

University of California wildcat strike continues despite quarantine measures

Dan Conway
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Over the past week, students at the University of California (UC) San Diego joined their counterparts at UC Santa Cruz, UC Santa Barbara and UC Davis in a wildcat strike for substantial cost of living adjustments. Graduate students at UC Berkeley are set to join the full teaching strike on Monday.

The latest actions follow the firings of 54 Santa Cruz graduate students by UC president, and former Homeland Security secretary under Obama, Janet Napolitano. An additional 20 Santa Cruz students have been told that there would be no positions available for them at the start of the 2020–2021 academic year.

Support for the strikers has spread across the US and internationally. Sympathy rallies were held in the past few days at the University of Maryland, University of Nevada-Reno and many other campuses.

The strikers have expressed their desire to continue their actions even as UC campuses shut down and convert to online-only classes as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. The social conditions facing students is intersecting explosively with the measures taken by governments in response to the virus. On Tuesday night, police launched a violent crackdown on the campus of the University of Dayton in Ohio, where students were given only 24 hours to vacate their dormitories.

Under these conditions the United Auto Workers, which nominally represents graduate student workers, is working desperately to contain the strike and divert it into safe channels.

The UAW is demanding that students end their strike immediately, promising only to hold a separate vote for an “unfair labor practices” strike in April which would exclude the economic demands of students. The UAW has also filed a grievance with the state labor department over allegations that the university entered

into “negotiation with any party other than the Union over cost of living issues”—in other words, that the university undermined the legally-sanctioned monopoly of the UAW by speaking directly to students.

The UAW is working with other unions active on UC campuses to isolate the strike as much as possible. On Monday, the American Federation of State and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) called off a strike of 100 workers at UC Hastings’ College of Law, which was set to begin Monday.

Jeff Herrera, AFSCME Local 3299 bargaining team member and UC Hastings library operations manager, claimed in a statement: “This market-competitive agreement ensures that UC Hastings will be able to retain the skilled professionals it needs to serve students, while also ensuring our members will be able to live and work with dignity.” In fact, the “market-competitive” agreement includes annual raises of only 3 percent, approximately equal to the rise in the Consumer Price Index in San Francisco, one of the most expensive cities in America, where the college is located.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to several students about the strike and the way forward for the students’ struggle.

Cheyenne is a first year PhD student in physics at UC Santa Cruz.

“It’s really sad how we’re at a university which talks about diversity and inclusion, how they want a broad student body from different backgrounds, but there’s only one background,” a wealthy one, “that you can be if you can afford to live in Santa Cruz without crushing debt.”

“A lot of people across the campus are in support of the strike,” Cheyenne continued. “Everyone knows how crazy it is to live here. The university acts like a

landlord, not a university. Student housing is twelve-hundred dollars a month for a shared apartment, which is not really a discount. There's a lot of stories, maybe a few are apocryphal, about people being homeless."

Asked about the role of the UAW, Cheyenne said, "There definitely is a sense and a feeling that the union is piggybacking off the work that UC graduate students have done. The union is considering a strike authorization vote after UC graduate students at Santa Cruz have literally put their livelihoods on the line for something that the union said they weren't going to help them with.

"Our union hasn't done much for us. We overwhelmingly voted down the current contract and we're stuck with it anyway. We asked for help but didn't get it."

DJ, an undergraduate at UCSC, also spoke to the WSW.

"I blame the admins for not giving the graduates COLA [cost of living adjustment], because they definitely need it. I've heard of people having to live out of their cars, and if you are going to hire people to work at your facility you have to pay them the right amount of money to live where they're at.

"I definitely feel like the amount the university gives us through financial aid is not enough for a lot of people that I know. A lot of people have day meal plans and they have to ration their things out, saying 'Oh, I just won't go to dining today because I can't really afford to.' They are all things I feel the university should be mindful of and care about, and instead they don't want to know what's going on and prefer to sit up on their ivory tower and go about their business.

"When you hear about the administration getting bonuses, and the fact they hired cops from another county in order to police the situation instead of granting COLA, it's ridiculous."

Asked about the class issues in the UCSC strike and more generally, DJ said, "I think that class has been a very prevalent force, especially in the current election year."

The strike raises fundamental class issues which extend far beyond the university campus. Across the state and country, students and teachers have borne decades of budget cuts under bipartisan efforts to privatize education. With the apparent onset of a new financial crisis triggered by the coronavirus pandemic,

capitalism is preparing to make the working class bear the cost of the crisis. While the Federal Reserve has pledged \$1.5 trillion to prop up stock prices, and the government spends \$1 trillion each year in military adventures, students and teachers are told that there is no money for a living wage, free education or free healthcare.

In order to secure the basic social right to a livable wage and public education, the working class must take those vast sums of wealth out of the hands of private companies and capitalist parties.



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