

What is reasonable?

Why isn't the UC coming to the bargaining table? Why is news of the strike absent from University communications? Where is the police presence at the picket? We're three days into one of the largest strikes in California history, so why isn't the university trying to stop us—whether through negotiation, ideological pressure, or brute force? The same questions are echoing around picket lines across the state. A whole week has passed since the TAs were invited to the bargaining table and we've seen no urgency to get to the heart of the matter — our rent burden — at the SR table either. What's going on?

The answer is simple. The strike, we must reiterate again and again, is not powerful as a *demonstration* of force, but as a *use* of our collective power. In other words, it is powerful *as a strike*. Those who thought that the first day or two of the strike would bring Labor Relations to the bargaining table with their tails between their legs were mistaken. Our power lies not in the threat of the strike, but in the strike itself, as it unfolds over time. The university's response shows us, loud and clear, that our success will be determined by how many grad workers are withholding their labor, and for how long they do so.

In official communications sent out before the strike, the University cooed about its dedication to undergraduate learning. But their utter lack of urgency about the cessation of countless hours of teaching by striking grad workers says otherwise. The stark truth is that the university system in the U.S. has transformed largely into a factory for manufacturing student debt. In this environment, the imperative of the admin is to get as many undergrads in the door and as indebted as possible. "Diversity" and "equity," in this context, take on perverse meanings, resonant more in the register of finance than social justice. "Inclusion," then, means exposing more students to more debt.

In short, admin needs butts in seats, and for those butts to get stamped with a grade at the end of term. For these university functionaries, what happens in the interim—that is, the totality of teaching and learning—matters little to the functioning of this process. The efficacy of the wildcat grading strike in 2019-20 showed this clearly. The wholesale shift to zoom university in the pandemic, with no thought of restructuring tuition in that impoverished learning environment, speaks no less eloquently.

Admin has not responded meaningfully to our labor action up to this point because they know this is how the University runs—at least it is how they run it. A week or two of lost classes doesn't diminish the swelling coffers, nor stem the indebtedness of its students. But as grad workers, we understand that the work we do matters, and we know that it matters to our undergraduates. The admin, sequestered in their professional offices, are utterly detached from this process. So long as the next batch of student debt receipts is not interrupted, there is no need for panic. And

there's some time yet, admin reckons. They'll soon get tired.

But we won't. And as we continue to withhold our labor, our power and leverage will accumulate. The exams and papers that turn into grades will begin to pile up. The lack of classes will begin to threaten accreditation. Missing research data will halt publications and grants. The pressure will mount with the duration of the strike and the approach of deadlines. This is essential to understand, because however "reasonable," or even "generous," the current offer on the table may seem to these haughty bureaucrats, or to faculty, we know that a few percentage points above the present misery cut it. The status quo is shit. We need to shift the balance between the bosses and the workers, and not only here. We need to radically change what seems reasonable, such that what is unreasonable is a wage that can't pay the rent. This claim takes our struggle beyond our own situation, and makes it a fight over the parameters for what is possible for workers and students everywhere. This is also why our boss is so adamant, in the words of labor relations, that *cost of living is not a big factor in the wages article*.

In this context, it's a positive development for UCOP to now be openly proclaiming that our demands are incompatible with their business model, and explicitly acknowledging that they have a political dimension rather than being narrowly economic. Calls for "neutral" mediation are calls to bring all this back to earth. But the fact that secure housing or adequate childcare are unreasonable under the present paradigm shows that business as usual (or "continuity of education" in the boss's preferred idiom) has already failed. We, of course, already knew that.

We have to stop asking what's reasonable, and to whom, and start asking what we're capable of fighting for. Our fellow grad workers at Columbia were out for 9 ½ weeks and won big wage raises and a huge childcare package. If we are prepared to struggle for our demands, we may be in for a long strike. The University has not been cowed into serious bargaining by a *threat* of force. But they can be *forced* to concede what we're demanding if we use our collective power for as long as necessary.

**BIG march and rally to condemn strike
breaking and union busting in STEM**

Friday, Nov 18

SRs: 10am Science Hill

Students: 11am Quarry Plaza

ASEs: Noon on the picket