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By E.P. Milligan
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University and College Union moves to prevent strikes as COVID-19 cases surge on UK campuses

Northumbria University in Newcastle moved to temporary online learning Wednesday, following an emergency call for an industrial action ballot by lecturers and staff.

The proposed strike was in opposition to the disastrous and homicidal conditions of the reopening of universities amid the coronavirus pandemic. The University of Newcastle followed suit, with both universities imposing distance learning measures for three weeks.

The two universities combined have recorded over 1,600 confirmed cases of COVID-19 among students and staff.

Newcastle upon Tyne, located in England's North East, is one of the areas hardest hit by COVID-19 in the country, with 1,227 new cases in the city in the seven days to October 5. Manchester University, Manchester Metropolitan, Sheffield University, Sheffield Hallam, and Exeter universities have also been forced to scuttle their lecture hall teaching plans and moved to online learning.

Northumbria University's decision to move online prompted the University and College Union (UCU) leadership to ditch within 24 hours its members' unanimous October 7 vote to ballot for strike action. Immediately following the vote, UCU General Secretary Jo Grady commented, "Our members do not want to take industrial action, but this is a matter of life and death. Unless the university changes course immediately, and moves to online learning as the default position, we will be balloting for industrial action." When university management moved to online learning, the UCU called off organizing a strike ballot.



One of the accommodation blocks (left) at Manchester Metropolitan University's Birley campus where dozens of students are locked down and in self-isolation after being infected with COVID-19

Grady's position is disingenuous. The UCU knew full well the [deadly situation](#) lecturers and students faced once back on campus. University staff at Leeds, Birmingham and Warwick have also called for strike ballots over safety concerns. Despite these demands from the rank and file, the UCU refuses to call for a coordinated nationwide stoppage, leaving potential industrial action by staff isolated on a local basis.

Union officials made no serious issue out of the temporary character of the move to online learning. UCU North East regional official Iain Owens spoke only of the "need to fully consult with unions before any return to in-person teaching, and not rush to get staff and students back onto campus."

The prevention of strike action by the UCU leadership comes on the heels of their [abandonment](#) of any defence of university staff pensions.

After a temporary lull over recent months—due to the national lockdown in place from March 23 to June 24—coronavirus cases have rocketed out of control. The spike in the pandemic was accelerated by the reopening of schools and universities across the country last month. As of Thursday, over 9,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19 had been reported among students and staff at 95 UK universities, almost double the number reported 24 hours earlier.

The situation at the universities is part of a nationwide surge that has seen almost 73,000 new confirmed cases from Monday through Friday this week, and 411 deaths recorded in hospitals. Coronavirus-related hospitalisations have reached their highest level since early June.

Hundreds of thousands of students across the country are stuck in high-risk conditions. Some students at Manchester University have been placed in intensive care, with health officials claiming that over half of the city's cases have affected those aged between 17 and 21.

The epicenters of new coronavirus cases in Britain all correlate with concentrations of student housing. On Friday, the *Times* published data which classed locations as "student areas" if they contained a campus, or if more than half the ward-sized "output areas" were described as student-dominated by the Office for National Statistics. It found that in 18 student areas more than one percent of the population had tested positive for COVID-19. In some student districts, the rate was up to 5 percent. "In Fallowfield Central in Manchester, one in 20 of the entire population tested positive for the virus in the week to October 2." This equates to a staggering infection rate of almost 5,000 cases for every 100,000 people. This scale of infection is over seven times higher than the rate in Nottingham, which this week recorded the UK's highest whole-area rate with 689 cases per 100,000.

The five highest concentrations in Scotland by neighborhood—Dalkeith Road (Edinburgh), Glasgow City Centre east, Meadows (Edinburgh), Old Aberdeen, and Old Town Edinburgh—all host significant student populations.

If another country records a rate of 20 people infected per 100,000, visitors returning from there must quarantine for 14 days in Britain.

The crisis in the universities stands as an indictment of the Johnson government's reopening of the economy, driven by its homicidal herd immunity policy. At the recommendation of the government, campuses reopened while boasting of "comprehensive" and "innovative" mixed-learning programs consisting of both face-to-face as well as online courses. Hundreds of thousands of young people were rushed into densely populated, university-owned student housing, with little regard for their safety and well-being. At the outset of the resurgence of case numbers, students were forcibly confined in university housing, often completely dependent on the university administration to deliver food and other essential items—all while the rest of the campus continued with business as usual.

At present, only seven universities in the UK have shut down in favor of online learning—with 88 universities still fully operating despite having confirmed cases. The high rate of transmission observed over the past week (student cases in Aberdeen more than doubled in

the week to Thursday from 62 to 142), indicates that university campuses will remain high-risk areas.

The majority of university administrations have intransigently refused to move to online learning, even as a deadly virus ripped through their campuses. Administrators have fought tooth and nail to prevent campus closures in the interest of continuing to collect tuition fees, rent from housing, and other associated fees—putting students, staff, and the surrounding communities in harm's way.

Thousands of students who have been ordered into self-isolation live in prison-like conditions. According to the *Guardian*, university administrations have in some cases taken extreme measures such as locking fire doors, hiring private security patrols, and even using guard dogs. Students found violating lockdown conditions can potentially face expulsion as well as fines of up to £500. To add insult to injury, university management have scapegoated students for causing the outbreak, slandering them as irresponsible to deflect blame from their own policies.

University administrations have also attempted to take advantage of students' vulnerability under quarantine. Over 1,000 people signed a petition denouncing Lancaster University's administration for profiting on food deliveries to self-isolating students. According to the petition, the university is currently charging 600 students £17.95 per day for ingredients amounting to less than £3 per portion. Students' daily rations consist of a cold breakfast, cold lunch, and a pre-packed microwavable dinner.

Students nationwide have expressed outrage at the conditions imposed on them, speaking out on social media platforms as well as putting signs of protest in their windows. At the Murano Street Student Village in Glasgow, where students are currently held under lock-and-key, one sign protested, "Students Not Criminals."

Yesterday, Bristol University was the latest to impose a lockdown, with 300 students told to self-isolate in their flats after 40 coronavirus cases were found at one hall of residence. In all, 254 students and three staff have tested positive.

The Socialist Equality Party has established the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee to oppose the unsafe return to schools, universities, and colleges. Teachers, lecturers, and students are invited to share your experiences since returning to schools and campuses by attending our next [online meeting](#) on Saturday October 10 at 2 pm.

10 October 2020