

UC Santa Cruz graduate students defy administration ultimatum, vote to continue strike

Our reporters
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The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), the youth movement of the Socialist Equality Party, is holding an emergency online meeting this Sunday, February 23, at 4pm Pacific Time to discuss an international socialist strategy for the UC strike. Visit iysse.com/UCstrike for further details.

Closing out the second week of the wildcat strike at University of California Santa Cruz (UCSC), roughly 1,000 graduate and undergraduate students and supporters held a so-called “Doomsday Rally” on campus, followed by a general assembly. At the assembly, students voted overwhelmingly to continue the strike and defy an administration ultimatum to submit final grades for Fall 2019, which 200 graduate teaching assistants have been withholding since December.

The strikers’ main demand is a cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) of \$1,412 to ease the crushing rent burden, currently over 50 percent of most graduate students’ salaries, in one of the most expensive areas of the country. The strike has sparked sympathy actions calling for COLA at most of the nine other UC campuses.

The UC administration, led by former Obama Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano, has responded to the strike with threats and stonewalling. Napolitano and UCSC Executive Vice Chancellor Lori Kletzer have threatened students with dismissal and deportation, setting 11:59 pm yesterday (Friday) as the deadline to submit Fall 2019 final grades.

The strike is having a considerable impact on the campus. Students report a state of disarray, with some classes attempting to hold exams in the evenings because the campus is shut down during normal business hours.

In a report-back from a meeting with the UCSC administration at the general assembly, a graduate student representative told the attendees that Kletzer and

administrator Quentin Williams refused their request for non-retaliation and a substantive meeting in exchange for grades. The administration specifically refused to remove disciplinary letters from student files or rescind student conduct summonses, saying they would negotiate only after students halted the strike. The speaker noted to Kletzer that “I personally was livid that two of my friends in that room were going to be deported.” Kletzer’s one-word response was, “Registered.”

A delegation of international students, who face the threat of deportation if they are fired, bravely stated that they would continue to withhold grades, noting, “There is a significant group of us who are willing to do this and this is because we trust the people in here that when it comes down to it, in the next month, in the next two months, in the next three months, that you’re going to be here for us.” They then highlighted solidarity from many faculty, who have assured them that they will find ways to fund them to prevent them from losing visas if the administration denies them spring teaching assistant positions in retaliation.

Ryan, a first-year PhD student in literature at UCSC, spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* about the wildcat strike. “I’m all for it,” Ryan said. “I did not submit my final grades. I am on fellowship, so I don’t have a TA (teaching assistant) position right now, but I’m still withholding my grades from the Fall. I have a TA-ship in the spring and that is the thing that they could possibly revoke from me if I do not submit my grades.”

Asked his thoughts on expanding the strike as far and wide as possible, Ryan, who also worked for three years as a commercial fisherman, responded, “I’m all about it. One thing that made me really stoked for today is that a bunch of the other UC campuses are on strike. I think it was UCSD that occupied their library yesterday and the

whole campus today. Berkeley's doing a bunch of stuff, [Santa Barbara] of course and [UCLA]. And I think a lot of our success actually relies on that inter-campus solidarity. It's something that Lori Kletzer can't ignore."

On conditions facing graduate students, Ryan noted, "We all know we have a horrible housing crisis throughout the state and particularly the Bay Area. Santa Cruz is a microcosm of that. I think it demonstrates the inequitable distribution of wealth at greater levels. It definitely also shows what the institution of the university actually tends to value from our graduate students. It's not our research. It's not the actual thing we're here to do. It's the simple input of grading labor that they don't want to pay faculty for."

"We've always been talking about how the number we need is \$1,412. We live with a really high rent burden, upwards of 50 percent. What that means is I get \$2,000 a month from the university and I spend \$1,250 a month in rent. That's what that means. I am almost 30 years old. I have had a partner for 10 years. It would be great if we could rent a house and maybe get married and have a kid."

Asked about graduate student homelessness, Ryan explained "I've known at least five [students who were homeless]. A friend of mine's partner lives in a van. He's not a student but he works here. A lot of students move home and then do Zoom calls [video conferences] into their classes. The unfortunate part is that they probably don't get the educational experience they thought they would get when they signed up for a PhD."

Blindsided by the wildcat strike, the United Auto Workers (UAW), reeling from a massive bribery scandal, is seeking to regain control and channel the struggle into a politically harmless, isolated struggle.

Devon, a delegate from the recently formed Harvard UAW graduate union, sought to provide political cover for the UAW International, which has refused to publicly support the wildcat strike. Harvard graduate students face conditions similar to those at UCSC and struck in December 2019.

Devon raised the Harvard strike, which the UAW called off without achieving any of the students' demands, as an example of a successful militant struggle waged through the official trade unions. He explained that the UAW ended the strike due to a perceived risk of firings, supposedly in the belief that Harvard would continue to negotiate in good faith after they had ended the strike. However, he admitted that ending the strike had substantially weakened the students' position, with the

administration "now too busy to meet with us." He concluded by encouraging strikers to "keep doing what you're doing."

This perspective is a trap. Having lost control of the graduate students, the UAW is putting on a "left" face and doing what it can to contain the strike and prevent it from assuming an openly political character. Completely absent from the UAW remarks was any reference to the Democratic or Republican parties or the capitalist system, much less a call to spread the strike to other sections of the working class.

The suggestion that students can win substantial economic gains simply through militant on-campus trade unionism is false. As the police repression of the protests demonstrates, simply by exercising their right to strike, students find themselves in direct opposition to Napolitano, the UC Board of Regents and the Democratic administration of Governor Newsom, which appoints the majority of board members.

The role of the UAW as labor police was demonstrated by its treatment of WSWs reporters at the event. Although striking students greeted the reporters warmly, a union representative sought to verbally and physically intimidate the WSWs reporting team for urging students to break with the corrupt UAW and expand the strike on and off the campuses.

The UC strike is fundamentally a political struggle. In a state that has been implementing austerity measures for over a decade, the fight for higher graduate student wages means a fight for expanded funding for public education. This means taking money away from California's numerous billionaires and from the trillions squandered on war.

Graduate students and their supporters should form rank-and-file committees, independent of and in opposition to the UAW, and fight for the broadest possible extension of the strike to win COLA and more. In particular, they should reach out to 14,000 Northern California Safeway workers who recently cast a 95 percent strike authorization vote and 200,000 Ontario teachers who are currently on strike.



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