

ON STRIKE We're striking for COLA, not for wages

Still nothing doing at bargaining. Putting the phlegm in phlegmatic, Nadine Fishel—UC's stonewaller in chief—repackaged UC's piffling offer between bouts of coughing. Nadine is under the weather, apparently, but no less determined to play the waiting game.

Four days on the picket line, and grad workers across the state continue to feel our power growing. Nothing builds resolve and solidarity like spending the day with our fellow workers, walking the picket side-by-side, eating meals together, and talking about ways to deepen our collective struggle. And our bargaining team members agree. We are at the height of our power, they say. The curious thing is that some of them think this is the time to start offering concessions to the boss.

At a meeting yesterday morning, some bargaining team members argued that this moment of collective power is the time to revoke the central demand of the negotiations, a demand that has been building for over three years: to permanently tie grad workers' compensation to the cost of living in California. In other words, they would have us abandon COLA at the moment when our power is still building.

But in the midst of the discussion over this misguided proposal, some 300 rank-and-file workers from campuses across the state suddenly flooded a meeting that had not been advertised to membership beforehand. In no uncertain terms, they expressed a nearly univocal position—this strike is about a COLA, about the end of rent burden. Without the demand to tether compensation to cost of living, the wage increase we're asking for becomes just another number. Lacking the organic connection to soaring rent prices, it becomes something eerily close to the "outrageous" demand that UC labor relations argues it is. With complete clarity, these rank-and-filers let their bargaining team know why they've gone out on the largest strike of academic workers in history, and why we plan to stay out until we win.

Without the COLA demand, our struggle loses its bite. COLA is a political demand, not simply a wage demand, because it links our compensation to market values. It makes it so that we, and all the workers who come after

us, can afford to live where we work. This is why administrative intransigence is the only face we've seen. Waves of sectoral unionization throughout the UC since the '90s have simply been incorporated into the university's business paradigm, in which incremental wage increases are offered, but without any relation to the outrageous cost of living in this state. This is precisely how we ended up rent-burdened in the first place. Conceding the framing of the demand (COLA) in favor of its result (the \$54K salary) has significant consequences for the UC system and for workers in higher education as a whole: it is the first step on the dismal path to capitulation without a real fight. The rank and file appears to appreciate this more keenly than our bargaining team.

Meanwhile, as STEM divisions begin a fresh round of strike-breaking and intimidation tactics, we find ourselves again confronted by the student-worker ambiguity so often exploited by our boss. Student researchers are now being threatened with academic consequences for their labor action because they're earning required credits for the work they produce for the university. The message is clear, if opportunistic: even if your strike as workers is protected, we will punish you as students. But no less clear is the fact that academic progress is contingent on compliance to the labor process, revealing the fiction on which the student/worker distinction is based.

The fact of being a student is the justification for inadequate compensation as a worker ("part-time work", as Labor Relations says), while that labor primarily functions to draw in grant money, carry out research operations, and keep the institution's tuition-rent wheels turning. Here, too, the COLA demand marks a decisive intervention, refusing to accept rent burden as the price of being a student half the time, just as we must refuse to accept intimidation or retaliation as the lot of student-workers.

The cry for "COLA!" rings out on the picket line, but rank-and-file workers know it's more than just a slogan. It means an end to rent burden for all grad workers, and it's the only way to end this strike. Tell that to your bargaining team.