

#BlackburnTakeover protesters must appeal to the working class

Reject Howard University's attempts to blame students for cafeteria layoffs!

International Youth and Students for Social Equality
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The attempt by the Howard University administration to blame student protesters for the layoff of school cafeteria workers is a provocative attack on the rights of workers and students alike and must be actively opposed.

Students at the historically black university in Washington D.C. have been protesting at the Blackburn University Center for three weeks against deplorable housing conditions, inadequate COVID-19 safety precautions, and the privatization of the university through contracts with corporations like Corvias, which manages the dormitories, and Sodexo, which employs the cafeteria workers.

Although students have documented proof of black mold, asbestos and brown water, as well as infestations of fleas, mice and cockroaches in the dorms, administrators refuse to negotiate or cancel the contracts and instead demand that the peaceful protesters end their demonstration.

On Tuesday, Howard administration insinuated that student protesters were responsible for recent layoffs of low-paid cafeteria staff, tweeting, "We're sad to report the occupation of Blackburn has led to an unintended consequence for the HU community. 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 members of Howard's Board of Trustees—bankers, corporate executives and political consultants—hope to pit students and workers against one another. They fear students can galvanize widespread support for their own demands by turning to campus workers and to the working class of all races. Coming in the midst of the largest strike wave in many decades, such an appeal would meet with a powerful response.

Students and workers share similar grievances against the university and the corporations with which it contracts. While Corvias and Howard cut costs by forcing students to live in unsafe and unhealthy conditions, Howard's contract with Sodexo grants them the right to heavily exploit cafeteria workers, paying them as little as \$14.50 an hour in 2020.

Last year, high levels of exploitation prompted campus cafeteria workers to distribute a petition demanding substantial increases in wages and better health care. The petition noted that Sodexo workers at Howard are paid far less than cafeteria workers at other colleges in the Washington D.C. area. Thousands of Howard students and alumni signed the petition, voicing their overwhelming support for the workers' demands.

The exploitation continued over the course of the pandemic, as

students and workers alike were forced to return to campus without adequate protection from the spread of the deadly coronavirus. At the beginning of the pandemic, roughly 100 campus workers were furloughed and left without pay or benefits, according to an April 24, 2020 article in the *Washington Post*.

When last year's layoffs took place, campus Sodexo workers asked Howard University to provide additional support, but at the time the *Post* article was published, Howard had not agreed. The *Post* article explained, "Howard officials said they will continue to work with their vendors to manage the crisis but did not share plans to provide benefits or pay." The WWSW contacted UNITE HERE Local 23 to confirm the rate of current wages and whether Howard helped workers with COVID-related pay and benefit requests, but did not receive a reply by press time.

Howard University's mistreatment of students and its reliance on cost-cutting contracts with exploitative corporations like Corvias and Sodexo exposes the right-wing, anti-working class character of identity politics.

The African-American members of Howard's Board of Trustees have no shared interests with Howard students, who are predominantly black and come largely from working-class and middle-class families. Their shared skin color does not in any way negate their mutually antagonistic class interests. For decades, racial politics has been used as a mechanism to divide the working class and enrich a tiny section of the affluent African-American elite. Identity politics, based on assertions of personal *privilege*, contradicts the purpose of the civil rights movement and the founding charter of Howard University, which were based on the struggle for social *equality*.

The university leadership's arrogant and dismissive attitude toward Howard students reflects the extremely unequal social relations that define capitalist society as a whole. This inequality has grown exponentially within the African-American population in recent decades.

The richest 10 percent of African Americans now own 75.3 percent of all wealth held by African Americans, and the poorest 60 percent of African Americans have zero wealth or negative wealth. Inequality within the African American population grew rapidly in the aftermath of the financial crash of 2007-2008, with the top 1 percent of African Americans increasing its share from 19.4 percent in 2007 to 44.7 percent in 2016. President Barack Obama, whose election was secured through the promotion of the lie that his race would make him more receptive to the needs of the oppressed, oversaw the bailouts of the banks and auto companies and greatly exacerbated this process.

The university's leadership consists of members of this parasitic financial oligarchy who have nothing in common with the founding principles of the university or its namesake, Union General Oliver Otis Howard, who fought to free the slaves during the Civil War and then fought to educate them through the Freedmen's Bureau.

Howard President Wayne A. I. Frederick's salary is \$1,066,099 per year, according to Nonprofitlight.com. Frederick is a member of the board of directors of both the Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond and the Chamber of Commerce. After the student protests began, Frederick said dormitory mold was inevitable and chided students for an inappropriate "tone" in their criticisms.

Other members of the Board of Trustees include Laurence Morse, founder and managing partner of the private equity firm Fairview Capital Partners; Leslie Hale, a former acquisitions advisor for Goldman Sachs and now president of the hotel real estate investment firm RLJ Lodging Trust; Mark A. L. Mason, chief financial officer of Citigroup; Chris Carr, former executive vice president of Starbucks and 20-year executive at ExxonMobil; Godfrey Gill, another former Goldman Sachs banker and vice president of Vista Equity Partners; Richard Goodman, former executive at PepsiCo, where he managed global operations, procurement and manufacturing; and Hillary Rosen, former Chief of Staff to Democratic Senator Dianne Feinstein and a CNN media personality.

This layer has greatly enriched itself through the exploitation of the working class of all races. Corporations like Goldman Sachs and Citibank are responsible for the financial crash of 2007-2008, which threw millions of working people, including black working-class families, into deep economic hardship. ExxonMobil has been sued for polluting impoverished communities in Texas and Louisiana with chemicals and cancer-causing soot. PepsiCo has been accused of using child labor and running sweatshops in Africa, Asia and South America.

To Howard's trustees, contracts with Corvias and Sodexo are sound business decisions. It is not important that Corvias is being sued for providing shoddy, unsafe and unhealthy housing at army bases, where economic conscripts and their families are forced to live. A complaint filed by four soldiers alleges that Corvias "conspired to conceal harmful environmental and structural housing defects from unsuspecting service members and their families and failed to comply with applicable building and housing codes," "knowingly leased substandard homes" and "charged grossly excessive rents swallowing up the whole of service members' basic allowance for housing."

Nor do the trustees mind that Sodexo contracts at 84 prisons in South America and Europe and fully manages five prisons in the UK, where the company has been accused of "cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment" that "appears to amount to torture," according to an official 2013 report by the British government. Sodexo also manages prison workshops and profits from prison labor.

As for the Howard leadership's connections with the Democratic Party, this 200-year-old capitalist party, alongside the Republicans, has overseen decades of attacks on living standards. It has cut social programs, reduced taxes for the corporations and the rich, deported millions of immigrants, and waged permanent imperialist war abroad. Under the Obama and Biden administrations, it has carried out untold crimes against the people of Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Honduras, Haiti, Somalia and elsewhere, using racial politics as a means of falsely presenting itself as "progressive." Its inability to advance any social program has paved the way for the fascist bigot Donald Trump.

The university has plenty of money to improve conditions for

students and workers. Earlier this year, it received \$20 million from the Knight Foundation, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Ford Foundation and an anonymous donor to establish the Center for Journalism and Democracy. Nikole Hannah-Jones and Ta-Nehisi Coates, two of the most prominent proponents of racial politics, who were selected to lead the center, have been far more vocal about promoting their own careers than about the protests at Howard, which they have barely mentioned.

Meanwhile, reporters at Howard's student-led newspaper, *The Hilltop*, issued a statement on November 2 asserting that the administration has censored student reporting on the protests. The Student Press Law Center issued a statement summarizing the students' claims:

The Student Press Law Center stands in support of the student journalists with *The Hilltop* at Howard University. We are deeply concerned about the unusual and harmful comments and steps taken by *The Hilltop's* staff adviser to restrict student journalists covering campus protests.

Student journalists are being forced to send all breaking news stories to their adviser, Keith L. Alexander, "for editing" before publication. On several occasions, *The Hilltop* staff say their adviser has forced the editing or removal of stories related to the ongoing #BlackburnTakeover protests about the condition of Howard University's student housing. *The Hilltop* editors say they received an email from their adviser on Oct. 8 stating that Howard University President Wayne A.I. Frederick was "irate" about a column published October 4.

The Center for Journalism and Democracy has not issued any statement in support of student journalists, nor have Hannah-Jones or Coates spoken out publicly on this matter.

It is revealing that the modern-day aristocrats who run Howard University dote on Hannah-Jones and Coates, providing them with lavish salaries and tenure, while students are forced to camp in tents in the middle of a pandemic, like French peasants at Versailles, begging for pennies to remove cockroaches and asbestos from their dorm rooms so they can properly exercise their right to an education. That's because the student demands cut across the Board of Trustees' financial interests, while Hannah-Jones and Coates' racial narrative of contemporary society and American history advances those interests.

Across the US and across the world, workers of all races are joining forces in a multi-national, multi-ethnic strike movement, demanding massive wage increases and improvements to working conditions. To improve their conditions, students must turn to this powerful social force—the international working class—uniting across racial lines in a common struggle for social equality.



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