

UC-Santa Cruz grad students continue wildcat strikes

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University of California-Santa Cruz (UCSC) graduate teaching assistants (TAs) entered their third week of wildcat strikes this week. At a general assembly meeting last Friday, 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 grading strike grew into a full-blown wildcat strike on February 10, in defiance of the no-strike clause and poverty wages included in the contract negotiated by the United Auto Workers (UAW) union last year.

The strikers' central demand is a substantial cost-of-living-adjustment (COLA) of \$1,412 per month to offset crushing rent burdens, currently over 50 percent of most graduate students' salaries in one of the most expensive areas of the country.

In the face of the popular support for the students, UC President Janet Napolitano decided not to enforce her threat to fire the grad students if they didn't submit grades last Friday and has moved the deadline for strikers to end their action to this Thursday. Demonstrations and assembly meetings are set to continue throughout the week at UCSC with another "Doomsday" rally on Thursday. If Napolitano goes through with her threat to fire the strikers, hundreds of UCSC TAs have pledged to withhold Spring 2020 quarter grades and refuse any new TA appointments.

Last Friday also saw solidarity actions spread to nearly all of the nine other campuses in the University of California system. Hundreds of graduate and undergraduate students and faculty throughout the state and nearly 1,000 protesters at UCSC marched in opposition to Napolitano's threat to terminate striking TAs. Graduate students across the state have also taken up the COLA demand at their own campuses.

UC graduate students also plan to demonstrate in Los Angeles, Davis, Merced, Irvine and San Diego. Following a general assembly meeting on Monday, grad student TAs at UC Santa Barbara formally voted to approve a one-day wildcat strike on Thursday to demand their own COLA increase of \$1,800 per month.

Ben, an undergraduate student at UC Berkeley, expressed his support for the striking students and faculty. "They are protesting to try to raise wages, so it actually goes above the cost of basic living conditions. There are situations where

people cannot afford to live even if they work for the university, and that's a huge problem at various UC campuses.

"Lecturers and grad students are being used as free labor. They do work that requires a lot of professional knowledge that isn't paid for or is being paid at a wage that can't sustain them. They're contributing a lot to teaching students, but if the wages aren't there then they can't live.

"They [UC Regents] want to raise tuition every year, but they don't factor in any benefit for students. What TAs provide is essential for lower division students, and this is the primary reason to hire them in the first place. But you're paying them such a low wage that they have to go on strike and cancel classes."

Protesters also denounced the mobilization of the police, who have arrested at least 17 demonstrators at UCSC since the strike began. Napolitano, previously Secretary of Homeland Security under the Obama administration and governor of Arizona, is notorious for her repressive measures against students. Reports in 2016 exposed a secret program under her administration to install spyware on the computers of students and campus affiliates.

Following the general assembly vote to refuse to submit grades by UCSC TAs, UCSC Executive Vice Chancellor Lori Kletzer declared in an email that the grade submission deadline was extended to Thursday, February 27, and that graduate students who returned to work would receive a \$2,500 housing supplement for the academic year, far below the \$1,400 per month COLA demand. Using a carrot-and-stick approach, UC administrators at each campus also sent emails to students and faculty combining insincere declarations of sympathy for graduate students with declarations that the wildcat strikes and any further actions were in violation of the United Auto Workers no-strike clause.

Napolitano and the state Democrats that stand behind her extended the deadline to give the UAW more time to reassert its control and strangle the strike. On Tuesday, UAW Local 2865, which covers 19,000 graduate student TAs in the UC system, released a statement championing the \$2,500 housing supplement as a result of union pressure while urging the UC administration to open negotiations.

This is a complete fraud. The fact that Napolitano is using the

no-strike clause in the UAW contract as a cudgel against UCSC grad students demonstrates that the unions are not workers organizations, but agents of management. It is also a criminal syndicate whose top leadership has been indicted and convicted for taking company bribes in exchange for signing sweetheart contracts and embezzling millions to fund the luxurious lifestyles of the union bureaucrats. There is no doubt that behind the scenes, UAW officials are meeting with high officials in the UC system and the state Democratic Party to figure out how to break the strike and prevent the spread of the contagion of opposition to other sections of the working class.

All of the unions in the UC system have worked with the university administration to balkanize students and workers across at least 15 different unions. This only underscores the fact that the unions do not unite workers but divide them, making it easier for corporation management to pick off one section of workers at a time. But the widespread support for the strike demonstrates the potential to unite grad students with other sections of UC workers, along with far broader sections of the working class, in a common struggle.

Grad students have already taken the initiative to form independent organizations, but this must be concretized through the formation of rank-and-file strike committees, which are answerable to the democratic will of grad students and workers and are prepared to defy every effort by the UAW bureaucracy to reassert its dictatorial control. These committees must fight for what grad students need, not what Napolitano, the Democrats and the UAW claim is affordable. What is possible can only be determined in the course of struggle, and for this rank-and-file committees must fight to mobilize the full support of the working class, including teachers, supermarket workers, Amazon workers and other workers in struggle.

Grad students are in a direct fight against the Democratic Party. Eighteen of the 26 members of the UC Board of Regents are hand selected by the governor of California, Democrat Gavin Newsom, and seven are ex-officio members, comprised of the current governor, lieutenant governor, speaker of the state assembly, state superintendent of public instruction, the president and vice president of the Alumni Associations of UC, and the president of the University of California.

Austerity has been the modus operandi of the Democratic Party, which has long controlled state politics in California. In the richest US state, home to over 150 billionaires and over 150,000 homeless, higher education funding stands at \$2 billion less than the pre-2008 financial crash level. The only way to attain the resources to provide free, high quality public and secondary education, and living wages to all workers is through a frontal assault on the entrenched wealth of the corporate and financial elite.

Zack, a third year PhD student in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at UCSC, tied the fight for a living wage at the university to fights teachers have waged for living wages and benefits. “I find it difficult to believe that an organization [UC

system] with more than \$6 billion in their annual operating budget can’t find \$16 million per year somewhere [to pay graduate students]. I do not believe that there isn’t enough money.

“Education has been almost comically underfunded nationwide for decades, and there is growing support to pull federal money from various bloated federal projects to be funneled into education. I actually have a number of friends taking part in the Red for Ed campaign in Indiana—most of my former school teachers are participating, and many of my high school friends who went into education are on board as well. TA grad students and educators share many commonalities.

“I haven’t seen this discussed in earnest yet by the COLA campaign, but I think a good step forward would be to explicitly expand our scope to include the undergraduate tutors and readers, which are also covered by our contract. That would only affect 100 or so undergrads, so it wouldn’t be enough on its own, but I think it’s a powerful first step forward if we choose that route. Another good step would be to help undergraduates organize in the event that UCSC attempts to increase tuition costs in the future and make explicit promises of support from the COLA campaign should that happen.”

“There is a general feeling of distrust for the UAW, both statewide and international, among the grads. Though the UAW issued a statement to the administration about a month ago to defend our grads against threats of termination by the university that would’ve violated the terms of our contract, there’s little love for the union.

“If someone’s union is no longer meeting those obligations, and attempts to create change within the union have failed, then it’s time to create a new organization that better suits their needs. It seems bizarre to me that unions have become as large and amalgamated as they have.”



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