The practices of the accommodation service at Victoria University of Wellington have lacked compassion and support.

My name is Azaria Howell and I’m a first-year student at Victoria University of Wellington who lived in a University Hall for the first few months at University before moving into a flat. I was an eyewitness to the carelessness and mismanagement of the Victoria University Halls, and I was the media spokesperson and one of the organisers of the Victoria University Halls of Residence Rent Strike.

To begin, the University kicked students out of Halls to return home for lockdown. I understood the thinking behind this idea, as nearly all of us got sick with ‘fresher flu’ and social distancing is rarely practised in these spaces; if one student got infected with Covid-19, there was no doubt that it would spread. However, a total guest ban had been put in place with the Halls before the lockdown, and we were told to keep track of the places we visit and the people we see, and to self isolate if we became sick. What I found incredibly unfair was the fact that the Halls forced students to buy emergency flights home to stay with family. This assumed a false narrative about students- that we all have a fair source of income to be able to afford flights home. At the last minute. In a global pandemic. Where most of us had lost our jobs in hospitality and retail.

Unfair treatment by VUW halls backdates this pandemic. At the start of the year, Victoria University increased their Hall fees by $4,000 for no apparent reason other than the fact that they have a monopoly on first-year living as most rentals require references, other than Halls. Students who were unable to find a rental that did not require a reference, which would likely be an inadequate rental as well, were forced to pay up and live in the Halls. I am subject to this. In high school, I worked two minimum-wage jobs to be able to save up for University- when I wasn’t at school, I was cooking pizzas and cleaning hotels, doing all I could to ensure I’d be able to pay rent. This should not be the ‘new normal’ for students looking to move out of their parents’ or caregivers’ home. Hall fees are becoming more and more unaffordable and so many students are unable to pay. Having one’s parents front the costs of the Halls comes from a position of privilege, and many families are clearly unable to afford this, making education inaccessible for many.

What really interested me, as I had lost my part-time job in Wellington due to the covid-19 pandemic, was the fact that University Halls were charging fees under alert levels 3 and 4, despite kicking us out of the halls earlier by forcing us to buy transport methods home. I was clearly outraged at this, and started a Facebook group pledging a rent strike, which overall gained 1,500 members, estimated to be around one-third of all VUW Hall residents. The fact that they tried to make us pay rent was criminal. Most of us had lost our jobs, as I had detailed before, and families and businesses were (and still are) struggling. The University, however, was paying their vice-chancellor a higher salary than the Prime Minister or other notable figures like Director-General of Health Dr. Ashley Bloomfield, this was clearly not a matter of cost, but rather a matter of treating students like cash cows, and exploiting us as much as possible. Victoria University had massive profits and was still trying to make students pay them even more.
The rent strike eventually worked, but the initial response from the University was not positive at all. The University had emailed me threatening to fire cleaners and Residential Advisors if students didn’t pay rent under alert levels 3 and 4. This was despite promising us that we would only be paying rent once we arrived back at the Halls, and that we would not have to pay during the lockdown. I found it sickening that the University threatened to fire these low-wage workers, and my intention wasn’t to make these people lose their jobs. This was a form of emotional blackmail that tried to stop students from speaking up about the University mistreating us over lockdown with regards to Hall fees. Rather than just giving up, the Rent Strike team and I decided to talk to the media about this injustice, and get it in the public eye. I’d like to thank every journalist who took the time to talk to us, and every MP and public figure who published this story, it was incredible to see that the general public was on the side of students, and recognised this injustice. Every political youth wing from a major party in New Zealand supported the rent strike, too, and getting the message out was central to the movement’s success. Due to the amount of public support we had, the University eventually backed down in their decision to make us pay rent, but this was only due to us speaking out and calling out this injustice.

Other instances of malpractice in the VUW Halls are also all too common. Earlier this year, RAs from Te Puni Village were not present whilst a student was having a health emergency which eventually sent them to the hospital. Other instances of the same negligent behaviour have been published in Salient Magazine, such as a victim of sexual assault being forced to remain in a Hall with their abuser. Just this week, an article by an international student titled ‘Stop Treating Us Like Cash Cows!’ was published, detailing similar practices by the University of exploiting students and assuming, for some reason, that we have enough disposable income to be able to afford the skyrocketing costs of education in New Zealand. It is way too common.

This malpractice has gone beyond University Halls at Victoria as well. The University has refused to scale up grades, despite many other Universities doing this. Students have been under immense levels of pressure due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and online learning is much harder than in-person study. I say this from experience- the University has a long history of metaphorically throwing students and our concerns under the bus.

More information on the rent strike can be found in my Salient Magazine article called ‘Why I Didn’t Pay My Rent.’ It is incredibly important that we support student media such as this magazine, as it allows students to speak out on these examples of injustice. Here is a link to the article: https://www.salient.org.nz/news/opinion-why-i-didnt-pay-my-rent?rq=rent

Thank you for your time. The fact that students are finally being listened to makes me optimistic, and I look forward to sharing my story in person if possible.