

“The grad students are putting their careers on the line, and I have to go out to support them”

University of California strikers defy firings and expand strike

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2 March 2020

Opposition continues to grow to the decision by University of California officials to fire roughly 80 striking grad students at UC Santa Cruz, who have refused to submit grades until their demands for a cost-of-living increase is granted. Last week the strike spread to graduate students at UC Davis (UCD) and UC Santa Barbara (UCSB), with students in at least one department at UC Berkeley announcing a sympathy strike. There are major protests and grad student assemblies being held today in Santa Cruz, Davis, Santa Barbara, Los Angeles, Berkeley, San Diego and other UC campuses.

Last Friday, UC President Janet Napolitano, the former US Secretary of Homeland Security under President Obama, and other UC officials terminated the students, making it clear that their major crime was defying the labor agreement signed by the United Auto Workers last year, which enforces poverty wages and a no-strike clause.

The graduate students' chief demand is a cost-of-living adjustment (COLA), ranging from about \$1,400 to \$1,800 per month depending on the campus, to cover the skyrocketing cost of rent in California. The majority of graduate students at multiple UC campuses spend over 50 percent of their salary on rent.

As support grows on and off the campuses, the unions and the Democratic Party are working hard to contain the strike and prevent it from spreading off campus and triggering a broader movement of the working class.

The UAW has publicly stated it will not defend the strikers for any activity not covered by the contract. After the firings, the UAW filed a complaint with the National Labor Relations Board. The complaint, however, is not over the unjust and vindictive firing of the grad students. Instead it complains that the administration had agreed to negotiate with the grad students who were acting outside of the legally sanctioned labor-management relationship.

The UAW and other unions are complicit in the strikebreaking action of Napolitano, which is backed by Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom, billionaire Richard

Blum (husband of Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein), and the rest of the Democratic Party-appointed UC Board of Regents.

Kaycee, a second-year undergrad at UCSC majoring in literature, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “I am in solidarity with the strikers because the wages we earn are unfair compared to the amount that the university demands from us. Continuing the strike and spreading it would tremendously increase the odds of COLA demands being met.” She explained that she took two days off work at the dining hall in support of the grad students on strike and was written up and penalized for doing so and may lose her job. “The grad students are putting their careers on the line to win their demand for COLA, and I felt I had go out in support even at the cost of losing my job.”

Faced with a potential explosion of popular opposition to the firing of the strikers, various “left” factions of the Democratic Party and the trade union apparatus are attempting to steer students and workers back into harmless political channels and snuff out the strike. Democratic Presidential candidate Sen. Bernie Sanders denounced the dismissals as “union busting,” an absurd term given that the UAW supports the firing. This only demonstrates that Sanders' chief concern is that the strike be contained within the official union apparatus.

Graduate students must break decisively with the entire trade union apparatus and form rank-and-file strike committees to fight for the broadest mobilization of the working class in their defense. In addition to reaching out to other students, faculty, and workers on campus, they must call on workers off the campuses, e.g. 14,000 northern California Safeway workers who have authorized strike action, and other workers to join the struggle for living wages, the right to high quality, free public and university education.

But this means urging workers to rebel against the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), National Education Association (NEA) and other unions, and to form rank-and-file factory and workplace committees too.

Preparations must be made for mass demonstrations and strikes to demand the reinstatement of the fired UCSC grad students and to back their demands.

Factions of the pseudoleft Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and similar organizations, such as Socialist Alternative, are promoting so-called reform of the UAW through its Unite All Workers for Democracy (UAWD) faction. They are also promoting the AFT or the NEA as a supposedly progressive alternative to the UAW. Both of these perspectives are bankrupt.

The UAWD claims that autoworkers can reform the UAW through establishing direct elections of the UAW president and other top officers. However, the corruption scandal that is now engulfing the UAW—with top officials convicted for taking bribes in exchange for signing sweetheart contracts and embezzling millions in workers' dues money—is not the product of a few “bad apples.” It is the inevitable consequence of the UAW's procapitalist and nationalist program and more than four decades of collusion with corporate management.

The “One person, one vote” proposal championed by UAWD was quashed by the UAW bureaucracy, which has a long record of ballot stuffing and collaborating with management in victimizing militant workers and its left-wing opponents.

Fundamentally, the UAWD's perspective is the same as that of previous “reform” movements within the unions, such as Teamsters for a Democratic Union or the UAW New Directions faction. These “dissidents,” which included anticommunist factions of the union bureaucracy, did nothing to challenge the nationalist and procapitalist program of the unions. In the end, they were incorporated into the top leadership positions, where they continued the same policies of austerity and class collaboration as their predecessors.

Similarly, the AFT and NEA are fundamentally no less reactionary than the UAW. Both unions spent the majority of 2018-19 trying to prevent the revolts by teachers in West Virginia, Arizona, Oklahoma, California and other states from coalescing into a nationwide strike to defend public education. Angered over decades of collusion by the AFT and NEA affiliates, West Virginia teachers organized a statewide strike, largely over social media, to fight poverty wages, underfunded benefits, and the planned introduction of charter schools. While the initial impulse was driven by teachers—unionized and nonunion—acting independent of the unions, various pseudoleft organizations, including the Democratic Socialists of America—helped the unions reassert their control over the strike. The AFT and NEA promptly shut the strikes down, betraying all of the demands of the teachers.

That is why grad students must take the next step and form rank-and-file strike committees, completely independent of the unions. At their assemblies they should pass resolutions and issue open letters to the workers across the UC system, the state of California and beyond to join this fight.

Fundamentally, this is a political struggle against the

Democratic Party, which defends the corporate and financial aristocracy just as vehemently as Trump and the Republicans. A radical redistribution of wealth—which is needed to meet the most elemental needs of the population—will not be attained through Sanders' appeals to the conscience of the rich and efforts to change the Democratic Party, a party of Wall Street and the Pentagon.

What is needed is the building of a powerful political movement of the working class, which is opposed to both corporate-controlled parties and committed to the fight for workers' power and socialism.

Muhammad, a graduate student striker at UC San Diego, told the WSWS, “It's important for workers to know we can't depend on the benevolence of bosses or bureaucratic unions or politicians to save us. The combination of an already corrupt and indifferent university administration, with a union structured to quash any rank-and-file movement, has put student workers across the UCs in this position. A general strike is a growing possibility in the US, and something which will undoubtedly play a role in any sort of radical or revolutionary change we may see.”

Vee, a second-year undergraduate at UC Santa Barbara who has participated in the demonstrations on campus, explained, “I used to be in the Navy, so I'm attending school with my GI Bill. My tuition is covered, and I get a monthly housing allowance of \$2,699 for each month. The allowance that I get isn't even enough to be able to afford housing near campus. I live in Ventura [40 miles away] and commute to campus two times a week. It's absurd that the administrators expect grad students to be able to survive at UCSB without higher COLA.

“Our TAs [teaching assistants] are the primary instructors, graders, mentors, advisors on so many levels. They at least deserve to not have to worry about being able to afford housing. Isla Vista [where many UCSB students live] has become an impoverished community. So many students are food insecure and barely making it.

“I feel like there's a lot at stake, especially in the way the UC president handles the negotiations. There was definitely a sense of anger at the rally today; people were really upset about the police interventions at UC Santa Cruz and you could tell.”



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