

SEP candidate Santa Cruz addresses UC San Diego rally

Students rally in defense of University of California strike

Jonathan Burleigh
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The ongoing strike of University of California (UC) graduate students escalated yesterday with mass demonstrations in response to calls for a UC-wide walkout. UC Santa Cruz (UCSC) strikers shut down campus, setting pickets beginning at 5:30am to block traffic. Many students and supporters went on strike and held mass demonstrations at other UC campuses and held assemblies to discuss the way forward. While the United Auto Workers (UAW) union is attempting to demobilize the strike and prevent it from openly challenging the Democratic Party, Socialist Equality Party (SEP) campaigners, including Vice Presidential candidate Norissa Santa Cruz, fought to expand the struggle off the campuses into a political strike against the Democrats.

The UC graduate student strike began as a fight for a substantial cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) and expanded sharply after last Friday's firing of what is now over 100 UCSC graduate teaching assistants (TAs) who began withholding Fall 2019 final grades in protest over massive rent burdens and widespread graduate student homelessness.

This wildcat strike was organized in direct defiance of the UAW's poverty contract, which includes a no-strike clause. Illustrating the corruption of the union, former UAW president Gary Jones was just indicted for embezzling \$1 million in union funds as part of a bribery scandal that has now spread to the entire national leadership.

The UAW is now calling on students to end the strike until at least April, when it intends to hold a strike authorization vote over so-called "unfair labor practices" (ULP). Listed among these unfair practices is "unlawful bargaining directly with individual graduate students," i.e., thinking of bargaining with the wildcat strikers. Unions have a long history of using such ULP strikes to

explicitly prevent workers from raising demands or even making statements related to compensation and working conditions.

In other words, the UAW is asking graduate students to call off their strike for livable wages, continue working under crushing rent burdens and homelessness, and then strike to demand "good faith" bargaining with the same team that "negotiated" poverty wages and a no-strike clause. There is no "good faith" between the UC regents under UC President and Obama administration Secretary of Homeland Security Napolitano and the Democratic Party that she represents and students. Napolitano made her position on COLA clear when she greeted initial COLA protests with police repression and then fired the strikers.

Strikers warmly greeted SEP and *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) campaigners at UC San Diego (UCSD), where over 500 rallied, UC Los Angeles (UCLA), 600, UC Berkeley (UCB), over 1,000 and UC Santa Cruz (UCSC), over 500. UC Santa Barbara graduate students, who have been on strike since last week, led a demonstration of over 2,000.

The UAW clearly does not have control over the strike. A speaker at the UCB rally rejected the UAW's efforts to shut down the strike, asserting, "We need to strike not in April, not in May, but right now, to save the jobs of our colleagues at UC Santa Cruz."

SEP Vice Presidential candidate Norissa Santa Cruz was given the chance to address the rally of over 500 at UCSD on a bullhorn speaker. She elaborated a socialist perspective to help guide the striking grad students:

"The SEP supports the striking grad students. Over the years, there have been immense cuts, not just in the UC system, but in public schools in the US and beyond. We've seen a wave of teachers strikes across the world

over the past two years. One of the main things you'll face is isolation of your struggle. And one of the main promoters of this isolation will be the United Auto Workers and the trade unions. What happens here at UC is that the entire workforce and students are divided into different unions, AFSCME, Teamsters, SEIU, UAW, etc. So if there is any action, only a tiny percentage of the workforce will go out on strike. Its isolated. The entire university continues to run and it's business as usual.

"What is fundamentally needed is a break with the Democratic Party. The unions are the largest contributors to the Democratic Party. And in California, this is what Democratic Party control looks like. Students must organize outside the Democrats, build rank-and-file committees.

"Did you know that high school students in the Sweetwater district here in San Diego are walking out tomorrow to protest the layoffs of over 250 teachers. You must take your struggle to those students. Send delegations to go talk to them. This is a political fight.

"Janet Napolitano and the UC regents represent the elite of the state of California and the entire Democratic Party.

"Organize with Sweetwater teachers and students. Expand your struggle, do not allow it to be isolated. The Socialist Equality Party supports you."

In holding discussions and assemblies, graduate students have taken important organizational steps outside the UAW. However, expanding the struggle requires the formation of rank-and-file committees that break consciously with the nationalism and corporatism of the UAW. The interests of the regents are diametrically opposed to the interests of the students and every "good faith" step in their direction is a step away from a tuition-free public university that pays its employees.

Greyson, an undergraduate student at UCSD, voiced his solidarity with the strike. "I organized a group of students to come out to show support for the COLA movement today. I think this was also an educational event, for people who want to know more about the issues.

Noting the vast inequality in California, he continued, "I'm very aware that there's an upside down pyramid of wealth."

Grayson explained the political content of the struggle, "The amount that they spend to put police on campus is way more than what the COLA protesters are asking for. I think the big thing about this is that COLA is more than just cost of living, like a monetary adjustment. If it was, they'd give them the money. But it's a political and social movement. The UC knows that if COLA goes

through, a lot more than money is at stake. Political power would be adjusted. Social power would be adjusted."

An international undergraduate student at UCSD who preferred to remain anonymous to avoid victimization, expressed solidarity with the graduate students: "Some of the stories I've heard are horrifying. The grad students should not be living in such terrible conditions. COLA is a beginning but we need to ramp it up to ensure that the UC works for us all."

Denouncing the UC administration, he continued, "If you can make students go hungry every single night, if you can make them homeless, I don't know what kind of person you are."

When a WSWS reporter pointed out that California billionaire Elon Musk made hundreds of millions of dollars each day this year, the student replied, "He STOLE that money. Wealth inequality here is just nuts. They say California is so liberal, but conditions here are pretty bad. The wealth of this campus IS the students and the teaching assistants and the other workers. It's not Elon Musk and the billionaires.

"Definitely in such a wealthy state, it shouldn't be like this. Maybe we need to change the entire world."

Speaking on the US elections, the student said, "Joe Biden is just as much a monster as Trump, he's just a more senile monster. He is a sexist, racist, though he may try to hide it. His administration would mean a significant turn for the worse. Honestly I don't see any difference between Trump and Biden."

Speaking about Bernie Sanders, the student said, "If Sanders is elected, he's not going to move toward socialism, but he's going to try to hide the contradictions of capitalism, and ensure the demise of capitalism doesn't come quite so soon. He's like FDR. FDR on his deathbed said he was the person who saved capitalism. I think Sanders is going to do the exact same thing.

"So we do need socialist parties talking about this stuff. I definitely applaud what you guys are doing. This is an imperialist world. We do need a revolution."



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