

Confronting coronavirus

University of California graduate students need a socialist political strategy

Jonathan Burleigh
28 March 2020

On Sunday, March 29, 10:00 a.m.—noon Pacific Daylight Time, the Socialist Equality Party and the World Socialist Web Site will hold an online forum to discuss a working class response to the global coronavirus pandemic. This event will be streamed live throughout the world on the WSWS. Register to participate in order to receive updates and information on future events. Share this event as broadly as possible with your friends, family and coworkers.

As the United States surpasses China in global cases of COVID-19, the US ruling class has made clear that it intends to make the working class pay the full cost of both the pandemic and the \$6 trillion it just handed to Wall Street. As the stock market surges on promises of stimulus, many hospitals around the country are already on the verge of collapse as COVID-19 cases continue to grow at an exponential rate. With the US economy set to contract by up to 25% this quarter, millions have lost their jobs while tens of millions more are forced to continue working under hazardous conditions to avoid destitution. Wildcat strikes have broken out across the US, among autoworkers, sanitation workers, Amazon workers, and others, with similar actions in Europe and Canada. The entire population of California has been ordered to “shelter in place” in a half-measure aimed to slow the spread of the disease. These are the conditions under which the strike of University of California (UC) graduate students finds itself as it enters its seventh week.

UC Santa Cruz (UCSC) graduate students first took wildcat action in defiance of the United Auto Workers (UAW) union in December in a justified fight for livable wages through a cost of living adjustment (COLA). The initial grade strike became a teaching strike in February, which quickly gained widespread support across the entire UC system, across the US and internationally, with sympathy strikes or mass demonstrations at all 11 UC campuses. In addition, graduate students at Columbia University, also represented by the UAW, have voted overwhelmingly in favor of strike action.

The UC administration met the wildcat strike by firing over 80 UCSC graduate students. The administration initially announced plans to strip victimized strikers of health insurance

even as they shut down campuses and ordered a haphazard switch to online classes in an effort to safeguard the health of students and employees. Faced with widespread popular opposition, including calls to boycott UCSC or the whole UC system, the administration was forced to reinstate health care while continuing to leave the strikers without income.

The UAW, which opposed the strike from the beginning, is attempting to divert the students behind a toothless unfair labor practices (ULP) strike aimed at forcing UC administration, acting on behalf of the Democrat-appointed Board of Regents, to “bargain in good faith.”

Faced with an impending recession, the only thing UC plans to bargain for is further cuts to education. The California State University system recently announced a system-wide hiring freeze for 2020. Similarly severe measures will likely be imposed soon at the more research-oriented UC system, with thousands of workers likely to lose jobs, wages and benefits.

In response to the Great Recession of 2007–2009, the UC budget was slashed by billions of dollars. The system sought to partially make up for the funding shortfall by drastically raising tuition (nominally “fees”). Mass student protests, confined to UC campuses, abjectly failed to halt budget cuts and tuition hikes.

The UC strike has gone as far as it can go on the basis of its current anarchistic trade unionist outlook, promoted by pseudo-left political organizations such as the Democratic Socialists of America and various anarchist tendencies. Such politics keep the struggle isolated on the campuses and reject the possibility of the development of a powerful political movement of all sections of the working class against the capitalist system. From the outset, the graduate students’ fight has been a political struggle against the Democratic Party from their local agent UC President Janet Napolitano to the national leadership which has slashed funding for public education over decades.

The onset of the coronavirus pandemic sweeps aside any illusions that the UC regents share any common ground with students and employees. Wages are not at poverty levels because the university won’t negotiate in “good faith” but because the politicians are attempting to extract as much money

as they can out of workers and students. The same system that tells grad students that there is no money for education and they have to work endless hours for scraps, found trillions of dollars overnight to back stock prices and bail out multi-billion dollar companies. The fight for better wages at the university can only exist as part of a struggle with workers across the country for a rational response to the ongoing public health catastrophe, a fight to place the lives of working people above the profit interests of the super-rich.

This necessitates a political break with not only the Democratic Party but also with the UAW and the entire corrupt trade union apparatus. The essentially pro-company orientation of the unions is displayed most clearly by the fact that unions such as the UAW and Teamsters have invariably tried to browbeat workers into continuing to work through the pandemic with completely inadequate protection. At the Fiat-Chrysler Sterling Heights Assembly Plant (SHAP), UAW officials threatened workers with termination if they refused to work. Despite this, workers succeeded in closing the plant through wildcat action. One of those initially infected at SHAP has since died of COVID-19.

The COLA movement is currently hamstrung by various attempts to pressure or reform the UAW. Despite the UAW's intransigent opposition to the wildcat strike, COLA organizers across the UC are running candidates in UAW local elections and working to channel their support behind the UAW's unfair labor practices (ULP) April strike vote. The main grievance cited by the UAW is that UC was "bypassing the Union and dealing directly with ASEs [academic student employees] and/or other groups regarding the terms and conditions of their employment." The union points to apparent attempts by the UC administration to negotiate with student government at UCSC, but this statement makes clear that they are equally opposed to UC negotiations with any other non-UAW entity, including and especially the wildcat strikers.

The function of a ULP strike is to demand that an employer bargain in good faith with a union. Workers are not allowed to raise demands related to wages or working conditions during ULP strikes, and most certainly are not allowed to call upon other workers to join their struggle. Thus, the call for a ULP strike is a demand that graduate students halt their wildcat strike, stop raising compensation demands, such as COLA, and pressure UC to "bargain in good faith" with the same union that agreed in 2018 to the current contract and has fought to enforce the no-strike clause, but is now faced with an impending economic recession and, presumably, massive budget cuts. Calls for a ULP strike are nothing but an effort to bring grad students back under the thumb of the corrupt UAW.

In opposition to this dead end, we call on graduate students and all those who support a socially rational response to the ongoing social crisis, now most sharply expressed in the COVID-19 pandemic, to form workplace and neighborhood committees and organize as broadly as possible based on the

following program of action:

- An emergency program to expand health care infrastructure, including accessible and universal testing and free treatment for all infected.
- The immediate closure of all schools, non-essential plants and other workplaces, with full income for workers affected, for as long as such measures are necessary to maintain public health.
- This requires re-hiring of all laid-off workers, including and especially over 80 victimized UCSC strikers. This necessarily means a fight against cuts to public education and for an expansion of education funding to meet pressing social needs.
- Students, many of whom have been evicted from dormitories or were homeless to begin with, must be provided immediately with safe and affordable housing.
- Abolish tuition and fees. As millions are thrown out of work, students should not be charged for their right to education, particularly through largely improvised online classes.
- Safe working conditions in essential industries.

- End all sanctions and trade war measures. Left in place, they could kill millions.

The trillions of dollars necessary to meet these demands clearly exist, and were indeed just handed by the US government to the banks. It is up to the working class to take up the political struggle to use these resources to meet pressing human needs regardless of its effect on profits. This is the fight for socialism.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact