Norissa Santa Cruz addresses University of California, Irvine strikers

California graduate student wildcat strike enters fifth week

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9 March 2020

The growing wildcat strike of University of California (UC) graduate student teaching assistants (TAs) has entered its fifth week, and has now spread from UC Santa Cruz (UCSC) to at least four other campuses, with substantial sympathy demonstrations at all of the 11 campuses.

Graduate students launched this struggle in opposition to the no-strike, poverty contract imposed by the United Auto Workers (UAW) union, demanding a substantial cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) to reduce crushing rent burdens in one of the most expensive states in the country. On February 28, UC fired roughly 80 TAs who refused to submit final grades for Fall 2019 in protest.

The strike has now spread to UC Santa Barbara, UC Davis, UC San Diego and most recently to nearly 100 professional and administrative workers at the UC Hastings law campus.

The UAW, whose entire leadership is reeling from a corruption and bribery scandal, is attempting to contain and isolate this movement, calling for an end to the strike for wages in favor of an “unfair labor practices” strike vote they plan to call in April. The main demand of this “sanctioned” strike would be preservation of the corrupt UAW’s role as the “sole legally recognized bargaining unit” for graduate students. The UAW is totally opposed to a strike for improved conditions.

Socialist Equality Party (SEP) Vice Presidential candidate Norissa Santa Cruz was invited to a meeting of COLA organizers at UC Irvine (UCI) and spoke to an audience of about 20. She advanced the SEP’s perspective of breaking with the UAW and forming rank-and-file committees of graduate students to broaden the strike both on and off the campuses. She further argued that the struggle for higher wages, which workers all across California desperately need, is inherently political and must be waged in opposition to the Democratic Party, which governs California and appoints the majority of the UC Board of Regents.

UCI is the fifth UC campus at which Santa Cruz and SEP Presidential candidate and National Secretary Joseph Kishore have spoken this past week, including UCSC and UC Berkeley (UCB) on Tuesday, UC Los Angeles (UCLA) on Wednesday and UC San Diego (UCSD) on Thursday.

Although there were a range of perspectives at the UCI meeting, the audience listened with interest and several of the organizers were particularly receptive to the perspective of forming independent rank-and-file committees in opposition to the UAW and the Democratic Party.

This weekend, strikers at UCSC released a video with interviews with many of the originial wildcat organizers. These video interviews demonstrate that the strike is a courageous and conscious stand not just for livable wages but in defense of public education.

The video opens, "Seeing what this movement has become, it's really about equal access to higher education. It's about equal access to the vocation of research and teaching."

Asked how life would be different with a COLA, "people said, 'I don't need to think twice before I run a heater. I don't need to think about how I'm going to feed my child and I can actually focus on my research. The university is not paying graduate student workers enough to live where they work and we can do better. We demand to be fairly compensated for our labor."

Another stated, "The UC system has shown that they

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do not care that the only people who can come to the university are those from privileged backgrounds, those with parental support, those who are not first-generation [students], those who have a leg up already."

"This is a systemic problem and it's not only here at Santa Cruz," noted another student. "It's UC-wide. People are outraged and they're quite disgusted and for the first time they've had a forum to express that."

Another student expressed his determination "I believe so deeply in equal access to the university that I and many others were willing to be fired."

A UCSC professor explained that two of his TAs were among those fired. One is pregnant and the other is international and now faces the possibility of deportation.

Students justified their decision to launch the wildcat strike, noting that 83% of UCSC graduate students voted against the current UAW contract. Correctly noting the importance of breaking outside of the union framework one student explained, "The point of the wildcat is literally that you are escaping from the range of action that the system gave you." Another noted that "The univeristy is actually making good on their promise to retaliate against us. Now we just have to make good on our promises to retaliate back."

As one student notes, the struggle against "austerity measures imposed on education by the regents, by the state. What we're hoping to see is the strike actually changing the structure of the university and giving people access to higher education for everyone."

This video expresses healthy and generous sentiments. The fight for decent wages for graduate students is part of the fight for high-quality public education for all students and livable wages for all workers. There is clearly no lack of determination or willingness to fight.

To achieve these goals, the strikers must fully break out of the UAW straitjacket, forming rank-and-file committees to do what the unions would never allow: reach out to workers across the state and call for the broadest possible mobilization of workers in a political struggle against the Democratic Party, from UC President Napolitano to California Governor Newsom. The conditions confronting UC students are the same as all educators and students suffering under the attack on public education. On Friday, students at San Ysidro high school in the Sweetwater school district walked out in opposition to massive budget cuts and hundreds of teacher layoffs. In Oakland, Los Angeles and other cities across the state, teachers are languishing under concessions contracts, teaching in overcrowded classrooms, without supplies for poverty wages.

The expansion of public education requires additional resources, which exist in abundance among the state's billionaires and trillion-dollar companies. How many trillions have been squandered away bailing out the banks, bombing the Middle East, throwing immigrants in cages? The only way these resources will be mobilized for public good is through a united political struggle of the working class for socialism.

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