

# CAN'T PAY, WON'T PAY

**RENT STRIKING DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS**

A HANDBOOK BY RENT STRIKE



# P R E A M B L E

**This handbook was produced by the RENT STRIKE collective in April 2020 in response to the Covid-19 crisis.** It is designed specifically to assist students to go on rent strike as a means to win rent suspensions or cuts in response to the financial difficulties the Covid-19 crisis has caused for tenants. It examines case studies of students that have already gone on rent strike due to the crisis, gives advice on how to maintain a strike and solidarity, as well as do crucial outreach, in a time of national lockdown, and more. While it is largely directed at students in university halls — whether privately-owned or university provided — much of this will be relevant to those renting in the private sector (for example, through a particular lettings agent) with minimal translation.

Clearly, this handbook is playing catch-up. Students from all across the UK are already organising rent strikes — often out of sheer necessity — due to the ongoing crisis. The aim of this handbook then, is not just to facilitate more strikes, **but also to bring all the existing strikes into articulation with one another**: to charge each particular strike with a significance beyond itself, a collective power. For we don't just strike for ourselves. Buried within every rent strike is not just the hatred of a particular landlord, but the property-owning class *in itself, as a whole*. Exposing this part-in-the-whole and the whole-in-the-part is what unleashes class consciousness, *the* necessary condition for the building of class power, and ultimately the overthrow of capitalism.

What does this mean, practically? First, share this handbook with anyone you know who's interested. Second, read it, and use its tips. Third, [reach out to us](#) or the local strikes referenced in this handbook for help. Fourth, realise you're not striking for your "self", but your class, for renters. Then go back to the first step.

Good luck. As the old RENT STRIKE slogan goes: *The future will contain what we put into it today: see you soon.*

*RENT STRIKE is a national collective of student housing campaigns and activists based in the UK. The collective was formed in summer 2016 after the successful UCL rent strike which won £1.5 million in concessions. Since then, we have promoted and supported the tactics of rent strikes and other collective direct action as means to radically tackle the housing crisis, cut rents, and improve living conditions. For a full timeline of RENT STRIKE's existence, see: [www.rent-strike.org/universities](http://www.rent-strike.org/universities)*

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*Cover Image: "Alone We Are Powerless, Together We Are Strong", [Red Women's Workshop](#), 1976.  
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# THE SUPPLY SQUARE.

BRISTOL

PLYMOUTH

SURREY

UoL

SOAS

# A wave of rent strikes in UK universities has already begun. It's time to spread it further...

If you're interested in taking action over the housing and renting crisis that Covid-19 has caused, you don't have to look far for inspiration: **students across the UK are already doing it, and already winning**. What's more, they're probably more useful examples than other rent strikes from the past, because they have all been organised under the unique lockdown conditions that the Covid-19 crisis has engendered, prohibiting the usual methods used to organise a strike such as door-knocking, leafletting, and demonstrations. This, naturally, has presented its own advantages and difficulties. So here's the warts and all, non-exhaustive picture of the direct action being taken at the moment in UK universities over rent, as far as we know at the time of writing...

## SOAS

Around 150 residents at a SOAS halls of residence in London, Dinwiddy House, [announced in March](#) that they would be withholding their rent until the third term's rent payment was cancelled. The rent strike is directed against Sanctuary Students, a private student accommodation provider that provides halls for SOAS students. While Sanctuary have reduced the cleaning services at Dinwiddy, and many students are under substantial financial duress, they are still expecting full rent payments as normal. This is also despite the fact that many universities, such as UCL, Durham, and [Lincoln](#), as well as private accommodation providers such as Unite Students and iQ, have cancelled the third term's payment (either for everyone, or just for those who have left their contract).

As of writing, the group has had no response from Sanctuary Students, and the strike is still going ahead, withholding hundreds of thousands of pounds from Sanctuary in the process. The strike is organised through a large group chat, with a smaller number of students and students' union officers taking the lead on designing sample emails that strikers can send to Sanctuary to put pressure on them. According to an organiser of the strike, spirits are high and a "good sense of solidarity" exists among the group. All power to them!

## SURREY

After an [anonymous post](#) on the university's "confession" page on Facebook advocated a rent strike, a Google Forms [pledge form](#) was created by pre-existing activist group [Surrey, Cut the Rent](#) which garnered 300 pledges to strike within 48 hours. The two demands of the strikers were simple: cancel the third term rent payment for everyone, and not subject any strikers to legal or academic sanctions. Unlike at SOAS, the strikers lived in university-managed, not private, halls.

As of writing, the threatened strike at Surrey has had mixed results. As a result of the group's pressure, university management announced within a few days that it would be allowing students to withdraw early from their accommodation contract and not pay the third term's rent. While this was a **partial win for the strike**, it also nullified its power, breaking the strikers into those who could stay in university accommodation v.s. those who could not. The majority of strikers had already left university accommodation and thus took up the university's offer, leaving behind those who had to stay in university accommodation to fend for themselves. Evidently, the lockdown conditions inhibited the group from building a proper network of solidarity and care, or a genuine collective interest, preventing the strike from achieving its demand of a cancelled third term payment *for everyone*.

## PLYMOUTH

Students have recently announced an exciting and ambitious rent strike being organised across the four universities in Plymouth, in both university-owned and privately-run student accommodation, as well as some lettings agencies. [A Facebook group](#), now with over 400 members, was set up,

and now the group has a [manifesto](#), [website](#), and [press coverage](#) in the local newspaper. The group have done lots of outreach, contacting the Plymouth branch of Solidarity Federation, MPs and local media outlets.

So far, the campaign has had some success with the universities, who have cancelled the third term's rent, but are still fighting to get the private providers to cancel the payment. Solidarity, Plymouth!



A rent strike banner from the current Bristol strike

## BRISTOL

In Bristol, the rent strike is different from the rest, in that rather than targeting university accommodation, it's targeting a private student lettings agency called [Digs](#).

The impetus for this strike was an email from Digs, sent to all their student tenants, explaining that they had to pay rent no matter what the situation with their student loans were and the effect that Covid-19 was having on their finances. This angered a great many tenants, and organisers of the strike could see that the atmosphere was right for calling for further action, due to the number of posts they saw online, particularly on university

confessions pages, expressing anger at the situation.

Consequently, organisers from [Bristol Cut The Rent](#) set up and distributed a 'sign up to strike' Google Form, which was posted on every social media account they had access to, all the university Facebook groups they could find, and the university confessions page, in order to reach Digs renters. 130 people signed up to strike in 4 days!

Importantly, they asked for all the strikers for their phone numbers (as well as emails), so they could set up a Whatsapp group for all of them to keep in contact and further organise. This was really important for growing the sense of community between striking tenants, doing media callouts, and also providing a space where they could collectively write responses to Digs and our landlords.

The final key thing that is currently helping the strike grow is the media interest. Organisers have reached out to as many media contacts as they possibly can, to get the story out there locally in Bristol and nationally. This is really helping put pressure on landlords and the letting agency and helping the campaign grow and succeed!

## UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

A rent strike has been organised in UoL's intercollegiate halls, by activists in and around a group called ['Liberate the University'](#). The strike was originally organised in order to fight against their exploitative policy of charging students who were unable to remove their belongings from their rooms during this time of crisis.

Organisers have utilised existing organisational structures within their group, with activists split into **working groups** focusing on research, outreach and direct action. This division of roles has allowed them to move swiftly with a social media campaign, whilst simultaneously contacting residents and various journalists about the campaign. Emphasis has been put onto the press work, in order to adapt to the unique circumstances of the quarantine and accept that - without possibility of physical demonstrations - it is essential to make use of press attention to put pressure on the university.

It has been harder to gain traction than it would be in person, but they've been contacting people directly who seem sympathetic on halls group chats and have had some success. Only a few days into their rent strike they've **already forced UoL to amend their policy to only charge residents a storage fee rather than their full rent** - this change was only communicated after a journalist asked them for comment, to which they responded by telling him this had always been their policy, despite both them and the journalist having screenshot evidence that this was not the case. You can keep up to date with their campaign [here](#).

# What are your demands?

It will be very difficult to maintain a strike and keep it focused if you don't have a clear idea of what you're fighting for (not just against). Before you start organising your rent strike, therefore, think about why you are doing it and what you want out of it. Talk to others who are interested in striking and listen to their particular struggles. Many people will want to strike because they don't want to pay for their accommodation while they're in lockdown somewhere else; others will want to strike because they have lost their job but cannot leave the accommodation as they have, for example, an abusive or unsafe home/family environment. These diverse needs need to be taken into account when formulating your demands.

Once your demands have been settled, make sure you are clear in communicating your demands, not just to management but also to new strikers. If you can clearly communicate how your demands are connected you can use them to build solidarity between the groups of students who are joining the rent strike for different reasons.

**Below we've set out a set of template demands** that you might find useful to build your strike around, based on what the campaigns covered in the previous section have demanded. Remember that this is only a template; add or subtract whatever you feel like depending on the local particularities of your strike. Many local groups contain these demands within a longer open letter that they send publicly to their accommodation provider, which lays out the specifics of their situation. (Examples of these are below.)

*We, students at [your university name] in [your halls/accommodation provider], are announcing today that we will be going on rent strike starting from xxxx, unless or until our demands are met. These five demands are:*

- 1. Cancellation of rent at all halls, both university and private, for all students, for the remainder of the academic year 2019-2020.*
- 2. Give students who are self-isolating in their halls the freedom to remain without the burden of rent.*
- 3. To offer all students a no-penalty early release clause from their tenancy contracts, for both this, and the next, academic years.*
- 4. End all evictions for the duration of the crisis, not just a slow down on the eviction process.*
- 5. That the university make no attempt at punishing or reprimanding the strikers legally or academically.*

For examples of other rent strike demands, click the following hyperlinks: [Surrey](#), [SOAS](#), [Plymouth](#), [University of London](#).

## CALLING OFF THE STRIKE

Make sure that you collectively discuss at what point you will call off the strike, based on your demands. Rent striking requires you to balance the risks to your members and the gains you can make. Think about how many demands must be met and what point of escalation are you collectively unwilling to go to. Don't necessarily give up on your demands at the first hurdle or partial win, though!



# Organising in a lockdown

*Many of the normal strategies and tactics for organising and spreading a rent strike, such as halls' assemblies and door-knocking, simply aren't possible at the moment due to the pandemic. Like much of the organising currently happening around Covid-19 at the moment, that means we have to focus on online means of organising student tenants. Below we've included some of our top tips for doing so:*

## 1. GAUGE INTEREST ONLINE

Usually, rent strike organisers can door-knock halls and organise in-person halls assemblies to gauge interest for a strike, and start important conversations about our exploitation as tenants. However, given this is not possible, it is important to gauge interest through other methods. If you live in student halls and have a **halls' group chat** (or any other relevant large group chat), then send feelers out to these chats – ask how people feel about the current accommodation situation – do they think we should be being charged by the university for our third term rent? Would they be interested in rent striking over this or other issues?

If your university has one, then you can also send out these feeler questions in a post on your **university's confessions page**, and see what sort of response it garners. Not only will this assist you in understanding the current interest in a rent strike or other action around housing on your campus, it will also begin to place the idea in student tenants' minds, and make it easier to convince them to pledge to strike later on.

## 2. VIDEO CALL MEETINGS

When organising with others online, it can be tempting to do everything in a group messenger chat. Whilst this is good for small updates and decisions, it's hard to have proper discussion in them and many important points will be lost within them. **Try to have regular online calls with other organisers**, with an agenda for these meetings written before in a collective document (such as a google doc). You should also have someone chosen as the chair of the meeting beforehand, who can moderate discussion.

It is also useful to have a **legend** for facilitating the meetings, to ensure people aren't talking over each other (e.g. send "1" to the chat if you want to make a point, "2" if you want to respond to a point, "C" for clarification, "+" if you agree, etc.) These meetings will not only be more constructive, but they will be good for helping maintain organiser morale – it's always nice to see your friends' faces when you're stuck inside! Zoom and Jitsi are easy to use video call platforms you can use for these meetings.





### 3. CREATE AN ONLINE FORM

Not only is this important for collecting contact details of rent strikers, but **an online form is simple resource to spread round social media and various student group chats**. It also ensures you can collate information on which halls have large numbers of sign ups and which need more outreach work.

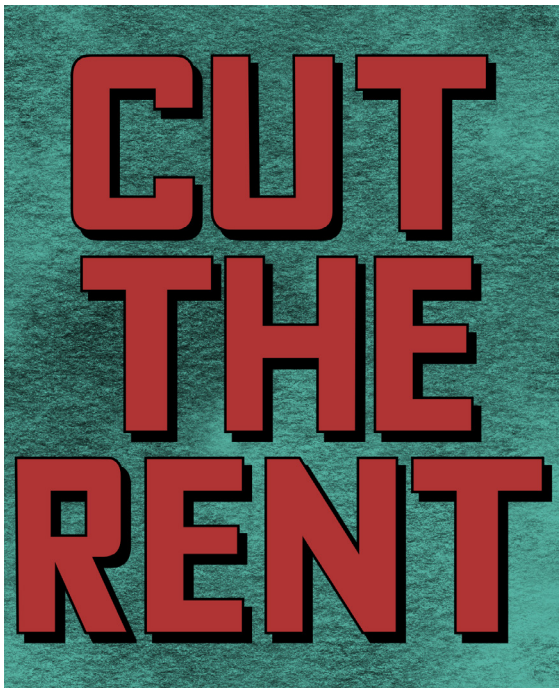
Another benefit of using an online form, rather than a petition or other document, is **it can include the majority of vital information within it**, which prevents you from having to write long messages and social media posts, that will probably be ignored by potential rent strikers. Always ensure the responses to these online forms are only viewable by the organisers of the rent strike – most rent strike groups use Google Docs/Forms in order to do this. Online sign-up forms usually ask for the following information:

1. Email address
2. Phone number
3. Halls of Residence
4. Are you willing to join the rent strike and withhold your third term rent?
5. Do you consent to being contacted with updates about the campaign?
6. Do you have any other information you believe is important for the organisers to know?

### 4. SPREAD THE FORM EVERYWHERE

**Post it regularly in any and all halls group chats you can find of.** If you don't live in halls, then contact someone you know who is to post it for you, and get them to message their friends in other student halls to do the same. **Freshers'/course group chats** are also extremely useful for spreading the sign-up form, as well as any general university facebook groups. If you have a university confessions page, be sure to post the sign-up form there with a short description at least every one or two days. Be sure in all messages and social media posts to encourage signees to share the form with all their flatmates/friends/etc.

If your university has any associated **big social media pages, such as a meme page, message them to see if they'll share the form** (and maybe even make a meme about the strike to send over and sweeten the deal). Make a collective spreadsheet of all the union societies and campaign groups at your university, and go through and message them all, asking them to post the form on their social media and/or spread round their membership, and note down in the spreadsheet which societies have been contacted and what their responses were.



## 5. AESTHETIC SOCIAL MEDIA

Have public facing social media accounts to share the sign-up form on, as well as any updates on the campaign. **Think about where you're audience will be**, and be sure to pay extra attention to maintaining social media presence on these platforms - for instance, if most people on your campus use Instagram, then be sure to post at least a couple of Instagram stories every day about the strike.

**Accompany all these posts with cool graphics.** Think about your audience - what will appeal to them? Remember that red and black anarcho-punk aesthetics might not be appealing to the majority of student tenants! Don't know how to do graphic design? Ask around and find a mate who does, or re-appropriate editable designs from [www.rent-strike.org/aesthetics](http://www.rent-strike.org/aesthetics). Some of these are shown below.

## 6. PHONEBANK

Maintaining numbers of the strike is important. There may be a good number of people who sign up and forget to cancel their direct debit for rent, or might not be sure if the strike is still going ahead. Use the phone numbers you've collected from the sign-up form and distribute them amongst the organisers. **Write a call script, and call every number, reminding them to not pay their next rent instalment**, and answer any questions they may have about the strike. This will ensure you have the highest possible turnout.

## 7. ONLINE ACTIONS

Just because you're stuck inside doesn't mean you can't build on the leverage you've created with the strike. Online actions could include **writing a template email that all strikers and supporters can mass email to the university** accommodation officer, or leaving mass bad reviews of the university online. Also utilise the attention the strike will gain by getting in contact with the press - having a press release ready to send off on day one is extremely useful!

JOIN THE [RENT-STRIKE.ORG](http://RENT-STRIKE.ORG)



# MAINTAINING

# SOLIDARITY

*In these times of crisis, it might be easy to find lots of individual students enthusiastic about rent striking. The difficult part, however, is turning these individuals into a collective, bound together by solidarity and care for one another. Building this community will be key to winning your strike - but in these times of lockdown, this will be extra difficult. So here are some tips for building solidarity in these difficult times...*

## Form a solidarity group

Maintaining solidarity is key to winning the strike. Especially during the lockdown, student tenants' may be feeling extra vulnerable and isolated – an online solidarity group (on Facebook or another platform) is a good way of countering this! Not only will this allow strikers to keep in touch and socialise with each other, but it can also double up as a mutual aid group to help residents with any problems they have over the coming months, which in turn will only make the solidarity of the community stronger!

Activities could include running groceries or medication to vulnerable or immunocompromised strikers or providing a friendly, listening ear and emotional support to those who feel isolated or overwhelmed by the crisis.

## Maintain contact with the strikers

Once you've collected the contact details of tenants' willing to strike, keep in contact with them, letting them know how negotiations are going and what's generally going on around the strike. Happy updates from other campaigns round the country are sure to also be appreciated and help maintain the morale of the strikers.

Invite strikers to open organising video-call meetings (using platforms such as Zoom, Jitsi, or Skype), and maybe even organise online social events (like a video-call pub quiz, an online house party, etc.). This will help build solidarity between strikers and make it harder for the university to try and get strikers to capitulate. Whilst ensuring you're keeping in contact with strikers, try not to inundate them with emails, as they will stop opening them if you do so.

In all seriousness, just have some fun with it: do whatever fucking weird online social activity that pops into your head. At the very least you'll have a good evening during some pretty miserable lockdown conditions, and potentially meet some new friends/comrades. Building the organisation and the community is just as important as reaching the goal itself.

# Other resources

## resources for students

- Students at Cambridge are compiling a **survey of UK universities' responses** to the Covid-19 crisis, in relation to their accommodation policies. This has some really useful information on what other universities have done, and let you know what you can expect and demand in any potential student Covid-19 rent strike. [Click here to see the results so far.](#)
- The **National Union of Students (NUS)** has laid out 5 demands to the government over the current crisis [here](#). It also contains some email addresses for people at NUS, should you want to contact them about your campaign.

## resources for private renters

- The **London Renters Union (LRU)** have produced some resources about what your rights are as a tenant during the current crisis, [which can be seen here](#). If you live in London, you can also contact them via that page, and we also strongly urge you to [join them as a member here](#). Membership is pay what you can afford starting from £4/month, or free if you are unwaged and cannot afford to pay.
- The community and tenants' union **ACORN** has also been organising Covid-19 community support throughout its local branches in Brighton, Bristol, Nottingham, Manchester, Sheffield, Leeds, Lancaster, and Newcastle. If you live in these areas and need support, [contact them here](#). If you live in these areas and can offer volunteer support, you can also sign up to volunteer through that link. You can also join ACORN [here](#).
- For those living in Scotland, the **tenants' union Living Rent** have been organising a Coronavirus Community Support scheme. You can see details of this, and sign up for help or to volunteer, [here](#). You can also join Living Rent here for as little as £3/month [here](#).
- The housing charity **Shelter** has an extensive list of advice for those with housing problems at the moment [here](#). For those living in Scotland, [see here](#).
- If you live in Bristol the Facebook group for the planned city-wide rent strike is [here](#).
- If you live outside the areas covered in the list above, you can contact ACORN or Living Rent about setting up a new branch in your locality, contact Shelter for advice, or try and start up your own rent strike campaign using some of the tips from this handbook and elsewhere.
- Massively detailed Covid-19 Organising Guide has been produced by the **Philadelphia Tenants Union** [here](#). An amazing resource, check it out!

## misc.

- Cool little list of the various strikes (rent strikes, prison strikes, labour strikes, and academic/tuition fee strikes) going on around the world due to the Covid-19 crisis [here](#)
- American magazine **The New Inquiry** has produced a huge webpage of rent strike resources [here](#), featuring a list of example demands, letters to landlords, petitions, and other organising resources from both the US and the UK.

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