Workers must defeat the strikebreaking by the Democrats!

Stop the firings of University of California grad students!

Statement of Socialist Equality Party (US) Vice Presidential candidate Norissa Santa Cruz
29 February 2020

The University of California (UC) strike is a political struggle against the Democratic Party and the corporate interests it defends. 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 Santa Cruz's previous statement on the UC struggle ***here****.*

As the Socialist Equality Party's candidate for Vice President of the United States, I unequivocally condemn yesterday's firing of graduate student workers by the University of California and demand the immediate and unconditional reinstatement of the 54 courageous workers who have been terminated. I call on UC workers and all workers throughout the state, the country and beyond to rally to the defense of the UC Santa Cruz grad students and defeat the strikebreaking by the California Democratic Party.

The only "crime" the UCSC students are guilty of is daring to demand decent pay and affordable housing. In doing so, they have stood up against UC President Janet Napolitano, the former secretary of Homeland Security under the Obama administration, and the United Auto Workers union, which signed a contract last year that condemns teaching assistants to poverty wages and many of them to homelessness.

The firings follow the brutal attack by campus police on protesting students and the arrest of at least 17 striking grad students. The UCSC administration also threatened foreign students participating in strikes with deportation.

The decision to fire the grad students was made at the highest levels of the state government in Sacramento. The UC Board of Regents includes ex-officio members such as California Governor Gavin Newsom and Tony Thurmond, state superintendent of public education, and is filled with other Democratic Party operatives and members of the ultra-rich. It also includes Richard Blum, husband of Democratic senator Dianne Feinstein and chairman and president of Blum Capital, a multi-billion-dollar private equity firm.

With sympathy protests spreading across campuses around the country and strikes spreading to two additional campuses at UC Santa Barbara and UC Davis, Napolitano and the state Democrats made the political decision to make an example of the UCSC grad students. In doing so, they hope to send a message to all workers and young people: if you fight the bipartisan program of endless austerity you will lose your job and be stripped of your livelihood.

In the eyes of the ruling elite, the UCSC grad students are guilty of another serious crime. They broke free from the shackles of their paid servants in the union bureaucracy, which has spent decades suppressing every form of opposition by the working class and imposing the dictates of big business and the two corporate controlled parties. Just last year, the teachers' unions sold out the powerful strikes by Los Angeles and Oakland educators, paving the way for school closures and sweeping budget cuts.

In firing the grad students, Napolitano and other UC officials accused them of not abiding by the sweetheart contract signed by the UAW. The termination letter, sent to each striking student, read, "In accordance with the agreement between the University of California and the United Auto Workers 2865, Academic Student Employees, Article 8 … this letter is a Notice of Intent to Dismiss." The letter, signed by UCSC Acting Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies Quentin Williams, continued, "[The dismissal] is based on abandonment of your responsibilities by failing to submit student grades well past the fall quarter deadline … and failing to follow a directive provided to you from the Interim Campus Provost and Executive Vice Chancellor."

During her time with the Department of Homeland Security, Napolitano was instrumental in implementing many of the anti-immigrant policies of the Obama administration, including mass deportations, workplace raids and family separations, all which took place well before

© World Socialist Web Site

Trump came into office. Her department invested heavily in border security and was instrumental in implementing rollbacks of democratic rights during the US ruling elite's fraudulent "war on terror" campaign.

It was no coincidence that such a figure was chosen to lead the board of regents. The University of California, with more than 280,000 students, is the largest university system in the world. The US ruling class quite rightly fears that student unrest there could quickly spiral out of control, spreading to other universities. Above all, what they fear is that students will reach outside of the campuses to the broad masses of working class people whose anger toward social inequality, stagnant wages, decaying social conditions and attacks on democratic rights is reaching a boiling point. This is expressed in the growing support for socialism despite the relentless attacks by both Trump and the Democratic Party establishment.

In response to the firings, Democratic Party presidential race front runner Bernie Sanders referred to the action in a tweet as "disgraceful" and urged the UCSC administration, Napolitano and the UC Board of Regents head to "stop this outrageous union busting." But the reality is, it is the "union," i.e., the UAW, which is fully backing Napolitano and her strikebreaking measures. In e-mails to membership, leading members of UAW Local 2865 emphasized that they opposed all strikes in defense of the Santa Cruz students. The UC only carried out this attack because they knew they could count on the collaboration of the UAW. What Sanders does not, and will not acknowledge, is that UCSC workers were only able to carry out the strike in the first place because they defied the UAW.

After the firings, Local 2865 has filed an unfair labor practices charge against the university. The UAW is not opposing the administration for dismissing the students, but because the University had "sought to engage in unlawful bargaining directly with individual graduate students and University funded student organizations." In other words, the grad students refused to be slaves to the corrupt UAW and advanced their own demands, which the UAW opposes. The common demand of the UAW and the UC system is that students honor the "good faith" bargaining that leaves many of them facing homelessness and hunger.

Despite the UAW's compliance, workers are showing tremendous willingness to expand the struggle as widely as possible. On Wednesday, UC Santa Barbara graduate students voted to begin a teaching strike in support of UCSC teaching assistants, calling for a Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) of $1,807.51 per month. A third UC strike began Thursday at UC Davis. Graduate students there demanded a COLA of $1,553.20 to reduce their rent burden, which is almost universally greater than 50 percent of their salaries.

As the Socialist Equality Party candidates for the US presidential election, Joseph Kishore and I welcome this and encourage the widest possible participation in campus-wide demonstrations scheduled for Monday, March 2. Most importantly, we encourage grad students to appeal to workers and youth across the state and country to join the fight to defend the right to high quality public education from kindergarten to the university level.

The graduate student workers are not alone. At the same time that the UC strikes take place, 12,000 Santa Clara County employees were set to strike on Friday before the action was called off by the Service Employees International Union. 14,000 Northern California Safeway workers passed a strike authorization vote by 95 percent this week and 200,000 teachers in Ontario, Canada struck last week against underfunded educational programs.

Joseph Kishore and I call for the formation of rank-and-file committees to take the conduct of these struggle out of the hands of the pro-capitalist and nationalist unions. These committees must fight for the broadest mobilization of the working class based on what workers and young people need, not what the big business political parties say is affordable.

The claim that there is no money for decent wages, to eliminate student debt or to address the great global challenges like the coronavirus pandemic and climate change is a lie. But obtaining the necessary resources requires a frontal assault on the private fortunes of the super-rich and a radical redistribution of wealth. It means ending the squandering of resources on the Pentagon war machine, the attack on immigrants and corporate tax cuts. That will only be accomplished if the working class builds a powerful political movement, independent of both corporate-controlled parties and based on the fight for workers' power and socialism. We encourage all workers who wish to fight for socialism to join our campaign.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site