15,000 students involved in rent strikes in 55 UK universities

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UK students are engaged in the largest rent strike in decades, in protest against their mistreatment and exploitation throughout the pandemic. There are currently strikes ongoing in at least 55 universities, with over 15,000 students nationwide now signed up to withhold their next rent payment and new rent strikes starting almost daily.

The strike wave began last term, after the Conservative government encouraged students to travel from all over the country, and the world, to gather in universities, as part of its criminal programme of reopening all education settings and the economy. Inevitably, huge outbreaks of COVID-19 ripped through campuses, forcing thousands of students to self-isolate.

More and more universities had to switch to fully online learning. However, this was done on an ad-hoc basis, resulting in a significant deterioration in the quality of education, which was plagued by issues such as Wi-Fi problems, lack of equipment to attend online classes and lack of contact with lecturers.

University administrations also failed to provide adequate mental health or quarantine support, with reports of some students going hungry as they were not allowed to leave their accommodation and were only provided one meagre meal a day. Several universities took the confinement of their students as an opportunity for profiteering, charging those self-isolating extortionate amounts for low-quality food packages.

The contempt with which students were treated was summed up at the University of Manchester, where metal fencing was erected around student residences in the middle of the night and a student occupation was met with a mob-handed police response.

Rent strikes at dozens of universities began to swell, as students refused to pay full accommodation fees for such reduced services and abusive treatment. Actions at Bristol University and the University of Manchester won rent rebates of 30 percent, in Manchester's case for the whole first term, inspiring strike plans at dozens of other universities.

Most groups have a similar set of demands, including a reduction in rent of between 30 and 50 percent, no repercussions for rent strikers, and better wellbeing and mental health support plans for students. Many rent strike movements have established links of solidarity between staff and students, demanding a no-redundancies policy for all staff and PhD students.

A huge spur was given to the strikes by the government's guidance, issued in the New Year as part of the national lockdown, telling students not to travel to their universities. This meant that students were paying rent for rooms that they are now instructed not to use, as their contracts usually last for 12 months. No provisions were made to suspend or refund students' costs. The government provided just £20 million in additional "hardship funds" to universities.

Many students have been thrown into a grave financial crisis as a result. The lockdown has necessarily closed the hospitality and retail sectors in which young people generally find employment to pay their way through university.

This has had a particularly sharp effect on international students from poorer backgrounds, who need to work to pay their exorbitant international fees—of around £14,000 to £20,000 a year—as well as their rent. A joint survey of international students by the Migrants Right Network and Unis Resist Border Controls found that more than half said they were destitute or at risk of becoming so. The Newham Community Project in East London is providing food packages to 1,300 students every week.

Facing mass opposition, universities and private student accommodation providers have offered a patchwork of rebates and single payments of varying sizes. Some, like Cambridge, University College London and Bristol, have

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offered a full rebate for the weeks students are forced to stay at home. However, these offers frequently come with big caveats attached. Bristol's offer, for example, does not apply to students who came back to halls this month, even if only for one night, to collect their belongings.

Other institutions have provided partial refunds or a fixed payment. Queen Mary University of London is offering a 30 percent reduction for the term, while Salford University and Lancaster University are providing "good will" payments of £1,200 and £400 to each student.

Private accommodation provider Unite Student has offered a 50 percent reduction for the four weeks up to February 14 and Student Roost has offered a refund for six weeks' worth of rent, both of which must be applied for to be received. Two other private providers of student accommodation, Campus Living Villages and Sanctuary Students, told the *Financial Times* that they would continue to charge full fees.

This amounts to a fraction of the rents due to be paid this term. The fact that students are still being forced to hand over millions of pounds for rooms they cannot use is the most glaring expression to date of their exploitation by a thoroughly marketised system of higher education.

Since the higher education "reforms" started by the 1997 Labour government, and accelerated since 2010, universities have become businesses—more interested in squeezing profits from students, and especially international students—than providing high quality education. Since most university funding now comes from student fees and rent, universities have been thrown into fierce competition with each other for student numbers and become increasingly entangled with big finance, private investors and property developers.

The student accommodation market alone is valued at more than £50 billion in the UK. Last February, the multi-trillion-dollar investment management firm Blackstone bought IQ Student Accommodation from giant US investment bank Goldman Sachs for £4.7 billion, in the largest private real estate transaction in the UK to that point.

Before Christmas, universities kept their incomes flowing by working with the government to sell the myth that students could gather together at "COVID-secure" campuses across the country, in the middle of a pandemic, with no risk of mass infection. The resulting concentration of students on campus was a danger not just to students themselves, but to their families and the wider community. The promises of a normal university experience quickly fell to pieces.

As the pandemic reached new and devastating heights with the start of the second term in the New Year, the lie of a safe return to the campuses became completely untenable and the exploitation naked. There is not even the pretence of a normal university experience to cover for the continued charging of fees and rent.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) supports the rent strikes. We fully back their expansion and demand the full refund of all tuition fees and rent paid for this academic year, to be funded from the pandemic profits of the major corporations and the billions handed to big business and banks by the government which must be reclaimed.

This would be the first step in the necessary struggle to dismantle the marketised system of higher education and establish a fully funded system of free, high-quality university education for all. Only then will students stop being treated as cash cows.

Such a struggle must be waged entirely independently of the National Union of Students (NUS) which did nothing to organise the rent strikes, only supporting them after the fact—with a few union officials appearing at some of the strikers' online rallies. They have confined their action to statements and petitions calling on the government to act. After the mass protests against the tripling of tuition fees in 2010, the NUS entirely adapted itself to the marketised regime.

Students must instead build rank-and-file committees in all universities—together with university workers—based on a socialist programme for the defence of education as a universal right. All those who agree with this programme should contact the IYSSE today.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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