Stanford University resident assistants strike over COVID-19, wages

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On Thursday, a group of Stanford University Resident Assistants (RAs) announced that they were going on an indefinite strike after the university failed to address their concerns and demands regarding COVID-19 safety. Student workers are demanding, among other things, virtual staff training to reduce the spread of COVID-19, compensation for a two-week mandatory training program, and greater student control and input over dormitory policies on campus.

The strike is part of a growing movement among students, staff and academics at campuses nationwide against the unsafe reopening of in-person classes. Lecturers at University of Michigan are currently threatening strike action over unsafe classrooms.

The group, Student Collective Action Against Residential Education (SCAARE), had threatened to strike Wednesday in an email sent to the university administrators. The decision to threaten a strike came after an RA caught COVID-19 at mandatory in-person training for RAs in the lead-up to the fall semester.

The university had put some 500 student workers in a single room for the all-day event. A few days later all of the RAs attending were notified in an email that one of them had tested positive for COVID-19. While all student RAs are mandated to be vaccinated, the Delta variant can spread much more easily than earlier variants among vaccinated people, especially months after their second dose.

In the letter addressed to the university, the student workers stated, “We cannot care for our residents when you are actively forcing us into conditions that directly threaten our emotional and physical health.”

It continued, “Particularly for those of us who are immunocompromised, you have forced us to make an impossible choice: either we risk attending another potential superspreader event, or we remain untrained as you continue to refuse to provide a hybrid or virtual option for staff training.” The letter was signed by over 100 RAs.

RAs at most universities and colleges are usually fellow students who receive a small amount of compensation, either in the form of lodging or a financial sum, in exchange for performing a wide variety of services for the University in the student dormitories. This often includes crisis management, helping students with mental health issues or medical problems, event hosting, and general assistance and management in student living quarters.

The students’ concern over the spread of COVID underscores the even deeper issue: classes should not be open for in-person learning in the first place. Many classes on the Stanford campus have hundreds of students. According to Stanford’s website, the university is also not placing any restrictions on nonstudent events unless they have more than 5,000 people and are held indoors, a measure that allows large and lucrative conferences hosted at the institution to continue.

Stanford University responded to the strike threat by making one day of the two-week mandatory RA training program online. Student workers, however, rejected this offer as inadequate. Only an estimated 150 student workers showed up to the online training, after the announcement of the beginning of the strike. There are an estimated 28 student dormitories on campus where the RAs are on strike.

Another demand of the Stanford RAs is that they receive financial compensation for the two-week training they undertake. Currently Stanford RAs get paid $11,400 a year and *do not* receive free room and board from the university. Not only is room and board far higher than this, $16,433 a year, but this sum is

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entirely inadequate for the costs of living in the Stanford area of Palo Alto—one of the most expensive places to live in the United States.

Often those participating in RA programs are those students who do not have the financial means to easily attend college and are trying to work to make it possible. Students are demanding they get paid $18 an hour for the training period.

One anonymous Stanford RA who spoke to *ABC 7* stated, “we’re essentially paying to work.” They also expressed their fear of retaliation from the university, saying, “I’m very very fearful, I am only one [person], and Stanford is this huge elite institution.”

Over the last month, colleges and campuses across the United States have gone back to in-person instruction for the fall semester, sending hospitalization rates beyond the peaks from last winter. In the San Francisco Bay Area, where Stanford is located, significant outbreaks have occurred in several counties despite high vaccination percentages. Contra Costa County, for example, has a 7-day average of COVID cases of 563 (as of September 4th), not far below the January peak of 680. Alameda County, where the city of Oakland is located, has gone from an average of 35 cases per day in June to 441 cases per day in the latest data. Santa Clara County, where Stanford is located, has gone from 35 cases per day in June to about 500 today—the worst outbreak since the winter months.

Across the San Francisco Bay, at the University of California, Berkeley, cases have spiked even though the campus has forbidden nonvaccinated students on campus. The weekly average among students have increased nearly sixfold to 65 since the beginning of August.

The outbreaks throughout the San Francisco Bay Area speak to the bankruptcy of a vaccine-only “mitigation” approach to COVID-19. While vaccines are a necessary part of any comprehensive eradication strategy, leading virologists and epidemiologists have stressed that COVID-19 could be eradicated in a matter of weeks through a combination of universal vaccinations, testing and contract tracing and a shutdown of schools and nonessential industries.

This is why the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), the youth section of the Socialist Equality Party, calls for an end to all in-person instruction. The virus can and should be eradicated. The necessary public health measures, however, will only be taken on the basis of a broad, scientifically informed, movement of the international working class to fight for these critical measures and stop the virus.

We call on Stanford RAs and all university students and faculty who want to fight against the unsafe return to in-person learning to contact the IYSSE and the *World Socialist Web Site* today to get involved in the fight.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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