

UCL, Cut the Rent:

A pamphlet from the rent strike

# **Contents**

⊥.	Preface
2.	Statement
3.	Demands
4.	Rent striking. Why and what's it like?
5.	History1
6.	Photo-essay1
7.	In the news28
8.	The activist network
9.	Acknowledgements38

## Preface

Pamphlets have been used to communicate political and social issues since the 1580s, they can provide documentation of movements' ideologies, beliefs and aims. This pamphlet is for the UCL, Cut the Rent campaign. It has value as a communication tool, a record of the January - Easter 2016 campaign period, and a textual archive. It has been designed in A5 layout in pdf format to facilitate quick distribution. We'd like to thank the strikers and campaigners for providing us with access and material.

# Statement

Over 500 students have pledged to join the indefinite rent strike declared in January by 150 students at University College London (UCL), reflecting campus-wide concerns over soaring accommodation costs and students' dissatisfaction with management's response. Organised by UCL, Cut the Rent (UCL-CTR) with support from the Radical Housing Network, the extension of the strike increases the amount of rent withheld to over £1,000,000.

Since 2009 UCL has increased the median rent by 56%, yielding annual

profits of 45% £15,779,000 - for the
University. UCL-CTR asserts
these are tuition fees by
stealth, which in a context
of stagnant student incomes
and the scrapping of
maintenance grants, further
undermines access to
education for low-income
students.

UCL management have admitted their accommodation is "unacceptable", therefore such flagrant profiteering demonstrates that UCL management have abandoned any notion of concerns for student welfare. With the cheapest rooms now, for

many, more expensive than the entire student loan payment, students are pushed deeper into debt: with many unable to focus on their studies due to the necessity of insecure, part-time work. The degradation of tenants' everyday lives into ones of anxiety and stress is a situation UCL-CTR refuses to accept.

UCL-CTR call upon UCL management to end the exploitation of tenants and immediately effect a 40% rent cut as the first step towards social rental rates. UCL-CTR fully intend to extend and escalate this dispute until its reasonable and proportionate demands are met. This is not only the beginning of a major

campaign, but the development of a tactic that could define the solution to the housing crisis.

Rent is everyone's problem: a recent study by Shelter found 53% of private tenants struggle to pay rent: in London 72% of tenant's total income is spent on rent alone. Whilst this dispute may be in the university, the exploitation of tenants by landlords is causing immeasurable suffering to millions: UCL-CTR wish to be clear they stand in full support of wider campaigns for housing justice.

UCL-CTR believes this strike marks a turning

point in the tactics of tenants struggling for affordable housing across London. New research from Oxford University demonstrates that in the current austerity environment, the only campaigns to win effective concessions involve confrontational direct action. This affirms UCL-CTR's position that disruptive protest can hold even the most powerful institutions to account; evidenced by UCL-CTR's 2015 rent strikes winning over £500,000 in compensation for students.

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

This text was based on UCL, Cut the Rent's Press Release, dated from  $25^{\rm th}$  January 2016,

www.facebook.com/uclcuttherent

### **Demands**

#### UCL-CTR demands:

- An immediate 40% rent cut for all residents in University College London accommodation
- The establishment and maintenance of affordable rent prices in UCL accommodation
- Full transparency and student involvement within the rent setting process

Campaigners are now withholding over £250,000 in rent. These demands imply not only a pursuit of affordable housing, but target affordable education, the student debt crisis, and social exclusion from our cities.

Sign the petition: <a href="www.change.org/p/university-college-london-the-rent-is-too-damn-high">www.change.org/p/university-college-london-the-rent-is-too-damn-high</a>

Like the Facebook page: <a href="https://www.facebook.com/uclcuttherent">www.facebook.com/uclcuttherent</a>

Follow on Twitter: www.twitter.com/rentcutUCL

Show your support. #RENTSTRIKE

# Rent Striking. Why and what's it like?

Joshua Clark and Amélie Chiffre are two of the students striking at UCL's Max Rayne Hall, Camden. Their contributions present two different experiences with explanations for the reasons they are on rent strike. From first-hand experience Joshua provides insight into how the student accommodation

housing issues. While Amélie gives a personal account of what it is like to be a student on a very limited budget and voices dismay at some of the 'improvements' made by UCL to student accommodation.



Image 1: Max Rayne Strikers

#### Joshua Clark:

Mv name is Joshua Clark and, amongst approximately 150 other students, I am withholding my rent from UCL. Quite simply, UCL isn't currently looking out for its students; it sets which isn't rent affordable. The cheapest rooms they offer constitute a good deal more than 50% of the maximum maintenance loan any UCL student will receive, and those closer to the campus than Max Rayne will consume the entirety of most students' loans. Despite having what Andrew Grainger calls a "surplus" which amounts to just under £16m, and what others might call a profit, they perpetuate this discrepancy in rent rates.

UCL might not be responsible for everything

its students endure; the government has its role, recklessly disregarding the welfare of people like myself. However, all I can see is my university maintaining a system which promotes a type of social cleansing in which you need to have money to come to such a prestigious university which should, in principle, only take in students based on academic merit.

I agree to some extent that the surplus is necessary, but shouldn't UCL be using other sources to fund it? UCL, via Andrew Grainger, has in essence admitted that rent is being set with the intention of funding expansion from the profit or: 'surplus'. As a first year living in halls, I find this notion unjust and

I know I'm not alone in this regard: other Max students get, a fundamental Rayners have expressed such notion of fairness which frustration.

amount of money their they are neglecting.

Equally, the "competitive rent" comment from UCL is something which motivates me every single morning to Guardian articles and the continue fighting for the campaign. UCL's accommodation prices shouldn't be determined by (a) we ought to just put up private sector factors, with it and work jobs, (b) they should set it in don't study in London. direct response to the

I've forced myself to read the comments from the public in response to my BBC segment, the common argument of which loosely resembles the following:



Image 2: Talking to the BBC

This kind of comment shows to me that UCL's insidious methods of operations have been so long accepted that they are now a banality, a commonplace which public will readily accept, allowing students to be priced out of London and, in the process, priced out UCL. Gone are the days, it seems, when your grades decided whether you would go to UCL or not: they're making the decision for us as they always were, but now it seems there is a different set of criteria.

I'm not striking for my own benefit, I don't want rent for free and UCL needs to know that we aren't naïve students who can be swept under the carpet. In short, I have friends who can't get by with the money they

have and working even a single job is sometimes unfeasible. I know for certain that I personally couldn't work a job and also perform in my studies, yet I have friends who have worked two jobs during term time and some of them continue to do so.

------

#### Amélie Chiffre:

Over 120 of us students at Max Rayne House, one of the UCL halls located in Camden, are on rent strike. Supported by the campaign UCL-CTR, we are demanding an immediate 40% cut in rent, transparency in rentsetting decisions and a long-term rent cap at UCL for future years students.

Max Rayne is actually one the cheapest of accommodations. This is why I'm living here. However, this fact doesn't mean it's affordable. Personally I've got two loans to pay my rent (one public with a bank and a fixed interest of 0.90% and one private without interest) and my own savings from former jobs. I'm currently working as a baby-sitter to cover some of my expenses (e.g. 18+ monthly Bus & Tram which costs £56.10). If my parents are able to help me living in London, they can't - and I do mean they can't - pay my rent, which totals £5423.60 for an academic year (a single room, self-catered, at £135.59 a week).

My contract stated that I'm paying the rent from the 19th September to the 25th June. These dates were given to me; I didn't choose them. Of course, I can make a request to leave my accommodation earlier (a way to 'save' two weeks' rent since UCL year officially finishes the 10th June) but in that case someone has to be found to replace me, otherwise I



Image 3: photo courtesy of Amélie
Chiffre

will pay the rent until the  $25^{\rm th}$  June, even though I'm not staying in my room.

UCL management claims that these prices are justified because, in the words of Director of Estates Andrew Grainger: 'UCL has ambitious plans over the next five years to refurbish and extend a number of student accommodation residences'. What really troubles me is that they are not planning to expand cheap - not to mention affordable accommodation, like Max Rayne. Grainger gives the example of Astor College, which 'will be redeveloped, starting in summer 2016'. Astor College costs £192,50 per week (single room like mine, but catered), way higher than Max Rayne rent,
even without the cost of 10
catered meals per week, and
it won't be available for a
long time, meaning we are
made to pay for
'refurbishments' and
expansions that we won't
see and even less benefit
from.

I'm striking because I want
to be asked my opinion
about the expenses made by
UCL in student
accommodations. As
students, we are the

first ones to be affected and we can tell better than anyone what we need and what really matters for student accommodation. I'm striking because the rent is not affordable. On the one hand, the current prices exacerbate student

debt, and on the other hand, it prevents many students from studying in London and at one of the best UK universities, which is a scandal. I hope UCL management will hear our reasons and understand our points.

Rent Striking. Why and What's it like?

Reference list.

These contributions were based on text courtesy of Joshua Clark and Amelie Chiffre

Image 1: UCL, Cut the Rent (2016), Max
Rayne Strikers, 24th January,
www.facebook.com/uclcuttherent

[accessed on: 01/04/2016]

Image 2: UCL, Cut the Rent (2016),
Talking to the BBC, 27<sup>th</sup> January,
www.facebook.com/uclcuttherent

[accessed on: 01/04/2016]

Image 3: Photo courtesy of Amélie
Chiffre

Image 4: Photo courtesy of Amélie
Chiffre



Image 4: photo courtesy of Amélie Chiffre

# History

The UCL-CTR campaign has been covered by The Independent, The Guardian, The Economist and BBC to name but a few. Amidst this contemporary focus, it is worth stepping back to consider the rent strike as part of a broader history of student activism.

Since the end of WWII, students have consistently been at the vanguard of political and social issues. Students were active in the Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam war protests, the miners' strikes of the 1980s, the anti-war demonstrations of the early 2000s, through to

the Occupy Movement of recent history<sup>1</sup>. Time and time again students have been present and active at important political moments.

Students have been key actors in determining what counts as a political issue. May 1968 in Paris saw issues of sexual freedom and individual liberty bought to the fore2. Whilst the antiglobalisation protests in Seattle in 1999 saw issues of workers' rights and environmental concern bought together in an international forum3.

Students have also led the way in experimenting with how to organize. During the Civil Rights Movement, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) experimented with horizontal, democratic forms of organizing, paving the way for #BlackLivesMatter4.

There is a history of universities being environments for free thinking and radical imagining. They are spaces and times of intense personal development, exposing students to new ideas, that at their best, can help students question the world around them. This is why the current wave of student activism is SO significant; it is about the current condition of universities themselves.

Tn 2010 the coalition government passed legislation to raise tuition fees to £9,000 per year. This prompted some of largest street the demonstrations since the anti-war protests in 2003. This was followed in 2011 and 2012 by occupations of university buildings across the  $UK^5$ . There have been marches against fees, against withdrawal of government grants, and against hikes in accommodation costs. Against the commercialization of university and academia. Against the increasing financial barriers to attending university.

These issues have been bought to the fore by UCL-CTR; with Andrew Grainger head of UCL estates declaring 'some people just simply cannot afford to study in London ... and that is the fact of life'.6

It is this logic that implies universities are no longer places to critically study and question the world, but places to consume a curriculum. There is a sense that what is at stake is not just the ability of students to attend universities, but the ability of universities to be environments from which politics can emerge.

As in the past, UCL-CTR has used innovative ways of being political in the contemporary world. The

campaign has been visually engaging, using social media to gain traction and the attention of traditional print media, to create public discussion. Whilst using the leverage of withholding rent to influence UCL management. Yet the foundation of the campaign has been face-toface conversations at the doorstep; talking with the students who are most affected by extortionate rent. The digital and personal have been used together in complementary and reinforcing ways. UCL-CTR has also cooperated with like-minded organisations such as the Radical Housing Network, encouraged other students across London and the UK to take similar actions.

This campaign has particular significance then, both for the immediate issue at hand of poor living conditions and unaffordable rents; but also for the idea that universities need to remain free and open institutions where critiques of society can be formulated, and alternative ideas developed for how society should be organised.

It is difficult in the moment to link walking down a street with a banner, or withholding money from management, with anything other than the task at hand. Perhaps with hindsight it will be possible to look back on this campaign and the affect it has had on what society considers the role of universities.

#### History; reference list

- <sup>1</sup> Harvey, D. (2012) Rebel Cities: from the right to the city to the urban revolution. London: verso.
- <sup>2</sup> Lefebvre, H. (2014), Critique of Everyday Life, the three volume text. London: Verso.
- <sup>3</sup> Hertz, N. (2001) The Silent Takeover: global capitalism and the death of democracy. London: Arrow.
- <sup>4</sup> Newkirck, V. R. (2015) I'm a black activist. Here's what people get wrong about Black Lives Matter. Online article, Vox, 8<sup>th</sup> December, www.vox.com [accessed on: 01/04/2016].
- <sup>5</sup> Ibrahim, J. (2011) The New Toll on Higher Education and the UK Student Revolts of 2010-2011. *Social Movement Studies*, Vol. 10, no.4, pg. 414-421.
- <sup>6</sup> Ali, A. (2016) UCL rent strike: Student support in fight against 'social cleansing' and soaring accommodation costs increases. The Independent, 3<sup>rd</sup> March, www.theindependent.co.uk [accessed on: 01/04/2016].



Poster 3: UCL, Cut the Rent, The Rent Strikes Back,  $10^{\rm th}$  February 2016, www.facebook.com/uclcuttherent, design by Ben Beach

# Photo-essay

The following images, taken from the UCL-CTR Facebook page and presented here in demonstration of 'Rex chronological portray the Christmas-Easter 2016 UCL-CTR campaign. From its on 18 March - the images beginnings on 25 January at display banners, actions, Max Rayne Hall, to marching and campaign escalation. at the Housing Bill

demonstrations in late the January, to order, Knight's Leaving Party' on the streets around University College London



Image 5: Banners in Max Rayne



Image 6: The reception office at Max Rayne #RentStrike



Image 7: Coco Pop infographics don't lie!



Image 8: UCL are ignoring the demands of the rent strikers



Image 9: Spotted on the tube...!



Image 10: OVER 500 STUDENTS PLEDGE TO JOIN UCL #RENTSTRIKE



Image 11: Join the #rentstrike!



Image 12: Police at the portico



Image 13: Bringing the #RentStrike to the March Against the Housing bill!



Image 14: EVICT REX | CUT THE RENT



Image 15: STRIKE | PORTEST | DEMONSTRATE



Image 16: CUT THE RENT NOW



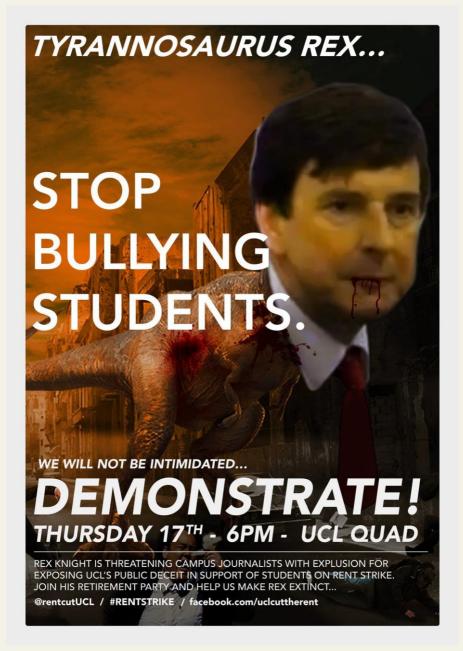
Image 17: IN ACTION



Image 18: EVICT MANAGEMENT



Image 19: TAKE THE ROOFS WIN THE STRIKE



Poster 4: UCL, Cut the Rent, Stop Bullying Students, 13th March 2016, www.facebook.com/uclcuttherent, design by Ben Beach

# In the news...

The UCL-CTR campaign has been widely reported across a diverse section of UK and international media. This has included the free press and broadsheets, alongside specialist student, youth socio-political and journalism. The campaign has also been reported as far afield as Manchester, France, Spain, India and China. As a collection, the articles document the journey of the campaign and articulate diverse views ranging from public opposition to political endorsement. Here's а selection of screenshots, providing an overview of the campaigns' public pervasiveness.

### January 2016:



London students refuse to pay rent and demand 40% cut

Over 150 UCL students risk eviction because they are refusing to pay rent for university halls that they say have become unaffordable

THEGUARDIAN.COM | BY ABBY YOUNG-POWELL

Image 20: The Guardian



UCL students withhold £250,000 rent in protest 

Students at a top London university are withholding around £250,000 of rent in a row over spiralling living costs. More than 150 students at University College London (UCL) announced today they would hold off payment until demands for a 40 per...

STANDARD COLIK

Image 21: Evening Standard



London students refuse to pay rent

'Accommodation costs are equating to social cleansing of working class students from education.'

METRO.CO.UK

Image 22: Metro



A Londres, les étudiants sont en grève contre l'augmentation des loyers ♥

La campagne «Réduisez les loyers» réunit 150 étudiants de l'université UCL. L'objectif ? Faire baisser de 40% les loyers des résidences universitaires, qui ont... ETUDIANT.LEFIGARO.FR

Image 23: Le Figaro Etudiant



### .@SianBerry backs Glasgow style rent strikes and tenants movement action on housing crisis @

Scottish news and politics, analysis and opinion. Scotland's political social media hub. THE SOLUTION to London's housing crisis lies in learning from the victory... COMMONSPACE.SCOT

Image 24: Common Space



一周2000块?伦敦大学学院学生因住宿费太贵抗议-观察者 网❤

据英国standard网站1月26日消息。因不著宿舍租金昂贵。150多名伦敦大学学院学生 发起拒付费用行动抗议。要求校方减少租金40%。校方则坚称。目前宿舍的收费符... M GUANCHA CN

Image 25: Guancha

### February 2016:



Gone Are the Days When Your Grades Decided Whether You Could Go to UCL or Not  $\,$ 

I'm not striking for my own benefit, I don't want rent for free and UCL needs to know that we aren't naïve students who can be swept under the carpet. In short, I have...
HUFFINGTONPOST.CO.UK

Image 26: Huffington Post



REVEALED: What's the worst thing about UCL?
The winner took almost half the vote
THETAB COM

Image 27: The Tab



Ciento cincuenta estudiantes lanzan una huelga de alquileres en Londres ∣ Periódico Diagonal ❤️

Un grupo de 150 estudiantes de dos residencias de la University College London mantienen una huelga de alquileres desde el 25 de enero para protestar por los...

DIAGONALPERIODICO.NET

Image 28: Periodico Diagonal



Cut the Rent: Striking Students on the Front Lines of the Housing Crisis

On 25 January, a rent strike was declared by more than 150 residents living in accommodation at University College London (UCL). Acting with the 'UCL, Cut... WIRE NOVARAMEDIA COM

Image 29: Novara Media



A third of 18-24-year-olds scared to check bank balance, poll finds  $\,$ 

Results of study lead to NUS warning of poverty crisis, against backdrop of UCL rent strike and scrapping of maintenance grants

THEGUARDIAN.COM | BY DAMIEN GAYLE

Image 30: The Guardian

### March 2016:



Flat out

Digs are getting less squalid, but some students are being priced out ECONOMIST.COM

Image 31: The Economist



500 More Angry UCL Students Are Refusing to Pay Rent | VICE | United Kingdom

The amount of rent withheld is now over £1million.

VICE.COM

Image 32: Vice



Student support for a rent strike at a London university is increasing

A London university has been accused of undertaking a "social cleansing" of the institution as students continue to declare their support to join a rent strike over... INDEPENDENT CO UK

Image 33: The Independent



UCL faces bullying accusations after threatening to expel a student

She was going to publish rent profit forecasts for Pi

THETAB.COM | BY BEN FOREMAN

Image 35: The Tab



UCL should retract 'threats' against student journalist, says  $\operatorname{NUJ}$ 

Union condemns letter to Rebecca Pinnington, who published article revealing financial documents amid protests over student rents

THEGUARDIAN.COM | BY JASPER JACKSON

Image 37: the Guardian



The UCL rent strikes are part of a far bigger battle against inequality | Michael Chessum

This government wants to normalise a more unequal society. That's why this campaign, and others like it, are so vital

Image 34: The Guardian



 $\label{thm:condition} Universities \ have \ no \ right \ to \ intimidate \ the \ student \ press \\ \ London \ Student \ condemns \ the \ attack \ on \ press \ freedom \ at \ UCL.$ 

LONDONSTUDENT.COOP

Image 36: London Student



The Spring Offensive Has Begun | IT

At this moment, 150 students at UCL are on rent strike, collectively withholding  $\pounds 250,\!000$  until their demands of a 40% rent cut are met. The average rent in UCL accommodation has risen by 56% in the last five years, with the university's…

INTERNATIONALTIMES.IT

Image 38: The International Times



Poster 5: UCL, Cut the Rent, *Demonstrate*, 14<sup>th</sup> March 2016, www.facebook.com/uclcuttherent, design by Ben Beach

## The activist network

Rent is everyone's problem. UCL-CTR, is part of a wider activism network of currently underway against extortionate student accommodation, and the lack of affordable housing in London and across the UK. Below is a map that aims to visualise the location of housing campaigns and other platforms for addressing the housing crisis across London. There are also references to historical campaigns as a reminder that these battles have been fought (and won!) before. The map accompanied by a table detailing the nature of the campaigns highlighted on

the map, and contact details where relevant. The challenges related to housing, facing students and the general public alike, are extraordinary. It is vitally important that like minded campaigns find space to express solidarity and support, working together for housing justice.

Map of housing activism (see table page-over for more
details). An interactive version of the map is available at:
https://goo.gl/umz3Cl



- University of the Arts London
- 2. King's College London
- 3. Goldsmith's University
- 4. SOAS
- 5. Imperial College
- 6. Focus E15
- 7. New Era 4 All

- 8. City University
- Unite Housing, Workers' Branch
- 10. St Pancras (1960)
- 11. Green Party
- 12. Brick Lane Debates
- 13. Peckham 1930
- 14. UCL-CTR

Google Map (2016) Rent Strikes Map of London. Custom map, available from: <a href="https://goo.gl/umz3C1">https://goo.gl/umz3C1</a> [accessed on: 01/04/2016]

### Additional detail from the map:

NO. 1	University of the Arts London
FOCUS	High Rents
LINK	http://www.suarts.org/campaigns/your-hall-your-call
NO. 2	King's College London
FOCUS	Affordability
LINK	https://www.facebook.com/KCLAffordableAccommodation Campaign/
NO. 3	Goldsmith's University
FOCUS	Affordability Quality
LINK	https://www.facebook.com/cuttherentatgoldsmiths/
NO. 4	SOAS
FOCUS	Lack of management Poor living environment
LINK	http://soasunion.org/news/article/6013/SOAS- Student-Rent-Strike-Wins-Compensation/
NO. 5	Imperial College
FOCUS	Retaining affordable Halls Need for dialogue between students and management
LINK	https://www.imperialcollegeunion.org/campaigns/a-to-z/against-acton/unions-view

NO. 6	Focus E15
FOCUS	Resisting Eviction Social Housing for all
LINK	http://focuse15.org/
NO. 7	New Era 4 All
FOCUS	Resisting Eviction
LINK	https://www.facebook.com/neweraestatetenants/
NO. 8	City university
FOCUS	Building work during term Lack of access to amenities
LINK	http://www.culsu.co.uk/news/article/6013/CULSU-Complaint-on-behalf-of-students-at-Pure-City-upheld/
NO. 9	Unite Housing Workers' Branch
FOCUS	Campaigns for rent control and council housing Empowering workers in housing associations
LINK	<pre>http://www.housingworkers.org.uk/readcampaign.html? campaign_id=52</pre>
NO. 10	St. Pancras, 1960 strike
NO. 10	St. Pancras, 1960 strike  Opposition to the council's setting of rents based on the rateable value of residents' properties

NO. 11	Green Party, Young Greens, London
FOCUS	Organising campaign for a 'Student Living Rent'
LINK	<pre>http://londonyounggreens.org.uk/student-living- rent/</pre>
NO. 12	The Brick Lane Debates
FOCUS	Platform and venue for social issues including the housing crisis
LINK	http://bricklanedebates.com/
NO. 13	Peckham, 1930 strike
FOCUS	Appalling living conditions
LINK	http://transpont.blogspot.co.uk/2014/01/peckham- rent-strike-1930s.html

Alongside these direct, focused campaigns, additional solidarity and support can be sought from:

- National Union of Students: <a href="https://www.nus.org.uk">www.nus.org.uk</a>
- Radical Housing Network: <a href="https://www.radicalhousingnetwork.org">www.radicalhousingnetwork.org</a>
- National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts: <a href="https://www.anticuts.com">www.anticuts.com</a>

# Acknowledgements

This pamphlet was produced by Joanna Bushell, YiTin Chiang, and Jack Layton as part of the Urban Studies MSc at University College London.

We would like to thank UCL-CTR, and rent strikers for granting us permission to produce this, and providing us with access and materials.

In particular, Joshua Clark and Amélie Chiffre for their contributions. As well as Anabel, Iida, Ben, Angus and Pascal for assisting with our enquiries.



Poster 6: UCL, Cut the Rent, RENT STRIKE!!, 25th January 2016, www.facebook.com/uclcuttherent, design by Ben Beach