

California students protest massive fee hike

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Protests erupted this week on university campuses throughout California in response to the decision by the University of California Regents' Finance Committee to hike student fees to unprecedented levels. On the campus of the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), police responded violently to student protests.

The Regents met on the UCLA campus on Wednesday to finalize plans to increase student fees by 32 percent, bringing tuition for the nominally public university system to over \$10,032 a year. This is the first time in history it has passed the symbolic \$10,000 marker. Half of the 32 percent hike will take effect in January 2010, in time for the start of winter quarter. The other half will take effect in the Fall of next year.

The Regents' decision shifts the brunt of the \$800 million that the state government cut from the University of California (UC) system this fiscal year onto the backs of the students. The student fee increase, officially passed on Thursday, will generate \$505 million for the university system. This leaves the UC with a \$295 million deficit that will be covered by continuing the process of cutting programs and course offerings, laying off lecturers, and increasing class sizes.

It is likely, however, that conditions in the UC will continue to worsen due to the emergence of a new shortfall in the California budget. Just four months after state lawmakers resolved an estimated \$24 billion deficit, the state is once again in fiscal meltdown. Despite across-the-board cuts to government spending on social programs, the estimated deficit has grown exponentially—to an expected \$20-25 billion over the next 18 months. This means that California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger and the Democratically-controlled California State Legislature will likely push through another round of austerity measures this Spring, which is likely to include another cut to funding

for the UC system.

Protests began at various UC campuses on Wednesday. On the Santa Cruz campus, approximately 500 students blocked traffic at one of the campuses main entrances. Protests at the University of California, Berkeley drew about 1000 students and faculty members.

The most pronounced opposition has been seen on the Los Angeles campus, where the Regents met to approve the most recent fee hike. On Wednesday, students from other UC campuses rode buses to UCLA to join the protest. Hundreds of students surrounded the building where the Regents were meeting, throwing food sticks and vinegar soaked bandanas at the police, who were lined up in full riot gear to quell the unrest. The large police presence indicates that the state anticipated the opposition that the unpopular decision would draw from students.

In the early afternoon on Wednesday, spontaneous protests erupted at Bruin Plaza on the UCLA campus. Reports of police violence, while not receiving coverage on mainstream media outlets, filled blogs and the online accounts of independent observers. One eyewitness related the following through an email circulating within the university community:

“I just arrived safely back from UCLA. I will never forget the atrocious events that happened today. Students who were practicing non-violent protests were beaten, tased, harassed and ultimately disrespected by police. Three of my friends were tased, one girl was hit in the face, someone broke their leg, and my own sister was pushed to the floor by plice officers, and her boyfriend was also hit by the officers.”

Police made 14 arrests, a majority of which occurred at the Regents' meeting when students spoke out against the decision to raise fees. Eyewitnesses insist that at least three members of UCLA's Afrikan Student Union were tasered. Police helicopters circled

overhead, and threatened to use tear gas to disperse the peaceful protests.

On Wednesday night, students at UCLA camped out in front of Campbell Hall in a continuation of the protest. On Thursday morning they stormed the building, barricading themselves inside. Others did the same in one of the parking structures on the campus. Large portions of UCLA were shutdown as a result of students' actions on Thursday.

WSWS reporters were at the UCLA campus on Wednesday talking to students involved in the protest.

A student named Jessica told reporters: "They are raising our fee so as to make it unfeasible for low income students to come here anymore."

She agreed that both the Republicans and Democrats in the California legislature and Congress have been complicit in gutting funds for education in favor of subsidies to big business.

She continued, "I think we should stop cutting education spending; especially in California, I think we should increase education spending, we should focus our spending on social services and not on subsidizing companies."

Amidst the students and employees, other concerned people attended the protest as well. Elario, a Mexican immigrant who has lived in the US for 20 years, is currently unemployed. He explained that he participated in the students' rally to show his solidarity. Elario said that society must be able to produce more educated students, workers and professionals, not soldiers to fight imperialist wars.

Elario continued by saying that the current policies have created nothing but unemployment. He insisted that if working people and students do not oppose them, they will get worse.

The situation facing UC students, which has reached a crisis level, as demonstrated by the protests occurring on campuses throughout the state, is not simply a product of the economic crisis facing California. The Obama administration has made a conscious and explicit decision to refuse any sort of financial aid to the states in the current downturn, despite the fact that Wall Street banks have received trillions of dollars worth of bailouts and other support. The massive fee hikes facing students in California are a direct product of the policies of the President and the Democratic Party.



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