

University of California graduate student strike: A struggle against the United Auto Workers and the Democratic Party

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For two months, graduate students and teaching assistants at the University of California have engaged in a wildcat strike, rebelling against the United Auto Workers (UAW) to demand cost of living adjustments (COLA) in one of the most expensive states in the US. The pay they are currently receiving does not even cover the average rent in the main cities of California, where housing costs are soaring.

The strike began at UC Santa Cruz (UCSC), but it has quickly spread to the entire 11-campus UC system. Last week, UC President Janet Napolitano—Barack Obama’s former secretary of the Department of Homeland Security—fired dozens of strikers and deployed police against a demonstration, triggering rallies at multiple campuses.

The strike is part of the international wave of social protest. It takes place in rebellion against the hated UAW and the contract it imposed on graduate students. Not only does the slave-charter contract fail to address the cost of living, it also includes a “no-strike” clause that strikers are boldly defying.

The UAW has responded by filing charges with the National Labor Relations Board against the UC administration—not for mistreating strikers, but for negotiating with them! In other words, the UAW has intervened not on behalf of its “members” but on behalf of its own interests, to maintain its status as the sole “collective bargaining agent” and to keep the dues money flowing to UAW headquarters in Detroit, Michigan.

The actions of the UAW against University of California graduate students are in conformity with what it is—an anti-working class organization run by criminals who are under investigation or have been indicted for stealing workers’ dues money and accepting bribes from the auto companies.

This week, prosecutors filed charges against former UAW President Gary Jones for embezzling more than \$1 million in workers’ dues money. According to the indictment from federal prosecutors, Jones and other top UAW executives engaged in a conspiracy to divert dues money to cover “cigars, private villas, high-end liquor and meal expenses, golfing apparel, golf clubs and green fees.”

For decades, the UAW has presided over the imposition of one concessions contract after the next, suppressing opposition among workers to the end of the eight-hour day, the implementation of multiple pay and benefit tiers, and the destruction of jobs. It has turned itself into a business, profiting off the exploitation of the workers it claims to represent while pocketing bribes from the auto companies.

What else would defenders of the UAW like as proof that it is not a workers’ organization? An organization that steals dues money while enforcing the dictates of the company is a scab organization, not a workers’ organization.

The UAW is a particularly obscene expression of a general process affecting all the trade unions, which are based on a nationalist and pro-capitalist perspective. The American Federation of Teachers, whose president Randi Weingarten “earns” half a million dollars per year, has betrayed strike after strike in the wave of teachers revolts throughout the country over the past two years, from West Virginia to Oklahoma, Arizona, Chicago, Los Angeles, Oakland and elsewhere.

The struggle of graduate students in the University of California system is at the same time a struggle against the Democratic Party.

The fact that it is Janet Napolitano, a top Democratic Party official, who is implementing the cuts and firing

strikers is only the most direct expression of the fact that the Democrats, no less than the Republicans, are committed to slashing funding for education to free up resources for the rich.

Decades of protests against tuition rises at UC have been met with stony silence by Democrats. In 2011, UC police infamously used pepper spray against protesters at UC Davis during the administration of Jerry Brown.

Those who declare that the strike must be kept free of politics—inevitably the same as those who insist that the UAW can be reformed—are working to subordinate workers to the existing parties and to capitalist politics. This argument is generally justified on the basis that politics “divides” workers.

In reality, a mass movement capable of challenging the ruling class can be based only on mobilizing the entire working class against inequality and capitalism. This is especially critical for the mobilization of the youth, whose growing interest in socialism must be directed toward the working class, not the Democratic Party.

The lack of stable career paths and ubiquitous part-time and gig employment only underscore that the struggles of youth and students inevitably raise questions related to the organization of capitalist society. The UCSC strikers have gained support for their cause because millions of young people, and workers in general, see in their exploited conditions the social reality that an entire generation faces under capitalism.

Even as the UC protests expand, there is a growing wave of opposition among teachers, workers and students to massive budget cuts planned at Sweetwater High School in San Diego, California. On Friday, students continued a series of walkouts to oppose the impending layoff of teachers and cuts to learning centers that will have a devastating impact.

For these struggles to succeed, basic political conclusions must be drawn. There are young people who retain illusions in Bernie Sanders, who tweeted support for the UC students. Sanders claims that he can lead a “political revolution” within the framework of the Democratic Party.

On February 28, he tweeted: “This is disgraceful. All workers deserve the right to bargain and strike for better wages and benefits. To Janet Napolitano and @UCSC: stop this outrageous union busting and negotiate in good faith.”

But strikers know the issue is not “union-busting,” since the union is itself “busting” the strike. And strikers do not want UC to “negotiate” with the rotten UAW—it wants

UC to meet the demands that the UAW has failed to address as the self-proclaimed “representative” of the graduate students. As for Sanders’ demand that “all workers deserve the right to strike”—tell that to the UAW, which negotiated a no-strike clause!

Sanders’ whole campaign is aimed at bringing workers and young people back into the Democratic Party—the very organization that is responsible, no less than the Republicans, for the conditions faced by the working class. In California, the entire state is controlled by Democrats, top to bottom.

Even as the Democratic Party is kicking Sanders in the teeth and trying to block his campaign, Sanders is doubling down on his insistence that workers support this reactionary organization.

It is necessary to put the matter to the strikers bluntly: without a clear political perspective and a conscious break from the unions, the strike will ultimately be isolated and defeated by the Democrats and the UAW.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on graduate students to form rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the unions, to appeal to workers throughout California and the United States.

These committees must establish lines of communication with Safeway workers, public school teachers, students and autoworkers, who view the students’ defiance of the UAW with admiration and enthusiasm. Once established, the rank-and-file committees will form the backbone of a powerful working class movement against the social conditions that all sections of the working class confront.

The development of independent organizations of struggle must be linked to the building of a genuine socialist leadership in the working class, connecting the fight for the social rights of all workers to a mass international political movement to put an end to inequality, war and the capitalist system.

In the 2020 elections, the Socialist Equality Party is running Joseph Kishore and Norissa Santa Cruz for president and vice president. For more information and to get involved, visit socialism2020.org.



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