

CSU students go on hunger strike against tuition hikes

Kevin Martinez
11 May 2012

Beginning last week, 13 students in the California State University (CSU) system have been engaged in a hunger strike to protest the decimation of public education and the spiraling cost of tuition. The students have pledged to go without solid food for a week until school officials place a five year moratorium on tuition increases, reduce executive salaries back to 1999 levels, eliminate all 23 campus presidents' allowances for housing and transport, and extend freedom of speech areas to include entire campuses.

In a California Faculty Association news release, Donnie Besson, a graduate student at CSU Long Beach, stated, "CSU students have fought back against budgets cuts to education and we've tried just about everything you can think to prevent the dismantling of our public university system. We've lobbied our state legislators, we've mobilized thousands to our state capitol, and we've presented new strategies to our board of trustees so that we can change the course and try efficient alternatives."

The strike has been organized by a group called Students for Quality Education (SQE) in response to the CSU spring admission freezes, tuition increases, faculty and staff layoffs, and the recent decision to increase the salaries of two CSU presidents by 10 percent, namely, CSU Fullerton President Mildred García, who will earn \$324,500 a year and CSU East Bay President Leroy Morishita, who will earn \$303,660 a year after the 10 percent raise.

Meanwhile, students have seen tuition at the CSU system soar by over 318 percent since 2002, including a 12 percent increase in student fees since last fall and another 9 percent increase this fall. In addition, the CSU system has lost \$970 million in state funds since 2008, the onset of the current recession.

While Democrat Governor Jerry Brown and the

Democratic-controlled state legislature are the guiltiest parties in this tragedy, the student groups on California's state campuses such as SQE have instead focused their anger and protests on top administrators, who, to be sure, are living quite well at the students' and faculties' expense.

Sarah Garcia, one of four students at Cal State Northridge campus who are on hunger strike, told the *New York Times*, "It's like they forget that we're the reason the university exists. What we have now is so much less than we thought we would be getting when we enrolled here." Garcia, who is a deaf studies major, told the newspaper she was only able to enroll in one required class this semester because all the others were unavailable.

In another particularly offensive move, the CSU Board of Trustees will vote this week to raise presidential salaries yet again, but this time it is being sold as a "pay freeze." In actuality, the salaries for all 23 campus presidents will be "frozen" for two years until 2014, but new presidents could still receive higher salaries within a 10 percent hike from their predecessor's salary from nonprofit campus foundations.

CSU spokesman Mike Uhlenkam said the university system "is trying to be mindful of what's going on with the state budget crisis, so we've frozen salaries on the state side, but we do need to compete in a national market for presidential compensation." In other words, the same twisted logic used to justify Wall Street bankers' bloated salaries in order to attract "the best of the best" while they received trillions in taxpayer bailouts, is now used to attract financial parasites to head California's ostensibly public schools.

The base pay alone for CSU presidents ranges from \$258,680 to \$350,000, plus free housing or an annual

housing stipend of \$50,000 to \$60,000. This however is not the least a CSU president can make; last year the CSU Board of Trustees approved a \$400,000 compensation package for the newly-hired president of San Diego State University and at the same meeting approved a 12 percent hike in student fees. CSU Chancellor Charles Reed himself earns \$421,500 a year plus housing and a \$30,000 annual “supplement” from the CSU foundation.

At a recent meeting with student protestors, Chancellor Reed was quoted as saying that the welfare of the campus starts with the president and that “student debt is not a big issue for California State University students, on the average.” Reed claimed that a CSU graduate will have “only” \$13,000 in student loan debt while the national average is \$24,000, citing a survey from 2010. This is to say nothing of the 50 percent unemployment rate that all college graduates in the US face, according to a new study.

In related developments, the California Faculty Association representing 23,000 teachers and staff voted overwhelmingly last week by 95 percent to authorize two “rolling day” strikes in the fall after two years in negotiations with administrators. The issue at stake is a 1 percent raise in salaries, which have been frozen since 2008.

Another critical issue is the university’s policy of relying on part-time instructors to teach full load courses but without tenure. The lecturers make on average \$50,000 a year, half of what a tenured professor makes. The university also wants to end a policy that automatically renews contracts for such teachers. Should the strike take place, it will be the largest in California state history and affect 400,000 students.

Hunger striking on California’s campuses is not a new phenomenon. In the past it was done to protest for nuclear disarmament and against apartheid in South Africa, but now students are fasting just to have the opportunity to attend a decent university. While the hunger strikers have displayed sincerity and sacrifice, the fast itself displays the lack of a political perspective on the college campuses.

What is required by students is a turn toward the working class, and not the consciences of various administrative bureaucrats or the impotent “strikes” by the CFA trade union. This is the perspective of the

Socialist Equality Party and its youth movement, the International Students for Social Equality.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact