

After shutdown of grad students strike, UC Berkeley prepares to shutter three libraries

Annie Campbell, Jonathan Burleigh
17 April 2023

On Thursday, April 20, at 6:30 p.m. PST, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality at UC Berkeley will hold a public meeting on “The war in Ukraine and how to stop it” in 120 Latimer Hall.

A few months after the end of the six-week strike at the end of 2022 by 48,000 academic workers at University of California, the flagship Berkeley campus is moving forward with several library closures. Initially announced in Spring 2022, the university has already taken significant steps toward the closure of the Anthropology, Physics-Astronomy and Mathematics-Statistics libraries, rationalizing these cuts in part on academic workers’ meager salary increases in the latest contract.

This closure plan will “save” only \$1 million, a miniscule fraction of the UC system’s \$38 billion budget but will have a significant educational impact on the students and faculty who rely on these spaces and services.

The Anthropology and the Physics-Astronomy libraries, which will be closed by August 2024, have already been emptied. They have been converted into study halls, which are only open from 1:00-5:00 p.m. and 9:00 a.m.-5:00 p.m. respectively. In order to use either of these collections, students must request access through another library on campus, since the books have been moved. However, many of these books have been moved to a storage facility in Richmond, and it can take a few weeks between requesting and retrieving a book.

The Mathematics-Statistics library, which will be closed by August 2025, retains its collection for now but is only open from 11:00 a.m.-5:00 p.m. The building, which currently holds the Mathematics Statistics library Evans Hall, is scheduled to be demolished; it is unclear how the other two spaces will be used.

The removal of library book collections is already affecting students. In the Physics and Astronomy departments, Alexey, a sophomore, explained:

Since last spring, it’s been much harder to get access to the books that I want. If you want to pick up a more popular textbook, it can take a few days for it to arrive, and sometimes they have to ship it from other schools,

like UCLA. And for more obscure books, I’ve had to wait weeks while they dig it out of storage in Richmond. And they don’t even have any staff. They just have someone who shows up at 5pm to lock the door. I don’t understand why they need to close the space. ... If we lose this, we lose the last quiet, accessible study space for physics and astronomy students. The rest are protected by key card.

In the Mathematics and Statistics departments, Julia, a senior, opposed closing the library. “I think they should still keep it open since the library offers digital and print textbooks and provides facilities like printing services and public computers,” she said. “I hope these are still around after it closes.”

Without free, timely access to key textbooks from libraries, many students will be forced to either purchase books, which can easily cost over \$100 each, or go without access to them. According to UC Berkeley, undergraduate students should budget \$1,274 per year for textbooks and other course materials, a major hardship for working class students.

These cuts have provoked widespread condemnation. Petitions calling for the defense of the Anthropology and Physics-Astronomy libraries have garnered almost 900 signatures and 500 signatures respectively, including students and faculty from South America and Central America, Europe, Asia, and Australia. Three demonstrations have been held at the Anthropology library over the past year.

These closures are part of a decades-long process of privatization of the University of California, with funding from the Democrat-controlled California government perpetually cut back over decades. According to the Public Policy Institute of California, state funding for the University of California (UC) system fell from its peak of nearly \$30,000 per student in the mid-1980s to \$13,600 in 2017-2018 (all in inflation-adjusted 2018 dollars). To make up for these cuts, the UC system has greatly increased student fees, which were negligible in the 1960s and 1970s and now amount to over \$14,000 for in-state undergraduates and over \$44,000 for students from outside California. The university has also increased its reliance on funding from industry and billionaire-backed foundations.

Even as students pay more than ever for public education, the university has continued to cut funding for critical educational services. In 2006, library funds made up 3.5 percent of the \$3 billion budget at the Berkeley campus. Now they make up only 1.8 percent. Students are now paying more than ever in tuition and fees for an education whose quality is rapidly deteriorating. Despite this, the university spent more on athletics (\$107.3 million) than libraries (\$60.1 million) in 2022.

Adding insult to injury, the University is blaming these library closures on the poverty raises won by academic student employees in their 2022 strike. According to *Berkeleyside*, “University spokesperson Janet Gilmore said plans for the libraries—consolidating specialty collections within ‘hub libraries’—effectively cut costs in the face of rising financial pressures, including inflation, repairs for aging campus infrastructure and the wage increase won by graduate students during the recent strike.”

Starting in November 2022, graduate students carried out the largest academic strike in US history. Graduate students, who perform many critical tasks for the university but earn poverty wages, demanded a \$54,084 wage, increased child care benefits and a cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) to tie raises to rent increases.

After more than a month on strike, the United Auto Workers (UAW) called a snap vote during the Christmas holiday week on a sellout contract which met none of the workers’ basic demands. The new deal keeps graduate student salaries at only \$34,000, just enough to disqualify them for government food assistance.

In response, the UC Rank-and-File Committee urged a “no” vote on these agreements and the continuation of the strike, but the UAW Succeeded in pushing the contract through using a combination of lies, browbeating and censoring of opposition.

The extent of the UAW’s betrayal is becoming clearer over time. The UC system did not allocate any additional funds to cover these meager wage increases, instead choosing to impose the full burden on the universities and their departments. As a result, many departments have decided to cut graduate student admissions, eliminate teaching positions and reduce course offerings because they do not have additional funds to pay for the salary increases. As a result, the quality of education will decrease, as student instructors and teaching assistants are forced to teach more students for no additional pay.

In response to these closures, the Cal Young Democratic Socialists of America, the Berkeley chapter of the youth movement of the Democratic Socialists of America, called for the library cuts to be reversed, with greater resources made available for staff, library hours, and in-person and online resources. However, they framed their opposition solely as a struggle against the UC leadership, as if the fight in defense of public education were not a fight against Democratic Party, particularly the administration headed by California Governor Gavin Newsom, who sits on the university’s Board of Regents.

Such appeals serve to divert students and workers away from their true opponent: the Democratic Party and the grotesquely unequal capitalist system it oversees in California, propped up by pro-management trade unions, such as the United Auto Workers.

Academic workers around the country are fighting against similar conditions. In recent months, strikes have broken out at Temple University, University of Michigan, University of Illinois Chicago, Chicago State University, Governors State University and Rutgers University against similar conditions.

K-12 public schools have also been cut to the bone, and Oakland educators near Berkeley are fighting for basic needs such as proper staffing. More broadly, workers across the world are fighting the same fundamental austerity measures, with millions of French workers and young people fighting the dictatorial pension cuts of the Macron administration.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at UC Berkeley calls on undergraduate students, graduate students, postdocs, professors, service workers and other academic employees to form rank-and-file committees to oppose these austerity measures and restore libraries and other essential academic services to needed levels.

To achieve this goal, these committees must be fully independent of the capitalist Democratic and Republican parties and the trade union bureaucrats that prop them up. These committees must unite the fight on the campuses with the broader struggle in the working class, reaching out to K-12 educators, health care workers and more in the Bay Area and beyond.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact