

Day 2: This is not free speech

With thousands of grad workers and postdocs striking a second day at every UC campus, the University has meekly announced that it supports “protected free speech activities.” But this is not a free speech activity. It is not a demonstration or a protest. This is an exercise of collective power.

Those of us at UC Santa Cruz three years ago, walking the familiar intersection of Bay and High, might be forgiven for thinking that something has changed at the top. Gone are the daily emails full of claims about our “illegal activity” from EVC Kletzer or then-grad dean Quentin Williams. There’s also no sign of deporter-in-chief Janet Napolitano, looming in the background, ready to issue another inimitable firing threat, signed “[Yours very truly](#).” Most conspicuous, surely, is the absence of some 30–40 patrol cars and a rotating row of cops clad in riot gear.

Is the Drake administration really more humane than that of the former Director of Homeland Security? On one level, we can attribute the tamer response to the fact that we’re on a sanctioned ULP strike this time, rather than a wildcat. Things are “above board,” even if, as should be obvious to everybody, the UC’s bad-faith bargaining is just a sideshow to the real struggle over wages and working conditions. The pressure is off our local administration too, at least relative to last time, since the COLA demand has now gone statewide.

But if the only bargaining to transpire on day one of the strike is any indication, the Drake administration has inherited Napolitano’s hallmark ruthless attitude toward contract negotiations. While tens of thousands of workers struck ten campuses, the top lawyers at Labor Relations bickered with our SRU bargaining team over the formatting of our transit proposal (how could we possibly forget to underline previous changes at this stage of bargaining!). For all the many “impossible” things we shifted during the wildcat, we never did manage to get the University to any bargaining table.

What’s more, none of the overarching trends of the Napolitano years have wavered. The upward pressure on student tuition (and therefore student debt), interrupted momentarily in the face of the COLA movement, remains constant under Drake. Enrollments and class sizes continue to climb, even in the face of a TA shortage, at least here in Santa Cruz. Rents in campus housing have increased systemwide, and the [value of UC’s invested endowment enjoys record growth](#). It is also clear that our demand to bring every grad worker out of rent burden is no less preposterous to Labor Relations under Drake than it was under Napolitano.

In the most important respects, Drake has done Napolitano’s legacy proud at the head of California’s biggest landlord and biggest boss. With administrators like this at the helm — however the tone of their emails and their display of police power may vary — it is clear that the only intervention that can salvage the decline of public higher education takes the form of major and prolonged strikes. The recent wave of strikes across the country has shown that when workers fight, we win. This strike is an opportunity not only to get paid enough to live where we work, but to shift the balance of power in public education away from the bureaucrats and investment officers and back toward those actually doing the teaching and research that serve the mission that this administration pretends to.

We know that power lies with those who do the work, and the picket line is an opportunity to continue building it. The conversations and community we find here are not just an affirmation of our power, but a way to strengthen it. So what we win in this strike won’t be determined by what administrators, faculty, or colleagues think we deserve, but by how strong our solidarity and resolve is. And that has very little to do with what the bosses deem “protected free speech.”

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*Let’s keep talking out here, and keep walking the picket.
Another day longer, another day stronger.*