Tuesday 4 February 2020

A new phase in the COLA struggle

SPREAD the STRIKE!!!

The strike is spreading. A frenzy of activity is afoot: meetings upon organizational meetings, inside and outside departments, between and across divisions, at this campus and on a cross-UC basis; among graduate student workers and undergraduates, layers of staff, lecturers, and faculty, junior and senior, campus workers and those rendered unemployed or unemployable by the university's incessant bait-and-switch approach to hiring. While as graduate students we are familiar with the severity of this experience, the same dynamic holds for so many seeking work within this institution's orbit. **The extent of this broad-based organizational effort, buoyed by the actions we've taken on and off campus, has accomplished more in the last ten weeks than in the last ten years of political activity.** The administration, witnessing this with characteristic chagrin, cannot but fall back on a hollow strategy of threats of reprisals couched within emails commending us for our continued suffering. One might ask who their dubious "offer" is designed to motivate. What happens when the administration runs out of carrots and all they have left are sticks?

What if, in approaching this matter more sensibly, we decide to refuse their terms altogether? **A COLA will not be a payment handed down in recognition of our suffering, but an objective that is reached for, and won, by our struggle.** The familiar insistence that there is "no money" available is merely the obverse of hoarding vast sums of cash. (Napolitano surely saw no contradiction in this when she tucked away $175 million from public scrutiny.) What trickles down, if anything, is the prevailing mentality of austerity—and it gathers force as it moves toward the bottom, contributing to the sense of anxiety and fear that graduate students feel whenever they demand more than mere crumbs. Though these pressures are real, we insist that our vulnerability vanishes only when we act collectively against the structures that confine our roles and circumscribe our possibilities.

Administrators love to claim that we don't understand how it all works (a worn-out technocratic line), forgetting that we are experts in how it doesn't. The wreckage of this system is vast and diverse: this strike mounts a challenge to the entire structure of administration.

One strike, many points of departure. The very fact of heterogeneous political tendencies within the movement, not to mention the structural segmentation of the graduate student labor force (into TAs, GSIs, tutors, readers, GSRs), necessitates an openness to multiple forms of action—united by their antagonism to a university, the same university that produces their fragmentation. Where the Fall grading strike prioritized consolidated decisiveness, the actions slated to begin next week foreground tactical agility. At the level of individual decisions, in department-level organizing and across the movement as a whole, the practical and the radical are poles of mutually transformative tension rather than of mutual exclusion.

All this contributes to the impression that we are entering a new phase in the movement, rather than undertaking a qualitatively different set of actions. We must strategize together, with a view towards targeting the weakest points in the institution--this was the tactical strength of withholding grades--and focusing our actions there. What could these look like? The planning meeting on Monday signalled a remarkable openness to confronting the ambiguity of our situation head-on, rather than retreating from it, and to formulating new collective measures that, without the presumption of uniformity, can allow for many different forms of escalation, all under the banner of our strike. The picket beginning on Monday marks a decisive opening determined by our circumstances. What exactly it opens onto will take shape through all of our actions.

See you on the picket.