Physics COLA Letter

Date: Fri, Feb 21, 2020 at 12:00 PM

We, the undersigned graduate students of the Physics Department, write this open letter to express support for the COLA campaign. Many grads in our own department experience significant food insecurity, and live in overcrowded or illegal housing. Our first- and second-year students, who came to the university after the 2018 UAW 2865 contract was signed, often contend with even more serious issues involving dangerous or unstable housing conditions, as the housing market’s problems have continued to escalate. We believe the University shares responsibility for the issues of housing costs and scarcity; UCSC’s enrollment policies and indifference to the dramatic insufficiency of student housing have most certainly contributed to the crisis our campus community now faces.

Labor actions such as the Fall 2019 grading strike and the current strike action, which make clear to the University that change is desperately needed, and that the current situation is completely unacceptable, are at this point justified. This is true even if they represent a violation of the inadequate UAW TA contract. While the University did respond with “new programs” for current graduate students, they were introduced based on unclear “need-based” criteria. Since we all live in Santa Cruz, or the surrounding area, and we are all subject to the same high cost of living, we are all in need of this assistance. We believe that the offer of a $2,500 annual housing supplement, while insufficient to pull many of us out of rent burden, was at the very least a step in the right direction, and could have an immediate, positive impact. The administration must, however, make very clear what the details of this program are. If it is true, as it appears, that a large number of students will be rendered ineligible based on their immigration status, and further that eligible students will be forced to compete for this “need-based” funding, then we demand that the administration removes such exclusions in order to ensure the fair and equitable distribution of such funding to all graduate students, without red tape or competition. Until they do this, it will not appear that the university administration is taking this issue seriously.

Further, we condemn the University administration’s response to the strike. While the strike did violate the no-strike clause of the current contract, retaliation against strikers as students rather than employees via student conduct penalties or other academic consequences, is unacceptable and in fact represents a breach of contract on the University's part. More egregious still is the violence of UCPD and the outrageous expense related to transporting police from around the state (EVC Kletzer has estimated that $2.1 million has been spent on extra UCPD presence, as of 2/21). Worker retaliation via mass firings, as recently threatened by the administration, would not only be an unjustified tactical escalation, but would throw entire departments, including their undergraduates, into total chaos. These events will inevitably
precipitate a massive depreciation of undergraduate education. This would belie the administration’s claims that preventing harm to undergrads is their highest priority.

We are therefore calling for Physics graduate students to participate in the Winter 2020 strike by holding office hours and discussion (when possible) at the picket line on the base of campus, and devoting at least some discussion or lab time to talking with undergrads about COLA (“teach-ins”). At the same time, we will also be gathering internal data on the precarious situation of graduate students in our department. Finally, we call for all physics grads to simply have a presence at the picket line to get to know their fellow grads from other divisions, and to show the administration and our colleagues that we are a part of this movement. We do not at this time call for cancelling all sections or refusing all grading, though we do not believe those TAs who do so are being negligent or harming their undergrads. While some departments can disrupt the University’s normal operation without damaging the academic progress and overall well-being of undergraduates, in the Physics department that is not the case. Many required classes are offered only once a year; making a substantial portion of the quarter non-operational would require us to either force students retake classes (holding them back up to a year at huge financial burden), or permit them to pass the class without mastering all the material, putting them at a disadvantage for graduate school and beyond.

Finally, we also call upon our faculty to push for resolution at the level of the Faculty Senate and with UCOP. While we appreciate the individual support we have received in conversation, we need all your voices in the campus-wide discussion. Only through turning concern into action can you materially support your graduate students. Imagine the research our department could produce if we were paid enough to avoid hours-long commutes, abusive landlords, and unhealthy living conditions.

We are aware and appreciative of the opportunities afforded to us, but wish to emphasize the struggle we experience to maximize our learning and contributions given current circumstances. We resolve to frankly discuss the situation of graduate rent burdens and abusive, unsafe, illegal housing during our prospective student visit day on March 10th, with the understanding it may well lower our matriculation rate, and we suggest all other departments follow suit. If no adequate resolution is found by the end of the quarter, or the university carries out their proposed mass firing of graduate students, further escalation will be both justified and inevitable, given the severity of the crisis and the apparent apathy of the administration. If it comes to this, we encourage instructors to establish lines of communication so they can act in solidarity with their grads while minimizing harm to their undergraduate students.

We are requesting a show of solidarity from the physics faculty, specifically that they attend a meeting with the physics graduate students to discuss the situation, and how they might assist our efforts to improve the lives of current and future graduate students, both within and outside of our department. This meeting should occur no later than February 28th. The last department meeting was productive but poorly attended. We would like every professor and graduate student who can possibly make it to attend the next one. We need the whole department
informed and involved in making decisions going forward. Please watch your emails and expect to receive additional communication about this meeting.

We hope this issue is brought to an adequate resolution as quickly as possible.

In solidarity,

1. Clayton Strawn, 3rd year
2. Michael Saccone, 5th year
3. David Laubner, 3rd year
4. Jacob Johnson, 1st year
5. Samantha Shears, 1st year
6. Ryan Van Haren, 3rd year
7. Hava Schwartz, 1st year
8. Michael Arciniaga, 5th year
9. Roy Sfadia, 4th year
10. Jeff Chaffin, 3rd year
11. Ryan Tumbleson, 1st year
12. Patrick LaBarre, 4th year
13. Alic Spellman, 2nd year
14. Sarah Mechbal, 5th year
15. Annika Gabriel, 1st year
16. Carey Williams, 4th year
17. Gabriela Huckabee, 1st year
18. Dana Faiez, 5th year
19. Tyler Smart, 4th year
20. Nolan Smyth, 2nd year
21. Spencer Everett, 4th year
22. Skyler Scott, 7th year
23. Evan Frangipane, 2nd year
24. Duncan Wood, 2nd year
25. Becker Sharif
26. Eli Nygren, 3rd year
27. John Tamanas, 4th year
28. James Kakos, 4th year
29. Valentin Urena Baltazar, 2nd year