



Organised rent strikes are a powerful tactic, but given the scale of the housing crisis, it is one that is under-used as a form of resistance against unaffordable rent rises. Landlords have always exploited the need for a

home, and use the threat of eviction to profiteer during periods of housing shortage.

Power to the Tenants

The use of rent strikes in 1891 helped win the Dockers' Strike in London's East End as part of a



wider civil unrest. However, probably the most famous use of rent strikes was initiated by women in the Clyde area of Glasgow during a housing shortage at the start of IWW. Landlords lost no time in racking up rents, but women who had been brought together in large numbers to work in munitions factories, organised strike committees and coordinated action involving around 20,000 tenants.

The strike was powerful enough to force then Prime Minister Lloyd-George to introduce legislation which returned rents to pre-war levels, as well changing the law on eviction. It has been

used periodically across the country since this time and almost always with success.

Students Make a Stand

Most recently, in 2016 and 2017 students at University College London (UCL) took rent strike action in high profile campaigns involving over 1,000 students. UCL's management was eventually forced to back down and the students won a range of concessions



including rent freezes, and accommodation bursaries for the disadvantaged. The NUS has subsequently attempted to build on this tactic organising rent strike workshops in 25 UK universities at freshers fairs in 2016. They are seeking resist rises in campus rents of around 18% in two years.

One Housing Group

In 2016 we also saw the first use of this threat within a housing association, when One Housing Group threatened to raise keyworker rents in Newham by up to 40%. The Tenants Association quickly organised a campaign and threatened OHG with a rent strike. This forced a massive retreat by the association, with rents even being reduced in some cases.



Organising a Campaign

Demands can't be won without a wider campaign. Publicity and media coverage is often a valuable companion, striking at the reputation of the landlord, and is a particular sensitivity for housing associations which trade on their philanthropic image. **The lists below provide some of the basic building blocks, but the HAWR Network is able to offer more specific advice and support.**

Organisation

- A rent strike committee to lead the campaign.
- Agree your set of demands and how much rent will be withheld – all or part?
- A rent account for the withheld rent money
- A separate account for the campaign budget
- A database for participants and also a wider supporters' network

Develop materials

- A logo and slogan
- A banner, flags, T Shirts, wristbands, etc
- A general flyer setting out the background and aim of the strike
- A Facebook and Twitter account – essential to allow all to contribute

For the local community

- Local canvassing in person
- Putting flyers through doors
- Window posters for participants to put up
- Meetings around local estates
- Stalls and leafletting at community events
- Local demonstrations and marches

For housing and other campaign bodies

- Sending speakers to meetings and giving out publicity materials
- Model motions to trade unions and trades councils
- Asking labour movement bodies such as trade unions, left-wing groups, and the TUC to post material on their website and circulate through their networks

For the wider public

- Regular communication through the press
- Regular social media updates
- Stunts that will gain media attention

For decision-makers

- Online petitions
- Lobbies of the local council or your HA
- Letter writing campaigns to councillors or HA board members
- Find out where HA board members work and lobby there

Campaigners and individuals considering rent strikes **should not** rely on this guidance (produced by the National Union of Students). It gives a useful overview but you **must** source your own legal advice before acting.

Part 2: Legal implications

NUS instructed [Bindmans LLP](#) to develop the guidance below in May 2016. Making yourself aware of the general guidance above is a good starting point for students thinking of going on rent strike, but we urge students and organisers to seek specific legal advice as they see fit.

Please note that the following guidance only applies to England and Wales.

A rent strike, or withholding rent, has no basis in law. There is no legal right to withhold rent even when a landlord has failed to carry out repairs or when the rent is very high or unaffordable. At times it can be a powerful tactic to try and encourage change but it should be remembered that withholding rent can be a risky tactic. As rent is not paid rent arrears build up putting tenants at risk of losing their homes. Tenants that do not pay rent run the risk that their landlord will issue possession proceedings and try to evict.

The last few years has seen a huge increase in the cost of student accommodation. Rent costs have spiked and student debt skyrocketed. Rent strikes are growing as a part of a campaigning tool to encourage universities to better control rents and provide better value for money. But what are the implications? Do you know the possible risks?

A rent strike is a political action and can be a way to highlight the issue and try and achieve change. However there are potentially very serious consequences:

- Loss of accommodation
- County Court Judgments
- Potential impact on employment
- Problems with future renting
- Visa and Home Office implications

Rent strike, a dangerous tactic?

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What are the possible implications?

Possession proceedings

As rent builds up arrears accrue and a landlord can issue a claim for possession. It can be surprisingly easy and relatively quick for a landlord to gain possession where there is unpaid rent. For an assured tenant, if a landlord is able to prove at least 8 weeks arrears, from when the notice of possession is served and the date of hearing the court must make an outright possession order.

A landlord does not need to prove any particular ground, simply that there are rent arrears. There would be no defence to argue that the rent is “unreasonably high” or prohibitive. A rent strike would not be a defence to a possession claim.

The court would also order the tenant to pay legal costs and court fees which can add to the debt.

County Court Judgment or ‘money judgment’

A landlord can bring court proceedings for the unpaid rent. Rather than a claim for possession or even alongside a claim for possession a landlord can issue a claim for a County Court Judgment for the unpaid rent. A claim for such a debt can be issued online and lead to a County Court Judgment. Enforcement of the court order can then follow and allows a landlord to take a range of option:

- Sending bailiffs
- Trying to seize funds from a bank account.
- Take sums from any employer e.g. from part time work

The consequences of rent arrears and/or a county court judgment can have longer term implications as follows.

References

It is common for landlords to seek references before agreeing to let a property to a prospective tenant. As part of checking whether or not to rent landlords can ask for details of rent payments to previous landlords. If your rent payment history and rent has been withheld a potential landlord can be less likely to consider you are a tenant in future.

Credit reference check

A County Court Judgment for rent arrears is information that will be linked to you through credit reference agencies. It can have an impact for a number of years and will not be avoided simply because the debt arose through a rent strike. Details of past debt and financial problems will be stored by credit reference agencies and checked by banks, financial institutions and even some employers. This may be linked to you for many years and extend far beyond your time at University. A credit reference check can make it more difficult to obtain financial services later in life. A judgment because of a rent strike may stop you gaining a loan or mortgage.

Impact on career and certain types of employment

A county court judgment against you for rent arrears is something that appears as part of your credit history. Certain jobs require you to disclose information about civil judgments and debts.

For example legal regulators such as the Law Society asks about Court Judgments, accountancy regulators check you are someone with 'good standing'. Judgments that arise because of rent strike may impact in these areas.

It is common for employers to check credit reference history for certain types of roles, for example those working in finance can be checked for past debt and credit problems. Employers will not know from such checks that credit problems arose because of a rent strike. All they will see is that there was a judgment or debt.

Immigration/visa

The Home Office when extending visas frequently asks whether there is a civil Judgment outstanding. If you need to apply to extend a visa or vary your visa status the presence of a civil Judgment can have implications for your visa application.

Disrepair? Can I withhold rent?

There is no legal right to withhold rent even when a landlord has failed to carry out repairs. Tenants who do not pay the rent run the risk a landlord will issue possession proceedings and try and evict them. It can be possible to put aside rent money in order to carry out repairs but the circumstances in which this can take place are limited and tenants must comply with a clear sequence of events including:

1. Notifying the landlord in writing that works are required.

2. Allowing the landlord reasonable time to carry out works and if these are not done notifying the landlord that unless the works are carried out by a certain date the tenant will then deduct the cost of the works and rent due.
3. If the landlord still does not act within a reasonable period then obtain three quotes for repair work from reputable contractors and send these to the landlord.
4. If the landlord still does not respond or carry out works then ask for it to be carried out by the contractor who provided the lowest quote.
5. Pay for the work and keep a receipt and send a copy to the landlord.
6. If the landlord then ignores the request to refund works then indicate that the costs of the work will be deducted from future rent payments. This does not pay for any compensation only for the cost of the works. It is a strict procedure and great care should be taken before undertaking this.

It is generally inadvisable for tenants to withhold rent because of disrepair and if rent is withheld it should be put aside.

If engaging in a rent strike put the money aside into a separate account and weigh up the potential implications. Go in with your eyes open and be aware of the risks and real dangers.