

Student rent strikers speak out at UK universities

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Students across the UK are organising rent strikes in opposition to their treatment during the coronavirus pandemic. Several ongoing and planned actions at specific universities are due to come together in a nationally organised strike in January. The World Socialist Web Site spoke with representatives of the rent strikes at the University of London (UoL) and Goldsmiths University earlier this month.

Simon (name changed at their request to preserve anonymity) explained that the UoL rent strike “emerged because of the pandemic. I don't think it would have occurred without the pandemic, but there are plenty of issues that are unrelated to the pandemic. First, we are charged some of the highest student rent in the country. We pay up to £10,000 a year in rent for what is essentially a small room and shared toilets.

“Most of us haven't had in person classes, and the University hasn't been providing adequate mental health support, quarantine support, and has been threatening students with eviction in the middle of a pandemic.”

The strike currently has “over 50 people” participating and the organisers are “trying to get 100 people signed up at least... we've got until the end of January to sign up people.”

Asked whether the students participating felt they had been treated as “cash cows”, Simon replied, “Yeah, absolutely. Over the last 10 years since tuition fees tripled—first of all introduced and then when they were tripled in 2010-2012—universities have become highly reliant on student rent and on student fees because government support has really fallen away over the last few years.

“So even in times of pandemic, when there's an economic crisis, universities still try and extract as much profit and money from students, who are often struggling themselves and unable to pay. In normal times, 60 percent of students need to work alongside their studies for financial reasons, then one in seven students have to work full time to pay the bills. During a pandemic, when unemployment is high, many students can't find jobs and are really struggling to make ends meet...

“There are two sides to this. The first is that the university is not prioritizing its students and choosing instead to pay exorbitantly high salaries to senior management with vice chancellors earning up to half a million pounds a year. But the other side of things is that the funding structure has meant that universities really don't have a lot of choice not to try and extract as much profit and money as possible from apprenticeships, from their students, because central government funding has just fallen away so much over the last two years.

“So, there are really two issues we're trying to get at. First is that the universities treated us pretty poorly and they've been insensitive to students' needs and even to mental health. But also we are trying to challenge the overall funding structure of universities in the UK.”

The university term ended early this year to manage students' return home from the campuses. Most were given a one-week window to receive a negative coronavirus test and return home. Simon explained, “There is some testing going on, which is good, but there's an issue because we're still having to pay rent over the time, so we're still paying rent for when we're not even using our rooms. Which is why we're demanding no penalty contract releases from our contracts and the ability for international students to go home to their country to study or to self-isolate without having to continue paying rent for a room they're not using.”

Student rent strikers are in contact with university cleaners, who are “very, very supportive of the strike and are looking to support us in any way they can, because the way that staff is often treated and the way that cleaners have been treated during the pandemic has been awful, with many redundancies. They got rid of overtime pay and they've cut a lot of hours a month.”

Speaking on the broader situation in the UK, Simon said, “Clearly the government's response to the pandemic has been pretty awful. We have the worst recession in Europe and the highest death toll in Europe. And clearly the ongoing lockdowns that have resulted from that have had a

significant impact on the higher education sector, just struggling to make ends meet because of the funding structure and how they are so reliant on students for profit, for money.

“So, it has had a significant impact on universities, and I would say this is an indirect result of the government’s response to the pandemic. But also the way that they continue to refuse to bail out the higher education sector is shameful. Our universities are some of the most important institutions that we have in this country and they’re being neglected by the government.”

Our reporter raised the tuition strike at Columbia University in the United States as an example of the common issues facing students internationally and asked if the UoL campaign had a message for the strikers in the US. “Absolutely, absolutely. We are in contact with the Columbia students. They are absolutely brilliant. We are in admiration of what they’ve managed to achieve. Getting 2500 students on a tuition fee strike, is incredible. Especially given the level of tuition over there which is something like £75,000 for Columbia I think.”

The WSWS spoke with Megan, a rent striker at Goldsmiths University in South London. She explained the difficult conditions faced by students in the last term:

“Our quality of learning has been hugely impacted by WiFi struggles in accommodation as well as the lack of in-person teaching. It’s very hard to complete work and attend lectures when you have no separation between work life and home life and it’s all being done in the same space/environment. Living conditions is another huge issue for us, we’re paying £177+ a week for our rooms where we’ve had problems with heating, hot water, kitchen appliances, black mould, etc. We also have received some photos from students who first moved into their rooms with urine stains all over the bathroom door, rooms having been used and not tidied, rotting bathroom doors and much more.

“Our wellbeing team is hugely underfunded and has nowhere near enough staff for the number of students they have to cater to. They are very hard to get in touch with and people are waiting weeks to be told they can only have 6 sessions but this has now decreased to 4! It’s just not enough for students at university in the midst of a global pandemic, we need more support.

“Communication from Goldsmiths has been very poor in regards to rules and Covid cases, we were finding out which flats had Covid from accommodation group chats and it was then revealed that the university hadn’t even told maintenance or cleaning staff, meaning they were unknowingly going into work environments which was dangerous to them and their family, the majority of our cleaning staff are also BAME.”

Students felt “lied to”, Megan explained. “We were brought to university under false pretences and promised a safe and integrated learning experience and we were told that it was safe for us to move into student halls which clearly isn’t true. We are paying extortionate amounts to live in accommodation when we could’ve done our learning from home as a huge majority of it is online anyway.

“We were brought here purely so they could take our money and we have not received anything remotely similar to the integrated learning experience we were promised. I personally haven’t been to a single lecture in person.”

Megan added, “I believe that the Covid crisis in universities is not only due to the universities themselves but also due to the mishaps in the way the government handled the crisis. In Loring Hall [at Goldsmiths] I believe we technically had herd immunity leading up to Christmas due to the sheer number of cases we had at one point and the amount of people who were then immune until we come back after Christmas.

“I think the whole idea of us having a fairly ‘normal’ university experience was complete and utter lies. They knew this was never going to work and they were so underprepared for us coming which not only puts us students at risk but also the wider community.”

The Goldsmiths rent strike was set up at the instigation of the university’s students’ union, which Megan praised. The strikers have also received “so much support from workers at the university, it’s been amazing! We have seen a huge amount of support from lecturers and also the cleaners who have so kindly offered to help and support us in any way possible. Security staff have also been amazing; when we did our banner drop a member of security practically applauded us and said we were doing good work which is so encouraging to see.”

Speaking on the University of Columbia tuition strike and what she thought of international student action, Megan said, “Unified student action does work; I’m in a chat with a number of strikers from multiple universities all calling for change. This isn’t an isolated problem, it’s a national and international problem and it’s amazing to see our work influence that of others! All of us who are a part of the rent strike would be more than happy to give them a hand and share our experiences to make their strike that little bit easier!”



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