

LIVERPOOL ANARCHIST



MANCHESTER STUDENTS' RENT STRIKE VICTORY

Recently around 200 students withheld their rent at the University of Manchester. They were locked inside their blocks, after being lured into living at the university with the promise of safe in-person teaching. A revolt followed, with students tearing down fences that were erected around their blocks! Nine students also occupied a disused 19-story accommodation block. Why that many rooms, which they described as an “upgrade”, are empty while so many sleep rough is a mystery only capitalism can explain. While the occupation was largely symbolic, it did a great deal to raise awareness, and thus harm the reputation of the university.

Initially they were offered a measly 5% rent reduction in return for an end to the strike. The *Student Union* fell over themselves to accept this offer, but since *UoM Rent Strike* and *9K 4 WHAT?* actually organised the strike the union was ignored. In the end their persistence won an impressive 30% reduction for the first term! Roughly £600-900 for *every* student, not just those that participated. This is being proclaimed as the biggest victory to ever come out of a student rent strike. The strike is set to carry on

into January unless a similar concession is gained for the whole year. They were following in the footsteps of 1,400 Bristol students, and it looks like it's spreading across the country with strikes breaking out from Newcastle to Brighton. Hopefully it continues to spread, and outside of the more expensive “elite” universities. An education in direct action is worth far more than any university degree.

In contrast, at the University of Liverpool, as of December 6th, the pathetic *Student Union* are merely petitioning management to “Refund the Rent”. While one demand has been won (the right to cancel contracts) this is undoubtedly an attempt from management to avoid the outbreak of a strike. If students want a rent strike they will have to do it themselves.

Obviously the vast majority of us aren't students, so why should we care? Perhaps most importantly helping them is the right thing to do. Solidarity goes both ways - for example students helped the Abercromby rent strikers in 1969 - we shouldn't expect support if we aren't willing to give it. Furthermore, student accommodation often ends up forcing local working class people to move out due to increased rent costs (gentrification); if students can get rent cuts this process might be slowed down or even reversed.

Crucially, we should be trying to learn from their example. Direct action can help us keep our livelihood and liberty. The basics of rent strikes are quite simple: convincing people to start and continue withholding their rent, resisting evictions and using other forms of direct action such as occupations in support. Obviously they are easier to organise for students living in halls, but this should also apply for some blocks of flats or council estates. There is also no need for “paid professionals”, looking to fund their salaries, to organise on our behalf. No one is saying it's easy or we are guaranteed a victory, but if freshers can manage to organise a rent strike, then why can't we? •

THE 1972 KIRKBY RENT STRIKE

In 1972 the national *Housing Finance Act* (HFA) raised the rents of council houses. There was national opposition, particularly strong in Liverpool, where in September twenty tenants' associations agreed to withhold rents. The strike spread through existing tenants' associations, "Fair Rents" Action Committees and mass meetings. They were supported by a new alternative media including the *Scottie Press*, *Liverpool Free News* and, in particular, *Big Flame*. Tenants also burnt rent bills, organised protests and disrupted council meetings. By October rent strikes had broken out in Birkenhead, Bootle, Cantril Farm, Huyton, Everton-Scotland Road, St. Helens and Warrington. These strikes were partial rather than total, just withholding the increase in rent.

The response was different in Kirkby, where a number of tenants had been involved in the 1969 Abercromby Rent Strike. In Tower Hills a mass meeting of 450 tenants agreed to a total rent strike, forming a group called *THURAG* with representatives for each street and block. In October, 1,475 Kirkby tenants withheld their rent completely. The "Over the Bridge" group, one of eight associations in Scotland Road, was alone in joining Kirkby, with almost complete support from their 570 residents. The total rent strikers proved far more resilient than their counterparts, and by March 1973 were effectively alone.

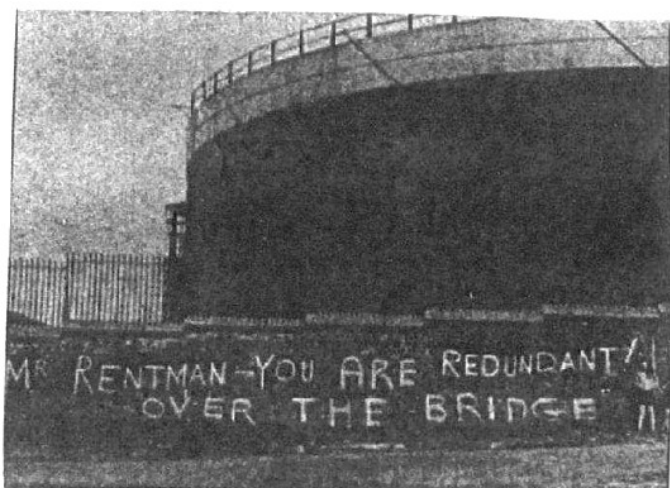
From the get-go housewives and the unemployed formed flying pickets in Kirkby to



"follow" rent collectors. Both Tower Hills and "Over the Bridge" quickly became no-go areas for bailiffs. On November 10th over 900 tenants resisted an eviction in Tower Hills. 50 tenants surrounded their home, while the rest sealed off the estate to all traffic. When *THURAG*'s spokesperson was threatened with an eviction, 400 tenants travelled from "Over the Bridge" to defend him. Preparations were made with a telephone tree setup to sound WW2 sirens, an assembly point and volunteer patrols. Community spirit flourished with a tenants community centre, weekly newsletter and an estate-wide party on the night of the strike's anniversary.

By June 1973, despite its small size, Kirkby council had the third highest rent arrears in the country. By October, Tower Hills managed to spread the strike to the Northwood estate and Croxteth, despite the fact that at this point rent strike was clearly in remission. They ignored court summons and decided to continue fighting their "own way." On December 6th, two strikers were arrested in their homes for contempt of court and taken to Walton Jail, where they received a warm welcome from the inmates. Within a few hours roadblocks were set up around the town and four industrial strikes broke out. That evening tenants from across Merseyside picketed the jail, while the frightened authorities stockpiled anti-riot gear. On the 21st, with five more arrested, Tower Hills agreed to end the strike by majority vote in exchange for "no more legal action." On the same day the strike ended in Oldham, followed by the remnants of the strike in Liverpool, Merseyside and Sheffield within a month.

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Unlike the successes of the 1968 and 1969 rent strikes, the 1972 strike ended after its last bastion fell with no material gains. While it's not worth overstating its failure, after all they only had to repay the rent and prisoners were released, it is worth reflecting on why the strike failed.

Promises from local Labour councils to refuse to implement the HFA came to nothing, meanwhile they urged non-payment and issued eviction notices. Due to faith in the Labour Party many tenants' associations, including the only real national association, were surprised when these promises didn't materialise and so were slow to respond. The overwhelming majority of associations also opted for partial strikes, which are less disruptive, yet appear more legitimate and "fair" to their masters. In contrast, *THURAG* and "Over the Bridge" underwent a process of radicalisation and rejected Labour and the legitimacy of the state. It took 14 months until Tower Hills strikers were arrested – just imagine the state's reluctance if militant resistance had spread beyond Merseyside. Since the HFA was a national policy the tenants required a strong national response, but this never really got off the ground and where it did it pulled its punches.

On the other hand, there was not enough industrial resistance to the HFA. Unlike tenants, workers have the capacity to swiftly shut down the economy.

Nationally there was no real opposition from the unions. Locally there was industrial support for the rent strike at the beginning from *Ford's* and *Bird's Eye* workers, but both suffered layoffs due to their actions. Luckily all those workers were re-hired, with mothers from *THURAG* joining their picket lines for reinstatement. The arrests that broke Tower Hills happened a few days before the last payday prior to Christmas, in an attempt to undermine any industrial response. Despite strong support from the rank-and-file, the union hierarchy were also reluctant, failing to call meetings or refusing to support Tower Hills at the end due to technicalities.

It *is* possible to win national gains as tenants. The Poll Tax rebellion built a successful national movement for non-payment, while the 1915 Glasgow Rent Strike saw strong industrial support for tenants and won a national rent freeze. •



In India, 26th November 2020, 250 million workers walked out in the largest general strike the world has yet seen.

AFTER LANDLORDS

Resisting evictions, rent strikes and squatting are all means of improving our lives in the present, building solidarity and exposing the injustice of the class divide. But these struggles can only bring partial and temporary victories until they escalate to the point of overturning the root cause: capitalism. Problems we face around housing are not simply due to callous landlords but are a product of an economic system based on private property and competition.

Currently houses are not resources distributed according to need, but property owned by people with the wealth to buy them. Those who cannot afford to buy a house must give much of their wage to a landlord. As well as being inherently exploitative, this hierarchy gives the landlord the power to impose arbitrary rules, increase rent, apply charges, get away with bullying and neglect, and ultimately evict the tenant from what has become their home. Those who cannot afford to pay rent will find themselves homeless, despite many houses remaining empty, an asset in someone's portfolio.

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In a free and equal society, houses would be built for living in, not for profit. They should be built to last – both functional and beautiful. The way we live could be transformed entirely, building collective housing that is eco-friendly, provides shared utilities, and includes spaces for communal meals and mutual child care, all under the direct democratic control of residents. But variety and choice must also be assured: many people value the privacy and seclusion of their own homes. We would not wish to find ourselves living in the state-administered concrete blocks of a Stalinist nightmare any more than the

dilapidated and insecure housing we survive in today.

So how can we achieve this? We must stop paying rents and mortgages, seize empty flats and hotels for redistribution and come together to self-manage and defend our own communities. Workers must also seize their workplaces and together we must abolish the state once and for all. Having a space of our own that cannot be taken away, in which we answer to no one, that we can curate to reflect our personality and support our individual needs, that we can keep to ourselves or share with others as we please, is something worth fighting for. •

BIRKENHEAD TEACHING ASSISTANTS REVERSE CUTS

15 teaching assistants and 6 play workers at Woodchurch Road Primary School were facing a 20% cut to their pay and hours. In October they voted 100% in favour of a one-day strike for December 3rd. Just a day before the proposed walkout, the cuts for play workers were scrapped and any decision regarding teaching assistants was postponed until July.

Often school workers feel hesitant to take strike action in case it harms their pupil's education. However, at an online meeting the workers received overwhelming community

support from over 2,000 viewers. At Woodchurch, the support staff rightfully pointed out that cuts are what harms children's futures not strikes. Given school is used to prepare children for the authoritarian world of work, seeing a strike might actually prove more beneficial.

In the future management will be better prepared. It's important that all the workers are willing to walk out together, to strike for longer than a day and to strike quickly rather than with a month's notice. Unions, in this case *Unison*, are likely to denounce these actions since they may be fined and workers could be fired. The salaries of union bureaucrats should not be our concern and workers can be fired for anything, which can be resisted by further strikes. You never know, maybe then they can start going on the offensive!



The *Liverpool Anarchist* is written by individual members of the Solidarity Federation, an anarcho-syndicalist union. We aim to publish monthly and welcome all contributions in accord with our basic ideas. We advocate working class direct action to improve our lives here and now while building a revolutionary movement to do away with capitalism, the state, and all other hierarchies.

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