

# University of California teaching assistants return to work

Kim Saito

9 December 1998

Hundreds of University of California graduate teaching assistants put down their picket signs Monday as part of an agreement with the university to a 45-day cooling-off period to allow final exams to take place. The strike for union recognition began December 1, affecting eight campuses throughout the state. Talks will resume within 10 days.

The graduate student employee organizations representing about 9,000 teaching assistants, tutors and readers in the UC system are affiliated with the United Auto Workers union. They have been seeking union recognition since 1983. Readers, tutors and acting instructors at UC Berkeley and San Diego are the only ones to have won collective bargaining rights.

This was the first time the group had organized a system-wide strike as the university was heading into the final exam period, when teaching assistants, tutors and readers correct and grade papers and exams.

University officials said last Sunday that the cooling-off period was brokered by State Senator John Burton (D-San Francisco) and Assembly Speaker Antonio Villaraigosa (D-Los Angeles). The intervention by the UAW-backed Democratic politicians came as the strike began to gain momentum and support from professors and students.

Earlier in the week Burton and Villaraigosa sent a letter to UC President Richard Atkinson urging him to take immediate action to recognize the teaching assistants' union. The university's position is that TAs are primarily graduate students and therefore not employees and eligible for collective bargaining.

There are about 6,700 teaching assistants and 2,300 tutors and readers in the UC system. Readers grade tests and papers for professors. Teacher aides are graduate students who handle 60 percent of the face-to-face instruction and small group classes with freshmen

and sophomores, supplementing large lectures given by professors. They are paid for 20 hours a week during the nine-month academic year for an average stipend of \$13,600.

The WSWWS spoke with striking TAs at the UC Irvine campus. Jonathan Singer has been a teaching assistant for two years in English and Comparative Literature. 'I think it's a remarkable structure of labor practice whereby the individuals who perform approximately 60 percent of the labor providing for undergraduate education are supposedly denied basic legal employee rights.'

Leslie Bunnage, a TA in the Sociology Department, said, 'I think strikes over union recognition should be a thing of the past. We shouldn't have to strike over this.'

'I am responsible for 90 students. In the social sciences, a major issue for us is the student-educator ratio, precisely because we work with large classes. We are responsible for so many students, and it's going up every year. Who pays? The undergrads. This is not just a labor issue. Because of the implications for workload, it seriously raises the issue of the quality of undergraduate education that we provide.'

'If you come to the picket lines, many have babies and young children. For many TAs, this is their main source of family income. We get medical benefits for ourselves but not for dependents.'

'We're essentially striking for union recognition because anything we'd want, like job security, student/educator ratios, could only be accomplished if we were a recognized body. In 1992, when the Berkeley TAs went on strike and won partial fee waivers, we all benefited from that.'

'I'm working on my PhD. These are people with higher degrees. UC tuition is about \$1,700 a quarter. It doesn't make sense for us to teach and also have to pay

the high tuition.'

Marty Ota--ez has been a TA for three years in the Anthropology Department. He is working on his PhD in cultural anthropology. 'The university just refuses to see us as employees with rights. It's a struggle because we do research, enroll in classes ourselves and then are responsible for holding discussions with undergrads. We have office hours. We administer the quizzes and tests. Some professors have the TAs make the tests. We're supposed to work 20 hours a week, but usually if you are responsible for a lot of students, it ends up being 25 to 30 hours.

'I'm not doing this just for myself. We're only employed nine months out of the year. I have a wife and no kids, but we have a lot of TAs who have families. A lot of children have been on the picket line. And there has been a lot of support from the undergrads and professors.'

One political science professor from UC Riverside said, 'I say more power to them! I totally support them. I used to be a grad student myself. The university basically uses them as cheap labor, and they say they are just grad students, not employees. We could not do our job without them. I know one professor who told his TA that he had to go on a trip abroad suddenly and that 200 exams had to be graded in a little over 24 hours. The TA did all that work, and the professor just signed his name!'

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