



STUDENT RENT STRIKES IN NOTTINGHAM AND BEYOND

As the 2020 academic year approached, students at the University of Nottingham were told a tantalising story. Come back to campus, university leaders said. Things will be a little different, but we're making it safe for everyone, and we promise you an unforgettable experience.

On that last point, they could not have been more right. We are all familiar with the crisis that engulfed the university beginning in September: [more than 2,312 reported cases](#) of COVID-19 among students and staff, hundreds of households forced into self-isolation, a perilous spike in infections and hospitalisations in the wider community. The institutional response to the outbreak has prioritised punishment over support. The university has posted security guards in locked-down halls of residence, [beefed up policing](#) in neighbourhoods near campus, issued a staggering [£58,865 in fines](#) to its own students, and even [dressed its registrar up as a copper](#). Meanwhile, the resources and supports that students actually need are in short supply. Breakfasts go undelivered to first-year undergraduates isolating in residence halls. Modules bounce confusingly between classrooms and computer screens. Mental-health services heave under the strain of ballooning caseloads. Students feel neglected, lied to, and cheated out of tuition fees and rents. For many, it has been a painful, alienating year. Unforgettable indeed.

Yet none of this is unique to Nottingham. While it is tempting to blame individual institutions for their bungled responses to the outbreak, the pattern at universities across the UK has been markedly similar. What the pandemic has revealed are the limitations of a higher education system organised like a market. As universities have been starved of public-sector funding and incentivised to compete for students, they have become increasingly reliant on fees—tuition fees, residence fees, catering fees, conference fees—just to stay afloat. Students, meanwhile, have been recast as consumers, a shift embraced and encouraged by university administrators who have invested in new buildings, splashy marketing campaigns, and giant TV screens to woo students and parents “shopping” for a superior university “experience.”

The pandemic has laid bare the ills of this market logic—not only in institutions’ bare-faced efforts to keep students paying tuition fees and rents, but also in the complaints by some students that online learning offers poor “value for money.” Teaching staff, for their part, have had to work overtime to shift their modules online and faced pressure to give face-to-face lectures in poorly ventilated classrooms. In all these ways, the marketisation of universities erodes working and learning conditions on campus, debases the social value of higher education, and undermines trust between teachers and students. And these issues have only been exacerbated by the pandemic. In response, students across the UK are organising an [unprecedented wave of rent strikes](#). These actions empower students, letting them exercise their influence as “consumers” by withholding residence fees from university landlords. At the University of Nottingham, over 950 students agreed to go on strike, forcing the institution to waive rent for anyone unable to take up their room in halls during the third lockdown. As universities grow ever more reliant on rents, they become vulnerable to rent strikes—which have the potential to result in real changes across the sector. At the same time, these struggles show students that they are more than just customers. Like all strikes in the education sector, they serve an important pedagogical purpose: they introduce a new generation to the benefits of collective political action. Yet it would be a mistake to see these strikes as isolated local struggles. University of Nottingham students are organising with their counterparts at Nottingham Trent University, and we are now seeing a nationwide rent strike campaign [producing incredible resources](#). These actions must be understood as part of a longer, broader movement that reaches back to the storming of Conservative Party headquarters by indignant students in 2010. Students are not only demanding their money back; they are also becoming conscious of, and harnessing, their power as a class.



Rent strikes offer an important opportunity to build solidarity between students and staff, even as university management try to [use them to divide us](#). That solidarity is critical to struggles in higher education—around the world, the most powerful student movements have always enjoyed broad support from teachers and lecturers—and it is sorely needed now, amidst a pandemic that threatens to divide us. University staff, who have long relied on traditional forms of labour action, would do well to pay attention to the creative tactics being used by student rent strikers. The learning conditions of students are inseparable from the working conditions of staff, and rent strikes, as vital struggles against the marketisation of higher education, advance the interests of us all.

WHAT NEXT?

Organise!

- The failings of the market driven university are effecting all of us, speak with your friends and colleagues. Does the university provide your accommodation or is it a private landlord? What action can you collectively take to challenge them? What support can you give rent strikers?
- Student rent strikers have been organising together across the University of Nottingham and Nottingham Trent University, as well as nationally — [many with great success](#). It is vital that these efforts are supported by staff, and recognised as one of a multitude of struggles with a common cause. Management will try to divide us, we cannot let them.
- We can also link up and learn lessons from other rent strike successes, such at [Manchester](#) and [Bristol](#), and more generally about the [demands and history](#) of student rent strikers. We must think about the steps students and workers can collectively take now to advance this struggle.

Get Involved!

Contact and join the Nottingham Rent Strikes

NTU: [@RentStrikeNTU](#) UoN: [@NottsRentStrike](#)

Follow the nationwide Rent Strike group for information on actions, organiser training, and more

[@RentStrikeNow](#)

Contact us: NottsUniWorker@gmail.com

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/NottsUniWorkers> Twitter: [@NottsUniWorkers](#)