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Wednesday 22 January 2020

Spread the strike: Meet the Regents

The University of California Board of Regents are an unelected body of suits: business-types, CEOs, CFOs, investors, real estate speculators, managers, and advisors, as well as political establishment insiders, only a handful of whom have any direct experience in educational settings, and all of whom embody a barely disguised contempt for public education. Regents are appointed by the governor under circumstances that scandalize even the SF Chronicle: “Most of the 26 regents who run the University of California are chosen in a process involving a ghostly, unnamed committee of 12 people who never meet, produce no public record of their actions, and publish no list of members. Some don’t even know who the other members are” (“Are Governors Ignoring Law When Appointing UC Regents?,” SF Chronicle). Despite their best efforts, however, the board of regents has not been entirely impervious to student input. In addition to the lone “student advisor,” a position that was introduced in 2016 and only survived until last year, when they collectively decided to discontinue the position, the regents had one student regent on their board. Given that this student advisor had no voting powers (their call to extend the student position went unheeded), they witnessed the termination of their own position from the sidelines, in an almost perfect synecdoche for democratic governance in the state of California.

This spectacle notwithstanding, the regents have a decisive job to do (even if they do no work in any meaningful sense of the term). According to Article IX, Section 9 of the California Constitution, the “corporation known as the Regents of the University of California” has “full powers of organization and governance,” and operates with near complete autonomy from state control. In 2017, when Janet Napolitano was found not only to have withheld \$175 million from public disclosure, but also to have obstructed the subsequent state audit conducted across the UC, the regents could have dismissed her (the fact that she was ever hired in the first place is a controversy of another order of magnitude). Instead, they merely reprimanded her for “poor judgment,” while committing to “fully support her continuing leadership.” On the other hand, hoarding vast sums of money while imposing an austerity model of education is part and parcel of the regents’ economic vision for the UC (routine tuition increases are just one instance of this), and Napolitano’s office has, in this

respect, performed splendidly. Indeed, there will be difficult shoes to fill when Napolitano retires at the end of this year. Then again, even if another top immigration cop can’t be found, California is full of craven speculators, financiers, and businessmen working at the intersection of public administration and profit to choose from—one need only take a look at the ranks of the regents for confirmation of this.

The COLA movement that has kicked off at UCSC is contesting this entire mode of administration, its extractive agenda, and the banal depravity of its highly-paid personnel. We have focused our actions first and foremost by attacking the working conditions at UCSC and the living conditions in Santa Cruz (and Northern California more generally), both of which are becoming more decrepit with each passing day.

In demanding a cost of living adjustment (COLA), we have called attention to the full scope of exploitation on our campus, not simply as graduate students, but in solidarity with other workers at the university who are overburdened, underpaid, and constantly wedged between an administration bent on chipping away at every past gain and tepid union leaders, who seem content to let them do so. At UCSC, the K7 bargaining unit of skilled trade workers overturned a years-long pattern of routinized symbolic strikes by withholding their labor indefinitely, and they won a contract after two weeks on strike, an outcome that AFSCME 3299 at large has been unable to achieve in 3 years of bargaining. In doing so, K7 hit upon the one thing that UCOP is more afraid of than a fair contract—bold, solidaristic action.

The sheer pace of this movement’s growth is a clear sign of its timely resonance, but also of its capacity to channel a heterogeneity of demands into a unified form of militancy. Our ambitions eclipse timid programs for more equitable allocations of austerity-level resources. The UC system seized upon the shocks of the 2008 crisis to double down on its faceless hostility to fair dealing: this has been, but can no longer be, the status quo for students and workers under California’s largest employer, whose fight for a minimally decent life is necessarily also a struggle for a different university. In the new phase of this struggle, the demands are multiplying across the UC campuses and are coalescing on the hitherto undisturbed doorsteps of UCOP and the UC regents. Knock knock.

