

Thousands protest education fee hikes in California

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Thousands of students in the University of California and California State University systems have participated in protests this week against fee hikes, budget cuts, police brutality and social inequality.

On Tuesday, over 2,000 UC Davis students walked out of class, held a mass rally, and marched through campus before occupying the administration building, Mrak Hall, overnight. The rally was the largest response to fee hikes at UC Davis in recent history.

At UC Berkeley, an estimated 10,000 protestors filled Sproul Plaza Tuesday evening, where students set up approximately 20 tents. This action was in response to the UC Police Department and UC Berkeley Chancellor Birgeneau's threats to dismantle any campus encampment. These threats come only a week after UCPD violently attacked a peaceful student protest.

As of Wednesday afternoon, the Sproul Plaza encampment remains, though dozens of police officers in riot gear entered and closed Mrak Hall at approximately 2:30 pm. No official dispersal order was given as student protesters were evicted.

Hundreds walked out of classes Tuesday at San Francisco State University, and hundreds more participated in a march on the banks in San Francisco's financial district Wednesday.

In Southern California, hundreds gathered at California State University, Long Beach Wednesday morning as the CSU Trustees voted to increase fees by 9 percent. The hike will cost students \$498 per year. In the last two years, tuition has gone up 23 percent, while enrollment has been slashed by 10,000 students.

The fee-increase vote was held up for some time due to attempts by students and faculty to enter the Chancellor's office, where the vote was taking place. The Trustees snuck out of the building and reconvened in a secret location, where they promptly pushed

through CSU's newest austerity package.

Police in riot gear used truncheons and pepper spray to disperse crowds of protesters who attempted to prevent the vote.

Mass protests were also planned for the University of California Regents meeting, scheduled for Wednesday. However, the Regents canceled the meeting and the vote on another 81 percent fee hike in response to growing student anger.

UC leaders claim they were forced to cancel the meeting in San Francisco because of "a real danger of significant violence and vandalism." Moreover, UC claims that they received word from police that "rogue elements intent on violence and confrontation with UC public safety officers were planning to attach themselves to peaceful demonstrations expected to occur at the meeting."

These remarks could not be more hypocritical. The only violence that has occurred in the past weeks has been on the side of police forces. Last week's attack at Berkeley is only one example. Video has surfaced recently of a middle-aged woman being punched in the face by police in New York, and a photo from Occupy Seattle shows an 84-year-old woman after being pepper sprayed by police in riot gear.

At UC Berkeley, thousands gathered at a 5:00 pm General Assembly, but the discussion was much less about social inequality than it was about free speech. Many gathered to hear Professor Robert Reich, former Secretary of Labor under President Clinton, who ordered the crowd of dissatisfied students to line up behind the Democratic Party in 2012.

During his speech, Reich repeated the plea for "no politics," so typical of Democratic Party supporters: "Every social movement in the last half-century or more, it started with moral outrage...and the actual

lessons, the specific demands for specific changes, came later.”

Reich revealed himself more explicitly in response to a question recently posed to him at Occupy Los Angeles: “In my opinion, will Obama ever fulfill the promises he made to us in 2008? The answer is this: President Obama, if he is faced with a strong and articulate and powerful progressive movement, President Obama will go along.”

The attempt to subordinate opposition behind the Democratic Party is also encouraged by many of the groups involved in the Occupy protests. The effort to exclude politics is aimed at maintaining the domination of existing politics, that is the politics of the Democratic Party. During mass demonstrations against tuition cuts in California in March 2010, organizers channeled opposition behind the reelection of Democratic gubernatorial candidate Jerry Brown, who has deepened the attack on public education initiated by Republican Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Three proposals were voted on and passed by the UC Berkeley General Assembly Tuesday, none of which addressed the basic political issues involved. The first accepted a request by Chancellor Birgeneau and UC President Yudof for a public debate between student and faculty representatives. The second proposal established that student representatives would send a letter to administration officials, demanding a halt both to fee increases and to the use of force against protesters. If not, a strike could begin on February 1, 2012. The third proposal was to re-establish the Occupy UC Berkeley encampment on Sproul Plaza.

The walkouts and rallies across the state represent a growing opposition in California to drastically higher fees and massive budget cuts. State of California officials announced today that trigger cuts will be necessary to curtail California’s massive public debt. The Legislative Analyst’s Office claims that the state will collect only \$300 million of the \$4 billion that Democratic Governor Jerry Brown and the Democratic-controlled Legislature projected earlier in the year.

Of course, no attempts will be made to raise taxes on the wealthiest Californians, and nearly all of the cuts will be made to UC, CSU, the California Community College system, public schools, and social services. The cuts will be made mid-year.

The events unfolding in UC and CSU highlight

growing anger amongst young people with social inequality and inaccessible, privatized models of higher education. However, the fight to defend public education, as with all the rights of the working class, depends on a political offensive against the Democratic Party and the capitalist system it defends.



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