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Graduate Students Strike on all University of California Campuses

David Bacon

BERKELEY, CA (1/7/98) -- For the first time in over a decade of labor conflict, graduate student unions at the University of California finally forced university officials to sit down and discuss recognition of their unions after a four-day strike on all eight teaching campuses. The job action, coming the week before final examinations, threw classes and the state's premier public university system into turmoil.

State Assembly Speaker Antonio Villaraigosa and State Senate President Pro-Tem John Burton then quietly brokered a deal in which the graduate student unions agreed to suspend their strike for 45 days, while administrators agreed to sit down within the first 10 of those days and discuss union recognition. That marked the first break in UC's historic position that graduate student employees are students, not workers, and therefore not entitled to union representation.

The associations of graduate student instructors on the UC campus are affiliated to the United Auto Workers. GSI unions have bargaining rights in eighteen other university systems nationwide.

During the UC walkout, hundreds of grad students organized vocal and boisterous picket-lines at the entrances to all the campuses, stopping deliveries. Many classrooms normally filled with students and instructors were empty. In others, knots of students organized self-study sessions without their teaching assistants.

On some campuses, university administrators tried to force the graduate students back to work. According to Anna Murasco, a teaching assistant at UC Davis, "I've seen letters in which TAs were told that they might not be hired again next year, and that they could even jeopardize their own oral examinations."

On many campuses, university administrators attempted to get professors and lecturers to take over instructional duties, while the lecturers' union, the University Council of the American Federation of Teachers, said UC couldn't make them scab. "Faculty are very supportive," said UC Riverside professor Edna Bonacich. "They feel it's a democratic issue. Faculty are not the employers here -- we don't control wages, conditions or class sizes."

The UC system, the largest public university system in the United States with 129,000 undergraduate students, depends on the labor of graduate student workers, who carry a great deal of the teaching load. While professors in many courses lecture to audiences numbering in the hundreds, teaching assistants provide instruction, hold discussions and answer questions in the smaller sessions between lectures, as well as grade papers and monitor student performance. In some cases, associates even teach their own courses. Other graduate student employees include readers and tutors.

Barclay Scott, a Spanish TA at UC Berkeley, gets paid for 20 hours a week but said she basically works fulltime. "For example, they only pay us to hold office hours two hours a week," she said. "Language

students need much more than that." Her students, like most taught by the striking instructors, supported the unions' demands. "Our working conditions are their learning conditions," explained Connie Razza, a TA at UCLA.

University administrators, faced with an impending strike, sought to replace traditional written final exams in many departments with multiple choice tests that could be graded by scabs. Both professors and students protested the move. Michael Watts, professor and director of UC Berkeley's Institute of International Studies, stated that "bringing in graduate student scabs at this late date to grade students would compromise the quality of their education."

For years graduate student workers have been trying to get the university to recognize their associations and bargain a contract that would provide better pay and benefits, and give the student employees basic workplace rights.

"Our position has always been that TAs are students first and foremost, and not employees," explained Chuck McFadden, a media relations spokesperson in UC's system wide administration. On the Berkeley campus, where grad student organizing began over 15 years ago, there have been at least five previous work stoppages, including a major strike in 1999. Other campuses have seen similar stoppages. The latest strike, however, was the first to include all campuses simultaneously.

Earlier this year, the Public Employees Relations Board, which administers the state's Higher Education Employee Relations Act, held that the 500 grad student workers on the UC San Diego campus were employees within the meaning of the law. Last June, they voted by a 3-1 majority on the campus in favor of representation by their student employee association.

Then PERB rejected a university appeal, which again claimed that student employees weren't eligible to organize. The university would bargain for readers and tutors, said a letter from UC President Richard Atkinson, but "will refuse to bargain with respect to advanced-degree students at UC San Diego and at other campuses who perform the duties of teaching assistant, teaching associate, or teaching fellow." UC appealed a similar PERB ruling in Los Angeles.

University defiance made the strike inevitable. Beginning last May, campus strike votes were held among the system's 9000 grad student workers. With over half of them participating, the decision to authorize a strike received 87% support.

Administration stonewalling might not have been risky during the last sixteen years of Republican state administrations. But when administrators go to Sacramento to get appropriations next year, they face newly-elected Democratic governor Grey Davis, and a Democratic legislature. Their intervention got the university to move. According to Ricardo Ochoa, president of the Association of Graduate Student Employees at the UC Berkeley campus, "UC has been acting as though the law just doesn't apply to them, and people are angry at their arrogance. We've just had enough," he said.

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