

Berkeley grad students vote to join wildcat strike as UAW scrambles to shut down struggle

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Graduate students at Berkeley, the flagship campus of the University of California (UC) system, voted on Monday to join the wildcat strike initiated by UC Santa Cruz graduate students last month.

Faced with crushing rent burdens, UCSC graduate students and teaching assistants (TAs) are demanding substantial cost-of-living adjustments. The strike has met with widespread support across the state and even around world, which has only been galvanized by the decision by UC President Janet Napolitano to fire dozens of strikers.

Berkeley graduate students are scheduled to begin their strike next Monday, March 16, bringing the total number of UC schools with strikes to six out of eleven. In addition to UCSC, the other schools where graduate students are on strike are UC Santa Barbara, UC Davis and UC San Diego. Administrative and professional workers at the UC Hastings law campus have also taken strike action. Solidarity demonstrations attracting thousands of people have taken place on all campuses in the UC system.

The stand taken by Berkeley graduate students repudiates the position of the UAW, which last month rejected a widely-circulated petition demanding a sympathy strike to defend fired UCSC strikers. In a letter to students, UAW Unit Chair Gerard Ramm declared that the union would not defend students who violated the no-strike clause in the UAW contract.

As the wildcat strike of University of California (UC) graduate students approaches the one month mark, the struggle has reached a crossroads. Fearing that the strike will spread off the campuses, the UAW, the Democratic Party and the pseudo-left are intensifying their efforts to smother the strike.

The UAW is attempting to shut down the wildcat strike and divert students away from their chief demand for COLA. While it is demanding that graduate students immediately shut down their wildcat strike, it promises only to call a vote for an officially authorized “unfair labor practices” (ULP) strike—a definition which legally prohibits the raising of economic demands—at some point in April. Unions have long used such strikes to muzzle workers and isolate and wear down militant workers, as in the ongoing strike by 2,000 Asarco copper miners in Arizona.

The timing of the vote means that any strike, if one took place at all, would occur during the summer when campuses are mostly shut down already—while sealing the fate of dozens of fired graduate students, including international students placed at risk of deportation.

Meanwhile, three UC campuses, including Berkeley, UCSC and UCLA, have announced the cancellation of all in-person campuses for the foreseeable future in response to the rapid spread of the Covid-19 pandemic on the West Coast. While the physical campuses will be shut down, classes will continue to be held online, meaning the continuation of the strike is still technically feasible. While such measures are objectively necessary to combat the spread of the deadly disease, there can be no doubt that the Napolitano administration, with the support of the UAW, will seek to use the public health crisis to force through measures aimed at breaking the strike.

Two weeks ago, the UC administration and the UAW filed dueling grievances with the California state Public Employment Relations Board. The UC’s complaint alleges that the UAW has failed to sufficiently abide by the terms of the no-strike clause in its contract with the

university, which obligates the union not to “in any way authorize, assist, encourage, participate in, sanction, ratify, condone or lend support to” any wildcat action and commits the union to “immediately take whatever affirmative action is necessary to prevent and bring about an end to any concerted activity in violation of this article.”

The no-strike clause forms the legal basis upon which Napolitano, the former Homeland Security secretary under Obama, has carried the firings at UCSC. That the UAW could agree to such language demonstrates that it is not a workers’ organization but a corrupt labor contractor. However, no strike clauses have been standard issue in American labor contracts for decades, demonstrating that the degeneration of the UAW is part of a universal process.

The UAW has filed two grievances against the administration. Seeking to save face, the first grievance protests the firing of the strikers, on the purely technical and legally tenuous basis that the move short-circuited the hiring authority of university departments.

The other, more significant complaint denounces UC for “negotiation with any party other than the Union over cost of living issues.” In other words, the UC administration threatened the legally-sanctioned monopoly of the UAW as the graduate students’ “bargaining agent” by speaking directly to the strikers.

The class hostility of the UAW to its own members is most crassly expressed in the corruption scandal which has embroiled much of its top leadership. Last week’s indictment of former UAW President Gary Jones on charges that he conspired to embezzle \$1 million in member dues to pay for private villas, lavish meals and endless golf junkets raises the specter of a federal takeover of the union under federal racketeering statutes.

The endemic corruption in the UAW bureaucracy is the outcome of decades of collaboration with the auto companies in plant closures and mass layoffs. Through its control of billion-dollar investment funds, the direct infusion of corporate cash through joint “training centers” and other mechanisms, the financial interests of the union have diverged sharply with the interests of its members—UAW-controlled assets have soared to over \$1 billion even though membership has declined by more than 75 percent since the 1970s. The UAW began to expand into graduate students in the 1980s in

order partially offset the loss of dues-paying autoworkers caused by its own policies.

The UAW has combined its attempts to wind down the strike with attempts at damage control, through totally insincere declarations of support. A recent email to UAW officers instructed them “to support the COLA movement in every way possible” and “avoid undermining strike solidarity”—in other words, to feign support for the strike while the UAW attempts to do exactly that by shutting the strike down.

The UAW’s efforts are being bolstered by similarly insincere shows of support from Democratic Party politicians such as Bernie Sanders, who covered for the UAW by falsely calling the university’s response a “union-busting” campaign, the corporate controlled press such as the *Los Angeles Times*, and pseudo left groups such as the Democratic Socialists of America. The experiences of the teachers’ wildcat strikes in West Virginia and Oklahoma in 2018 show that the embrace of such forces is a “kiss of death” for strikers, aimed at covering up whatever miserable sellout the union arranges as a massive “victory.” In West Virginia, all of these forces were caught flat-footed when teachers angrily rejected a sellout by the teachers’ unions which they had promoted, and voted to continue their strike.

Graduate students cannot make progress by pressuring the UAW or by appealing to the Democrats, who control the state government in California and are leading the attacks against the strike. Instead, they must appeal to the working class for support. There are immense reservoirs of support throughout the country, including 14,000 Safeway workers in California who recently authorized strike action, teachers and students in the Sweetwater school district in San Diego who are locked in a battle against budget cuts, and hundreds of thousands of autoworkers, who will respond to the students’ defiance of the hated UAW with great enthusiasm.



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