

University of California, San Diego students, staff and faculty issue open letter opposing reckless reopening plan

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11 September 2020

Nearly 500 students and staff and more than 100 professors at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD) have signed an open letter calling on the university to cancel in-person classes, limit campus housing to those with no other viable options and cancel layoffs and furloughs.

The letter, published three weeks in advance of the fall quarter, opposes the university's "Return to Learn" plan, under which 12 percent of courses would take place at least partially in person. The university has announced that at least 47 students, 21 staff and 184 health care workers have so far tested positive for COVID-19, even before the fall quarter begins on September 28. Thousands of students have continued to live on campus over the summer.

As the letter notes, some 14,000 students would be brought back to campus under the plan, including about 7,500 undergraduates who would stay in dormitories. The university has attempted to justify the return-to-campus plan by proposing a series of half measures, including mandatory face coverings, daily screenings and testing every 16 days. Class sizes would be limited to fewer than 50 students and no more than 25 percent of classroom capacity, and students living in dormitories would be assigned to "residential pods." The details of the plan's testing program have not been made public, and no plans are in place to make information about outbreaks in dormitories publicly available.

The open letter correctly states that these measures are completely insufficient to prevent a devastating spread of the virus and references the recent outbreaks at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the University of Alabama and the University of Notre Dame, where thousands of students were infected after those campuses were reopened under similar policies.

At the University of North Carolina, dorms were held at 60 percent capacity and classroom seats at 30 percent, but within a week of reopening, the university's testing positivity rate had jumped by over 10 percent and as many as 48 new infections were reported in a single day. Nationwide, 51,000 positive cases have been documented on college campuses, with 35,000 cases in the last three weeks. As the open letter notes, "To imagine that UCSD will be an exception to this rule is both arrogant and negligent."

Danny Heinz, a doctoral student who co-authored the letter, told the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, "I am concerned that there will be an outbreak that could spread beyond campus to the community and that it could sacrifice the education of children, shut down

business and affect the public's health."

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality commends the brave stand taken by the letter signatories in opposing the university's reckless reopening plan. Students and workers are responding to a very real situation, and rightly stress that the community spread which will result from the premature reopening of the campus threatens to do "irreparable harm both to the UCSD community and to the San Diego community at large."

The same dangers face students and educators at schools and universities reopening throughout the country. Even as the national death toll approaches 200,000—with more than 1 in 50 people in the country infected—teachers and students are being marshaled into primary school classrooms in order to pressure parents to return to work. In California, the Democratic Party administration is granting waivers to school districts that permit elementary schools to reopen once case rates fall under 200 per 100,000 people, twenty times more than what the CDC defines as a low incidence.

Colleges and universities have been even more unwilling to move to remote instruction, and to the extent that they have done so, it has largely been in response to state mandates. According to the College Crisis Initiative at Davidson College, less than 7 percent of the four-year colleges and universities surveyed nationwide plan to have their Fall 2020 semesters fully online.

The nearly universal institution of "partial re-openings" and "hybrid classes" is partly driven by the need to resume the collection of tuition and housing money, and provide a justification for maintaining student fees at their pre-COVID levels. At UCSD, student fees for the 2020–2021 school year total \$17,355 for California residents and \$34,457 for non-residents, up from last year despite the drastically reduced services.

Under conditions in which the state government has cut \$300 million (8.1 percent) in funding for the University of California, as part of a \$54 billion budget cut for the 2020–2021 fiscal year, the state's public universities are under enormous pressure to remain financially solvent.

The open letter notes that the university's actions indicate that it is "being run as a business rather than as a community" and references the moves by the UC system to increase undergraduate enrollment without adequately covering the costs of education or hiring enough new faculty. UCSD has also dramatically increased

the number and compensation of administrators. According to a faculty report on UCSD finances, expenditures on annual salaries for the Chancellor's and Vice-Chancellors' offices more than doubled between 2012 and 2018.

Nevertheless, the university has temporarily laid off 200 workers during the summer, cut \$24 million from its hospital budget, and is instituting wage cuts, layoffs and furloughs for housing and dining workers. In opposition to the administration's cynical justification that the Return to Learn plan is necessary to provide campus employment, the letter's statement that "workers should not have to choose between employment and health" is highly significant.

As the letter states, "The university's decision to pursue Return to Learn at all costs shows how the needs of the institution are being given more weight than the needs of its stakeholders." More fundamentally, it is the needs of the financial oligarchy, which seeks to offload trillions of dollars in education costs onto working people, which are paramount.

Enormous opposition exists among students, educators and workers to the unsafe opening of schools and universities. In August, students and faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the University of Georgia staged "die-in" protests in opposition to unsafe reopening plans, and at least 700 students at the University of Iowa participated in a "sick-out" protest in early September. Students and faculty at Texas A&M, Pennsylvania State University, Kutztown University, Northwestern University, Boston University and numerous other colleges have written their own open letters and garnered support from hundreds of students.

Starting Tuesday, over 1,000 graduate student instructors went on strike at the University of Michigan, after the Graduate Employee Organization (GEO) voted overwhelmingly to stage a walkout. Prior to the strike, over 1,800 graduate students signed an open letter outlining the GEO's demands, which include completely online instruction, robust testing and contact tracing, a universal right to work remotely without documentation, rent freezes, emergency funds for students and the demilitarization of the campus.

Students voted to strike after administrators rejected the demands as not "financially feasible." The strike immediately gathered strong support from students, staff and faculty—and typically thuggish threats of retaliation from the university administration. Yesterday, students voted to reject a sellout contract which met none of the demands in the open letter, but was nonetheless pushed by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), with which the GEO is associated.

The situation at the University of Michigan reveals some of the challenges students face at universities across the country. The genuine opposition expressed by those who signed the open letter is at risk of being suppressed if it stays within the framework of the unions. AFSCME, the UC's largest employee union, and the UAW, which represents student employees, have thoroughly exposed themselves as arms of management which will never fight for the interests of student workers. AFSCME has routinely negotiated poverty wages for its UC workers, kept workers on the job without a contract, allowed jobs to be subcontracted to outside companies to drive down wages and shut down strikes over the

votes of its membership.

This spring, when graduate students at the UC Santa Cruz waged a nearly fourth-month wildcat strike demanding a cost of living adjustment (COLA), the UAW refused to come to the defense of fired graduate student workers, continued to enforce an anti-democratic no-strike clause and billed an Unfair Labor Practices (ULP) suit while biding time to shut down the strike. Seizing on the opportunity provided by the pandemic, the UAW bargaining team voted in June against even taking a vote on the ULP, in a cynical and contemptuous disregard for the democratic rights of the thousands who went on strike.

Students and workers must learn the lessons of these betrayals and take the fight against unsafe reopenings into their own hands. This mean, above all, building organizations which are answerable only to students, teachers and staff and capable of advancing their demands on the basis of genuine, independent scientific knowledge. A struggle for life or death will be lost by conciliatory appeals to the administrators and unions that answer to their masters in Sacramento and Washington D.C.

Working people must resist any pressure to adapt themselves to the racialist politics of the Democratic Party and its academic hangers-on. The UCSD open letter notes the "hugely disproportionate toll on people of color, migrants, and the incarcerated," but casts these issues in academic, racialist terms, and makes no reference to the fundamental cause of these conditions, which is the oppression and exploitation of the working class under capitalism.

The struggle against school reopenings must not be isolated. The issues faced by students in San Diego are the same as those faced by their counterparts around the world. Workers and young people must link up with struggles at other universities, schools and workplaces, and direct the reopening of schools on a safe, scientific and genuinely democratic basis through the formation of independent rank-and-file safety committees.



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