

Student rent strikes spread across UK universities

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Thousands of students across the UK are organising rent strikes protesting their treatment by Boris Johnson's government and university authorities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

After students arrived at their campuses in October, all promises of a safe re-opening and a normal university experience were exposed as lies. The virus infected tens of thousands and forced many more into self-isolation with woefully inadequate support.

Students correctly concluded they had been brought to campuses not for their own educational benefit, but as “cash cows” for universities desperate to retain the enormous incomes they collect in tuition fees and rent. They are demanding lower rents, better accommodation conditions, improved food boxes for quarantining students, mental health check-ins, transparency and accountability of security services policing lockdowns, and no redundancies for university staff.

The largest action is at the University of Bristol, where over 1,400 students are taking part in a rent strike that began in October, and which will continue into the new term in January. Strikers have defied threats from the university, including an email to those withholding their rent, warning, “your faculty will soon be notified of this debt and your enrolment status may be affected”. Public condemnation forced the university to retract a further despicable announcement that unpaid rent would be deducted from the bursaries of students who receive financial support.

Despite these heavy-handed tactics, student organisers have refused to end the rent strike until the university meets demands for a 30 percent rent reduction for the entire year, early release from accommodation contracts and better mental health support. Bristol university has so far been forced to grant a full 10-day rebate for the days up to December 18, and a 30 percent reduction for the period between December 19 and early February.

Around 600 students are pledged to join an ongoing rent strike at the University of Manchester in January. The strike has been accompanied by protests against authoritarian

security measures taken by the university. On November 5, students tore down steel fencing erected by the university around its Fallowfield campus without warning. A week later, they held another protest in the face of police and security intimidation and occupied the Owens Park Tower accommodation block at the Fallowfield campus in support of the rent strikers.

The occupiers demanded that the university agree to cut rents and commit to making no staff redundancies during the pandemic, and that university management meet with students to discuss their demands. During the two weeks of the occupation, the university refused to meet with the occupiers, escalating instead its punitive measures, including cutting off internet access in the tower. After students refused to be cowed, the university was forced to offer a 30 percent reduction in the term's rent, worth £4 million.

The University of Sheffield has also agreed to refund rent paid in the last two weeks of term, following another student campaign, to the tune of £1 million.

These successes have given a spur to rent strikes across the UK, with thousands now participating in Sussex, Oxford, Cambridge, Edinburgh, Nottingham, and universities across London. Students are joining forces across campuses. Luke, a Goldsmiths University of London student taking part in the rent strike, told LBC radio: “We had a lot of calls with Bristol rent strike organisers, really listening in to their tactics. They told us the university won't really listen to you at first, they'll give you little crumbs and little meetings, but you're going to have to take more action.”

Manchester organisers discussed actions by students in the UK at a meeting for University of Columbia tuition strikers in the US, which involves over 2,500 students.

Students also marched from Owens Park in the student area to St Peters Square in the city centre to demand the resignation of the University of Manchester's Vice-Chancellor, Dame Nancy Rothwell. She had responded in the *Manchester Evening News* to questions about why students had been invited back to campuses by mentioning her “responsibility... to make sure the University of

Manchester is financially sustainable”, and in an interview on BBC’s *Newsnight* lied about having apologised to a student who the victim of racial profiling by university security staff.

Rent strikers in the UK have also received statements of support from university staff. In November, 50 academics at Bristol signed an open letter supporting the rent strikers’ demands. Several staff members at Manchester went to the Fallowfield campus to read a statement declaring, “We are with you. We are here for you.”

The concessions won so far in the rent strikes and the broad support they have received are important developments but, as the students involved have said themselves, there is much further to go. Only three universities have offered partial reductions, largely confined to periods in which students will not be using their accommodation due to the early return home for Christmas and planned staggered return to the campuses in the New Year.

The students confront major political issues. Responding to the Covid crisis at universities and the appalling treatment and exploitation of students, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) explained in a statement issued last month, “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.”

Overtaking these obstacles requires extending the struggle across the university system and into the working class. Students and staff must also establish their complete independence from the union bureaucracies.

It is no coincidence that the fight against the pandemic and its consequences has developed rapidly among students, who have weak ties to the trade unions and the Labour Party, and among whom their “official” representatives in the National Union of Students enjoy no credibility. The campus trade unions have done little but offer verbal support for the students’ actions, while blocking any struggle by their own members, including strikes and walkouts, against the unsafe campus re-openings and management demands for massive staff and funding cuts.

Events at the University of Manchester are instructive. When students in Fallowfield tore down the fencing around their campus—in a protest organised independently of the Manchester Students Union (SU)—the NUS posted an empty message of solidarity and declared it “an opportunity for students and SU officers to join forces and lobby the government together.”

While University of Manchester management was refusing to talk to occupiers of the tower, the SU tweeted that they were “meeting with university leaders daily to negotiate the

demands our students have presented”, all behind closed doors. The organisers of the rent strike replied that “meeting with the university but not telling us the content is not the support that we were expecting from our SU.”

Five days after the Owens Park Tower occupation began, the SU endorsed an “accommodation pledge” from the university, a mere 5 percent reduction in rent for the year, announced without even consulting rent strikers. The occupiers rejected this insulting offer and denounced the university for refusing to negotiate with them directly. They remained in the tower for more than another week until the 30 percent rent reduction for the term was offered. At this point, the SU issued yet another statement claiming credit for the victory won by the rent strike and tower occupation, making only an oblique reference to the “student campaigning groups” which had actually fought for the rebate.

The fight of students and university staff for safe conditions and a university system which prioritises wellbeing and education over profits requires the formation of rank-and-file campus safety and action committees, from which the treacherous representatives of the NUS and other unions are barred. These committees will ensure students are not once again forced back into conditions which guarantee they will be infected or placed in self-isolation and will fight for the resources necessary to suppress the virus and provide high-quality online learning and student support until a safe return to campuses is possible.

The IYSSE insists that “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 urge all students who agree with this programme to contact the International Youth and Students for Social Equality and to join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact