

WSWS on the spot report

Howard University students denounce deplorable living conditions

Our reporters
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As the student occupation of Howard University's Blackburn Center has entered its fifth week, protesters have garnered significant support for their demands that administration at the historically black university immediately address deplorable living conditions.

In early October, students occupied the Blackburn Center to protest vermin infestations, mold, asbestos and other conditions overseen by the for-profit building management company Corvias. Students have camped outside the building in tents demanding that Howard University President Wayne A. I. Frederick convene a school-wide town hall meeting to discuss student and alumni representation on the Howard board of trustees, improved living conditions and freedom from legal and academic repercussions for student protesters.

A group of protesters spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about their protest and distributed copies of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality's statement Reject Howard University's attempts to blame students for cafeteria layoffs!

"They're in it for the money," said Aniyah. "They have been doing everything to get us out" of the encampment. "They brought up celebrities like Phylicia Rashad that oppose our takeover. And the president of the university makes over a million dollars!"

Janelle said she has asthma and that the air filter in her dorm room hasn't been changed since 2014. She said a maintenance person associated with the contracting firm Corvias came to her dorm but made an excuse and did not fix it.

Autumn, a Howard senior, explained that the Howard administration is threatening academic discipline against students and justifying its harsh position by claiming that amnesty would result in students "using the protest as an excuse to skip class."

She stated that the purpose of the demand for a town hall was to open the campus administration to wider demands

from the Howard student body, such as "better mental health services, better campus Wi-Fi, safer eating quarters and better financial aid assistance."

Autumn also spoke about the poor maintenance of the dorms, saying that she had been forced to spend a winter without heating during her freshman year, an indication that the current protests are the product of years of neglect on the part of the university. She noted that when a Corvias contractor recently attempted to fix her heater, it fell out of the window because it had been scotch-taped in place by the previous maintenance person.

"[University President Frederick] keeps Corvias around and refuses to break their contract," Autumn explained. "He doesn't care about students or he'd get rid of them."

The university leadership continues to do business with other employers of highly exploited workers as well. Last week, the campus contractor Sodexo announced the layoff of its cafeteria staff, which the university blamed on students, claiming it was an "unintended consequence" of the school occupation.

Students were quick to explain that this narrative had been concocted by the university to incite the campus community against them.

Jayden, a political science major, explained that the cafeteria in Blackburn was not directly connected to the building lobby where the occupation was taking place, and that there were in fact multiple points of entry to the dining rooms in the lower levels of the building. Rather than students causing these layoffs, the "administration shut down the cafeteria and is trying to pin the blame on students," Jayden said.

Jayden explained that many campus workers solidarized themselves with the occupation but were also fearful of losing their jobs. He said that one of the laid-off Sodexo workers' parents had written the administration stating her child had been victimized by the university: "she expressed that her child is in support of this and her losing her job was

not in vain.”

Jam, a campus contractor and veteran of the 1989 Howard University student protests, noted that Sodexo would not have needed to fire workers “because everyone knows that they are paid up front for their services. The university buys in bulk from them.” Instead, Jam said he believed that Sodexo was likely looking to lay off some workers and seized on the protest as an opportunity to cut expenses.

Autumn also spoke to the conditions of faculty members on the campus. When asked how she saw the occupation of Blackburn relating to broader developments in the class struggle, she relayed the experience of teachers at her university. “Teachers and faculty are under-appreciated,” she said, a number of faculty had gathered and walked out in support of the occupants in the days before and some were even speaking about going on strike. “They are not being paid well, and might go out on their own strike,” Autumn said.

Many students immediately centered their struggle in terms of their own working class family backgrounds, and said they were motivated by the issue of social inequality. Jayden spoke of the difference in living standards between the Howard administration and the student and faculty body as being a case of “tone deafness.”

“You [President Frederick] live comfortably in Maryland while students are sleeping on concrete for 25 days and faculty is poorly paid as well.”

Articles in the *Washington Post* and other publications have also attested to the poor conditions not only of students, but faculty as well. In July, in response to the media celebrations over the granting of tenure to Nikole Hannah-Jones, the author of the *New York Times*’ 1619 Project, an anonymous faculty member at Howard published a letter on the website *Medium* stating that the rest of the campus staff felt “devalued and disrespected” at their jobs. The university claims it has no money to meet student demands, but \$20 million are being provided to fund a journalism center which Hannah-Jones will lead.

In a Friday address, Frederick attempted to save face. While agreeing to none of the students’ demands, he stated, “I hear the concerns, I want to be absolutely clear about that.” The university president admitted that his administration had been “lacking... in preventative maintenance... avoiding trouble when issues do occur [and] responding to them quickly.”

Referring to the use of police violence against protesters, Jayden said a police officer named “Officer Smith” had “placed an 18-year-old student in a choke hold” while her back was against a metal bar on the building’s exterior in the first days of the occupation. The fact that many of the police officers were African American did not mean they

treated the students any more delicately.

“This was during the homecoming game when all the people were cheering [for the football team]. This was in front of Howard alumni, and parents were here. There were officers pushing peoples’ parents out of the way.”

Janelle, a freshman studying international affairs, spoke directly to the claims that the students’ skin color makes them natural allies of the wealthy members of the board of trustees and well-paid administrators. “Howard is supposed to be the ‘Mecca’ for black students,” she said, “An escape from ‘white supremacy,’ but it’s disappointing to me.” Asked to explain, she said, “I’ve never felt more oppressed than when I attended this campus.”

On the class conflict at Howard, Janelle said that it “speaks to how the class divide is not just by race... minorities, when they come into positions of power, end up doing the same as the white supremacists. They don’t distribute their wealth.”

Autumn also said that the university was using the hiring of well-known media celebrities such as the *New York Times*’ 1619 Project author Nikole Hannah-Jones and reparations advocate Ta-Nehisi Coates as a way to redirect focus from some of the campus’s underhanded behavior. “They use famous personalities to sweep dust under the rug,” she said.

Jayden explained that the protests against the administration had deep historic roots. “The Blackburn takeover isn’t an isolated incident,” and previous protests were also related to “housing conditions and leadership being oppressive to the student body.” Speaking about the support that the occupation has from the student body, Jayden explained, “Students are in support but are scared of retaliation, of sacrificing their careers. But the majority are in solidarity.”

Regarding his own motivations for participating in the occupation, Jayden explained, “I have two jobs to pay bills, but I am willing to sacrifice myself because this fight is bigger than just me... even though I’m living off of campus, I’m standing in solidarity with these students.”



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