

# STUDENT RADICALS

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[an  
incomplete  
history  
of protest  
at the  
University  
of Sussex,  
1971-75]





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## **An introduction about tradition**

At school I was known to both teachers and classmates for being a bit of a lefty. When my conservative history teacher found out I was applying to Sussex she laughed saying “that will hardly challenge your ideas”. That was my first clue. On my arrival at Sussex, I started to understand what she was getting at. Freshers fair had all kinds of radical groups present; there were anarchists, Trotskyists, feminists. Weed-smoking hippies were strewn around campus like litter at a festival. And talking to people I started to pick up interesting stories: rumblings of a staff strike, previous independent workers’ group for Associate Tutors etc. I immediately knew I would like it there.

I got involved with the anarchists: going to meetings, taking part in occupations etc. Being rather contrary and politically immature I frequently got into arguments with people and I was hardly a leading light within the university’s radical milieu. But I was there, you know, did my bit, most of the time like, I was kind of around...

Anyway, through my involvement in activism I would speak to staff who had been there for years and I began to pick up even more stories of strikes and occupations and interesting groups that came and went over the years. I soon found out that when we held occupations, without even knowing it ourselves (and regardless of the action’s effectiveness), our actions were being added to the tradition of protest that has plagued University of Sussex authorities for decades. A member of staff once told me that in a meeting with senior management, she’d been asked why it was that Sussex students kept holding occupations... meanwhile we were hardly aware we had any tradition stretching back further than the late nineties.

By the time I finished university, I’d heard so many stories that I felt they needed to be put down on paper. After all, the events of Sussex uni’s radical past are important for those still there. I began seeing ourselves as part of a tradition of radicalism and feared that the further we got from it, the more likely it would be forgotten. And

if forgotten, the more likely that an official history of peace and tranquillity within the safe confines of the university's immovable institutions would take its place.

Originally I had grand ideas: something along the lines of 'A history of everything radical that ever happened at Sussex. Ever'. As is clear by now, I abandoned this plan due to it being unrealistic for me to cover everything. There was just too much. In the end I focussed on students because the information was easier to come by and I focussed on the early 1970s because it sort of signalled a change in the politics at Sussex, the really early years of Sussex militancy. That, and I'm also really lazy so it seemed like a realisable goal. I approached it a bit like someone going on a diet or quitting smoking.

So don't take this text as stressing students or the early 1970s as the highlights of Sussex's militant tradition. There are many stories outside of that specification that deserve to be told. One I remembered being told about by a technical worker was a dispute in 1982 against staff cuts where workers held a demonstration in the university itself. As the demonstration snaked through the campus, it stopped outside buildings, calling on the workers inside to join them, effectively pulling out large chunks of the university on wildcat strike. There were more stories like this; I wrote notes on some and forgot others. Anyone who wanted to research a history of workers' struggles at Sussex could write a decent sized book on the subject though.

As the title suggests, this isn't a comprehensive history of student struggles at the University of Sussex. There are things that occurred in this period that I don't cover. Moreover, it's largely the result of research done in archives, building a story from newspaper articles, leaflets, pamphlets and other materials that were produced at the time. If you were a participant in these struggles, I would urge you to get in touch and add your thoughts to the document. This is very much a first draft that is eager to be worked on and your help would be very much appreciated. Similarly, if you wanted to write your

own account, you could submit something to the libcom.org website, which has a growing archive on the University of Sussex (at libcom.org/tags/university-of-sussex).

But here's what I have so far. It's not much but it's something and goes someway to recording the radical tradition of Sussex students. And to paraphrase Haim Topol's character from Fiddler on the Roof, "If you haven't got tradition, what do you have?"

## **Sussex, back in the day**

The University of Sussex opened as a full university in 1961 with only 52 students, quickly gaining a reputation for academic independence and the development of a unique interdisciplinary approach to education (which later administrations would seem impatient to dismantle). The next year it admitted 400 students and as its population grew steadily, its students picked up a reputation for being part of the good looking, fashionable avant-garde of the day's youth (a tradition which continues to this day and which I was obviously a part/the dynamic leader of...)

Early politics at Sussex were what you would expect from any 'progressive leaning' university: students were broadly supportive of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, they were anti-Apartheid and the campus had been a source of volunteers for the campaigns of a local left-Labour MP. However, though certainly tending towards the political left, not supporting white supremacy and encouraging people to vote Labour hardly constituted radicalism, even in the 1960s.

As with many universities around the UK, 1968 was the year this began to change. Occupations at universities around the country and, of course, the uprising of workers and students in France all left its mark on the Sussex student, marking a change toward a more confrontational politics. February 21st 1968 saw a 'teach-in' about the war in Vietnam. An American flag was burnt. In The Daily Telegraph, a flustered Tory MP declared Sussex a "hotbed

for communism”<sup>1</sup> Of course, the anti-Vietnam protest was small (around 20 people) and there was no attempt to disrupt the running of the university. But still, The Telegraph said...

However, as a fan of clichés once proclaimed, ‘from small acorns mighty oak trees grow’. The next few years saw political protest at Sussex develop wider in scope in terms of what it criticised and closer to home in terms of where politics happened. The problem for many students became not only ‘this government’ or ‘that war’ but the entire economic system which supported them both. And politics ceased to happen solely in government corridors or in Vietnam or South Africa. It happened everywhere and it happened in our everyday lives. It happened at the very university they attended.

## **Assessing assessment: struggles to control course content and examination**

Discontent had been brewing amongst Sussex students for some time over different issues regarding education at the university. Concerns cropped up for various reasons, among both Arts and Sciences students, and the subsequent struggles went on to question not just the function of the examinations they were resisting but the role of examination, assessment and ultimately of the university itself in capitalist society.

There were quite a few struggles around course content and assessment in this period. However, due mostly to not being a professional historian or having a wealthy philanthropist to subsidise my research, I’ve had to limit this study to three struggles, all taking part in the 1971-72 academic year. Firstly, I’ll look at the boycott of preliminary examinations (prelims) by Arts and Social Studies students. Secondly, I will look at the boycott of the same exams by students in Biological Sciences and the emergence of the ‘Biology Co-op’ group. Finally, I will analyse the struggles of students in International Relations over more control of the actual content of their course.



## **Prelims boycott in Arts and Social Studies**

It's probably useful first to explain exactly what the preliminary examinations were. The prelims were exams which students had to sit at the end of their first and second terms at Sussex university. The prelims particularly irked first year students who, even if satisfied with the course content and focus, still felt the prelim examinations were fundamentally pointless. Chris Sinha, a Sussex student at the time, mentioned in his study of the boycotts that:

*“Many students were dissatisfied with the courses themselves, for differing reasons, but even those students satisfied with the prelim courses were in many cases completely opposed to any assessment of them, seeing the examination of the prelims courses as a waste of time, which had no connection to the rest of the course”<sup>2</sup>*

This discontent led to 25 students taking the Introduction to History course to boycott their prelims at the end of the first term in December 1971. Their only demand was the abolition of the preliminary examination. There were neither further demands nor an elaborate critique of capitalism or the university. It was merely a refusal to take part in an assessment which they felt had no benefit for them. There was also no victimisation of the students taking part and so more boycotts were organised for the second term. Again, students taking the Introduction to History course organised themselves but this time they were joined by students from Language and Values (Philosophy), Critical Reading (European Studies) and Aspects of the Modern Industrial System (MIS).

The biggest confrontation came from students on the MIS course. About 50% of the students from the course refused to take the exam and the campaign had a high active involvement from its base (approximately 30 students meeting regularly to organise it, compared with 14 on the Introduction to History course). According to Sinha, the second round of exam boycotts in the Arts and Social Studies courses also began to develop a more explicitly political analysis:

*“During the campaign, discussion groups and seminars were held to criticise the content of the course. Out of these discussions, critiques of the courses which were being boycotted were formulated”<sup>3</sup>*

As Unionews (the student union’s newspaper) reported, “Discussions were held during the three days of the [MIS] exam, on the course and assessment in general”<sup>4</sup> and common demands were formulated by the boycotters. These were:

1. The ending of all assessment
2. The right to do collective work
3. No three hour papers
4. Reduction of units assessed<sup>5</sup>

By now the boycotts had grown to a point whereby the university could no longer ignore them. As well as students on the courses already mentioned, I also came across a leaflet declaring that students of English and French had taken action and that the Philosophy faculty had refused to do pass/fail grading in the preliminary examinations. The action of the rebellious students had compelled the Sussex authorities to take some form of action against them. The university authorities sent letters to the parents of the misbehaving students informing them of their child’s defiance and threatening them with punishment. In the end, no more than two of the boycotting students were put on the Vice-Chancellor’s list.

Furthermore, the exam boycotts had been a massive success. In the first two weeks of the summer term, the committee of Arts Deans met and decided that terminal assessment was unnecessary for the preliminary courses. Indeed, as Sinha noted at the time, in consequence of the boycotts, “there is now no terminal assessment for MIS, History, Language and Values, or for most of the school prelim courses. The examinations office now has nothing to do with prelim courses”.<sup>6</sup> Though grading remained, the scrapping of these exams was a massive victory for Arts students at Sussex and, as we

shall see, they were not alone in their triumphant attack on exams at the university.

### **Prelims boycott in Biological Sciences**

As well as the exam boycotts in Arts and Social Studies, boycotts were also organised by students in Biological Sciences. The reason for the students' discontent was similar to those of Arts: having to sit an arduous examination process which seemed largely pointless to their actual understanding of the subject. However, no doubt due to the less overtly ideological nature of their courses, the anti-prelims campaign in the Sciences focused far more on teaching methods and assessment rather than course content (at least at first).

A meeting was called and attended by between 40 and 80 students to set up what was to be known as 'The Biology Co-op', concerned with promoting co-operative work in their courses and agitated amongst their fellow students to boycott the examination process. About 30 students eventually became fully committed to the idea of the co-operative and took part in its organising activities. It would be in April of the second term that the big showdown between the science students and the university would take place. There were six papers: two biology, two chemistry and two maths. Successful boycotts were organised in the biology and chemistry papers with half of the students refusing to co-operate with the exam procedure. As Unionews reported:

*"Fifty percent of the Biology Class (38 people which included Biologists, Biochemists, Experimental Psychologists, Neurobiologists and Geographers) refused to sit the Prelims, choosing instead to take the exam papers out of the room, work on them collectively and hand in the completed scripts with self-assessments"*<sup>7</sup>

The prelim boycotts in the Sciences were extremely well organised. There was an agreed procedure for all the exams: first, the boycotting students walked into the exam hall, picked up their

papers and left. Next, the boycotters formed discussion groups which went through the paper together. Finally, at the end of the discussions, the students filled in and submitted to the university a) some comments on what was gained from the group discussion, b) a self-assessment sheet indicating areas of difficulty and c) comments on the course content and presentation. We can only imagine what the university management thought when half their first year Biological Sciences students turned up after skipping their exams and handed in a sheet with gentle suggestions on how to improve the course for next time!

Certainly, the Sussex administration was not as amused by these actions as me. Possibly due to the backdrop of the Arts boycotts and the general unrest at the university that year, the university took a much harder line on the Sciences boycotters. All were told they must re-sit the exams. 18 refused and were put on the Dean's list except for three who were put on the VC's list. These three were forced to sit the exams or be thrown out of the university. All three sat the exams and passed. However, though the reaction of the university was harsher on the science students than on those in Arts (one student was even pressured by his grant-awarding Local Education Authority to sit their exams), the prelim boycotts here again won key concessions regarding the form of assessment (most importantly, the preliminary exam being scrapped). Of course, though the prelims were replaced by new methods of assessment, the scrapping of the prelims still represented a massive victory for the students in fighting pointless examination procedures.

The struggles of students in Arts and Sciences represented discontent with the forms of assessment, which then spilled over into varying degrees of criticism of the course's content. However, the 1971-72 academic year also saw the struggles of students whose starting point was their dissatisfaction with the ideological nature of their course itself. One such struggle was that of students in International Relations.

## **Campaigns in International Relations**

The impetus for the struggles in International Relations (IR) came from under- and postgraduate students who were attempting to start understanding IR in a way that opposed the dominant ideologies that had hitherto been taken as a given. Students began to recognise the important position which the university fulfilled in imparting capitalist ideology in society, especially in a subject like IR, dealing as it did with the interrelationships between capitalist states.

This movement of IR students began with the meeting of regular, extra-curricular, IR Student Seminars of somewhere around 20-25 students. These seminars began based around general themes like “What is IR?” and “Is it worth studying? If so, why?” These discussions would discuss the defects and problems which these students had with conventional IR and attacked it as being “wrapped in the tight shrouds of western ideology and tainted with myths of the cold war”.<sup>8</sup>

From here, the students attending these seminars compiled an ‘alternative bibliography’ and designed new IR courses, put together with the intention of analysing world affairs from an anti-capitalist perspective. They also put together an anonymous assessment sheet so that students could express their views of the course to faculty. At some point in this period, a vacancy for professorship in the IR department became open at Sussex and the students of these seminars began to campaign to be able to choose (or at least have input into) who would get the job. Indeed, there was extremely high activity amongst students in this campaign with more than half of the IR student body agreeing on the criteria which any new professor would have to fulfil.

One of the main criteria was that any professor chosen for the job should be “a person of politically radical ideas with a highly critical attitude to contemporary affairs”.<sup>9</sup> Other criteria were things like Third World orientation and an awareness of non-state actors in IR. One final and major criteria was that any candidate chosen must

not come from any established government institution (such as the Institute for Strategic Studies). A list of preferred candidates was handed to the university. 80% of IR students were surveyed on these criteria and 70% of those surveyed were in favour of the criteria put forward. In the face of this sentiment, the eventual selection of Coral Bell (from the Institute for Strategic Studies!) was a massive slap in the face for IR students. 90% of them opposed her appointment and the subsequent opposition led her to brand the students as 'left-wing McCarthyists'. The irony of having a conservative figure of authority branding a popular movement as 'McCarthyist' was obviously lost on her.<sup>10</sup>

Sadly, these campaigns in IR were defeated. Professor Bell kept her job and overt confrontation with the IR faculty was not really to resurface. Though the students had irritated their faculty, unlike their peers who had boycotted their exams, they had not taken any decisive action to show the university that they were not merely into taking opinion polls. This is what decided the fate of their campaign. However, as a quick aside, it's probably worth mentioning that this part of my research took a while for me to get my head around, mostly because of the vast change in the ideological landscape in IR both at Sussex and academia generally. As a former student of IR at Sussex, my experience was that it was one of the 'lefty' departments, with a significant Marxist tendency amongst the faculty. It took me a while to get my head around the idea that the department could be attacked for lacking a critique of capitalism and non-state actors in IR. However, it was these days which saw the beginning of an ideological shift within IR (at Sussex and elsewhere) to criticise the liberal/realist dominance within the subject. That the IR of those days was so unrecognisable to me when compared to the IR of my experience is testament to the struggles of its students in this period (as well as the workers and peasants of the world who themselves forced this re-examination).

### **Postscript to the struggles of 1971-72**

Again, I really can't stress enough that the events described

above represent a fraction of the struggles that have taken place at the University of Sussex around the presentation and content of its courses. However, due to a lack of time and resources, other campaigns, which I saw mentions of but with very little detail, have been neglected. It's a sad fact that these movements often leave very little evidence of their existence beyond their leaflets and the memories of their participants. However, one thing which was abundantly clear was that the prelim boycotts and IR campaigns did not end in the summer holidays of 1972. Rather, they were the beginning of a continuing discussion around the role education plays in society. The 1971-72 struggles questioned the fundamental nature of how education is organised in this society and the 1972-73 academic year saw several articles in the pages of Unionews presenting an alternative view on assessment.

There were also prelim boycotts in the 1972-73 academic year. For instance, one action saw 50% of students on the Statistics course boycotting their preliminary exams. Also that year, there was a meeting of students and faculty which put forward several demands such as the abolition of grading, the right to decide course content and for a general assembly to be the final arbiter in university affairs. From the humble beginning of just refusing pointless exams, the students went on to question who controls the university and for what purpose it is put. And further, through their actions, they experimented with how it could be different. They questioned the necessity (and in some cases even the possibility) of putting a percentage on their understanding. And when they felt it wasn't necessary, they asked what purpose it served to constantly do so. And finally, they asked whether education could only be about improving their position in the job market, or if it could be for learning about, questioning and changing the world they lived in. In the end, what they wanted was not just a 'different approach' to education in a capitalist society but a radically different society where education existed for its own sake.

These facts become relevant today when we look at how universities

are being pushed in the opposite direction, turning increasingly into competing businesses producing skilled workers and research for the economy. Raising tuition fees, cutting unprofitable departments, promoting 'marketable' research areas and the increasing shift towards undemocratic, corporate management styles are all symptoms of this tendency. When we oppose this, we're expressing the opposite tendency, the common feeling that there should be more to education than just getting young people ready for work. The struggles over course content and assessment at Sussex in the 1970s were, to my mind, the development of this tendency taken to its logical conclusion.

The involvement of faculty in supporting the students was also a hugely important development and had lasting effects. In the aftermath of the prelim boycotts, a group of supportive faculty got together to form the Radical Faculty Action Group (RFAG). Again, due to my lack of resources, I was able to find very little on what was almost certainly a very interesting collective. However, issue #30 of Focus (a sort of analytical journal covering social and political issues, produced at Sussex university) was given over in its entirety for RFAG to put forward their view of what "socialist education" would look like. They summarised their proposals in the introduction:

*"As priorities we propose:*

- An open university – lectures, library, arts centre, sports facilities, faculty time to be open to the community. The whole university, not just part of it, to be a centre for continuous education*
- Positive discrimination in student admissions in favour of schools and people in deprived areas. A decisive move towards more adult entrants. Percentage of public school entrants to be drastically cut*
- No compulsory or competitive exams – no classification in other forms of assessment. More collective and more co-operative work*



- *More interdisciplinary courses, growing organically out of problems and interests and crossing traditional arts/sciences boundaries*
- *No status distinctions (i.e. lecturer, reader, professor and their parallels) among faculty and administration*
- *All university employees, academic, clerical, manual, administrative, technical, to be paid according to the same criteria of need”<sup>11</sup>*

Of course, we shouldn't romanticise about Sussex in this period. There were also some downright reactionary views amongst the student population as well.<sup>12</sup> However, the preliminary exam boycotts marked a very important development in the radicalism of students at Sussex university. In refusing to cooperate with the exam procedure, those students refused the individualising and competitive nature of education in capitalist society. They embarked on a refusal of capitalist education's function to turn out skilled workers for the labour market, preferring instead to put education to the simple use of advancing our understanding of the world around us (as well as to reorder it in a more egalitarian manner). As one leaflet of exam boycotters put it:

*“We recognise that the role assessment plays in the university is one of social control. It is the overriding form of discipline which ultimately forces the student to conform to the already decided upon system of teaching and course structure. Assessment reinforces the hierarchical structure of society as a whole.”*

These student struggles, in what they opposed and how they opposed them, pointed towards a different educationalism based around cooperative rather than competitive work, interdisciplinary collaboration rather than arbitrary separation and research dictated by interest rather than 'rational' market forces. Indeed, those wishing to look into alternative pedagogies to those of capitalist orthodoxy would do well to add the struggles of students and

education workers against their own institutions to the studies of 'free school' experiments such as Summerhill. The struggles against assessment at Sussex outlined here are certainly a good place to start.

## **Change begins at home: student struggles around living conditions**

If we are to be honest about the situation, the conditions which students are willing to live in are often quite poor. Having just left the family home, frequently being drunk or hungover and simply being too lazy to take the bins out means that student housing almost inevitably means living somewhere a bit rough round the edges. At the same time, however, landlords (whether private or university) have taken such a situation as *carte blanche* to take the piss. Having rented a few places, I (like pretty much everyone else I've ever known) have repeatedly been confronted with landlords and letting agents keen to squeeze every last penny out of you while refusing to sort out even the most basic issues of disrepair. This problem is compounded by cuts to grants and bursary schemes as well as increases in interest rates on the loans we take out.

The University of Sussex, when acting as a landlord, was never much different. From the early 1970s, student struggles around living conditions had been a recurring feature of Sussex life with several rent strikes and occupations over the years. Even in my cursory glance through the archives I found mention of rent strikes in 1972, 1973, 1974-75, 1977, 1979, 1982 and 1985 as well as a smattering of occupations over the issues. Again, I was in no position to do a proper investigation into all these events so had to focus my research on a few specific disputes. Firstly, I will look at the formation of the University of Sussex Tenants Association (USTA) and the 1972 rent strike against substandard university accommodation. Secondly, I will cover the 1973 rent strike over university grants for students.<sup>13</sup> Finally, I'll look at the downturn in struggle between 1973-75 that still saw an occupation of Sussex

House by homeless students and an epic rent strike against grant cuts and rent increases at Sussex university.

### **The 1972 rent strike and the formation of USTA**

When Sussex was founded, its campus was almost certainly an idyllic haven for its 400-odd students. The University Grants Commission funded its early accommodation but later the university funded its building projects by taking out loans. These loans were then to be paid back by increasing the profitability of the properties and the university in general. As the student population grew, the accommodation provided began to grow increasingly inadequate. In 1971 (when campus population was about 1,000) it was noted that no study of student opinion on housing had been taken since 1963 (when total student population was 410).<sup>14</sup> There was little forward planning by the university and the building of accommodation seemed to be on an ad hoc basis, resulting in rapidly decreasing living standards and “structural faults” leading to “endless problems like damp and fungus”.<sup>15</sup> With these issues in mind, the University of Sussex Tenants’ Association (USTA) was set up in the autumn term of 1971 with the intention of reversing the deteriorating living conditions on campus.

Almost immediately, USTA was in dispute. The university’s plan to build new campus accommodation, Park House 6, in exactly the same inadequate design as the rest of campus accommodation was too much for students. Disregarding the assurances he gave to students that no further planning on Park House 6 would go ahead until students had been properly consulted, the VC began negotiations for the planning as soon as the students began going back home for the Christmas holiday.<sup>16</sup> The remnants of the campus population mobilised for a meeting and passed two resolutions. The first was that the “form and siting of future accommodation be decided by a committee having parity student representation” while the second stated that no contract for borrowing money was to be signed until March 15th so that USTA could submit an alternative proposal.<sup>17</sup>

“Rents will be withheld indefinitely until the isolated and insensitive bureaucracy in Essex House wakens [sic] up and realises that we will no longer tolerate their paternalistic rail-roading of student demands”.<sup>18</sup> 77% of students on campus withheld their rent that term and many who paid had done so before the rent strike began.

It was not long after the struggle began that its view began to widen. A motion on the rent strike at a general meeting of the student union argued that the student housing problem was “inextricably linked to the general housing problem of the country”, called for workers’ control of the building industry (though admittedly this was framed by the traditional leftist call for nationalisation) and the “takeover of all empty property, including office blocks and luxury apartments”.<sup>19</sup> As the rent strike continued, issues of *Unionews* would frequently carry articles making links between the issues being faced by University of Sussex tenants and the wider housing crisis in the UK.

In a last-ditch attempt by the university to break the rent strike, Brian Smith, chairman of Community Services declared that “no students owing rent would be allowed back into University accommodation next year”.<sup>20</sup> This threat had little effect as by the time Smith’s statement was printed in *Unionews*, Vice Chancellor Professor Asa Briggs had agreed to meet with a delegation from USTA about the accommodation dispute and rent strike. Briggs then gave the delegation a signed statement which, true to the democratic nature of the struggle, was “presented to the General Meeting of USTA. The delegates made it clear that they had no mandate to reach a settlement there and then”.<sup>21</sup> At a well-attended general meeting that evening, the students decided to call off their rent strike and the first tenants’ struggle at Sussex was won.

The students had withheld a total of £35,000 for fifteen weeks and had won a victory from the university. The final agreement stated that “the planned hall of residence known as Park House 6 shall not be built, as its design sharply conflicts with the students’

requirements”.<sup>22</sup> The university was also forced to back down from its proposed 6.5% rent increase, which was knocked down to 3.5%.

The success of the rent strike carried over a culture of organisation into the next academic year. Students held meetings and took action over both large and small issues that negatively affected their living conditions. For instance, students living in Essex House “decided to elect a committee on a kitchen i.e. corridor basis” while Holland House residents met to discuss “increases in rent plus heating costs and also the grossly inadequate facilities, for instance one small sink in a kitchen serving 24 people [...] To back up their demand for a reduction in charges and an improvement in facilities, the tenants decided on a rent strike”.<sup>23</sup>

### **1973: Rent strike over grants**

In terms of successful student struggle, the 1971-72 academic year ended on a massive high. The prelim boycotts in both the Arts and Sciences coupled with the successful rent strike probably made radical students feel invincible. The next couple of years would bear more mixed results but still plenty of action. When looking at their grant payments in September 1972, students found that they’d been raised by £15, a mere 4%, while being faced with inflation soaring at 20%. Furthermore, students found that the real-terms value of their grant had dropped almost 17% over the past decade. By October, a UGM of the student union accepted a motion demanding a £100 increase in the basic rate.

This would be part of a UK-wide campaign on grants (though the issue of Unionews referenced in this section mentions a “Europe-wide” campaign) and, like students at many other universities around the country, Sussex students prepared for a rent strike starting in January the next year. The rent strike at Sussex started on the 16th, combining it also with a boycott of the Refectory, while students at 23 other universities around the UK took part in their own rent strikes. Unionews at this time was also showing a degree of dissatisfaction with the NUS highlighting the fact that they had

accepted cuts in both 1968 (under Labour) and 1971 (under the Conservatives). The article continued:

*“the policy of negotiation is insufficient. We must understand that the government is seeking to keep the cost of education as low as possible, and that so long as it meets with no determined opposition, so long will it continue to have its way. At last we are beginning to recognise this fact. At the Autumn Conference, the NUS committed itself to militant action on a national scale, partly in response to students who were taking action independently at the eight universities where rent strikes were being held last term.”<sup>24</sup>*

In my opinion, the above quote can be read as evidence of the Sussex students’ openness to a “student specific” version of militant trade unionism; that is, an acceptance that direct action – not negotiation – is where students’ power lies (even if this isn’t extended to a critique of representative unions completely). It also shows that militant students at Sussex were aware that the NUS was always a few steps behind, being pushed into taking action by the fact that a significant portion of its base was taking action already.

The Sussex rent strike was well supported with two-thirds of students paying money into the USTA strike account and others holding onto their money themselves. About a quarter of students paid their rent but many of these were “foreign students advised by USTA to pay to avoid troubles with home countries’ governments”.<sup>25</sup> By late February, 44 universities around the UK were on rent strike. In the midst of all this, the university administration decided it would be a good time to announce a 4.5% increase in rent at the beginning of the next academic year. Within a few months however they had changed their minds once more and “agreed not to raise student rents for another year”.<sup>26</sup>

It’s not clear what happened in these months as the agreement of the university to not raise rents seemed to have caused the end of the

1973 rent strike, which originally was about grants. Of course, this was probably tied in with what was going on with the wider grants campaign, of which I'm unable to find out details. Another question left unanswered from my research was the result of a discussion by Holland House residents' about whether to continue their rent strike alone against their problem of overcrowding.

### **1973-75: you win some, you lose some**

This chapter on student struggle is where the cracks begin to appear in the students' militancy, for which there are a variety of possible reasons. A dramatic few years, it saw three separate occupations and one bloody long rent strike. However, though it wasn't without its joyous moments, it also couldn't be said to have ended in glorious victory for the students. The period opened well. Students protested about a lack of accommodation after an estimated 100 students were left completely homeless at the beginning of the 1973-74 academic year. As a result, a meeting was called which gathered 500 students who then voted "by a large majority to occupy the Senate Chamber in Sussex House".<sup>27</sup> Approximately 300 students marched over and occupied it immediately. The scene described in Unionews is comical:

*"The VC, Asa Briggs, looking out of his spacious office must have been bemused by the comings and goings – people scurrying between Falmer House carrying mattresses and blankets into the Chamber through the windows"*<sup>28</sup>

However, one of the most interesting aspects of this occupation was the level of organisation amongst the students. The solidarity and mutual aid involved in maintaining this action was such that it brought forth the creative abilities of all its participants. Unionews continued:

*"Food had to be provided. The doors were made secure by some well-built occupants and a fine pair of boots. Without doubt the whole operation went with precision, and with whole-hearted*

*support from everybody involved that administrative Mecca of Sussex House began to change its colours. It is amazing in such a situation the ingenuity and effort of the occupation meant no effort was too great. No talent left unearthed – everybody could contribute something.”<sup>29</sup>*

Furthermore, as with many struggles which took place at Sussex, the occupation took on a highly democratic character:

*“Even though a co-ordinating committee existed [...] all decisions are made by the mass meetings. The various committees merely carry out the mandates as expressed by the occupants themselves”<sup>30</sup>*

Occupants stayed at Sussex House day and night with occupying numbers between 70 and 100. Thousands of leaflets were produced and distributed to students, faculty, campus staff and Brighton residents. Indeed, as before, the occupying students were keen to link the student housing shortage to the general shortage of housing. However, though addressed in the demands put forward by the occupiers, the language was less radical than it had been in 1972. Certainly, the occupation did well in the way it addressed the immediate needs of the homeless students: it called for their immediate rehousing, and even demanded that Sussex entirely scraps ‘Category C’ housing – that is “housing so bad as to class the occupants as homeless”.<sup>31</sup>

However, whereas in 1972, students had called for taking over empty properties and workers’ control of industry, this occupation put forward calls to put pressure on Brighton and Lewes councils “to take action on vacant private housing”.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, other demands included the somewhat vague “careful investigation of new housing” and tenants’ association, trade union and student union representation on management’s housing committee. These demands aside, the occupation lasted six days, after which the 100 students were all found new accommodation by the university



management. However, in the coming months, the occupation would be criticised in the pages of *Unionews*:

*“The demands were wide ranging but the extent of the action was pathetically short-term. The occupation was an unqualified success for the 100 homeless students but as far as the wider issues were concerned it was useless, taking place, as it did, away from Brighton where the problem lay [...] nothing else was done in furtherance of those wider issues [...] At the time of the occupation, there were around 1,000 families on the council waiting list – there are now around 1,400 on that list; then there were roughly 2,700 empty houses in Brighton, now there are over 3,000 [and as of 2011, over 3,500]”<sup>33</sup>*

Indeed, it would seem that though there were a variety of demands put forward by the occupying students, once the original demand of housing the homeless students was met, the occupation was ended. This obviously isn't bad in itself; however, it does call into question the sincerity behind the rest of the demands. The autumn term of 1973 also saw the rumblings of the following year's rent strike. In response to the university going back on its promise at the end of the previous academic year to not raise student rents, an USTA general meeting opposed the proposed £1/week increase as unrealistic. The meeting concluded that “rent levels need to be related to grants and therefore while demanding a freeze on rents [the meeting] aligned the strike to the national grants campaign”.<sup>34</sup>

By the end of January, £20,000 had been collected in the USTA strike fund though the student union newspaper noted that most of the enthusiasm for the strike came from first year students while amongst third years “a weariness for this perennial occasion has set in”.<sup>35</sup> However, even in late April, 70% of students were withholding rent, although most were not putting it into the rent strike account. Still, other reports show that the strike was weaker than usual. Towards the end of the 1973-74 academic year, third-years were sent letters stating that they would not be allowed to graduate if they

were in debt to the university, which was widely understood to be in reference to the rent strike. Added to this were legal threats made against debtors if rents were not paid over the summer holidays. By October 1974, only 400 students (out of 4,000) were paying money into the USTA strike account. More positively, the Guest House Tenants' Association (organisation for students in private housing arranged by the university) had put forward demands for their rent to be subsidised to campus levels and for the eventual abolition of the guest house system entirely by the end of the year.

Arguably as a result of the weakness of the rent strike, the students turned to other forms of action and on October 29th 1974, over ten months after the beginning of the rent strike, students occupied Sussex House and the university's telephone exchange, stating the following aims:

- "a) to prevent proposed increases in campus rent levels of 28% and to fight the recent refectory price increases of 12.5%*
- b) to gain immediate subsidy of guest house rents to campus levels and an end to the guest house system by October 1975"*<sup>36</sup>

After a few weeks, a UGM of 1,000 students voted to end the occupation of the telephone desk (though not Sussex House) as negotiations continued. Students also intended to extend the campaign again should negotiations break down.

And indeed, students began preparing for the rent strike in the New Year, canvassing for support and getting students to sign a pledge of their intention to take part in it. Seminars were held on issues surrounding the strike such as 'homelessness in Brighton', 'education cutbacks' etc). Sadly, the rent strike in 1975 did not go brilliantly. The response from students was mixed; very few paid money into the strike account and there were reports of almost zero-involvement in some parts of the campus: "in York House [...] only two or three out of 24 had joined the strike".<sup>37</sup>

The summer term of 1975 really saw the end of the rent strike when “out of a total of 1,500 tenants, only about 150 joined the strike”.<sup>38</sup> This was the death knell for the rent strike, which had gone on almost a year and a half (though admittedly only limping along for some of the time). Unionews printed a declaration of surrender, writing: “we have to accept that on this issue, this year, we have been defeated.”<sup>39</sup>

### **Postscript to the struggles over living conditions of 1972-75**

Sort of kills the mood, doesn't it? Sorry about that. But it would be wrong to think that 1975 was the end of student radicalism at Sussex... as I mentioned earlier, it wasn't even the end of rent strikes! These continued to happen, though with less frequency, into the mid-1980s. One thing that is obvious from looking at the struggles of USTA between 1972 and 1975 is that, over time, the strength and militancy of the students taking part decreased over time. Why was this? Well, it's impossible to say with any certainty by putting together a story through the pages of the student union newspaper but it's possible to give it a guess.

One possibility is that the university's response became increasingly heavy-handed. There's more mention of the administration taking action against students in the 1974-75 rent strike than in 1972. This doesn't necessarily mean that there was actually more of a crackdown, only that it took on more importance for the students and it could have been more important just because of internal issues: that is, that the movement itself was weaker. It's impossible to gauge the degree of management backlash. Another reason, which I feel carries more weight, is that appetite for action simply decreased over the years in question. This too could be for a variety of reasons but I feel the following two are most likely.

Firstly, at the beginning of the 1974-75 rent strike, Unionews mentioned that a “weariness” for more rent strikes had set in amongst the third years. Interestingly, these third-years would have been first-years during the victorious (and well observed) rent strike

of 1972 and many would even have taken an active part in it. Perhaps there was a feeling amongst them that the rent strike had become a ritualised form of protest, not really aimed at anything much, just something for fresh-out-of-school first-years and lefties. And perhaps this feeling was not the exclusive view of third-years.

Related to this, another issue could be the increasing remoteness of the issue from the university itself. Comparing the struggles which won tangible concessions from management with those which seemingly won none, we see that it is a clear division between struggles where the university was the site and target of the action and struggles where the university was the site but not the primary target (i.e. it was about grants set by government). Where the university had less control over handing out concessions it shouldn't be surprising that it handed out less.

This could also have translated into more cynicism amongst the student body itself. Whereas the link between action and target was clear in the 1972 rent strike or the 1973 occupation for homeless students, the link between the action and target for the rent strikes over grants was less clear-cut.

Furthermore, there could also have been a feeling amongst many students that these actions contained a degree of lefty posturing. For instance, the 1974-75 rent strike was originally over an increase in campus rents but then became tied, quite superficially, to the national grants campaign. This was also seen in the 1973 homeless students' occupation: of the seven demands made on the university only one was met and the occupation was called off. As I said earlier, this isn't bad in itself; a serious concession was won, but it does call into question how serious the students were about the other six demands. Perhaps there was a degree of empty lefty sloganeering in these campaigns which put off students from getting involved.

Finally, there are some comments to be made about the key organisational protagonist in this period. USTA clearly was the

result of student dissatisfaction with the living conditions they found themselves in and almost immediately embarked on a rent strike in January 1972. The way this struggle was concluded, with an USTA delegation taking an offer from management back to a general meeting of tenants, was true to the democratic fighting spirit in which it was set up. However, over time, USTA seemed to become more detached from the student body it was supposed to represent. That cracks in the 1974-75 rent strike were visible from its beginning suggests a disconnect between USTA and campus tenants.

The clear desire to be seen as an 'official' representative of student tenants was also a problematic feature of its later demands where it asked to have a presence on several university management committees. Though the problems with such an approach are too numerous to get into here, it should be noted that there is a history of militant organisations that end up permanently on management committees that then move away from their previous militancy. And this history is very long. Funnily enough, it would seem that USTA went a similar way. Looking at a pamphlet introducing USTA to new student-tenants in the 1980s, the pamphlet mostly deals with welcoming students to campus, where the bars and sports facilities are etc. and very little on actually struggling to improve living conditions. Again, this isn't bad in itself and if I go to Butlins it's useful to be given an introductory guide to the place. But clearly such material sits in stark contrast with the original fighting talk that USTA was founded on.

## **Some concluding remarks**

It's sometimes difficult to draw useful conclusions from past struggles for the ones we find ourselves in today. Times change, as do the specific issues we address and how we orient ourselves to them. So the point of writing a pamphlet like this? Well, in many ways, this pamphlet is really just a history of cool stuff that happened at Sussex in the early 1970s. Is it relevant to students today? Sort of. Are there lessons to be learned? Probably. What these are though, is harder to say...

One of the main things that impressed me from the events covered in this pamphlet was how the students' grievances over their exams moved on to an entire rejection of the university's role in society. The radicalisation of the students' (and eventually the staff's) demands were the logical conclusions of their campaigns against the everyday issues they faced. The radical criticisms which the students expressed in relation to their assessment was not just empty lefty sloganeering but an expression of their dissatisfaction with capitalism as they experienced it through the university.

Is this still relevant today, when a lot more young people go to university? For me, yes. Even if having a university degree is more common these days, what you are able to do with it still very much depends on your final grade. However, a job where the specifics of your degree will be asked for and put to use (such as in academia, research etc) will usually be the better paid jobs of those who went to university. Those pursuing a career actually using their degree will be in competition with other students in their field to get the best grade. Grading, therefore, on the whole divides graduates into those who will go on to the higher paid professions and those who will go on to generic, less well-paid 'white-collar' jobs.

However, grading also has an ideological function. As grading puts us in competition with each other for the opportunity to get the best jobs, it generally passes on to us the individualistic and competitive culture of capitalism. We have to secure better grades than our peers so that we can go on to get better jobs so we can live in a better area and send our kids to better schools so they can go on to do the same. Added to this, grading drives home the top-down approach to education where the teachers know everything and the students are empty vessels that need to have knowledge poured into them. As the IR students' struggle showed, it is possible for students to have ideas in advance of their teachers. Grading, then, reinforces the idea that teachers teach, students study and then teachers assess the students' understanding. Such assessment never happens in the other direction.

These issues might throw up questions about the possibility of similar campaigns today. Well, first it is important to recognise that questioning capitalism is not something which becomes widespread from enough people reading the right newspapers or pamphlets. It comes from people taking collective action to improve their situation against the 'needs' of businesses to turn a profit or to function in the market. As such, it seems clear that rather than try to recreate past struggles, our starting point should always be our current dissatisfaction with how capitalism organises our day-to-day lives. At Sussex, in the early 1970s, this may have been assessment. Today, well, that's for those on the ground to say but in these days of austerity I'd say issues weren't in short supply!

Another thing I took was the contrast between well-targeted direct action and empty lefty sloganeering. It's always tempting in the moment to put your opinions on all the world's wrongs into a shopping list of demands. You feel like you're at an 'all you can demand' buffet: you don't occupy buildings every day so you might as well make the most of it. However, cheaply making demands you have no ability to enforce does very little other than make lefties feel good for having thought about the plights of others. But to put it bluntly, class struggle isn't a shit Christmas present and it's not 'the thought that counts'.

The 1973 Sussex House occupation illustrates this perfectly. In and of itself, it was certainly a success (students left homeless by Sussex House lived in Sussex House until they were housed). But the other demands seemed superfluous as they were immediately dropped once the main demand was met. Fair enough if the occupation had been a springboard for a wider campaign but it seems it was not. On the other hand, the struggles which were most solidly won were those that targeted something immediate and then took action that directly affected its functioning. This tactical principle is another thing that maintains its relevance to today's university struggles.

So these are some thoughts I had while researching and writing this.

But for people who believe that the world needs a deep fundamental change, history has two main uses. Firstly, of course, is its use as a source of understanding: learning from the successes and failures of the past so as to succeed in the future or looking at the sequence of events leading to the present so as to understand how we got here. But the other function it has, in my opinion, is just as important: that is, to be a source of pride and inspiration for those who feel affinity with the actors in those events. Perhaps this pamphlet fulfils mostly the latter function.

The people taking pride in these events could be anyone: it could be present-day Sussex students walking around campus, imagining the mattresses and blankets being passed through the windows of occupied Sussex House. It could be students from other universities, relating it to their own history of struggle (or lack thereof) and being spurred to action by it. To be honest, it could be anyone who takes inspiration from people taking direct action to improve the conditions they live in... and in the time discussed in this pamphlet, there was definitely a lot of action going on to take inspiration from. As was mentioned previously, official histories will always emphasise the stability of 'business as usual'. Even when forced to mention the turbulent struggles of its history, they will gloss over it, apologise for the unfortunate aberration and stress the return back to normality.

But our history is not their history. Where their history takes our inaction as an endorsement of management's 'right to manage', our history takes it for what it is; a very temporary state of affairs. Our histories point to where we utilised collective action for our own ends and how we frequently rejected stability in favour of militancy. And how, after history had 'ended', economic stability triumphed and our bosses had expected it all to last forever, our histories show how, time and again, we return to haunt them. Our history shows us that what we did before we can do again. Not with the same slogans, the same campaigns or the same organisations. But this one very simple principle of history remains always the same... if we did it before we can do it again.



## Endnotes

1. Daily Telegraph, 23/02/1968
2. An Assessment of Assessment – Chris Sinha (p. 13-14)
3. *ibid.* (p. 14)
4. Unionews, 4th October 1972
5. *ibid.*
6. An Assessment of Assessment – Chris Sinha (p. 14)
7. Unionews, 11th October 1972
8. Unionews, 24th January 1972
9. An Assessment of Assessment – Chris Sinha (p. 20)
10. When actual McCarthyism was in fact a conservative figure of authority attacking popular movements. Joseph McCarthy was a US Senator who went on a campaign of ‘exposing’ supposed communists and communist-sympathisers in the American government and, later, ‘McCarthyism’ would be used to describe anti-communist witchhunting in all walks of life.
11. Focus #30, May 1973
12. “We, the higher educated, are the only hope that society has got... [Change] isn’t going to come from the working class. They are poorly educated, badly treated and accustomed to using their power only for short-term gains. So it is up to us.” – ‘Our Union: What role?’ by JT Frayne, Focus #27, November 1972
13. As fantastical as it might seem now, there once was a time when students were given money to go to university rather than lent it and forced into years of debt for their early adult life.
14. Unionews, 22nd November 1971
15. Unionews, 24th January 1972
16. It should be noted that this old chestnut of moving forward with unpopular policies just as everyone’s going home for the holidays has been a favourite of Sussex university authorities afraid of student and staff protests. It also happened while I was a student there.
17. Unionews, 24th January 1972
18. *ibid.*
19. Unionews, 21st February 1972
20. Unionews, 24th April 1972

21. Unionnews, 1st May 1972
22. Unionnews, 11th October 1972
23. *ibid.*
24. *ibid.*
25. Unionnews, 24th January 1973
26. Unionnews, 19th June 1973
27. Unionnews, 11th October 1973
28. *ibid.*
29. *ibid.*
30. *ibid.*
31. *ibid.*
32. *ibid.* Obviously the likelihood of either happening at the time is up for debate, but the shift from encouraging people to take direct action for their own material interests to calling on people to pressure the council to make the relevant changes in policy is interesting in its own right.
33. Unionnews, 20th March 1974
34. Unionnews, 24th April 1974
35. Unionnews, 24th January 1974
36. Unionnews, 6th November 1974
37. Unionnews, 6th May 1975
38. Unionnews, 28th May 1975
39. *ibid.*



# SUSSEX: A RADICAL TRADITION

Sussex University has a reputation for radicalism - and it's a well-earned one. In this pamphlet former Sussex student Ed Goddard retrieves some of the lost history of this radical tradition. In one 5 year period from 1971 to 1975, Sussex saw protests, assessment boycotts, and rent strikes, as well as a questioning of the role and purpose of education itself, and what a truly free education - free from the limitations of capitalist society - could look like. Today, with education oncemore on the front lines, it's more important than ever to understand our own forgotten history of struggle.



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