

# COLA, COVID, and 50/500 Years of Struggle

A Dispatch from the University of California, Berkeley, Wildcat Strike

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY,  
ETHNIC STUDIES GRADUATE COLLECTIVE

**ABSTRACT** This short dispatch reflects on the recent cost-of-living-adjustment (COLA) student movement at the University of California. We outline a short history of student labor activism at the University of California, Berkeley, and juxtapose it with the struggles that have come out of the Department of Ethnic Studies since 1969. We discuss the context of COLA and how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the aims, goals, and development of the movement from an ethnic studies perspective.

**KEYWORDS** ethnic studies, Third World Liberation Front, COLA, decolonization

Academic politics are so vicious because the stakes are so small.

—Henry Kissinger

The recent wave of cost-of-living-adjustment (COLA) activism at the University of California was sparked in the fall of 2019 at the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC) by a militant faction affiliated with the organizing efforts of the UC student-worker union, United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 2865. During the summer of 2019, the union leadership and the University of California administration negotiated and signed a controversial contract agreeing to a 3 percent wage increase with no housing subsidy or recognition of the dire need for a COLA.<sup>1</sup> Largely in response to the contract, in December 2019, hundreds of graduate students at Santa Cruz withheld grades, motioning the start of a wildcat strike. When the strike was met with a series of firings, arrests, and other retaliatory charges on the

part of the UCSC administration with the full support of Janet Napolitano's UC Office of the President, it set off a chain reaction of solidarity across the UC system, galvanizing graduate students to join the wildcat strike.

At UC Berkeley, a general assembly of graduate students began to organize in solidarity with UCSC students, to spread the wildcat strike across UC campuses. With the Department of African American and Diaspora Studies leading the way, the Department of Ethnic Studies shortly followed, along with seventeen other departments declaring themselves strike-ready. On March 9, 2020, graduate students voted to join the wildcat strike by withholding grades and labor, until the following demands were met: (1) the reinstatement of all fired UCSC graduate students, (2) a COLA, (3) the UC's dropping its unfair labor practice charge against the union, (4) the demilitarization of the UC Police, and (5) the elimination of single-semester lecturer appointments.

### **Notes on Fifty Years of Struggle**

As a collective of ethnic studies graduate students at UC Berkeley, we see the importance and value for the call to adjust income levels to the rising cost of living. We also concern ourselves with the state-sanctioned violence that people of color experience at the hands of the police. Therefore, what we also see as non-negotiable is the "demilitarization" of UC police, or better yet the complete removal of cops from campus. It must be stated that labor organizing at UC Berkeley and across UC campuses has historically focused on a class analysis. To be clear, there have always been people of color at the forefront of movements for labor rights, but centering race in the analysis has not always been a priority when agitating the rank and file. Union organizing at the University of California goes back to the late 1930s.<sup>2</sup> There were sporadic efforts from the 1960s to the 1990s to mobilize for union affiliation but it wasn't until 1998 that a graduate student strike resulted in the recognition of graduate students as workers, giving birth to UAW Local 2865. All these efforts paralleled and coalesced with various movements that we consider to be in the larger spirit of the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF).

Alongside the unionization efforts of the late '60s, students of color (Asian American, Black, Native, and Chicanx) mobilized the longest and most costly student strike in US history. We see ourselves as the successors of the legacy set forth by the TWLF in 1969, and we continue the emancipatory and decolonizing projects that emerged in the political, epistemic, and spiritual battle for "ethnic studies."<sup>3</sup> Since the creation of the Department of Ethnic Studies, the UC administration has continuously tried to shrink, merge, and ultimately dismantle what remains of the department at UC Berkeley, beginning with the denial of a previously promised autonomous college. Labor rights are among the political fronts, but not the only

political front, on which we have had to engage. The 1969 TWLF strikers included as part of their strategy the effort to gain the support and solidarity of the teaching assistants struggling to unionize.<sup>4</sup> It was similar in the 1980s and 1990s, during the anti-apartheid movement and the movement against reactionary anti-immigrant California Senate Propositions 187, 227, and 209. Black and Indigenous students and students of color have always had to fight on various fronts while centering race and racism because our survival depends on it. For example, as the UAW Local 2865 formed in 1998, an iteration of the TWLF reformed itself in 1999 to fight against austerity cuts and attacks on the Department of Ethnic Studies, which resulted in a long and contentious hunger strike in 1999 to save the department from being dissolved.<sup>5</sup> The 1999 TWLF hunger strike could be read as a precursor to the 2009 austerity crisis, which hit the UC system as a result of the 2008 global financial meltdown. Like the miner's canary, students of color always feel the crisis "before" it hits.

Much like in years before, in 2009 and 2010 Ethnic Studies students became preoccupied with the administration's crusade to dissolve and divest from the Department of Ethnic Studies once again. As part of a strategy of attrition, the UC Berkeley administration had ignored requests to fill retired faculty and staff positions. When the administration launched a blanket "equal" cut across the board, smaller departments like Ethnic Studies were hit hardest, and a hunger strike was launched in 2011 to defend Ethnic Studies from these cuts and the massive cuts to public education in California in general.<sup>6</sup> As the broader student movement fought back against tuition hikes and mass layoffs, those of us in Ethnic Studies had to contend with the continued threat to our self-determination and existence as a department. Inspired by the Occupy Wall Street movement, students created an encampment on the steps of Sproul Hall, and in response the UC Berkeley administration unleashed the police force on protesters. Many of the organizers, students of color, some from Ethnic Studies, were brutalized and arrested.<sup>7</sup> As the Occupy movements fizzled out when police officers were given a green light to violently crush encampments, the rise of the more militant "decolonize" contingent of activists brought forth an Indigenous-centered critique of the call to "occupy everything," and as a result many white activists, in typical fashion, simply faded away.<sup>8</sup>

### **A COLA Makes Sense**

The call to organize around a COLA came to us from our comrades in African American and Diaspora Studies. In a letter they penned addressed to UC Berkeley chancellor Carol Christ, they stated their support for a COLA and stressed the demand to address the history of police brutality on the part of the UC Police Department.

As Indigenous graduate students and graduate students of color, we are indebted to the TWLF's vision and effort to build solidarity among racialized people. We also maintain our commitment to the vision for a Third World College—an autonomous college within, yet beyond, the university system. For us, COLA became a rallying point to reactivate a cultural memory and an invitation to recommit to the TWLF's guiding principles of solidarity, self-determination, and an education that is relevant to and in partnership with racialized, marginalized, and minoritized communities. The COLA struggles emerge from a larger context: the historically unjust and unequal distribution of resources rooted in systems of power such as white supremacy, capitalism, cis-heterosexist patriarchy, ableism, and settler colonialism. As an ethnic studies collective, our demand for COLA also includes a commitment to decolonize the university and struggle for a just and equitable society for all marginalized people.<sup>9</sup>

### **The Effects of COVID-19 on COLA**

Although the first case of COVID-19 in California was confirmed on January 25, 2020, the World Health Organization did not declare coronavirus a global health emergency until January 30. The COLA movement's increasing momentum came together in a rally on Sproul Hall, which was attended by over one thousand undergraduate students, graduate students, faculty, staff, and residents. On March 16, seven Bay Area counties declared a shelter-in-place order, and on March 19 the governor of California issued a state-wide shelter-in-place order, limiting our ability to mobilize rallies and physical picket lines on campus. By April, the entire COLA organizing strategy had to shift, and as students fell deeper into precariousness many organizers began to push for a sanctioned strike backed by the UAW Local 2865 through an unfair labor practice charge. Because of the crisis, many graduate students returned to work and reneged on their commitment to withhold grades, leading organizers at UCSC and other UC campuses to call off the wildcat strike and work in favor of a sanctioned unfair labor practices strike.<sup>10</sup>

### **Where Are We Now**

Janet Napolitano announced that the University of California took \$600 million in losses in the month of March alone and projected April's losses to surpass those numbers.<sup>11</sup> Mass layoffs of lecturers, staff, and other precarious workers are scheduled for the fall. On April 3, 2020, Henry Kissinger penned an op-ed in the *Wall Street Journal*, where he wrote, "When the Covid-19 pandemic is over, many countries' institutions will be perceived as having failed. Whether this judgment is objectively fair is irrelevant. The reality is the world will never be the same after the coronavirus. To argue now about the past only makes it harder to do what has to be done," and he could not be more right about that.<sup>12</sup> The University of California will

not look the same after the dust of COVID-19 settles, and it is up to us, and those of us in other marginalized spaces, to be there to remake it from the ground up: into a university that actually serves the people.

Graduate students in Ethnic Studies and African American and Diaspora Studies continue to organize and build capacity with other student and community comrades. We believe in the fight for COLA, but beyond a cost of living adjustment, our collective strives toward greater and more radical demands that address the fundamental problems movements like COLA are trying to address. For us, it has always been about police brutality and the state-sanctioned violence inflicted on Black and Brown people. Our struggles have always been about land and food, against settler colonialism and white supremacist violence. COVID-19 has intensified all these fronts, but people of color have been living in a constant crisis for over five hundred years, and we know how to survive.

On May 2, 2020, an online town hall was held by members of UC Ethnic Studies–affiliated programs and departments. Alliances were built and new possibilities were born. We are here for a COLA, but we will not stop there. We are not only graduate workers. We are also abolitionists, women of color feminists, poets, writers, musicians, and cooks. We are radical health workers, mothers, daughters, and spiritual guides. We are only in the initial stages, and it is difficult to predict where we will go, or how we will get there. We have the legacy of the TWLF and the history of over five hundred years of anti-colonial and anti-racist resistance to guide us. We will continue to build and work toward decolonial futures like our lives depend on it, because they do.

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**THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY, ETHNIC STUDIES GRADUATE COLLECTIVE** is an organizing body of indigenous students and students of color who come together as guests on Huichin, the traditional homelands of Chochenyo and Lisjan Ohlone. As beneficiaries of a settler-colonial institution, we unite in our work to decolonize our relationships with our communities and with the land and water. We affirm and acknowledge our responsibility to this place, a site of historic violence and ongoing dispossession, which demands commitment to a process of reparations that includes access to dignified housing for all marginalized communities. We are guided by the principles of autonomy and self-determination with a vision of a future where land, labor, and life are respected in mutuality and reciprocity. Abraham Ramirez, Cynthia Ledesma, Angela Aguilar, Sonia Suarez, Marcelo Garzo Montalvo, and Ina Kelleher contributed to this piece.

#### Notes

1. Latimer and Horton estimate that “in the 2018–2019 academic year, 77% of PhD (i.e. all PhD students in the UC system except UC Davis, Merced, and Riverside) and 100% of master’s students across the UC system were rent-burdened, yielding a total percentage of 78% of academic graduate students being rent-burdened.” The Department of Housing and Urban

- Development defines rent-burdened as spending more than 30 percent of pre-tax income on rent. In talking to graduate students involved with COLA at UC Berkeley, we found that a significant portion spend anywhere from 50 to 70 percent of their income on rent alone.
2. UAW 2865, "Our History."
  3. We agree with Maldonado-Torres when he writes, "Seen from the outside and through the lenses of the European sciences . . . Ethnic Studies and related fields only appear partially and in distorted form" and that "Ethnic Studies, their survival, and continued growth also have to do with its rich and diverse epistemological foundations." See Maldonado-Torres, "Ethnic Studies," 235.
  4. AAPA cofounder and 1969 striker Harvey Dong notes that "support from the American Federation of Teachers Local 1570 occurred incrementally." An initial vote in January 1969 to support the strike and stand in solidarity was defeated. It was not until an offshoot of thirty-six AFT Local 1570 members who stood in solidarity with the TWLF were arrested and brutalized by the police in February of that year that the union voted to strike. See Dong, "Third World Liberation Front"; and Leong, "Personal and Social Transformation."
  5. See Luna, "1999 twLF."
  6. The current 2020 COLA4All movement can be traced back to this specific moment in student movement history. See Ikebe, "Roots."
  7. See Dupuy, "Occupy Cal"; and *Daily Californian*, "Complete Coverage."
  8. Tuck and Yang, "Decolonization." To see the more radical tendencies within Oakland Occupy, also known as Oakland Commune, see Conatz, "Occupy Oakland," and the short film *The Oakland Commune*, produced by Brandon Jourdan and Marianne Maeckelbergh.
  9. See Lee and Ahtone, "Land-Grab Universities," on the need to return land back to its original caretakers.
  10. Graduate students in most departments decided to return to work and break the digital picket line, leaving graduate students in Ethnic Studies and African American and Diaspora Studies (i.e., students of color) along with Theater, Dance, and Performance Studies as the last workers holding the line.
  11. See Watanabe, "UC Reels."
  12. Kissinger, "Coronavirus Pandemic."

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