

Howard University students announce agreement to end campus occupation

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On Monday morning, representatives of Howard University and the group of students occupying the Blackburn University Center announced a confidential agreement had been reached, ending the campus protest which had been going on since October 12 at the historically black university in Washington D.C.

Donald Temple, a lawyer representing the students spoke at a press conference announcing the deal, declaring, “While the specific terms of the agreement are confidential, it can be said without any hesitation or reservation that the students courageously journeyed on a path towards greater university accountability and transparency and public safety.”

Howard president Wayne A.I. Frederick’s office released a statement calling on campus protests to end and for “non-student protesters to depart the surrounding area—and to end their occupation of the campus.” The university president, who receives an annual salary of \$1.2 million from the school, further called on the students to “come together as one” under his leadership, without explaining what particular steps would be taken to address their needs.

“We got what we came for. We got increased scrutiny. We got increased transparency and increased accountability. And by virtue of this protest, we garnered everything that we were entitled to,” said Channing Hill, head of the Howard chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Hill’s comments, as quoted by NBC News, came without the slightest hint of irony, considering that the protest leaders and the university have refused to disclose what the agreement entails.

The Howard University #BlackburnTakeover protests received national attention, pitting undergraduate students from working class and middle class families against the school’s wealthy administrators, headed by

the millionaire university president himself.

Students occupied the student center, demanding safe and sanitary living quarters, free of rats, mice, mold and other dangers. Students also demanded reinstatement of student and alumni representation on the board of trustees, a campus-wide town hall meeting with Frederick and academic and legal amnesty for those involved in the protest.

Among the issues emerging in the protests was the university contracting dorm services to the private company Corvias. Students reported black mold and fungus growing inside the ventilation systems, with little support from the maintenance firm.

“The interests of students and the interests of a private company can clash,” said the *Washington Post* last week. The *Post* quoted privatization specialist Jeremy Mohler, who said Corvias was “accountable to their shareholders. They’re accountable to their investors. They’re not accountable to the students at Howard University.”

In Frederick’s address to the public about the ending of the protests, a linked reference to the university’s “strategic master plan” promises vaguely to “support faculty, research and student development.” The text also states the campus will continue to engage in “collaborative partnerships across divisions and beyond campus borders,” insinuating that further outsourcing of campus services is planned.

The protests cut across the Democratic Party-driven racial narrative, which claims that historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) such as Howard are more accountable to their students due to the latter, for the most part, having the same racial background as the school’s leaders.

An article published Sunday on CNN improbably sought to frame the protest at a majority black college

against a majority black leadership as a racial conflict. According to CNN, the difficulty finding affordable and safe living conditions is “indicative of a widespread issue with crumbling buildings on century-old HBCU campuses that are often underfunded compared to predominately White institutions.”

In fact, the students’ protest against the unbearable living situation at Howard reflects class divisions which cut across all racial questions. It occurs as workers across the world have taken up strike action against decades of low pay and benefits just as the pandemic has deepened the levels of social inequality, with corporate bosses forcing workers into unsafe warehouses, schools and factories to pump out profits.

Far from being an impoverished university of modest means, an article this year in the Chicago *Sun-Times* [“While Howard University rides a wave of acclaim, some Black colleges are struggling”] notes that “[l]ast summer’s protests over racial injustice brought renewed attention to historically Black colleges and universities and led to a surge in private donations for some.” Howard has received millions of dollars in donation money from Amazon founder Jeff Bezos’ ex-wife, MacKenzie Scott, as well as billionaire Michael Bloomberg.

The university drew media-wide acclaim earlier this year when it announced that it had awarded tenured faculty positions to the *New York Times* 1619 Project’s Nikole Hannah-Jones and racist media commentator Ta-Nehisi Coates. “While larger HBCUs often have the funding resources necessary to attract accomplished talent like Nikole Hannah-Jones and Ta-Nehisi Coates, many smaller institutions need donors to step forward, contributing much-needed financial resources for us to compete,” notes Shaw University president Paulette Dillard to the *Sun-Times*.

Similarly, while Hannah-Jones has been given millions to open the newly-proclaimed Institute for Journalism and Democracy at Howard and Coates is a university alumnus, neither has spoken publicly in support of the students. The *Washington Informer*, a black-owned publication, notes, “Coates and Hannah-Jones didn’t respond to The Informer’s request for comment about the protest.”

Numerous commentators on social media denounced the college for its treatment of protesters, which at times included sending police to brutalize them, as well

as resorting to intimidation such as cutting heat in the early months of winter.

“Shame it took so long [it] should have been basic human rights for the students to live,” states one user on Twitter. Another declares: “I pray y’all get it together especially if y’all gonna have your celebrity alumni out pumping you up for new students. This has been a disgrace for HBCUs. Get it together. The ancestors are not happy or proud.”

Other commentators voiced suspicion about the decision to hide the agreement’s content. “Don’t get me wrong. I’m immensely proud of the students who fought for change with the #BlackburnTakeover and love that they were able to finally reach an agreement,” tweeted journalist Alexa Lisitza, a Howard alumna. “But, that agreement being confidential will make it hard to hold Howard to the standard we know it needs to reach.”



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