

California: Graduate student workers union stages two-day strike on UC campuses

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United Auto Workers Local 2865 began a two-day strike on April 2 of the Graduate Student Instructors (GSIs), Teachers' Assistants (TAs), tutors and readers on the nine campuses in the University of California (UC) system.

There are 12,000 graduate student academic workers employed by UC in UAW 2865. The union is currently negotiating a new contract with the university system.

The two-day strike was a publicity stunt staged by the UAW. The vast majority of the graduate students at the UC campuses were never even informed by their union that they were going on strike. The majority of classes continued without interruption at most UC campuses.

The first day of the two-day strike was only partial, and involved participation only from UC Berkeley, Davis, San Diego and Santa Cruz, while on the second day the union called for a strike on all of the UC campuses.

Despite the fact that the contract for the graduate student workers in the UC system is currently being negotiated, the union leadership stated explicitly that the question of the contract would not be part of the strike. Robert Cavoris, a union representative from UC Santa Cruz, told the press, "The strike is exclusively about intimidation practices... It is not about the bargaining."

The intimidation practices to which the union referred are part of an Unfair Labor Practices (ULP) suit that the UAW has filed with the Public Employees Relations Board (PERB). The suit claims that UC has threatened to fire graduate student workers for striking, and has also attempted to threaten international graduate students with the loss of their visa if they participate in protests.

The UAW has worked with other unions in isolating different sections of workers and instructors within the

UC system. Last month, the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 3299, which includes service and patient care workers at 10 UC campuses, called off a strike after accepting a concessions contract.

The UAW, like AFSCME, is committed to its political alliance with the Democratic Party and the administrations of California Governor Jerry Brown and President Obama. The unions are determined to prevent a united struggle against the attack on public education. This attack, which is supported by both Democrats and Republicans, has included continual cuts in funding for the UC and other public university and college systems.

Not a single concrete demand pertaining to the unfair labor practices charges was raised during the strike by the UAW. The character of the entire affair was encapsulated in an open letter by "Members of United Auto Workers Local 2865" published on the online pseudo-left magazine, *Jacobin*, which stated, "The reasons for striking are serious, but also banal."

Twenty-two students at UC Santa Cruz were arrested on Wednesday morning while picketing. Only two of those arrested were striking workers, while 20 were undergraduates who had been instructed by union representative Joshua Brahinsky to picket in the road leading to campus, blocking traffic. Police in SWAT gear arrested first Brahinsky and then other protesters. During his arrest Brahinsky flailed on the ground and repeatedly called out in pain. The union initially alleged that he had been tasered by the police, but when video evidence revealed otherwise, it retracted the claim.

The union issued a emergency alert to its membership, telling them to make phone calls to UC president and former head of the Department of Homeland Security, Janet Napolitano, demanding that

“UC stop intimidating students.”

The arrested students were released later in the afternoon. Brahinsky, who is a lead negotiator for UAW 2865, spoke with UC Santa Cruz students and told them that arrested students all “had a really boring day, but the beginning was really fun.” He continued, “The good result of this is that there has been a lot of really good press coverage all over the country.”

From the vantage point of the union, the undergraduate students were exploited as part of a publicity stunt. The union called the strike, did not inform the majority of its members, and, it would seem, deliberately provoked the arrest of undergraduate students, in a bid to gain some press coverage and make a show of opposition prior to the conclusion of a sell-out contract.

The contractual demands of the UAW in its negotiations with UC are so limited that they are an insult to the graduate student workers. The union is demanding that the university begin including gender neutral bathrooms in new and renovated campus buildings, as well as establish lactation rooms for nursing mothers.

Mention is made in union leaflets of class sizes and the massive overwork of graduate students, who are often responsible for the instruction and grading of at times hundreds of students. The only concrete demand the UAW has raised in this regard, however, is to propose the creation of “joint labor/management class size panels.” No explicit power is given to these panels other than to discuss class size, nor is any specific reduction in the instructor-student ratio proposed.

The union is also attempting to negotiate a 5 percent per year pay increase for the duration of the contract. This demand is presented by the union in their official statements to the students as a “demand for a living wage.”

Entry level graduate student instructors (graduate student instructors or teacher assistants) at UC Berkeley earn a pa -rate of \$3,531 per month for full-time employment, but are legally limited to a maximum 50 percent work time per month. The take-home pay of a GSI per month will average \$1,700 or less. A reader, responsible for grading students’ papers, earns \$12.92 per hour. Assuming that a student worker is able to secure work on a year-round basis, including over the summer vacation, this amounts to barely more than the

poverty threshold.

The rent for a two-bedroom apartment in UC Berkeley university housing was \$1,765 per month last year, more than the monthly pay of the graduate student workers. Rent in university housing has been raised by an average of 7 percent every year for the past decade. The raise that the union is touting as “a living wage” would not even cover the average increase in rent. Many graduate students, particularly those with families, rely on food stamps in order to purchase groceries.

There is significant and growing anger among the student worker population as their living and work conditions and future job prospects have become untenable. The average graduate student with a freshly minted Ph.D from the University of California system is far more likely to wind up unemployed or find highly exploitative work as an adjunct instructor or lecturer than to secure a tenure-track position.

The social function of the unions, including UAW 2865, with its stunt strikes and empty demands, is to diffuse and suppress this social anger.



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