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RADICALHOUSINGJOURNAL

'The rents keep rising and so will we':
Reflections on the 2021 Rent Strike at the University of Sussex

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Abstract

In January 2021, over 700 students living in the UK's University of Sussex accommodation withheld their rent in defiance of the unacceptable conditions of housing and unreasonable rent prices. Primarily, this was a reaction to their anger and upset at how Sussex had falsely assured them that, despite the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, they should expect a normal student experience. However, the rent strike action also needs to be contextualised within an understanding of how the neoliberalisation of higher education has led to a situation of low quality but high rent student accommodation across the UK - and how students have been fighting back. The following discussion looks at the position of student renters in a higher education system driven by market forces; the implications of your university simultaneously being your landlord; and the extraordinary conditions which led to the rent strike at Sussex. While students at Sussex showed the power of collective action in forcing the University to eventually concede to some of the strike's demands, this article also highlights the unprecedented struggles the movement faced in light of the pandemic. For a movement so reliant on reaching out and mobilising students, the Sussex Rent Strike also provides student and housing activists a useful understanding of both the advantages and limits of digital organising.

Keywords

Student housing, rent strike, digital organising, archiving resistance

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Introduction

Every year, universities in England send out thousands of glossy brochures and spend up to millions of pounds on flashy adverts attempting to bring in prospective domestic and international students. But behind these picture-perfect images of student life lies another story: one of eye-watering tuition fees, rising student debt, and unaffordable housing. Over the last few decades, reforms to the UK higher education system mirroring those seen in the United States have been pushed through its parliament. Against a backdrop of the further marketisation of higher education, there has been the scrapping of maintenance grants and the introduction of high-interest tuition fee loans. Tuition fees for undergraduate courses in England and Wales (not in Scotland or Northern Ireland) now stand at £9,250 per year for domestic students and £18,000 for international students. On top of this, in 2015 the government lifted the cap on student numbers, removing the limit on how many students universities can recruit. This has led to many universities deciding to profit from their students as a strategy for long-term survival, entering public-private partnerships to construct fast-build, poor quality student accommodation financed through long-term loans at often wildly high interest rates. Nor is this accommodation cheap to rent: the contracts often give private construction companies the option to raise rents and, especially at campus universities, an often-young student body makes a lucrative captive market, paying high prices to rent these rooms.

Students, however, have not been passive recipients of these changes. In 2010, students mobilised en masse in attempts to stop the incoming tuition fee rise. Referred to colloquially as the Millbank Revolt, this protest saw the occupation of the Conservative Party headquarters in London. While ultimately not successful, and perhaps more importantly, the 2010 student movement led a generation of young people into experiencing the power of collective political action. While the networks that formed then have, to an extent, waned and dispersed, the knowledge of the potential of student movements has remained within universities across England and Wales. And, crucially, at times of real anger, students have translated this potential into successful action against universities.

The following conversation takes place between current and former students at the University of Sussex in Brighton, England. Sussex was set up in the 1960s with the aim of breaking away from the established red brick institutions and pioneering a fresh and progressive approach to tertiary education. The now (in)famous brutalist early campus architecture designed by Basil Spence was meant to reflect the ideals of the university: to create a new kind of academic environment, one of innovative thinking and heightened social consciousness. Indeed, in light of this, over the years, Sussex has been a place of heightened student political engagement: a place to explore identities and experiment with ideas; and an important node within student politics throughout the country. With the neoliberalisation of higher education, however, the institution's ethos has changed beyond recognition and the focus of the university's management has become more concerned with doubling down on profiting from student tuition fees and, significantly, student accommodation. Perhaps the starkest recent example of this was seen with the demolition of the most affordable rooms

on campus in 2017, and their replacement by more expensive rooms, priced at £176 per week.

Here we are joined by four organisers of a rent strike group from the University of Sussex. **Roseanne Steffen** (RS) was active within student movements from the Youth Strikes for Climate to the student solidarity group for the 2018/19 University and College Union (UCU) industrial action. She ran in the Sussex Students' Union election with eight others on a left-wing slate and worked as the Student Living and Sustainability Officer at Sussex Students' Union in the 2020-2021 academic year, after graduating with a Bachelor of Arts in International Relations and Geography. **Billie Krish** (BK) is a second-year undergraduate student studying Politics and Anthropology. He comes from a background of community organising and, angry at the university's handling of the pandemic, became active as a rent strike organiser quickly after arriving at Sussex. **Daisy Handscombe** (DH), while not at the time living in university accommodation, joined the organising team following years of experience in the student activist scene at Sussex and as a renter herself. **Haris Jamil** (HJ), an international student who lived for almost three years in university accommodation, got involved in the rent strike at the beginning of 2021.

They reflect on their involvement in the rent strike, as well as their wider experiences as students seeking safe and affordable housing within the context of a neoliberal higher education system. The interview has been edited for clarity and context.

Figure 1

Two students wearing masks hold a handmade banner saying 'Join the Rent Strike'. **Photo by Haris Jamil**

RHJ: What does it mean to be students in the higher education sector in the UK, at the intersection of multiple market-driven forces?

DH: When I found out I was going to Sussex in particular, I remember my aunt wanted to go there when she was a teenager, and she said, 'Oh, it's going to be this great experience. To go into university in general, but like going to Sussex in particular; the things you'll be

able to get involved with, and the people you'll meet, and the kind of teaching environment, they're so different, so unique, and so brilliant and radical.'

Getting to campus and finding my feet, I saw a very different side to things. On an open day (when prospective students visit universities to find out about courses and university life) I remember walking around this new accommodation the university built and sort of seeing the price that it was going to cost and knowing that I couldn't live there. They were showing me all these places, these nice new buildings with fancy ensuites. I'm getting there, thinking, I can just afford to come to university, and I'm getting a lot of support from the government with this massive loan that they've changed from a grant to a loan. Immediately, I knew that my experience was going to be completely different to the one they were trying to sell me and the one my aunt was talking to me about. There is a dissonance between all of these stories I was being given and knowing the one I'm about to embark on for the next three or four years was going to be, despite all the positives– it was going to be completely different and, in a lot of ways, a lot worse.

HJ: I would say there was quite immediate pressure in first year, that you only have one year in quite an isolated campus outside of town to create this community around you. This was sold as a big positive by the university: come live in this kind of model village, with campus being this safe and radical place to come and live for a year and to really kickstart your life. But I think so many people are really forced into specific housing that they can't afford, because the university controls what housing was built, how much is built, and what has been taken away. This idea that you have control over where you live, and how much you're paying, is fast becoming a myth. People now are making the decisions for where students are going to be able to live in five years' time, and they're university managers with profit in mind. I think the other big thing for me, that I saw amongst lots of my friends, was that almost immediately, people are also forced to engage in paid work, because they can't afford that kind of situation.

RS: In a recent student survey (Save the Student, 2022) it was shown that in 2021 three quarters of students across the country have struggled financially to make ends meet, with two in five students considering dropping out due to money worries. This has a huge knock-on effect on all aspects of life, from studies to students' mental health, with many students rushing from lectures to part time jobs. Many people engage in part time work to subsidise their living costs, with jobs in hospitality always drawing many students in. However, due to many businesses in this sector suffering because of the pandemic, lots of students have been let go or have been unable to find work in these areas, with the percentage of students engaged in part time work dropping from 74% to 66% in 2021. The picture gets bleaker when you add housing into the mix, with the average price students pay across the UK rising to £148 per week. The process of submitting a university application now looks remarkably more straightforward than navigating all the additional costs and worries of studying at a university in the UK. The system is now skewed towards becoming only accessible for students with financial support from family. Altogether, effects of the high tuition fees, climbing rents, decreasing part time work opportunities and limited affordable housing options creates a stretched and depressing picture of student experience.

BK: Yes, while the position that we've been forced into is really depressing, it's hard not to be politicised by it and want to do all you can for the next generations of students!

RHJ: What are the dynamics of being both renters and students, and having the University of Sussex as a landlord?

DH: It was the first time in my life where I had to rent myself. The rent costs will get higher and higher and higher, especially as the university is expanding the student population. The university management wants more students to come along. They make plans in anticipation of how many more students they want to be on campus, and how much more they're all going to be paying and therefore profit the University. It feels disgusting. I'm not comfortable with that sort of environment being this educational institution, being so focused on profit margins, and screwing over students, and using them as consumers. It just feels really wrong. When you have a landlord that also controls your degree, and the future of your educational life, career choices etc., it makes this place that's meant to be a home feel more like a place of punishment. The University is still hounding and threatening students who withheld rent in 2020; a lot of those on rent strike have been left in limbo about their future and safety. While the University can't legally withhold degrees, this doesn't seem to stop them from making various threats towards students. Instead of properly engaging with the financial situation (and thus welfare) of many students - particularly since the pandemic - they definitely prioritise their interests as landlords.

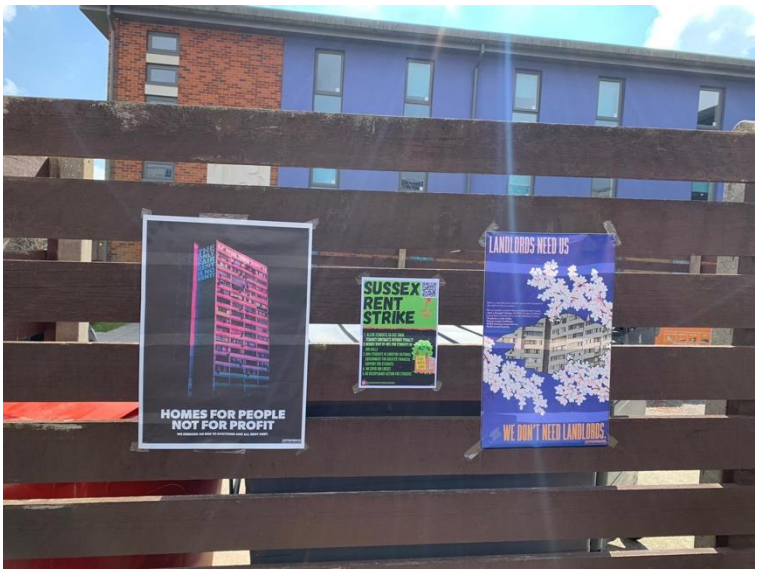
HJ: Also, there's something to be said about the way student housing is shown in the videos and photos, and how it's actually very different. And this especially impacts international students as they move from completely different countries with hopes of getting fancy accommodation as advertised by universities. International students like me face way higher tuition fees and so universities in general see us as the ultimate cash cows. Many efforts are made by universities to bring us here from different countries but once we are here the university becomes a typical landlord and doesn't care about us at all. International students face the reality of university accommodation and they complain about it, but they are not listened to. This comes from the fact that UK universities, like Sussex, have this blanket idea that all international students are ridiculously rich and so just won't complain. But, of course, this just isn't true. We are students just like everyone else. We have so much else to worry about when arriving in a foreign country so far from home and yet we are often treated as lesser students.

International students are often also under the illusion that they have to live in university accommodation for three whole years. This is just not true. They live on campus for only one year and many mostly have a bad experience. They then have to move out at the end of their tenancy after the first year because the university doesn't have space for them to stay. However, finding private accommodation is challenging too since unlike home students, we don't have access to UK guarantors. So, for international students renting is not easy and comes with many challenges.

BK: I think you're both hitting on something really important here, which is that these buildings aren't designed to be lived in for more than a year. They're designed cheaply in the knowledge that people will be rammed through them year after year almost like a machine. They might be maintained over the summer to look slightly fresh again, but fundamentally the University does not care about the quality of the housing and certainly not the sustainability of it. What this obviously means then is that new university accommodation starts falling apart really quickly. But this doesn't stop them raising the prices every September because students move on and leave campus at the end of one year and there is no one to question how the University can justify the increase for the next cohort of students. This is where the Renters Union comes in!

RS: And I think this idea of the accommodation not really being your home is reflected in the contract that students sign when moving in as well. Students living on Sussex's campus are not considered 'tenants' but rather 'occupants.' We can think of this as a somewhat similar dynamic to a hotel, or boarding house: the university retains the right to enter a student dwelling without prior notice, and the court is not needed in the process of evicting someone. While the university also emphasises that it not only provides a tenancy, but a whole host of mental health services, the dynamic of being an occupant gives a different set of entitlements that differ from being a tenant, all of which have to be navigated. It can feel like a really precarious place to inhabit. Also, it means that there are different actions that are at the disposal of the University for disciplining students. Being a student officer at the Students Union at the time of the strike helped me understand this dynamic within the institution's structures. We saw the purposeful blurring of the lines between academic and non-academic debt, for example in the case of the threat, as Daisy said, that they could withhold degree transcripts for people who are on rent strike. And that turned out to be completely false because of that separation of academic and non-academic debt. Academic debt refers to the debt acquired by a university from tuition fees, non-academic debt is rent arrears collected by a university.

Figure 2



Assorted flyers are pasted on a wall on campus accommodation. Two from the Autonomous Design Group, an open source graphic designers collective say Homes for People not Profit, and Landlords Need Us, We Don't Need Landlords. The other poster is from the SRU with a QR code for people to scan for more info. **Photo by Haris Jamil**

RHJ: In the Radical Housing Journal, we speak a lot about how different communities worldwide organise against housing precarity in order to obtain the right to housing, and so on, and so forth. So it's kind of amazing to see a community of students that, as you were saying, are supposed to just care for the academic side of life, internships, etc., engaging with housing politically. How did you end up organising and doing direct housing action?

RS: For me, it was a combination of influences over the past few years. In the recent round of industrial action by UCU, students, including myself, who were involved in student-staff solidarity efforts discovered, through conversations at the 'teach out' series, about the existence of archives documenting a rich history of student-staff organising in the context of the increasingly neoliberal university. What really stood out was the rent strikes of 1971-1973. In 1971, students frustrated at the lack of student involvement in decision-making on housing provision, affordability and quality, decided to set up a University of Sussex Tenants' Association (USTA). Immediately, they disputed plans to build Park House 6 with a rent increase of 6.5 per cent, an inadequate and cheaply sourced building design, and no student consultation. Students organised themselves and by Christmas 77 per cent of the student population withheld rent, totalling £35,000, and had occupied the management building. They issued statements describing what they saw as management's 'paternalistic rail-roading of student demands' (Goddard 2011, p. 18). In January of 1972, management conceded to negotiations and was 'forced to back down' (ibid) from the intended rent increase, to 3.5%. These provided inspiration for large scale mobilising around housing. It also provided conviction that students are kind of stuck in a cycle of inertia when it comes to mobilising housing, due to the constant change in student population.

But, sort of amazingly, looking at this history reminded me that university managers are scared of the power of student organising. For me, it shows the necessity and power of proper student organising today to break the trend of the massive increase of rents, and decrease in the quality of affordable housing provided.

The foundations of the Sussex Renters Union were set up before the autumn term of 2020/21 based on the principles of tackling rising rents on campus and aiming to foster a sense of genuine communal living. We were inspired by this historical organising at Sussex and some of us had already been involved in an Affordable Housing campaign (Sussex Students' Union, 2020) to prevent the building of more luxury student housing and facilities, wildly, on the Park Village site where students fought for rent reductions in the 1970s! However, it was the chaos and mishandling of students' return to University in the autumn which sparked an escalation to the tactic of rent strike. Trade Unions and INDY sage (a group of independent scientists providing advice to the government on minimising deaths and supporting Britain's COVID recovery), called strongly for a more phased return of students to universities across the country due to rising cases of coronavirus. This, however, was ignored by the government, and universities, including Sussex, toed the line and returned on the same weekend.

DH: Yes, so students returned to Sussex and campus was open briefly but then everything shut down due to new lockdowns being announced. Only the main shop and the doctor's

surgery remained open. All the classes moved online and students - many of whom had moved away from home for the first time - were suddenly being told they weren't allowed to leave their accommodation buildings.

The university tried to deny the fact that they had lied to students about the reality of returning to campus. They tried to appear compassionate and sent emails talking about how there was support for us if we needed it, but this wasn't really the case. For example, they seemed to pride themselves on providing food parcels to students who were quarantining, but many students were complaining of their bad quality and the ludicrous expense.

As well as this, thirty-nine staff from the outsourced on-site catering company Chartwells were threatened with redundancy because of outlet closures. This sparked a joint union campaign with staff and students, and we were able to achieve a reversal in this decision. Overall, I suppose, there was just this mass anger across the campus, and a big part of that was this general sense of being lied to amongst the student population.

BK: I think it's important to say though that this anger amongst students was not confined to Sussex and was brewing across the country. We began talking with friends and fellow campaigners in other institutions to try and work out how to best try and fight what was really a national issue being felt in all of our unis. An open meeting online was organised and facilitated through the still loosely formed national rent strike network and the NUS (National Union of Students)'s president Larissa Kennedy. The purpose of this was to skill students up and to help them form groups within their universities. We were also coming together to show solidarity with one another and to lend support and advice. There was an incident in Manchester University halls, for example, where students were literally fenced in and not allowed to leave, and where a student was racially profiled when trying to leave.

At Sussex we officially called the strike on 2 December 2020 at a socially distanced rally with students and trade union activists speaking. The demands were: 50 per cent rent reductions for the whole academic year, allow students to leave tenancy contracts without penalty, no COVID job losses, no disciplinary action for strikers, and a call on the university to lobby the government for more financial support for students. A google doc was circulated in all first-year student groups, for people to agree to the action and the way in which they want to get involved and be contacted; this had 730 sign ups by the end. Initially the university responded with panicky emails to all students living in halls. There was an angry/disappointed parent tone at first. Then, as to be expected maybe, they attempted to drive a wedge between students and staff - claiming that cleaners' jobs would be threatened by our action. This was wildly untrue and disproved as cleaners are outsourced by the University and not paid for by the housing budget.

RS: University managers were also determined to frame the strike as an extreme action by a small fringe group of vindictive student activists. This came up again and again, in weekly meetings with University management which myself, and other comrades who had been elected on a left-wing slate, attended due to the role of student representative. So in late December, student organisers like Billie and Harris from the Sussex Renters Union drafted a referendum to be put to the whole student population. The referendum was that the

Students' Union would unequivocally support student rent strikes and put this into policy: 89 per cent voted yes, and the profile and the demands of the rent strike were made more visible.

BK: Yeah, and then in January, just before rent was due, we contacted everyone who had signed up to the Google doc. We wanted to try and make sure that they were ready to strike. In particular, we gave support to many students who needed help cancelling their bank payments to the University which is made purposefully difficult to do. We also were there to reassure strikers of their rights and the power of collective action. On 12 January 2021, hundreds of students withheld their rent. In the months that followed, we held many open meetings, email exchanges and finally we had a negotiation meeting with senior management and the Sussex Renters Union, which the Students' Union officers facilitated.

Following more pressure on various different fronts, the university then finally partially conceded on 16 May 2021. They offered a 10 per cent rent rebate for all students in their first year for that academic year. Students were also told they could leave their tenancy without penalty. There was a rent deadline extension and payment plan options set up. Unfortunately, though, many of the other demands were not met and the effects are still being felt. For this reason, the SRU is still going strong today!

Figure 3

A student is putting up flyers and holding one that says 'The Rent is Too Damn High: Rent Strike Now' from the Autonomous Design Group (open source) **Photo by Liam Pen**

RHJ: How did the experience of lockdown and social isolation lead to the conditions of/for the rent strike?

DH: The whole sort of time period that we're functioning in, the context of the pandemic, was crisis-driven for a variety of reasons. And for a lot of us, we're just living in crisis anyway, because of the pandemic health wise, being away from parents, being away from friends, that

was just really quite difficult to deal with on an individual level. There are so many layers to trying to organise something on this kind of scale, that it's very, very difficult to keep up morale when you can't meet up and you can't have friendly chats with people because I don't really know who you are! I just see you in a weekly meeting where we sort of go, 'Oh my God!, they said they're going to evict this person or they said that this person is going to have their degree withheld, or this person's got the bailiffs coming after them.' It's just, there's no sort of relief. There's no time off from doing this kind of things. Because you're in your house in a lockdown. And you hear all these horrible stories about things that are happening to the people you consider your friends but you've never met before.

BK: 100 per cent! I think social isolation really brought out the emotions in people. Yes there was this anger at being mis-sold the university experience. The fact that we're paying these really high rates supposedly because of the luxury of living close to classes and surrounded by peers - neither of which meant anything during a pandemic. But, also, I suppose the flip side to this is that actually social isolation on campus brought with it a sort of enforced loneliness. At points I really remember feeling like this was the loneliest and saddest I'd ever been. Campus felt like a ghost town with all the life sucked out of it. Being part of the SRU did give me some sense of community and I was able to channel everything I was feeling into the campaign, but I know that for a lot of people there was a general sense of apathy. Actually, this sometimes meant it was hard to engage with students who had lost any hope that we could bring about change.

RS: Lots of students were also really stressed about their financial situation. I received countless emails from people who had relied on getting a job while at uni but couldn't due to lockdowns and the particular impact it had on jobs in the hospitality sector. So, yes, some people also didn't have the capacity to get involved because of the toll the pandemic was already having on their lives.

HJ: I agree with all of this. During the lockdowns many students, especially international students, had to stay on campus without it being their choice since they were not able to return home as borders were closed. They were stranded on campus with little support initially from university with buying groceries or mental health issues. In fact, the university imposed strict security on students during the lockdown period, with security agents patrolling campus. Above all, students were expected to pay the same rents and any repairs needed were further delayed and not given any importance.

RS: And I suppose, as these different factors intersected, angry students living on campus came together through just expressing their frustration on various online channels. It didn't take much time to turn these online chat groups into an active movement later known as the renters' union. Most of these students who were actively involved in the rent strike had not been politically active before. It is just the horrible experience of living in university-managed accommodations that made them outspoken, organised, and willing to take radical actions such as freezing their rent payments.

BK: Right. And I think what was really interesting here was that - because of the immediacy of the situation - for a lot of students including myself, the first interaction we had with the

university was one of antagonism. Before we'd even handed in any pieces of work, we were already in this conflict with the institution.

Figure 4

This is the Graphic created by Eli Aldridge, ex Sussex student that depicts a Monopoly design based on the University of Sussex accommodation encouraging students to join the strike.
Source: Eli Aldridge

RHJ: Going on with a rent strike is a massive decision to take, and involves lots of emotional labour and organisational capacities. Can you tell us more about how those initial phases emerged and developed? How were decisions taken during that crucial time in January?

BK: So, the first thing to reiterate is that, though we officially called the rent strike at the beginning of December 2020, we'd been working towards it from the start of term in September. As said, pretty much immediately after arriving at Sussex it was clear that we had been lied to and that we were going to be charged normal rent for a very abnormal experience. I, like other angry students, got in touch with Roseanne as well as the rest of the Student Union officers, and the SRU really took shape from there. We held a series of initial meetings where we got to know each other and tried to work out what to do with our

collective anger and dismay. For a lot of us, this coming together fused with early freshers [first year students] socialising (of which there was little). What this meant was that, while small in number, the Renters Union started on a very strong footing where the students involved were both riled up and, thanks to being confined in our rooms, had time to get to work.

In terms of strategy, we were focused on mobilising students and also formulating a list of demands. While there was always a tension that people weren't necessarily at first engaging with the campaign, demands had to still be reflective of the whole campus student population. These came about through open meetings and social media polls. As Roseanne said, it was clear that primarily we wanted a substantial rent rebate for all students in halls. We were also calling the University to allow students to leave their contracts and move out of accommodation if they wanted. In light of what we were seeing with Chartwells, this all needed to happen using the University's resources and could not be the cause of any staff job losses.

With mobilising students, we were restricted to mainly using social media and relying on word of mouth. Out of the initial group of organisers, we set up several working groups to cover key aspects of the campaign. Our communications team (shout out to Daisy!) was amazing at creating posters and graphics which we then posted across various platforms and WhatsApp groups that had been set up across the accommodations. While there were scores of angry students, a lot of our organising work also relied on previous experience in activist circles. I think it's useful here to acknowledge that, especially in the fast-paced (and sometimes manic) environment of the strike, tight-knit activist circles can, paradoxically, be quite exclusionary spaces to those they purport to serve. This was something we were all very conscious of in terms of the language we were using and responsibilities we were asking people to undertake. I'm also sure though that some students felt this was all just too much and that prohibited them from participating in withholding rent.

And this, for me, is all to do with the fact that all our organising took place over Zoom. As Daisy said earlier, though we were nearly all living or working on the same campus, not being able to meet people in person was a real problem.

RS: Yes, while we tried to bring people together, trust was always very low. Students didn't know each other, and this made persuading them of the collective power we had in joint strike action quite hard. And for so many students, they had no experience of dealing with the university and so many were understandably scared of how the University might respond and were intimidated by their threatening emails. We sought a lot of (non-formal) legal advice and had the communications working group making resources to reassure people about their rights, which we shared widely. But I think this was a good example of how not being able to have face-to-face conversations has its limits. We just couldn't get past a lot of people's hesitancies.

This also meant that actually making strategic decisions was, at times, quite tricky. We were always working on the understanding that in order to have legitimacy in the eyes of the University, we needed to have as many voices as possible making the decisions in terms of

the direction of the campaign. We had good democratic structures in place and called public meetings for all students to attend to vote on proposals, but often we'd only get a handful of new people joining the Zooms and so in reality us organisers were left having to make the big calls.

BK: Yes, it was quite crushing when that happened. Though we reached over 700 rent strike sign-ups and spent a lot of time phoning students to ask them to come to the important meetings, somehow they just couldn't be persuaded to turn out in numbers. I think the most we had once was about 40 people on a call. When people did turn up, many also had their cameras off and didn't really engage. I should say this was also my experience of many Zoom seminars where academic tutors were left talking to blank screens of students - and so maybe this was more a general uncomfortableness of being online with relative strangers. But, nonetheless, it was still a real sticking point for us and our movement building.

DH: I think we really struggled with the formal aspect of organising. On the student side of things, none of us had any long term experience with organising a protest or action, let alone a campus-wide rent strike. It was a space to learn about organising, but also there was a limit to how much prep we could do and so, once we'd called the strike, it was very much learning as we went.

One thing for example we were really concerned about was to get media attention to the campaign because the University will always try and avoid reputational damage which could impact how prospective students feel about coming to Sussex. I know Billie was in touch with a few BBC journalists and those from local papers in the early stages of the strike, but again we just couldn't ever seem to cut through.

RHJ: You've talked about some of this already, but what have you learnt about engaging peers using digital organising and activism tactics, both the challenges and successes?

BK: Well, yes, social movements are nurtured through the ability to create personal relationships with people, which builds trust. Being confined to using digital media I think the odds were pretty much stacked against us. I mean, it's really important to distinguish the difference between using media to sustain relationships and using it to build relationships from scratch. Whilst I don't want to downplay the fact that the University made concessions, I can't help but wonder if we could have pushed for even more had we been able to build the movement in person which would have made it naturally stronger with more trusting relationships. At the end of the strike for example, we had to work out whether people were happy to give into the concessions by using an Instagram poll - where we couldn't be sure that every striker had voted nor that every voter was a striker.

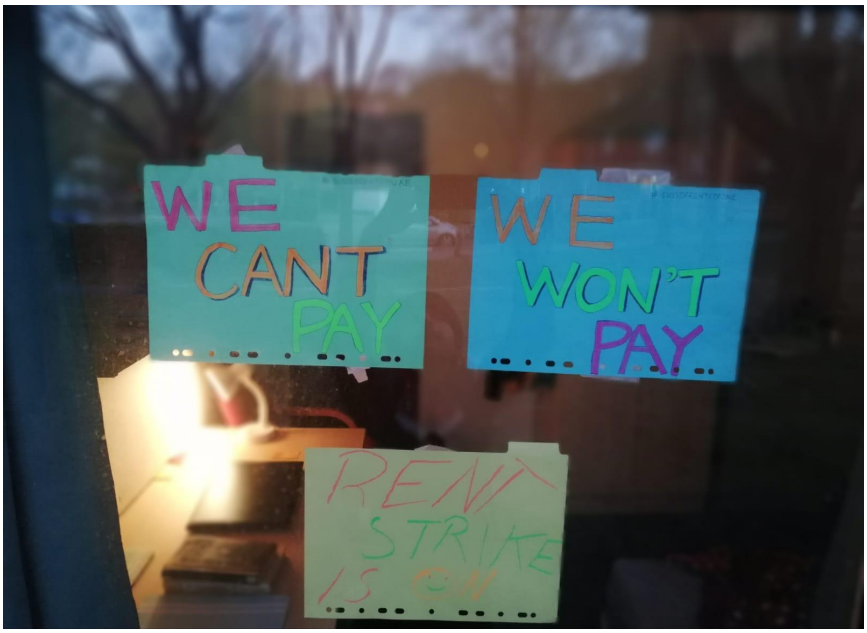
DH: Yes, that's maybe fair, but also, I think one of the things the Renters Union did quite well was social media engagement. For students generally, but particularly during the lockdown, social media became this refuge from the world but also a place to vent and focus anger and frustration. So, the Instagram and Twitter pages we used became an indispensable

resource that we used to spread our message of the rent strike, engage new students, and convey information to a massive student population. I attended a teach-out during the UCU strike last month that touched on the use of memes and online jokes to engage a new generation of activists. This was definitely something that SRU did, as well as the student movement in general. I think this works for several reasons, but mainly because our generation has lived through a number of crises (America's constant pursuit of imperialist war and encroaching ecological collapse, to name a few) and a quick, easily digestible joke is the best way to get information across. This does have some drawbacks, that we definitely struggled with, specifically: how can you translate online engagement into actual action? It's difficult now, as pandemic restrictions are lifted in the UK, to get social media likes to people at an organising meeting, but trying to convince strangers over an Instagram story to withhold rent and risk eviction or disruptions to their degrees? I'm not sure we ever found a comfortable or reliable answer to this problem. Our main response was to make our messaging as personable as possible and to hold regular open assemblies and check-in meetings via Zoom so students could see who had started organising the strike and had people to talk to – I think this was massively beneficial.

RS: Drawing on that, I think when the pictures of the rent strike signs displayed in student accommodation windows started circulating, both on social media and within the national media, they were really important for getting students listened to. They were the only means of making a visual protest. But, on the other hand, they also felt really bleak to look at. For me, they displayed just how isolated everyone was. It showed what was missing in that time: connection, making friends and building trust with one another. Something that is hard to overcome, however convenient digital organising might seem.

Figure 5

Handmade posters stuck on a window in campus accommodation say: We Can't Pay, We Won't Pay, Rent Strike is On! **Photo by Haris Jamil**



RHJ: How can we ensure that the knowledge gained from this rent strike and the SRU is passed on to new activists and students?

DH: I'm a big fan of archiving. I sort of stumbled into it in my new job at the Students' Union at Sussex, and it's become a useful tool for engaging new students, those on the outskirts of the activist circles on campus, with the general student movement. Like Roseanne said, rent strikes in particular have a long and successful history at Sussex. I helped organise an exhibition about the history of student activism at Sussex a few months ago, with a section dedicated to rent strikes and occupations.

It was one of the best coming-togethers of students that I've seen whilst I was at university, like the support and the networks that were laid, and the things that we managed to do. As a group, it's something that I'm really proud of, despite all of the draining work that went into it and how exhausted I think we all felt near the end, it was still like a really, really cool thing to be involved with. I'm really proud to have been able to help in some capacity. Posters and leaflets to do with our rent strike have already been filed in our archives and records.

HJ: Almost one and a half years of a rent strike has created lots of activists who are now involved in various different campaign organisations, including the Students' Union. Many students are working with other students and local Brighton residents on loads of issues. Since after the rent strike there is now a new culture of resistance and campaigning that has developed among the student body at Sussex. I feel that many students now recognise activism, campaigning, and strikes as important tools to be used against the status quo. The SRU as a campaigning body has emerged out of these strikes and it is not just active to protect the rights of students as renters, but also offers a platform full of resources and knowledge for new activists at Sussex to use.

BK: Right, and more specifically, the whole point of setting up the SRU has been to build a campaign that involves a whole raft of people from across the university so that we can stop the management exploiting students who pass through Sussex accommodation not knowing the ludicrousness of both rent increases and the decline in quality. The reason these campaigns in universities are so hard to pull off is because students running them today will not see the benefits of them and so are understandably less inclined to get involved. What we need to be doing is finding the future leaders of these campaign groups so that the SRU can lead sustained campaigns which in 10 or 15 years will see Universities bowing to pressure. University managements have the upper hand in being able to plan decades in advance - the only way we can really turn the tide is by matching these timeframes in our campaign planning.

RHJ: What would you consider the most successful or important tactics out of the different organising tactics deployed? What would you like to see in the future of student housing?

RS: For me, I think holding the knowledge of students and staff who had done this work historically and fought for the same things on the very same campus, and sharing it with

others through organising the rent strike was very important. Understanding that staff working conditions and students' studying conditions are inextricably linked was super important for taking on the university management. From attending the online rallies to helping us students understand the longer-term picture of accommodation on campus and getting facts and figures to take to management, many staff within the UCU and other trade unions have stood by students in solidarity with this action. I first found out about this journal (RHJ) because of a dear tutor, and brilliant geographer, Josie Jolley, whom I reached out to for advice on the affordable housing campaign back in 2018. She has tragically passed away now, but her memory and work to make Sussex a better place won't be lost or forgotten. In her words: if Sussex truly wants to 'dare to be different', and 'pioneering', then it should embrace its radicalism and put its money where its mouth is to pioneer sustainable alternatives to the present neoliberal model. Living and studying in a higher education institution in the UK is a massive privilege, but it really shouldn't be. Fighting for better housing necessarily feeds into the fight for free education that is inspiring, experimental and radical.

BK: Gosh, that's quite a tricky thing to answer because, really, it's the combination of everything and persistent trial and error knowing that every campaign is unique which has got us to where we are today. But, fundamentally, the most important thing is to always be listening. In terms of mobilising students, the hours we spent phoning every single striker to try and show them that behind the social media posts we were real students just like them was probably the most important thing we did. Also, holding open Zoom calls where people could come and just check-in with one another was also really important for trying to build that sense of community amongst strikers. I've got to say, I was hesitant to go along with both of these plans to start with but was happy to be persuaded.

And I think nationally, too, getting in touch with other universities' rent strike organisations and listening to advice and concerns made a huge impact on our success. At the end of the day, the issues we face at Sussex are similar to those being faced by students in every university across the country. The neoliberalisation of higher education in the UK means that we are all fighting the same battles. Though we need to be able to adapt tactics and strategies to the specific situations in each of our own universities, the way we sustain these campaigns is by recognising that we are all part of one big movement. This is how we achieve our ultimate goal of ensuring that universities are places which above all prioritise our education - whilst also providing affordable and good quality accommodation.

Learn more about the Sussex Renters' Union via Twitter **(@SussexRU)** and Instagram **(@sussexrentersunion).**

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