

”I don’t want to die trying to graduate”

Students and faculty demand remote learning options at University of California campuses

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Since the first day of in-person classes began at University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) on January 31, a group of students have conducted a sit-in at Murphy Hall, the administration building. Coming at the height of the spread of the Omicron variant of SARS-CoV-2, the students are demanding that the university guarantee remote options for at least the rest of the academic year instead of solely in-person learning.

The UCLA sit-in and student strike are part of similar actions being carried out at other University of California campuses. Despite broad opposition from students and educators, UC’s 10 campuses across the state returned to in-person learning on Monday. As of this writing, UCLA Chancellor Gene Block is scheduled to meet with student protesters on Friday afternoon.

Prior to the reopening of the campus, a petition posted on *Change.org* demanding permanent remote learning options for students at UCLA had garnered nearly 30,000 signatures across the campus, the equivalent of three-quarters of the student body. The protest by these students is part of a growing movement across the US and internationally of students and teachers rejecting the deadly policies of mass infection.

In recent weeks, UCLA has seen an increase in cases fueled by the Omicron variant. Just in the first week of January, the university reported over 1,200 cases, which came close to reaching the total 1,400 cases reported the entire previous fall quarter. The actual number of cases is likely larger as students have long complained of the campus’s history of inadequate and poorly organized COVID-19 testing and reporting.

The widely circulated petition has been sponsored by a coalition of the Disabled Student Union (DSU), Mother Organizations Coalition and Undergraduate Students Association Council, which are demanding that all in-person lectures be permanently live-streamed with no mandates for students to attend or teaching assistants to hold live

discussions.

Speaking with the *World Socialist Web Site*, Christopher Ikonomou, organizer of the DSU, described how students had been pushing since last August to demand safe, remote options, but that campus administration had originally refused to meet with them until October, when they were planning a protest.

“We asked them to give us concrete compromises,” he noted, including “live streaming lectures, recording classes, accurate captioning, allowing professors and graduate students to teach remotely, getting rid of punitive attendance measures. But our meeting with them was a disaster. They didn’t come with any compromises; they didn’t even use captions for the meeting.” Ikonomou noted many disabled students on the call were unable to easily participate in the call.

“The administration strung us out with all these meetings, but never compromised with us. At the end of the Fall 2021 quarter, we became exhausted. Many of us were too tired to keep fighting.”

The resistance and hostility displayed by the UCLA administrators to accommodating disabled and immunocompromised students are in line with the general attitudes of the ruling class. Statements from the administration echoed the eugenicist theme expressed by the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Dr. Rochelle Walensky, when she stated on January 10 that the fact that COVID-19 predominantly kills people who are “unwell to begin with” is “encouraging news.”

Ikonomou said that “as a disabled person, this rhetoric of ‘only the vulnerable are going to die’—as if that was a positive thing—is sickening. The CDC said, as if it was encouraging news, that 75 percent of deaths would be from disabled people!”

He noted that, historically, disabled people “are not valued by capitalism because they are not seen as productive. It’s okay to sacrifice low-wage workers, whose lives are

expendable. [There is] a mindset of ‘we don’t care about you.’”

Many signatories of the petition left comments voicing their concern and opposition toward the dangerous decision to force in-person learning.

David Jekel, a postdoctoral student and lecturer at UC San Diego, stated, “I believe the UC needs to stop forcing its students and employees to put their lives in danger to maintain a facade of normalcy! Use the technology and resources at your disposal to make your education available to disabled people and to everyone!”

UCLA employee Patrick Burke said, “The last year has taught us that remote learning can be implemented for all who need it. Removing the remote learning option for those with disabilities removes a proven tool to make the campus community accessible & inclusive. I worked at UCLA for 22 years seeking to advance accessibility. Don’t roll back accessibility at a time when the lives of students, staff & faculty depend on it.”

Another signatory named MJ Hill responded, “Remote options are essential in the current pandemic context. The university should never require staff, faculty, and students to risk their lives and well-being for education, especially when reasonable accommodations (like remote courses) can be easily adopted. A refusal to offer these remote options will cause irreparable harm.”

Ariel Adelman, a UCLA student and member of the DSU, bluntly stated, “I don’t want to die trying to graduate.”

Eliana, a sophomore majoring in International Developments, told the WSWs, “At the Monday rally, many students spoke about how this illness has caused a lot of pain. In-person classes are too painful for many people. We are afraid because COVID is so contagious. It’s not ‘mild.’ Can you be ‘mildly dead’ because of it?” She added, “Why should we have to decide between our lives and a college education?”

When asked about the need to unite the working class internationally to fight for a global strategy to stop the pandemic, Eliana stated, “I definitely agree with you that we have to do this globally to eliminate COVID because it’s causing millions and millions of people all over this world death and grief, severe chronic pain and loss of function. Our protest is part of this bigger picture. Our message to all disabled people, workers, students and everyone who wants something better: stay strong, stand together and get active in your community.”

Also on Monday, dozens of students at UCLA held demonstrations as part of a separate petition signed by more than 1,300 people calling for a boycott of classes and a demand for the option to choose between in-person and remote learning. They vowed to continue demonstrations

until their demands are met.

Additional walkouts and demonstrations were planned for the next day until the administration abruptly, and cynically, announced at 11:56 p.m. that it would shift to remote learning for a single day Tuesday “out of an abundance of caution” following threats of violence made by a former campus lecturer, Matthew C. Harris, who has since been apprehended. The move was likely aimed not simply at protecting students but quelling opposition, as the campus had been aware for months of Harris’s threats. Classes resumed the following day despite the ongoing threat to lives by the pandemic.

On Wednesday, students and workers at UC Irvine also held a strike in protest of the university’s in-person mandate and demanded universal access to remote learning. They posted an open letter online calling for Wednesday’s strike, warning that “[t]he consequences of the University’s demands to return to ‘business as usual’ despite these unprecedented rates [of COVID-19 infections] are material and violent, coming at the expense of the safety, security, and quite literally the lives of our disabled.”

At UC Berkeley, students also held a walkout on Thursday demanding online options. A student who wished to remain anonymous told the WSWs that the campus has prohibited most professors from offering remote learning options to their students, stating, “If you’re at risk, immunocompromised, disabled, you basically cannot go to the class. I’ve been working with a few students to create our own Zoom link and have our class there.” The Berkeley student characterized the pandemic as “a mass disabling event.”

Students clearly see that remote learning is the only safe option amidst a continuing deadly pandemic. The only way forward is through the mobilization of workers and students of all countries in a conscious fight against capitalism and for socialism.

We encourage students and educators across all UC campuses to get involved with the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, which is fighting to unite students and workers in a common struggle internationally.

We also urge UC students and educators to create Rank-and-File Safety Committees independent of the pro-capitalist unions and to attend the upcoming meeting of the West Coast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees on Saturday, February 12, at 12 p.m. PST.



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