

UC Santa Cruz graduate students call for expansion of wildcat strike

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The UC Santa Cruz (UCSC) graduate student wildcat strike escalated yesterday, Tuesday February 18, as students acting in defiance of the United Auto Workers (UAW) mounted an all-day picket, culminating in a general assembly to vote on further action. Graduate students are holding fast against police repression and threats of dismissal or even deportation from the highest level university administration. Despite a virtual media blackout, support for the movement is growing across the UC system, drawing widespread support from students, faculty, and workers across the country.

A significant number of students attended the general assembly meeting, whose outcome is not yet clear. One speaker called for students to “spread the strike throughout the entire UC system,” including to undergraduate students, campus workers, and tenure- and non-tenure-track professors. The speaker noted to applause that the role of the UAW in trying to enforce the no-strike clause in their contract.

The UCSC graduate students’ main demand is a substantial cost of living adjustment (COLA) of \$1,412 per month for graduate students living off roughly \$2,400 per month in one of the most expensive areas in the country.

Wildcat action began in December with a grading strike by roughly 200 teaching assistants, who have refused to turn in final grades accounting for 70-90% of UCSC Fall 2019 classes until their demands are met. Last week, students escalated action to a full strike, which was met with police repression. At today’s general assembly meeting, strikers met to discuss a collective response to a UCSC ultimatum that threatens students with disciplinary action up to and including dismissal if they do not submit Fall 2019 grades by midnight this Friday.

The response of UCSC administration has been a characteristic mixture of stonewalling and repression. On Friday, February 14, UC President Janet Napolitano, Obama’s former Secretary of Homeland Security, threatened striking students with dismissal. She claimed that any improvement in Santa Cruz student’s poverty wages before the contract expires in 2022 “would undercut the very foundation of an agreement negotiated in good faith by the UAW.”

Twenty minutes later, UCSC Executive Vice Chancellor Lori Kletzer emailed students with the Friday, February 21 ultimatum to submit final grades. Speaking for the UC administration, Kletzer sought to demobilize graduate students with a series of minor pallatives, including guarantees of funding for graduate students and annual lump sum housing assistance of \$2,500 per year for graduate students who cannot find on campus housing.

Strikers rightly rejected these proposals as totally inadequate. The primary demand of COLA is centered around the fact that even with full funding, students cannot afford to live in Santa Cruz.

Will Parrish, a graduate student in UCSC’s History of Consciousness program who is coordinating media and outreach for the strike, summed up striker sentiment. “People are outraged, I’d say generally. I think that a lot of people feel determined... to continue and withstand these attempts to break the strike before we get what we need, which is a cost-of-living-adjustment.”

UCSC administration has even issued threats of deportation to international students, “reminding” students that “Participation in a wildcat strike is not, in itself, a violation of your immigration status. However, any actions that result in subsequent discipline or arrest may have immigration consequences.”

Strikers rebuffed these threats on their website “By any assessment, we are winning this struggle.” Noting, “If hundreds of graduate student workers are terminated from employment, whole departments will be unable to offer courses next quarter, dozens of international graduate students will effectively face deportation, UCSC rankings will nosedive, huge sources of funding will be jeopardized, political organizing at other campuses will intensify, and UCSC may become subject to academic boycott.” They then conclude, “This is a call to organize within your department and with comrades in departments across the academic divisions over the next seven days.”

Despite UC threats and intimidation, support for the strikers is growing. Graduate students at UC Santa Barbara and UC San Diego have drafted COLA demands and presented them to university leadership. Workers at other universities have begun circulating a pledge to join the grade strike if any retaliation is taken against the Santa Cruz strike. City buses are refusing to cross picket lines. The strikers’ GoFundMe page has exceeded its \$75,000 goal, with 1,600 donors.

Significantly, the Executive Board of the Council of UC Faculty Associations, which represents all faculty in the ten UC campuses, issued an open letter in support of the strikers. The open letter noted, “The graduate student demand for cost of living increases, begun in actions at UC Santa Cruz and now spreading across the system, is an acute response to unsustainable conditions.” Faculty continued that, “A punitive response to these actions, resulting in the dismissal of hundreds of Academic Student Employees, will disrupt the education of thousands of undergraduates and will make the work of many UCSC faculty difficult or impossible. Therefore we urge you to work to achieve a speedy and satisfactory solution to the cost of living crisis that we all recognize. We all hope for a quick solution that will both address legitimate and pressing graduate student concerns and not interfere with faculty ability to do their jobs.”

In a subsequent email, Kletzer invoked the supposed sanctity of the student’s collective bargaining agreement through the UAW, arguing, “Participation in the wildcat strike not only violates the no strikes clause in the collective bargaining agreement between the UAW and the University but also reflects a failure to meet your employment responsibilities and will result

in disciplinary action, up to and including dismissal.”

This UAW agreement was negotiated by a union whose top executives are essentially all deeply implicated in a federal bribery scandal for taking payoffs from US auto companies for over a decade. This contract is being used as a weapon by the bosses against the most militant workers to lock academic student employees into poverty wages. UCSC graduate students are right to consider such a contract, which UCSC students voted down by 83%, to be null and void.

The Santa Cruz university workers took an important step by taking independent action against the UAW’s wishes and calling to extend the strike to other UC campuses. To take this fight forward, grad students across the UC system should form rank-and-file strike committees, independent of the UAW, to spread the strike and appeal to all workers to defend their fight. They must reject the claims by organizations like the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) that the UAW can be pressured to fight.

The dire conditions that graduate students are forced to work in are one part of the bipartisan attack on public educators being carried out across the country. Securing COLA at Santa Cruz will require not just a fight against Napolitano but against her handlers in Sacramento and Washington D.C. who set her agenda and budget. Just in December, the US Congress passed, with overwhelming bipartisan support, Trump’s record military budget of \$738 billion, including funding for his border wall.

The fight for decent wages for graduate students is necessarily a fight against the war budget, the attacks on immigrants, and the obscene level of inequality. We urge graduate students and workers who agree with this perspective and wish to defend the Santa Cruz strikers to contact the International Youth and Students for Social Equality today.



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