

As support for wildcat strike spreads

Unions work to defeat UC-Santa Cruz grad student strike

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The University of California (UC) strike is a political struggle. UC strikers and supporters can hear Socialist Equality Party presidential and vice-presidential candidates Joseph Kishore and Norissa Santa Cruz speak next week at townhall meetings at UC Berkeley (March 3), UC Los Angeles (March 4), and San Diego (March 5). Read her statement on the UC struggle here.

For striking graduate students at the University of California (UC), Santa Cruz (UCSC), today marks “Doomsday 2.0,” the administration’s new deadline to submit withheld Fall 2019 grades.

The original deadline was set for last Friday by UCSC Executive Vice Chancellor Lori Kletzer and UC President, and former Obama Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano. But after grad students defied administration threats of dismissal, which would open up international students to deportation, and voted to continue their grade strike beyond the deadline, the administration decided to push the deadline back to midnight tonight. Eighty-five of the initial 200 graduate students have withstood pressure and not submitted Fall 2019 grades.

What originated as a grading strike by 200 graduate teaching assistants (TAs) in Fall 2019 became a full wildcat teaching strike three weeks ago. The strikers’ main demand is a cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) of \$1,412 to cover the recent astronomical rise in rents. The strike has garnered widespread support among undergraduates and faculty at UCSC, with rallies nearing 1,000 people.

The success of the strike requires the broadest possible mobilization of the entire working class in California and beyond. If Napolitano makes good on her threat to fire striking graduate students, workers across California must mobilize in their defense. This is not simply a campus issue, but a political struggle against the Democratic Party, which has diverted billions from education and other social necessities to fund the profits of the American ruling class.

The strike has gained strong support across the UC system,

with sympathy actions at nearly all of the 10 UC campuses. UC-Santa Barbara graduate students voted yesterday to begin a teaching strike today in support of UCSC TAs, and are calling for COLA of their own of \$1,807.51. Graduate students have rallied in support at UC Davis, UC Berkeley, UC San Diego, UC Irvine, and most recently UC Riverside.

At the same time, 12,000 Santa Clara County workers may strike on Friday and 14,000 Northern California Safeway workers have passed a strike authorization by 95 percent, demonstrating the potential for a broader struggle uniting graduate students with the working class throughout the region. The potential also exists to link up the strike with the global fight in defense of education; only last week, more than 200,000 teachers struck in Ontario, Canada against underfunded education programs.

“The strike needs to spread for us to win,” explained a UCSC undergraduate psychology major who asked to remain anonymous. Rejecting claims by UC administration and the Democratic Party that there is “no money” for education, they continued, “They [UCSC] paid \$300,000 per day for police presence at the strike. So, there’s money in the budget for that, but not for COLA? Not to mention the \$175 million that the UC President [Janet Napolitano] hid. And the money is going to line the pockets of the UC admins and elites that invest into the corporation. Their claim that there’s no money in the budget is complete BS and only serves to redirect attention back to the strikers to make it seem as if they’re in the wrong for asking for more benefits.”

Speaking on the effects of low graduate student wages, the student explained: “It’s becoming unsustainable for [grad students] to continue their education and it’s much the same with undergrads at UCSC and students across America and the world. It’s becoming a commodity that only the rich can afford to maintain their wealth, while poor people shovel themselves into debt and work until they’re dead to pay it off.

“The struggle isn’t confined to just the university system,” the student added, “but a government that puts profits over people. While the strike now is contained to the UC system, universal changes are needed across higher education.”

The central force seeking to divide and weaken this objectively growing movement of the working class is the corrupt trade union apparatus. The Napolitano administration is relying upon the “no-strike” clause in the starvation contract bargained by United Auto Workers Local 2865 to back up her threats to fire the striking grad students.

The union itself is working systematically to isolate and undermine the wildcat strike. In an email to graduate students at Berkeley, UAW Unit Chair Gerard Ramm rejected the demand of a widely signed petition at UC Berkeley for a sympathy strike if UCSC strikers are fired. The letter declared that the UAW would enforce the no-strike clause and refuse to defend the UCSC strikers or any UC Berkeley students who took sympathy wildcat action beyond filing a grievance.

Kletzer herself played a major role in the original UAW graduate student union drive at UC Berkeley in the 1980s. The fluid boundaries between the union apparatus and the university administration shows that the union functions as an arm of management. It is a repetition of the experience in the auto industry, where the UAW controls billions in company stock and is embroiled in a massive corruption and bribery scandal.

Meanwhile, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) has been forced to call out nearly 12,000 Santa Clara County workers, less than an hour away from UC Santa Cruz on Friday if the county refuses to reinstate a planned 3 percent wage increase by 4 PM today. However, there can be no doubt that the SEIU is working behind the scenes to prevent a strike at the eleventh hour or limit its scope or duration as much as possible. The SEIU previously called an ineffective ten-day “rolling walkout,” which it ended without any gains.

As for the 14,000 Safeway workers The United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union only called a strike authorization vote after workers to stay on the job without a contract for a year and a half.

UC Berkeley students report that at COLA meetings on campus, many students are strongly opposed to the official UAW line and want to fight with the UCSC strikers. Faced with a potential collapse in support for the UAW, pseudo-left tendencies such as the Bread & Roses caucus of the Democratic Socialists of America are promoting illusions that the UAW and other unions can be reformed.

Keith Brower Brown, Bread & Roses caucus member and UAW representative at Berkeley, declared in an article on the caucus’s “The Call” website that graduate students

should support the Unite All Workers for Democracy (UAWD) movement within the UAW. Brown notes that the UC UAW leadership opposed the failed campaign by UAWD to trigger a special UAW convention to amend the union’s constitution and calls on students to pressure them to support it—in 2021, when UAWD will try again.

Above all, Brown opposes any suggestion that grad students break from the union and organize independently. “We want to make clear we don’t agree with the harsh accusations against Local 2865 leaders that a small minority of members have made in recent years,” Brown says. “Nobody gains by ignoring the fact that the UAW 2865 leaders we know have been passionately committed organizers, who have revitalized our union’s strength and solidarity in long-neglected campuses and departments.” In fact, these “passionately committed organizers” are working hand-in-glove with the university administration to defeat the strike.

Brown’s statements make clear that the role of union “reformers” is to reinforce the domination of the trade union bureaucracy in the face of a growing mood of rebellion among the rank and file. It also exposes the political duplicity of the DSA itself, which lends critical political assistance to the Democratic Party even as it carries out attacks against worker and students.

The way forward for graduate students is not to hand the initiative back to the corrupt UAW, but to concretize their break with this organization through the formation of rank-and-file strike committees that are prepared to defy the efforts of the UAW to shut down the strike. These committees will provide the means for graduate students to break through the union attempts at isolation and mobilize the full support of the working class, who are facing the same attacks on wages and living standards.



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