

California graduate students expand wildcat strike to fourth campus, with two more slated to join

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The wildcat strike by graduate students across California has taken a pivotal turn over the past week. Following the summary firing of more than 80 grad students at UC Santa Cruz (UCSC) last Friday, demonstrations and protests were held on nearly every University of California campus this week, culminating in strikes and protests involving over 5,000 students, faculty and other workers statewide on Thursday afternoon.

Following the firing of the Santa Cruz grad students, UC Santa Barbara (UCSB) and UC Davis (UCD) grad students joined wildcat strike action, and on Thursday grad students at UC San Diego (UCSD) also voted to join the wildcat strike. Plans have been made for UC Berkeley (UCB) and UC Los Angeles (UCLA) grad students to join the strike as well, with calls raised by sections of grad students at the four other UC campuses to also join.

The Thursday assemblies were estimated to reach over 1,000 at UCLA, 2,000 at UCSB, 1,000 at UCB, 500 at UCSD, and 500 at UCSC. Petitions calling for the reinstatement of fired strikers and the implementation of their demand for a cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) have been signed by thousands of students and faculty over the past week.

A widely circulated post on Twitter Friday noted that UC has paid for Google advertisements to promote their narrative of events for relevant searches on Google. The action calls to mind the failed efforts of the UC Davis administration to scrub the internet of links to the infamous pepper spraying of students during the Occupy Wall Street protests of 2011, which backfired and drew more attention to this scandal.

The grad student strike has reached a crossroads. In breaking with the United Auto Workers (UAW) union—whose leadership is embroiled in a multimillion dollar corruption scandal—UC grad students have inspired workers around the world and shown the way forward through their independent initiative. Striking grad students will come under increasing pressure to end the strike and cede control over their struggle to the union bureaucracy.

A statement released Friday by a section of the East Bay Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) points to these pressures bearing down on grad students. While proclaiming

“solidarity” for the striking graduate students, the statement notes, “This strike is currently one of the defining labor struggles in the United States.”

However, the statement continues, “The wildcat has moved UAW 2865 towards supporting a cost-of-living adjustment campaign that could culminate into an unfair labor practices strike backed by union officers. So, this battle may continue for some time. And, since many UAW 2865 members are also DSA members, the outcome will carry an outsized meaning for the future of socialists in the labor movement.”

As of this writing, the statement has been endorsed by 60 members of the East Bay DSA, with the leadership nevertheless refusing to adopt it as their chapter’s official position, out of “concern that the DSA remain neutral in what was really a dispute that was internal to UAW 2865,” according to the statement. Evidently, even the mildest statement of support for independent action is unacceptable to the DSA leadership.

The idea that the wildcat strike has “moved” the UAW leadership is meant to provide cover for the union, which has opposed the demands of grad students from the beginning and negotiated their miserable contract in 2018.

The UAW’s efforts to stymie the wildcat strike and replace it with a legal “unfair labor practices” dispute represent a complete dead end for grad students. The UAW is seeking to replace the wildcat strike for wages with a strike that explicitly excludes wage demands. Grad students should carefully examine the situation facing striking Asarco miners, who have been on strike as part of an “unfair labor practices” dispute, where the union forbids its members from talking about economic conditions, with no end in sight after five months.

In opposition to this kowtowing before the union, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) has fought throughout this struggle to provide a genuine socialist orientation to grad students. The SEP vice presidential candidate Norissa Santa Cruz addressed students at the UCSD rally Thursday, while campaigners for the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with students at other campuses. We have called for the formation of rank-and-file strike committees to maintain complete independence from the UAW, break with the Democratic Party

that controls politics across California, and expand the strike to the broadest layers of the working class, including over 14,000 Safeway workers who recently voted to authorize a strike.

Adam, a grad student in the Berkeley Geography Department currently studying abroad in London, spoke with the WSWS. Adam has been following developments in California closely and has joined the picket lines of University and College Union (UCU) strikers. Roughly 50,000 lecturers, technicians, library and other university staff represented by UCU have recently been engaged in rolling strikes across the UK.

A grad student at Berkeley since 2016, Adam went through the contract negotiations process in 2018, which culminated in the UAW imposing the sellout contract against which grad students are presently rebelling.

He commented on the experience in 2018, stating, “I felt like the union leadership circled the wagons around a compromise in the name of getting a victory in 2018, and rammed a contract vote down the membership’s throats. They were trying to get a win before things got more radical, and many of us thought we were betrayed. We felt like the bargaining team lied to us, and an about-face occurred, and so for the last 18 months or so many of us felt like we were on the outside looking in. The local UAW leadership really sided with the administration, we called them the ‘admin caucus.’ What’s happening now is a wildcat strike gone systemwide. The union isn’t leading this fight.

“We’ve been told so many times by the union, ‘we’re not ready to strike, the campuses aren’t ready.’ It’s been so utterly refreshing to see that narrative destroyed by the membership, by a wide movement. Even the DSA was honestly detrimental to our union fight, pushing organizers to settle contracts quickly. The union has said again and again, ‘You’re on your own.’ Someone tied to the union recently said we’re in violation of the law.”

Adam stated, “We should turn toward the working class, that’s where the power lies. Even an industrial labor movement at UC could develop powerfully. We have service workers, custodians, librarians, post docs, the numbers of unions involved is very large. If the nurses and janitors go on a prolonged strike, that could be huge. I need librarians more than a chancellor. I’ll side with my fellow workers, and if we mobilized that power, we’d bring the university system to its knees.”

Speaking on his experience in London, Adam stated, “I was moved to tears today at the strike meeting after pickets for the UCU strikers. Cells were reporting how many members were at each university, and I gave an international solidarity statement today on behalf of UC strikers. The whole room erupted in applause. It was awesome and truly inspiring.”

At UC Berkeley, Katherine and Sebastian, two undergraduates studying the environmental sciences, spoke to the WSWS. Katherine said, “The theme of inequality is very big here. This is a question taking place all across California. I

work at a lab with grad students, and you can see the stress and work that is put on graduate students.” She also noted, “I think this could easily kickstart into something bigger, even international.”

Sebastian commented, “California is one of the top economies on planet earth, next to nations like Russia in terms of GDP. For a state with such wealth to say, ‘We can’t afford to pay our workers, our teachers, our graduate students,’ is ridiculous. Where does that money go? Politicians say the economy is going great, the Dow Jones is up, but what does that translate into in terms of jobs, healthcare and education?”

Julie, a French-American graduate student, commented on the larger international context of the strike. “I don’t think it’s a coincidence that we see strikes happening here in the US and in France at the same time,” she said. “We’re seeing mass international austerity, especially for educational workers, the level of precariousness that is had, and the amount of work we have to do. There are days where you don’t sleep much, you don’t eat much, but you work a hell of a lot.

“I think this is all linked to an international system that looks very much alike, whether you are in the US or Europe. That is, an extreme, neoliberal, hypercapitalist system.”

The WSWS also spoke to a group of striking undergraduate students who are employed by the university as “readers,” students who get paid to grade lower division students’ work.

Kaylan commented, “We need to show the administration that the students have power in the situation, not them.” She continued, “Hopefully this snowballs because teachers deserve more pay in our society. Teachers are so influential in everyone’s lives, and society needs to be valuing them more. Their status economically should reflect their true value to society.”



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