

UC Santa Cruz graduate students wildcat strike enters critical phase

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The wildcat strike begun by University of California Santa Cruz graduate students early last week has now entered a critical stage. The striking students who work as graduate and teaching assistants had pledged to withhold submitting final grades for the Fall quarter, until the administration met their demand for an above-board cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) of \$1,400. The due date for the grades is today, Wednesday, December 18, and will likely see a showdown between the striking students and the administration.

The strike mounted in defiance of the graduate students' official union, UC Student Workers-United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 2865, has drawn nationwide attention and support from students across public and private universities. Santa Cruz, which lies within Silicon Valley, is one of the most expensive cities to live in California, a state that is already known for its general high cost of living. As various reports indicate, single rooms for rent in the city go for as much as \$2,300. The situation is so desperate that many graduate students have been forced to periodically, and at times even permanently, live in their cars. Students forced to live in this manner have been subject to police harassment, and fines of \$300, since sleeping outside is illegal in the County of Santa Cruz.

Like all other university unions, the UAW has a "no strike" clause as part of contracts with the UC system. The contracts the UAW negotiated with the UC also include wording that promises the university a 10-day notice before any strike action, so the university can hire scabs to blunt the effects of the strike. The contract negotiated by the union in 2018 provided an insulting three percent raise in grad student wages. Nearly 85 percent of the grad students voted against the contract, demanding to go on strike. The UAW, with characteristic arrogance, chose to ignore the demands of its membership.

Recognizing the futility of working through the union, the grad students at UC Santa Cruz have been articulating their COLA demand directly to the administration since early September. In November, the students presented their demand for a \$1,400 per month increase for all graduate

students regardless of immigration status directly to the President of the University of California. The amount covers the difference between what it costs to rent a room in a three-bedroom apartment in Santa Cruz, as against Riverside, where US graduate assistants are paid the same amount. The meeting was followed by demonstrations and speak-outs, which were ignored by the administration.

On December 6, students circulated a straw poll amongst 450 graduate workers. In response more than 85 percent supported going on strike immediately. Two days later, a general assembly of 250 students voted in favor of the strike and withholding grades. The administration responded by notified the students that their actions were in violation of their contracts and refused to negotiate with them. UCSC officials have also done their best to drive a wedge between the graduate and undergraduate students, suggesting in emails to the latter that their education was being undermined by illegal actions of their teaching assistants.

Despite the best efforts of the administration and the UAW, the wildcat strike has garnered support far and wide. Students from public and private universities across the US as well as students from the University of Sheffield (UK), who themselves went on strike last week, have reached out via social media in support of the striking students. Within UC Santa Cruz itself, undergraduates have joined the strikers at the McHenry Library in solidarity; 433 faculty members have signed a petition supporting the COLA increases for all graduate students; the UCSC Faculty Organizing Group (FOG) has issued a statement calling on the administration to drop its "hardline tactics" and is encouraging academic departments to support the students by issuing "no-retaliation statements."

While blocking any joint action by tenured and tenure track faculty, the Santa Cruz Faculty Association was forced to issue a statement urging faculty to support the grad students by not performing the tasks usually done by the TAs and not submit the grades withheld by the graduate students.

In an e-mail to faculty, which claimed to "provide clarity"

regarding the submission of fall quarter grades, interim campus provost/executive vice-chancellor Lori Kletzer insisted that “faculty members are responsible for assigning and submitting final course grades,” even if “portions of student assessment [are] delegated to teaching assistants and readers.” In what can only be seen as a thinly veiled threat, faculty are reminded of their ultimate responsibility and strangely enough told to “contact your department chair or provost for guidance” if they do not have the information needed to calculate those grades.

It is not clear how many faculty members will follow the instructions of the administration. What is clear, however, is that the US Santa Cruz graduate students are engaged in a crucially important struggle that has ramifications for grad students throughout the United States and internationally. In every case, including the current strike at Harvard University, the biggest obstacle to uniting grad students with university workers and broader sections of the working class has been the unions, which are allied with the Democratic Party and support its austerity agenda.

The main concern of the United Auto Workers union, the American Federation of Teachers and the other unions that are “organizing” grad students is to increase dues income and offset the loss of hundreds of thousands of members due to their collaboration in the closing of factories and schools and mass layoffs. The UAW has proven that far from being a genuine workers organization it is a direct tool of corporate management whose top officials received millions in bribes in exchange for signing pro-company sweetheart contracts.

For UCSC grad students to take their struggle forward they must transform their independent initiative into concrete organizational measures. This means forming a rank-and-file strike committee, independent of the UAW, which is democratically controlled by grad students themselves. These committees should reach out to faculty and other university workers, along with striking Kaiser Permanente workers, teachers and other sections of workers throughout the state to prepare joint actions including mass demonstrations and strikes.

At this crucial moment of the strike, the students must be warned against moves by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and other pseudo-left apologists for the UAW and other corporatist unions, to derail the struggle at UCSC. In a statement from the DSA-Santa Cruz chapter, the organization declares its support for the wildcat strike while encouraging illusions that the UAW and other unions—along with the Democratic Party—can be pressured into fighting for grad students, teachers and other workers.

If grad students looked to any section of the union bureaucracy or the Democratic Party to advance their struggle this would be a fatal mistake that would lead to the

betrayal and defeat of this fight. The DSA is a faction of the Democratic Party, which has spearheaded the attack on teachers and public education no less ruthlessly than Trump and the Republicans.

Over the last two years, as educators have increasingly clashed with the teacher unions, including during the West Virginia wildcat strike, the DSA has promoted the lie that educators could rely on the unions to defend themselves. In the end, the deals reached by the teacher unions in Los Angeles, Oakland, Denver, Chicago and other cities ignored educators demands for significant increases in wages and school funding and demands for smaller class sizes and more staffing.

Striking UCSC grad students face an implacable enemy in the UC Board of Regents, which is composed of members from the highest echelons of the Democratic Party. Eighteen of the 26 Regent board members are selected by the Governor of California, and seven are ex officio members, including the current Governor Gavin Newsom, Lieutenant Governor, Speaker of the State Assembly, State Superintendent of Public Instruction, president and vice president of the Alumni Associations of UC, and president of the University of California. No one gets on this board without the endorsement of the Democrats. While the trade unions attempt to portray themselves as opponents of the UC Regents, they are in fact the largest contributors to the Democratic Party.

The fight for secure and decent paying jobs, affordable housing, the cancellation of student debt and high-quality and free public education from kindergarten to university level, requires a direct assault on the entrenched wealth of the super-rich and a vast redistribution of wealth from the top down. The allies of grad students are not Democratic politicians and trade union bureaucrats but the masses of working people throughout the state, the country and around the world who are determined to fight austerity and social inequality.

Breaking from this trade union apparatus, as UCSC grad students have begun to do, is the only way forward not just for the striking graduate students, but workers everywhere. Now this struggle must be taken forward consciously and deliberately by forming rank-and-file strike committees and expanding the fight.



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