

Socialist Equality Party presidential candidate speaks with University of California strikers

Our reporters
5 March 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 this week at a town hall meeting in San Diego on March 5. Read Santa Cruz's statement on the UC struggle [here](#).

Graduate students at the University of California Santa Cruz (UCSC) are continuing their wildcat strike to demand cost-of-living wage increases, despite the vindictive firing of over 100 graduate student teaching assistants (TAs) by the university administration. The strike has spread to UC Davis (UCD) and UC Santa Barbara (UCSB) with solidarity actions, and in some cases, strike votes at most if not all of the 10 UC campuses.

The struggle has pitted grad students directly against the Democratic Party and the United Auto Workers (UAW) union, which signed a contract last year that imposes poverty level wages and a no-strike clause. On Tuesday, Joseph Kishore, the presidential candidate of the Socialist Equality Party, spoke with students on the picket lines. They discussed the role of the UAW and other unions in isolating workers' struggles and the political issues in the 2020 election.

Many students expressed their hostility to the Democratic Party and were interested in an alternative. In a widely echoed sentiment, Phil C, a graduate student in the History of Consciousness department, told Kishore, "The two parties are just factions of the same basic political position." Cyril, an alumnus who was supporting the strikers, made a similar point, saying, "Even if they get a senate full of Democrats they wouldn't pass anything good; they're all centrists and neo-liberals."

At the election meeting at UC Berkeley Monday night

the SEP's vice-presidential candidate, Norissa Santa Cruz, spoke at length on the role of the UAW in collaborating with the administration.

Earlier, *World Socialist Web Site* reporters spoke with strikers and their supporters at the Los Angeles (UCLA), San Diego (UCSD), Irvine (UCI) and Santa Cruz (UCSC) campuses.

Abdullah, a grad student at the rally of nearly 150 students at UCLA, said, "There is a lot of money being poured into the system. They have the money, yet they are operating largely by exploiting underpaid graduate student workers who are forced to live in conditions of near poverty, just to live near campus."

Asked whether this is the reality for most workers in the world, Abdullah replied, "Of course. One of the main problems is capitalism itself. One corollary of that is the fact that this country is controlled by plutocrats who exploit people and we have to stop tolerating it."

Abdullah spoke of the history of class struggle in the US previously enabling workers to win gains: "There have been advances at times within this society, which have often come through disregarding the established processes. The civil rights struggle is an example. Definitely there has to be some major transformation. The political process in this country is skewed and we need to change it."

Abdullah also expressed his view on the role of the trade unions: "The unions in this country have been largely compromised, it's a demonstrated fact, it's been the case for a long time. It's symptomatic of the larger problems with capitalism in this country."

Yasmin, an undergrad student of atmospheric and oceanic science, voiced her support for grad students. "It's unfair that the UC system makes so much money off of the labor of graduate students and TAs, but they can't

even give them enough to live where they work in Los Angeles.”

Yasmin also pointed to the underlying economic basis for the housing crisis. “It’s the capitalist system. That’s how billionaires are made, how big corporations are formed, without ensuring basic things like health care or job security.”

Yasmin also protested the role of UC President Janet Napolitano, formerly the head of Homeland Security under the Obama administration, stating, “They wanted someone to quell student protests. That is not acceptable. It’s now considered normal for them to fire us.”

About 200 graduate students and supporters held a rally and march at UC-Irvine, 40 miles south of Los Angeles. Aida, a TA in criminology, said, “I think the firing of the Santa Cruz grad students is ridiculous. Forty-five percent of my income goes to rent. I live on campus and share a place with my roommate, but I have no money to buy furniture. Then you have to pay for your car, insurance, phone, and then I send money to my parents and younger brother. It becomes a game juggling and budgeting. Towards the end of the month, I run out of basic stuff. My partner sometimes helps if she can, but a lot of times I use my credit card to buy basics.”

Jordan, a graduate TA also in criminology, said, “I pay 90 percent of my income to live on campus. The 10 percent that’s left has to go to car payments, food, and my partner’s health insurance because she’s not covered by UCI. She is in the master’s program in education here at UCI and is student teaching, which means she gets no pay as a student teacher. She works from 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. every day at an elementary school, and she drives to work. And we both have a ton of student loans.”

Speaking on her working conditions, Jordan stated, “As a TA, I have to attend undergraduate lectures, maintain online grade books, grade papers and exams, and meet regularly with the students. Last week, I calculated that my total time working as a TA, completing my own coursework, and attending meetings with faculty amounts to 50–60 hours a week. After that, there’s nothing left for my own research. I get paid \$21,000 for nine months and we aren’t guaranteed work during the summer. If you spread that out over 12 months, it’s about \$1,750 a month.”

The WSWS also spoke with a Pakistani grad student in fine arts. He asked to speak anonymously for fear of retaliation due to his international status. UCSC has already threatened international strikers with deportation. On the firing of the UCSC grad students, he said, “I think

it’s horrible. Maybe they can do that to 57 grad students, but can they fire 5,000 or more of us? Strikes are happening all over: Canada, here in the US by the teachers, autoworkers, all over the world. Authority does not like resistance.

“I’m in the Master of Fine Arts (MFA) program, not PhD. So, I’m paid less. My take home pay is \$1,100 a month. As it is, the arts are so underfunded here in this country. Also, as an international student, I pay higher tuition. Students who are residents of California pay \$15,000 in tuition a year to attend a UC campus. I have to pay \$35,000.

“I’m one of three TAs in a class with 300 students. So, each of us is responsible for 100 students. We do the grading of exams, papers, quizzes and attend all the classes. We have to grade many writing assignments.”

“Last week I had my first encounter with police brutality here. Around the time of our rally, the campus police brutally arrested an alumna. As an international student, I definitely feel the fear. Nothing has happened to me, but when I came over here, it was when Trump was elected president.”

Showing her support at the rally at UC-San Diego, Katrina, an undergraduate studying cognitive science, explained, “It’s the same story, different group. Someone is underpaid for their work by a private corporation who is profiting off their labor and they don’t care about their well-being.

“My parents are in the military so I don’t have to pay as much for school, but even then I depend on them for gas, food, etc. I’ve tried living in La Jolla and having a job, and my grades tanked. You actually go into debt with all the work.

“Socialism has been associated with dictatorship but the truth is capitalism is the real dictatorship. Under socialism, learning wouldn’t be for profit, automation can ensure a high standard of living for everyone.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact