# The lessons of the University of California grad student strike

**Jonathan Burleigh**
**30 April 2020**

The leaders of the strike by University of California (UC) graduate student instructors have ended the nearly four-month wildcat strike, ceding authority to the United Auto Workers (UAW), the same union student workers were forced to rebel against in the first place.

Citing plans by UC Santa Cruz (UCSC) administration to break their grade strike by giving passing grades to all students whose grades were withheld during the job action, leaders of the UCSC COLA movement announced Monday, through their PayUsMoreUCSC Twitter account, that they would end the grade strike, which began in December 2019 and temporarily became a full teaching strike in February 2020. Isolated grade or teaching strikes at other UC campuses may continue for a while, but these were launched to support the UCSC strike, which has now been shut down.

The struggle was ended not because of any lack of support for the student workers. On the contrary, millions of workers in the state and beyond identified with the grad students who refused to accept the poverty wages negotiated by the UAW and courageously defied arrests, firings and even threats of deportation by UC President Janet Napolitano, the former US Secretary of Homeland Security under the Obama administration.

The leaders of the UC Santa Cruz cost of living adjustment (COLA) movement lacked any viable perspective to unite the struggle of grad students with the rising tide of working class opposition, which has only grown since the outbreak of the pandemic and the criminal response of the Trump administration.

The leaders of the wildcat movement were largely influenced by anarchism and other types of middle class pseudo-left politics. They promoted the illusion that the UAW—whose leaders have been thrown in jail for taking bribes from the auto bosses—could be turned into a fighting force for students. They also claimed that the Democratic Party-run university administration could be forced to accept their demands through a student protest limited to the campuses.

As a result of this orientation, the strike leaders consistently opposed the call by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) for grad students to break free from the grip of the UAW by building rank-and-file strike committees to appeal to workers throughout the state and transform the strike into a political counteroffensive against the austerity program of both parties. The struggle for living wages, like all the other social rights of the working class, the SEP and IYSSE insisted, was bound up with building a politically independent and socialist movement of the working class.

Instead, over the past month and a half the main line of the UC-wide COLA movement has shifted toward the UAW International's cynical and self-serving claim that the filing of an Unfair Labor Practices (ULP) suit will lead to the reinstatement of fired strikers and an increase in wages. What was first billed as a complement to the strike is now being pushed as an excuse for ending it.

UAW loyalists and supporters of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and other pseudo-left organizations have already largely taken over the leadership of local COLA organizations on many UC campuses, with little or no resistance from the initial strike leaders.

The ULP suit is nothing but a trap, aimed at consolidating the hold of the UAW and subordinating grad students to the time-tested "collective bargaining" set-up, long used by the Democrats and unions to impose poverty wages on workers and funnel dues money to the unions. The UAW has already filed a similar suit charging that the university 'llegally bargained' with the student government and groups of striking students instead of the UAW.

Even under the highly doubtful event that the UAW eventually called a strike, under the terms of a ULP dispute, it could quickly shut it down if management agreed to "bargain in good faith" with the UAW, i.e., recognized it as the 'sole bargaining unit' of grad students. ULP strikers cannot raise wage demands, such as COLA, and certainly cannot call on other workers to join them in sympathy strikes.

A video posted by COLA strike leadership supports the

© World Socialist Web Site

UAW and its phony ULP lawsuit. Another statement declares, “The UAW’s current position on settlement for these ULP charges includes a raise to $40,000 per year for graduate student workers.” But the fact is this woefully inadequate amount will only be the starting point of negotiations and will be quickly dropped as soon as it is rejected by the administration.

This is precisely what happened in the 2018 contract, when the UAW’s initial “bargaining position” was that no grad student should pay more than a third of their income on rent. This was quickly dropped. Many UCSC grad students pay over 50 percent.

Grad students need organizations to fight. But the UAW and other unions long ago abandoned any of the defensive functions once associated with the unions. Instead, the nationalist and pro-capitalist unions have spent the last four decades betraying strikes and integrating themselves into the structure of corporate management and the state.

Now the American Federation of Teachers, the Teamsters and other unions are appealing to the Trump administration and big business to use their services to save capitalism and suppress opposition to the reckless push to “reopen the economy” and the unprecedented austerity demands needed to pay for the bailout of Wall Street.

In March, rank-and-file autoworkers rebelled against the UAW, which was working with GM, Ford and Fiat Chrysler to keep the factories open as the deadly disease spread. If the workers had not taken the initiative, forcing the closure of the industry, the death toll—now at 24 autoworkers—would have been higher.

The financial meltdown of state budgets due to the pandemic will be used by both parties to demand even greater austerity and the expansion of online courses to slash jobs and labor costs. After the Trump administration, with the full backing of the Democrats—including Bernie Sanders—handed over trillions to bail out the Wall Street speculators and giant corporations, the universal refrain from both parties to the demands of workers for living wages, adquate school funding and other social rights will be “there is no money.”

With estimates that California's budget deficits could hit $85 billion or more per year, Governor Gavin Newsom is already assembling a new task force, headed by billionaires and executives from Apple, Disney and other corporate giants, to make the working class pay for the crisis through savage cuts to education and other public services.

Instead of dead-end appeals to the UAW and the Democratic Party, grad students should turn to the growing struggles of the working class, including the health care, meatpacking, transit, Instacart, Amazon and Whole Foods workers who have walked out and protested to demand safe working conditions.

Last week grad students at Columbia University began grade strike action and announced an upcoming rent strike to demand an end to rent payments, increased stipends and other substantive measures to ensure they remain safe in the New York epicenter of the pandemic. Once again, however, the UAW is seeking to isolate the strike and block students from mobilizing the immense social opposition in a city, the home of Wall Street, where thousands have died in understaffed and ill-equipped hospitals.

That is why the SEP and the IYSSE urge grad students at UC, Columbia and around the country to form rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, to unite with every section of workers to fight for what the working class needs, not what the capitalist system and its political front men claim they can afford.

This should include the payment of living wages and full COLA to all grad students, the rehiring of the victimized strikers, the abolition of tuition and fees and the immediate suspension of all rent, credit card, car and student loan payments. At the same time there must be an emergency program to expand health care, including universal and free testing and medical treatment for all. Students, many of whom have been evicted from dormitories or were homeless to begin with, must be provided with safe and affordable housing.

The only way to redirect society’s resources toward human need, instead of private profit, is through a frontal assault on the accumulated wealth and power of the corporate and financial oligarchy, the seizing of their private fortunes and a radical redistribution of wealth. This requires the fight for workers power and the socialist transformation of society.

Despite the betrayal by the UAW and its apologists, the fight by the UC grad students is not over. However, they need new organizations and a new political strategy. We urge all students to contact the SEP and IYSSE to build the leadership necessary to mobilize the working class and fight for socialism.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**wsws.org/contact**

© World Socialist Web Site