

Students occupy four universities in Britain as rent strikes continue

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Students at four universities in Manchester, Sheffield and Nottingham began occupying campus buildings last week in protest over their treatment as "cash cows".

The protests follow the return of millions of students to university campuses across the UK. Despite even the Johnson government's reckless "roadmap" for reopening the economy stating that higher education providers should not reopen for in-person teaching before May 17, many universities have encouraged students to travel across the country to return to rented halls.

Office for National Statistics data for March found that three quarters of students had already returned to the same accommodation they had been using in the previous term. The university administrations, backed by the media, have mounted a propaganda campaign to insist all students return as soon as possible. In April, the University of Portsmouth even produced a template letter for its students to send to MPs, which said the closure of campuses "hurts students, benefits no one and is inconsistent with other government decisions."

Students know the main thing "hurt" by their remaining at home is the universities' and property companies' ability to collect their exorbitant rent. Thousands of students at around 50 universities have joined rent strikes since January 2020, demanding refunds on the rent they have been paying for halls they could not even access due to travel restrictions, or in which they were forced to self-isolate after being drawn to campuses by lies about "Covid-secure" conditions.

These strikes secured partial refunds and concessions at many universities, with the University of Sheffield granting refunds of 30 percent to students who could not access their halls, and the University of Manchester conceding a 30 percent rent reduction for the first term after students occupied a building on the Fallowfield campus in December. However, the concessions universities made were limited.

The University of Sheffield offered a refund of just two weeks rent to students on practical courses, such as medicine, who had no choice but to return. The refund in Manchester was not extended to the second term.

The universities refusal to offer any further concessions, has sparked the new round of occupations at the University of Nottingham, the University of Sheffield and Sheffield Hallam University, and University of Manchester.

On April 22, Manchester students occupied the Samuel Alexander building containing the School of Arts, Languages of Cultures, in support of the demand for a 30 percent rent rebate for the second term, a cash rebate of £1,500 for all students, and that the university's senior management team be elected by staff and students. They are demanding the university withdraw the threat of compulsory redundancies for library staff, and to end police patrols on the Fallowfield campus.

Students at Sheffield Hallam have occupied the Cantor building. Despite paying in some cases up to £170 per week in rent, many Hallam students complain of poor and squalid living conditions. They have reported mice and rat infestations and leaking sewage and being left without hot meals or working toilets. Students at the University of Sheffield, occupying the Arts Tower building, have reported being charged £30 for poor food parcels, with students who requested vegetarian food given meat.

Students at the Sheffield universities and at Manchester also report being intimidated by security guards entering private dorms and police entering dorms without a warrant. Police violence and intimidation has been a major issue facing students during the pandemic. Students on the University of Manchester Fallowfield campus have been subject to numerous police and security measures since returning in September, including an incident of racial profiling of a student by university security, and an incident where the university put up steel fencing around

the site and forced students to travel through a security checkpoint.

Two of the student protestors at Sheffield Hallam were victims of brutality by university security, having been pinned against the floor at the Cantor building occupation.

When the rent strikes began in January, many of the organisers declared their intention not just to fight for rent refunds, but against the system of marketisation in higher education, which has transformed universities into profit-making businesses. Students are treated primarily as customers, or sources of income, with ever-increasing targets set for university "recruitment" teams, particularly aimed at international students, who pay inflated fees. The occupations and rent strikes show that young people are looking for a way to wage a struggle for basic demands the profit-driven universities refuse to meet.

In a meeting hosted by the pseudo-left People's Assembly on Wednesday evening, addressed by University and College Union (UCU) General Secretary Jo Grady and National Union of Students (NUS) President Larissa Kennedy, both insisted students must stop talking about "marketisation".

Grady falsified the record of the UCU, both over its role in allowing the government to open campuses during the pandemic, and in its recent strikes against the undermining of the Universities Superannuation (pension) Scheme (USS). Her claim that the UCU "took a strident position" in opposing campus reopenings at the start of the academic year in reality consisted only of appeals to university managements and open letters to the Conservative government regarding safety concerns—but with no call for industrial action by its 130,000 members.

Just as dishonest was her claim that "In 2018 student occupations were central in getting UCU members progressive good deals in the USS strike." The strikes to defend the pension scheme in 2018 ended with a miserable sellout, with the employers' offering up a promise to listen to the report of a "Joint Expert Panel," the findings of which were promptly ignored.

One of the "progressive good deals" put to the membership in March 2018 was described by Grady herself as "a needless capitulation." She was not union leader at the time and knew that voting against the sellout deal would win her backing in a leadership contest. She was elected after her predecessor, Sally Hunt, was ousted by members following the 2018 USS sellout. Her current apologetics confirm that the role of the UCU as a tool of management in imposing unsafe working conditions and cuts in pay, terms, conditions and jobs remains

unchanged.

Grady put forward a "friendly suggestion" that although it was clear students were receiving less contact time due to the burden of marketisation on staff resources, "when we're trying to tell people that, it doesn't really make sense to them". The NUS sang from the same hymn sheet, with Kennedy asking, "We're here talking about 'marketisation'—what average student do you know that's talking about marketisation? I'm so sorry, like, I love you folks, but nobody cares."

The real concern of the UCU and NUS is that any criticisms of privatisation threatens their lucrative role as part of the university governance structure.

In contrast, most students speaking from the occupations traced the source of their mistreatment to the market system now established in higher education, and expressed opposition to the reckless reopening of campuses in the midst of a pandemic.

A speaker from the University of Sheffield occupation echoed comments he had made to the *Tab* web site, describing the local student's union as "a puppet of the university". The Manchester students recalled the role of their students' union during the previous occupation, which attempted to sell out the struggle for a mere five percent rent refund.

To take their struggle forward, students must unite with education workers throughout the sector in a joint offensive. A successful struggle cannot be conducted through the NUS or education unions that have strangled every fight of student and education workers over decades.

The struggle of students must be joined up with that of lecturers, other educators such as school teachers, and the rest of the working class to demand protection from the pandemic and a decent education and working conditions for all and to prepare for a political general strike against the government. Those students looking to wage this struggle will find an instrument to do so through the Educators Rank -and-File Safety Committee and the newly announced International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File-Committees.



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