

University protests continue in California

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Protests at University of California (UC) campuses continued for a third day on Friday, as students mobilized against a massive hike in fees at the state's institutions of public higher education.

Yesterday, the UC Board of Regents approved a 32 percent increase in fees for undergraduates attending a UC school. In total, the fee hike, which will be implemented in two stages over the course of 2010, will add about \$2,500 a year to students' bills. This will bring the price tag for enrolling in the UC system to more than \$10,000 a year. This sum is in addition to the thousands of dollars that undergraduates and their families must pay in order to cover the costs for room, board, books and incidental expenses.

University officials are claiming that the fee hike will affect only those whose families make more than \$70,000 a year, with those whose families earn less and who are eligible for federal financial aid being given access to grants through the UC Blue and Gold Opportunity Plan.

Students, most of whom have never heard of the program, are skeptical, believing that many will not be eligible for whatever benefits are offered. Moreover, many working class undergraduates have parents whose combined incomes are above the \$70,000 cut-off point, but cannot afford to pay the fee increase.

At the University of California, Davis, which is located in the largely agricultural central valley, as many as 150 protesters occupied the campus administrative building Thursday evening. After 9 pm, police clad in riot gear entered Mrak Hall and arrested the 52 who remained. According to the Graduate Student Association, those taken into custody included students, faculty and staff.

On Friday, students at the University of California, Berkeley, which is in the San Francisco Bay area, barricaded themselves in a part of Wheeler Hall. As of this writing, the occupation, which began at 6 am, is still ongoing. The Berkeley campus newspaper, the *Daily Californian*, reported receiving a text message this

morning from someone inside the building indicating that some 60 people were camped there, including undergraduate and graduate students.

According to a *World Socialist Web Site* reporter, the occupiers are demanding the rehiring of 38 recently laid-off janitors and a complete amnesty for all those involved in the protest actions. Despite a heavy downpour, many people gathered outside of the building in the course of the day to express support for those inside. The Berkeley police were also on hand, armed with truncheons, mace and pistols.

At the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC), which has been the site of previous building occupations in recent months, students took over a floor in Kerr Hall on Wednesday and Kresge Town Hall the next day. They issued a list of 35 short- and long-term demands, including the repeal of the fee hike, the restoration of fellowship funding for graduate students, amnesty for all those involved in the protests, the tying of the salaries of top administrators to those of the lowest-paid workers, and the complete abolition of education fees and student debt.

A building occupation at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), ended on Thursday. Having issued a statement that did not include any demands, students vacated the building voluntarily.

The building occupations are only part of more widespread demonstrations which have been occurring on the campuses since Wednesday. These have included rallies, sit-ins, and classroom walk-outs.

UCLA Political Science Professor Mark Sawyer told the press that he was teaching his course when shouts of "Walkout! Walkout!" became audible in the classroom. His students stood up and left in response, with Sawyer joining them.

"I have single moms in that class [and] students supporting parents. I have people who have children and they are scraping together what they can to try to support themselves and their education," Sawyer said.

At the various events that have occurred over the course

of the past several days, students have put forth a variety of slogans expressing their anger over the attack on public education in California. “Whose university? Our university!” echoed across Covell Commons at UCLA on Wednesday. Protesters have held up signs expressing opposition to “education for the rich.” “Don’t Privatize, Democratize!” read others.

On November 18, the *Associated Press* quoted Sonja Diaz, a graduate student at UCLA, as saying, “We are bailing out the banks, we are bailing out Wall Street. Where is the bailout for public education?”

Many students in the UC system hold part-time and even full-time jobs in order to support themselves while attending college. The fee hikes will make it impossible for them to continue going to school. It was reported on Friday that California’s unemployment rate has inched up again, and is now at 12.3 percent.

On Thursday, the *Los Angeles Times* related the story of Tommy Le, a UCSC student who traveled to UCLA to protest on Thursday.

“Le, 21, an American studies major from El Monte, said he was worried about being able to afford the higher charges,” the newspaper reported, adding, “He works two part-time jobs and sends money home to help his family.”

The police have made a show of force on the campuses. Officers have been outfitted in riot gear and armed with batons and stun guns. Arrests have occurred at different universities, including the dozens at UC Davis, 14 at UCLA, and one thus far reported at UC Berkeley.

According to *City-on-a-Hill*, a student-run newspaper at UCSC, patrolmen at the university threatened to arrest students on Wednesday when they blocked roads leading onto the campus. When news of this spread, other students joined in to offer support and the police backed off on their threat.

A preliminary report issued by UCLA confirmed two instances of police using tasers against students on Wednesday, as protesters started to converge on the building where the UC Regents were meeting to vote on the fee hikes.

Photographic coverage of one of the incidents can be seen here:

In 2006, Mostafa Tabatabaiejad, an Iranian-American UCLA student, was tasered multiple times by campus police for refusing to leave the library after being ordered to do so. The incident caused widespread anger, as a cell phone recording was made of the event in which the student’s screams of pain and protest were clearly audible. In May of this year, UCLA paid Tabatabaiejad

\$220,000 to settle a civil lawsuit.

The show of force on the campuses is designed to intimidate the students. The tasing incident at UCLA makes it clear that the police are prepared to use violence against protesters.

The protests that have occurred across California express widespread opposition to the efforts of both political parties to force working people and youth to pay for the economic crisis. Students in the UC system, as well as the California State University system, face not just the combined forces of the Democrats and Republicans at the state level, but also at the national level.

The Obama administration bears direct responsibility for the assault on public education in California, as it has refused to offer any financial assistance to the state, standing by as the living standards of ordinary people are decimated.

The struggle must not be limited to protesting the decision of the UC Regents. Students must unite with faculty and staff on the campuses, and above all, reach out to the broad mass of working people in California and beyond.

The struggle for the right to high-quality public education for all can be won only if it is linked up with a broader fight in defense of jobs, health care and living standards. This is a political struggle against the Obama administration, the Republican administration in California and both parties of big business. It requires the building of an independent political movement of working people based on a socialist program to reorganize economic life in accordance with social needs, not corporate profits.



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