

GRADUATE STUDENTS

# After Announcing Firing of Grad Assistants, UC-Santa Cruz Is in Turmoil

By *Vimal Patel* | MARCH 02, 2020

✓ PREMIUM

SANTA CRUZ, CALIF.



Photo by Daniel Dreifuss

Graduate students at the U. of California at Santa Barbara (above) voted on Monday to strike, part of a movement started in December by grad students at UC-Santa Cruz.

This idyllic University of California campus spiraled toward a labor crisis on Monday in the aftermath of an extraordinary decision to send dismissal notices to 54 striking graduate students who are withholding winter-term grades to demand a cost-of-living adjustment.

In the wake of the mass firing, it was unclear who would handle the undergraduate courses that would have been taught by the teaching assistants.

More than 500 other graduate students have pledged not to fill the spots vacated by the dismissed teaching assistants.

Rather than quelling the uprising, the dismissal added fuel to the fire. On Monday, the first business day since dismissal letters were sent to the students, an energized crowd of a couple of hundred graduate students and their allies gathered on a picket line at the campus's main entrance.

The strike underscored the precarious living conditions of graduate students, especially in a city like Santa Cruz facing an affordable-housing shortage, where the modest graduate-student stipends — pay in exchange for supporting university teaching and research — often fall short. The average rental in Santa Cruz costs \$2,600 per month, according to RentCafe. The base take-home pay for many graduate teaching assistants is about \$2,100 a month.

The decision to fire the students put many of them in limbo, with a potential loss of financial aid and no source of income. It's especially concerning for international students, whose visas are tied to employment in the United States. Several students who received dismissal notices are international students.

### **'We Can't Just Go Back'**

Jack Davies, a second-year Ph.D. student in the history of consciousness, is one of an additional 30 or so students who don't technically face dismissal but who will not be assigned to teach in the spring. Davies, who is from Australia, is most worried about the tuition-and-fees credit that he will be on the hook for if he loses his assistantship. Domestic students can take time off, but that's not an option for international students.

He's continuing with the strike, he said, because he doesn't see much of a choice. "Where we were before the strike was intolerable," Davies said, as a crowd of fellow strikers crossed the street to chants of "Hey Hey! Hey Ho! Deport

Napolitano!” — a reference to the University of California system’s president, Janet Napolitano. The chants earned a cascade of solidarity honks from passing cars.

“So we can’t just go back to where we were,” Davies said.

“I don’t have any sense the research I’m doing, the classes I’m studying in myself, the languages I’m learning mean a single thing to this institution. It’s only that I fill two sections of 60 students, 30 each, and get their tuition to roll over to the next quarter. It feels like this place is almost tolerating my research, rather than promoting or cherishing it.” In November the university joined the elite Association of American Universities, which requires that its members continue to invest in, among other things, graduate programs.

The graduate students’ “wildcat” strike, not authorized by the United Auto Workers, the union that represents teaching and research assistants in the UC system, began in December. In recent days it has spread to the university system’s Davis and Santa Barbara campuses, and has gained support nationally.

Sen. Bernie Sanders of Vermont, the front-runner for the Democratic presidential nomination, slammed the university’s decision in a tweet on Friday. The American Association of University Professors on Monday released a statement supporting the strike and calling it “courageous.” And a GoFundMe account, set up to support the striking students, had raised more than \$225,000 as of Monday afternoon.

## **Housing Subsidy Offered**

For their part, university leaders say unaffordable housing is a major but complex problem. In a letter last month to Santa Cruz faculty, staff, and students, Napolitano noted that graduate students receive a tuition waiver, 3-percent annual wage increases, a \$3,300 annual child-care subsidy, and remission of health-care premiums. Moreover, in response to the wildcat strike, the university announced it would offer a \$2,500 housing subsidy.

The university said the students were guilty of insubordination for withholding undergraduate grades well past the December deadline and for not following a campus directive in February to end the strike. The strikers are seeking a \$1,412 monthly cost-of-living increase that they say is necessary to live in Santa Cruz, one of the most expensive areas in the country.

A spokesman did not respond to an email seeking comment about how the university planned to handle the reduction in teaching force that a mass dismissal of graduate teaching assistants would cause. Monday was the first day of registration for spring classes.

Professors and departments across the campus faced a dilemma. They had to balance supporting their graduate students while carrying out the university's mission of educating undergraduates. "We're trying to come up with creative ways to do both, and that's not easy to do right," said Steve McKay, an associate professor of sociology who was at the picket. "One of the most important things the administration could do to actually solve this is negotiating with the students."

H. Marshall Leicester Jr., a professor of English literature who was at the picket on Monday morning, said not knowing what the teaching work force would look like for the spring quarter made planning especially complicated.

One purpose of the strike, Leicester said, is “to blow the cover on what’s happened to the University of California and to higher education in this country. To show the extent to which it’s been privatized and gotten itself involved with corporate money and corporate influence. This is really about the future of a university, properly understood.”

*Vimal Patel covers student life, social mobility and other topics. Follow him on Twitter @vimalpatel232, or write to him at vimal.patel@chronicle.com.*



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