

Howard University cafeteria workers denounce university efforts to scapegoat students for layoffs

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One month into the student occupation of Howard University's Blackburn Center, campus workers are demanding that the university administration address the horrendous living conditions in student dormitories.

Students have camped outside the building in tents since October, demanding Howard University President Wayne A.I. Frederick meet with students and alumni over vermin infestations, black mold, cockroaches and other health hazards overseen by the for-profit building management company Corvias. The university has responded by deploying police to dislodge the peaceful protest.

Last week, the university announced that Sodexo cafeteria workers were laid off because of "unforeseen" costs caused by the student protests. But the WSWs contacted Sodexo on campus, and a representative said there had been no layoffs. A second source with knowledge also stated there had been no layoffs. In addition, Howard's Office for Campus Life continues to operate from the building the cafeteria was in, and the administration has not said if students will be issued a refund for their dining plan due to the cafeteria's closure.

If it is true there were no layoffs, this means the university lied in order to present the students as "privileged" in a cynical attempt to turn the working class against them.

The WSWs spoke to cafeteria workers at Howard who denounced the university's efforts to blame students for attacks on workers. The workers, who wished to remain anonymous for fear of retribution, spoke clearly and powerfully in defense of the students.

"They've been laying off workers since before this protest. [Howard] tried to blame it on the protesters, but

the fact is that they were being petty and trying to intimidate the students. They closed down the other cafeteria when we already had limited resources, so now all the students are coming to this building," one worker said.

Another worker told the WSWs, "They should have done something about the dorms during the pandemic. No students were on campus."

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* also spoke with striking students, who described the deplorable conditions they are facing.

"It's been one month now of students living in tents," one student said. "[Because of a housing shortage] the university sent a lot of kids off campus, basically telling them you're not going to live on campus."

The decaying condition of several of the university's dorms has contributed to a number of health problems among students.

"I know a friend that's in the hospital coughing up blood because of the black mold. ... It's in everyone's vents. Everyone in Towers had this weird cough, so someone looked in the vents and saw the mold, which had already started to spread to people's things."

Taiye, another student, told the WSWs that the university purposefully lowered the temperature in buildings to intimidate and deter students.

"Not only was the heating turned off, but the a/c (air conditioning) was on in the building. It's incredibly cold and difficult to get anything done in there," Taiye said.

The university claims it does not have the funds to repair the buildings or address the housing shortage, but students pointed to Howard's recent Homecoming

featuring some of the school's most illustrious alumni. When asked about Frederick's \$1 million income and the rising cost of tuition, students said there was no reason they should live the way they currently are.

"For us to spend \$48,000 a year here ... for that much money there shouldn't be rats in the dorms, there shouldn't be roaches, and there shouldn't be mold. It's obviously been a problem for years," one student said.

The protests at Howard University, the flagship of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU), expose the fraudulent and reactionary nature of identity politics. Vice President Kamala Harris, who lives just three miles from the campus, used Howard as a backdrop to promote the Democrats' agenda during the 2020 presidential election. Moreover, a black university with a mostly black administration presides over housing conditions the pseudo-left attribute to "structural racism," and many of the police who assaulted protesters last week were black.

The student protesters at Howard University must link up their struggles with the broader strike movement developing among the working class in the US and internationally.



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