging exorbitant prices for food packages. Lancaster University charged £17.95 a day for meals estimated to cost £4. Queens University Belfast charged £210 for the fortnight of quarantine for items costing £55.

Entirely inadequate care has been paid to students' mental health, placed under severe strain by these uncertain and isolating conditions at an already stressful time of life. Eight students were reported have killed themselves in October, including Fin Kitson

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on October 8, who had been living at the Manchester Fallowfield campus.

The cause of this catastrophe is not fundamentally the pandemic, but the herd immunity policy and the marketised system of higher education which blocked any rational response to the threat of the virus. Successive Labour and Conservative governments have created a system which sets universities against each other in fierce competition for student fee income and private investment.

The consequences have already been made clear in the assault on academic staff pensions, the explosion of insecure contracts in the sector, the hyper-exploitation of cleaners and security guards, and ballooning class sizes and student rents. As the pandemic spread, universities refused to lose out to their competitors by moving to online instruction, which would have cut off accommodation income, spurred demands for a reduction in tuition fees and possibly reduced student intake. Instead, students were sold the lie of "COVID-secure" campuses to secure their attendance and full payment of fees, then abandoned.

Universities' callous treatment of international students is the most outrageous example of this agenda. These students are worth at least £7 billion in fees alone to UK universities each year—thanks to enormous annual tuition that can run into the tens of thousands—and intense efforts were made to fly students from abroad onto campus. Thousands came from China, a country where the virus has been largely brought under control, to the north of England, with an infection rate of around 500 per 100,000.

Forcing students back to university towns, where they play an important economic role, was also an essential element of the ruling class' plan to force the population to "learn to live with the virus". That is, to accept thousands of extra deaths as a price for keeping the economy open and corporate profits flowing.

No opposition was organised against the criminal reopening of the campuses by either the University and College Union (UCU) or the National Union of Students (NUS), despite both making statements about the grave dangers. UCU General Secretary Jo Grady even went as far as warning, in August, that universities could become "the care homes of any second wave of COVID" and that they were "sleepwalking into disaster."

Since the reopening of universities, the UCU and NUS have channelled the anger of their members into ineffectual appeals to university administrations and the government. The UCU intervened to hold backroom negotiations with the employers, in order to prevent industrial action over safety concerns or to protect jobs.

Students and university workers have repeatedly shown willingness to fight, organising rent strikes and protests against unfair fees and treatment and voting for industrial action. This opposition can only be carried forward and expanded in a struggle against the entire marketised system of higher education and in opposition to the betrays of the UCU and NUS. The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) calls on students to build campus safety committees, in alliance with lecturers and other university workers and independent of the unions.

The first task of these committees will be to organise the safe return home of students. No confidence can be placed in the government or the university administrations to achieve this. Under the government's plans, students are set to be sent home in a one-week period from December 3, after receiving a negative COVID test. No details of how this will work have been made available, either nationally or at individual institutions.

Campus safety committees must then ensure, with the aid of scientists and medical experts, that there is no return to colleges and universities until the virus is genuinely suppressed and proper safety measures have been implemented. Johnson is ending the partial one-month lockdown on December 2 and allowing multiple households to meet over Christmas, preparing a third devastating wave of the virus in the New Year. Students must not become vectors, and be put at risk themselves, of any resurgence. A refusal to return to campus must be organised as part of a struggle alongside workers to shut down non-essential production and fight for the necessary lockdown measures—with full support to all workers and small businesses affected.

Until face-to-face teaching can resume, high-quality online learning must be provided, including asynchronous online lectures, a timetable of online contact hours suitable for all time-zones, arrangements between universities to share lab time, and the allocation of the massive resources and staffing levels required to make this possible.

This programme requires the wholesale dismantling of the market system and the role of private finance in higher education. Tuition fees must be abolished, and student debt cancelled. A cost of living grant must be reintroduced and substantially increased to cover all living costs. The IYSSE demands an end to all scapegoating and victimisation of students and the return of all fees paid this term.

A fight for these demands is inseparable from a broader struggle for socialism by the working class. The obscene fortunes of the super-rich must be expropriated and used to fund the provision of social needs, including the right to a full and free education.

We call on all who agree with our programme to join the IYSSE today and to attend the next meeting, on Saturday, November 28 at 2pm, of the Educators Rank-and File Committee, established by the Socialist Equality Party.

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