

Student protest at Howard University over abysmal living conditions enters fourth week

Dominic Gustavo
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The protest by students at Howard University in Washington, DC entered its fourth week on Tuesday, with as many as 50 students continuing to occupy the Blackburn University Center while dozens more camped out in tents outside.

The occupation at the “crown jewel” of historically black colleges and universities (HBCU) was launched to protest abysmal living conditions—students complained of mold growing in their dorms, mice, cockroach and flea infestations and poor plumbing and ventilation—as well as the lack of student and faculty representation on the university board of trustees, among other grievances.

Student protesters have advanced four main demands: an open town hall meeting with university president Wayne A.I. Frederick and other administrators; the restoration of student, alumni and faculty representation on the board of trustees; a meeting with administrators to discuss housing conditions; and finally, academic and legal immunity for protesters.

Rising tuition costs—which now exceed \$28,000 annually, up from just over \$27,000 last year—add insult to injury, as students pay more to live in deplorable conditions. On October 21, in apparent response to this, the university announced that \$11 million in pandemic-relief funding would be distributed to students facing financial difficulties. This would amount to an average of \$834 per student, an absolute pittance.

Last week, Frederick released an open letter, his first public commentary on the protests, in which he demanded an end to the student occupation. “Howard University’s proud tradition of student protest has never been—and can never be—invoked as a justification for tactics that harm our students,” said Frederick, apparently unaware that the conditions inside the dorms had provoked the uproar.

“The current occupation of the Armour J. Blackburn Center is a departure from past norms,” the university president declared. Frederick claimed there was a “distinct difference between peaceful protest and freedom of expression and the occupation of a University building that impedes operations and access to essential services and creates health and safety risks... The occupation of the Blackburn center must end.”

He added that he was “committed to expanded regular meetings with student leaders” and that his team was prepared to “deliver rapid and responsive care to the living and learning conditions of our students.” Frederick failed to provide any hint of concrete steps that had been taken to address students’ concerns.

Student protesters expressed hostility and defiance to Frederick’s letter. Howard freshman Autumn Hester told the *Washington Post* that she had reported mold growing in her dorm room, but she had not been transferred to another dorm. Hester explained that the building occupation was necessary to get the school’s attention: “The moment we leave, we lose leverage... We’re staying put, no matter what he says.”

On October 26, Frederick and other university officials met with student leaders. The student-run university newspaper the *Hilltop* reported that Frederick, rather than addressing student concerns, focused on downplaying the extent of the students’ grievances. The publication reported Frederick saying that only 38 instances of mold had been found on campus. The university president went on to say that these were the necessary result of damp and humid conditions, and that “We’re going to have more.”

Frederick went on to address the shortage of student housing on campus, as well as the outrage over the university’s leasing of several dorm buildings, which

had contributed to the housing shortage. Frederick claimed that the university could not afford to repair the buildings, and had leased them out to obtain immediate revenue, which was supposedly utilized to fund renovations on other buildings.

Students expressed their frustration at not having their grievances answered. The *Hilltop* reported a statement by Student Association President Kylie Burke saying, “[r]ather than providing an open forum for present student leaders to ask their own prepared questions, the meeting consisted almost entirely of a ‘University Master Plan’ presentation ... the attending student leaders were sent a blank invitation with less than 24 hours’ notice, were not provided an agenda beforehand, nor were we notified of the presentation format.”

The university administration, which both received and doled out millions to create faculty positions for media celebrities such as Nikole Hannah-Jones of the *New York Times*’ 1619 Project, a racist falsification of American history, and race-based reparations advocate Ta-Nehisi Coates, as well as for the \$1 million-plus salary of Frederick himself, is clearly not interested in bargaining with the students for better conditions.

On Monday, in an effort to drive a wedge between the students and highly exploited campus workers, the university announced on Twitter that it had laid off an unspecified number of cafeteria workers, a supposed “unintended consequence for the HU community” caused by the protesters’ occupation. “Due to the café being closed, some Sodexo workers have been laid off. We are committed to working with our students to avoid more repercussions like this one,’ the university stated threateningly.

A critical stage has been reached in the protests at Howard University. The conflict at the predominantly black school demonstrates the woeful bankruptcy of identity politics, which seeks to cover up the class interests of the venal upper middle class elite and divide the working class. On their part, neither Hannah-Jones nor Coates have so much as tweeted their support for the students demanding decent living quarters.

The Howard University student protesters must see their protests as part of a broader movement developing among the working class of all ethnic, national and racial backgrounds against social inequality and

austerity on every continent. The Socialist Equality Party in the United States and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), the youth movement of the SEP, call on students at Howard to turn their struggle toward building a mass movement of all working people and youth and to take up the fight for socialism.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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