To Chancellor Christ,

Colleagues in numerous departments at UC Berkeley, beginning with the African American Studies Department, have declared themselves strike-ready in the support of our peers at the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC) fighting for a just, livable wage in the face of precipitously rising costs of living across California. We, the graduate students of the German Department at UC Berkeley, are writing to join these departments in announcing ourselves strike-ready, a decision to which we came collectively and unanimously. We are strongly in favor of the demilitarization of all UC campuses and call for the UC to reverse any retaliatory actions taken against participants of the wildcat strike on various UC campuses.

The increasing precarity of the positions of graduate students is by now an open secret. The fact that UC Berkeley does not pay Graduate Student Instructors a living wage is patent: the GSI wages fail even to cover the basic necessities of housing and food as calculated by the UC itself. These unfair labor practices affect first-generation academics, people of color, indigenous peoples, differently-abled people, queer, trans, and non-binary people disproportionately, compromising this university’s attempts to remedy these groups’ reduced access to higher education. The failure to compensate Academic Student Employees (ASEs) in order to enable them to live where they work has forced our peers at UCSC to undertake a wildcat strike. Their demands resonate with graduate students at UC Santa Barbara, UC Davis, UC Los Angeles, UC Merced, UC Irvine, UC Riverside, and UC San Diego, who are similarly organizing. Rather than addressing the urgent concerns of the workers who keep the UC system running, the UC President, Janet Napolitano, has dismissed at least 80 students from their ASE-TA positions or denied them an ASE-TA appointment for the Spring Quarter. We condemn such retaliations against a movement of workers demanding their basic needs be covered by the wages they earn from the crucial labor they provide.

We, the graduate students of the German Department at UC Berkeley, are in complete solidarity with the striking graduate students at UCSC and with the COLA organizers at UC Berkeley. On February 21, 2020, they issued a letter with the following demands to address both the unjust retaliation at UCSC and the unfair labor practices on our campus:

1) a COLA (Cost of Living Adjustment) for every graduate student, regardless of residence, visa, documentation, employment or funding status, to bring every student out of rent burden without raising tuition or fees, cutting admissions, or retaliating;

2) all threats of retaliation against striking students at UCSC be dropped; and

3) a meeting between Dean Lisa García Bedolla and Berkeley’s COLA organizers immediately to join the ongoing work of ensuring every member of the graduate student community meets the basic human needs of food and shelter and freedom from police violence and intimidation.
Should the UC Berkeley administration fail to meet these demands by the original deadline, March 6, 2020, we, as a department, are ready to strike.

Graduate student labor runs this campus - without it, there are no classes, labs, discussion sections, or mentoring. We in the German department know the value of our labor: it exceeds the salaries and support given to us by the UC system.

Our graduate students teach both elementary and intermediate courses in the German language as well as reading and composition courses. Foreign language and cultural education push students to engage with other perspectives, a competency necessary for the 21st century. Academic writing courses are “both a practical necessity for college students and a significant step in the life of the mind generally,” according to the university. UC Berkeley’s own description concedes the importance of our contribution in teaching these courses.

UC Berkeley relies on us to provide the foundations of the world-renowned education it markets. We take that calling seriously, spending long hours preparing these courses and acting as intellectual and all too often emotional mentors. We do all this in addition to the voluntary labor of running our departments, as well as producing the cutting-edge research necessary to complete our degrees. These pressures led the German Department graduate students to focus this year’s annual German Department conference on the relationship between debt, guilt, and education, a topic that is not only relevant to students of German history. The crushing financial debt under which many undergraduate, graduate, and campus laborers suffer is almost exclusively caused by the financial practices of the university.

The UC system, the largest employer in our country’s richest state, does not pay its graduate students enough to survive. Many graduate students on this campus live in crowded and unsanitary conditions and must rely on resources like the food pantry or CalFresh to keep from going hungry. Employees with children or dependents, as well as those without financially supportive family or partners, face compounding hardships that are only exacerbated by our meager incomes. We are forced to work additional jobs on and off campus. All of this is detrimental to the quality of our teaching and research.

We are grateful for the solidarity of our students, who recognize the extensive work we put into our courses, sections, and interactions with them. They are disgusted to learn that UC Berkeley, a campus they love and for which they happily recruit, values the graduate students and their labor so little. They want to know why their teachers are living in poverty.

Many graduate student employees of this university are struggling. We want to do our job, to focus on teaching, but we need help. The University can and must provide a COLA so that our rent burden is decreased.

On Thursday, March 5, the graduate students of the German department joined our colleagues across campus and across the state to withhold our labor in solidarity with the vulnerable graduate students facing draconian retaliation by the UC administration. Our department is completely prepared to do this every day until our demands are met and so will our fellow graduate student-workers system-wide. We want the victims of President Napolitano’s retaliatory measures reinstated in their positions, we want her to face accountability for her flagrant repression of labor, we want to demilitarize our campus, and if its figureheads continue to insult our intelligence and dignity, we will shut down every campus in the UC system.

Regards,
The Graduate Students of the UC Berkeley Department of German