

WHEN WE FIGHT, WE WIN!

An Analysis of COLA Wins Statewide



Student workers across the University of California are currently engaged in rank-and-file organizing in response to a slew of crises. On top of pre-existing campaigns concerning a whole host of pressing issues, we are responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, demanding the defunding of UC Police Departments, and combatting austerity measures already affecting UC workers. While the convergence of the pandemic, police violence, and budget cuts was unforeseeable at the outset of the COLA strikes at UC Santa Cruz just one year ago, we also discovered the strategic positions we occupy and the tools we possess in the course of the labor actions that followed in the 2019-20 academic year. To understand our current situation and to grow our power, it is crucial that we take stock of what we won last year. There have already been several insightful analyses of the strengths and weaknesses of the COLA movement that have provided occasion for self-reflection and critique, but we have yet to undertake a more systematic survey of the positive, material outcomes of last year's struggle.¹ The following is an appraisal of the concessions that organized, militant student workers extracted from UC administration at departmental, campus, and statewide levels during the COLA labor actions. It is also an evaluation of the level of organization that made these wins possible. We seek to answer the following questions: Where did we win the most, and why? What did it take to win? And, crucially, given our current situation, how do we win again?

¹For further reading, see "[Recording the Complexity of Struggle: An Interview with the COLA Agitation Committee](#)," and "[We Cannot Wait: A Critical Assessment of the UC Berkeley COLA Movement](#)"

The demand for a cost of living adjustment and the wildcat strike activities that militated for it resulted in a host of material gains for student workers across the UC system. These include new summer stipends, "housing stipends," departmental "top ups" of TA salaries, and other benefits and raises. Our boss has not, of course, conceded that these changes to the terms of our employment are responses to the COLA movement. Admitting this would further exacerbate their present legal issues with respect to the unfair labor practice charges filed by our union, UAW 2865. The direct dealing that constituted the unfair labor practice must be understood as the efforts of a panicked boss to diffuse a labor action beginning to sweep the state. Because many of our gains from this past year are the product of administration's attempts to buy off strike support, the gains we have made this year,

while cause for celebration, are a double-edged sword. Uneven gains across our unit can deepen pre-existing inequalities or create new ones, and producing such inequalities among union members is a tried and true union-busting tool. Further, any public concession to the COLA movement would also admit the seriousness of the threat to University operations that organized graduate student workers posed at various moments over the last year. Because of all of these conditions, in order to account for the wins of the COLA movement we have had to make our own independent inquiries at individual, departmental, campus, and statewide levels. Given the uneven strength of the COLA movement across various departments and campuses, our initial findings are not surprising: we won significant wage increases for student workers where we had the most intense levels of rank-and-file organizing and militancy.

**In other words, the lesson that our gains over the last year can teach us is this:
WHEN WE FIGHT, WE WIN.**

The labor actions of the 2019-20 academic year were the largest mobilizations of graduate student workers across the UC since the 2009-2011 uprisings to oppose austerity. In December 2019, a militant movement led by rank-and-file graduate student workers at UCSC for a cost of living adjustment (COLA) quickly spread to campuses across the state. Graduate student workers across the UC system recognized their own predicament in the simple demand that we should be paid enough to live where we work. The call for a raise to alleviate the financial strain produced between stagnating UC wages and

California's exorbitant housing market caught on more quickly than anyone could have anticipated. After some weeks of the UCSC wildcat strike, the movement spread to other campuses where workers coordinated walkouts and sickouts, and went on teaching and grading strikes at Berkeley, Davis, Santa Barbara, and San Diego. In so doing, and in ways that have so far been somewhat opaque and underappreciated, our collective movement won substantial economic gains and built significant organizational power for rank-and-file union members.

THE WINS OF THE COLA MOVEMENT

While the UC administration will never admit to conceding to the demands of the wildcat strike, we won wage increases and other benefits on nearly every, if not every, campus that participated in labor actions of some kind. The power of the mass, coordinated labor action that we organized becomes particularly evident when we compare these gains to the concessions secured from the University during collective bargaining in 2018, where no rank-and-file organizing materialized in the crucial summer months when the contract was settled.

SUMMARY OF COLA WINS

Santa Cruz

- Five year “funding guarantee” for terminal degrees
- Campus-wide \$2500 annual “Housing Stipend,” later limited to students in years 1-6
- Ta raises to parity with GSR wages; enhanced first year funding packages in Computer Science and Engineering Department
- Monthly pay increases in the Baskin School of Engineering
- Dissertation quarter fellowship increase to \$8000 in History Department
- Increase in fellowship amounts from local funding agencies like The Humanities Institute and the Cota-Robles Fellowships

Berkeley

- \$5000 summer fellowships and annual wage increases to \$25,000 in Comparative Literature
- One time \$3500 payments in Near Eastern Studies
- Raises to \$30,000/year in Rhetoric Department
- Raises to \$28,000/year in Spanish and Portuguese Department
- Raises to \$40,000/year in Physics

Los Angeles

- \$6,000 summer funding in Sociology

Irvine

- Campus-wide \$5000 summer funding guarantee for terminal degrees

Davis

- \$200/month raise for English graduates teaching stand-alone college writing courses

San Diego

- Additional summer funding in Literature and Ethnic Studies Departments
- Two payments of “bonus funding” in Cognitive Science Department

Santa Barbara

- One time payment of \$400 to every graduate student in Linguistics Department
- Some campus level “housing response” payments of \$500

1

Santa Cruz

At Santa Cruz, all students in terminal degrees (MFA and PhD) were granted five year funding guarantees and an additional \$2500 "housing stipend" per year. In individual departments like Computer Science and Engineering, TA and GSR compensation was equalized in the form of salary "top ups" for TAs, and funding packages for incoming students were improved from their initial offers. In History, dissertation fellowship quarter amounts were increased from \$7000 to \$8000. In addition, at least two funding organizations on campus, The Humanities Institute and the Cota Robles Foundation, substantially increased the amounts of quarterly stipends and summer stipends awarded to grantees.

2

Berkeley

At Berkeley, several striking departments made crucial economic gains for the 2020-2021 academic year. Graduate students in Comparative Literature had their salaries raised to at least \$25,000/year for the academic year 2020-2021. In addition, more generous summer funding of \$5,000 was made available for those in the dissertation writing stage, who often do not have guaranteed summer funding. This summer writing grant pilot program was subsequently expanded, and funds were made available to graduate students in other departments as well. Similarly, graduate students in Spanish and Portuguese were provided a pay increase to \$28,000/year. In Rhetoric, the salaries of students in senior years were increased to parity with junior cohorts, equalizing all students at \$30,000/year. Finally, some graduate students in Near Eastern Studies received one-time payments of \$3500.

The list goes on: at Santa Barbara, the Linguistics Department awarded \$400 to each student, and across campus some students were awarded \$500 in "housing response" support. At Irvine, all students in terminal degrees were granted a minimum summer funding rate of \$5000. Significantly, English grads at Davis received a \$200/mo raise for teaching their own stand-alone college writing courses. At San Diego, Ethnic Studies and Literature both provided additional summer funding to students, while Cognitive Science provided two sets of "bonus" funding.

It is clear that many departments across the state quietly boosted student-worker remuneration around the time that strike activities began on their respective campuses, perhaps in recognition of the legitimacy of graduate student need, or perhaps to head off labor actions from spreading to their own students. This may have been the case in the Physics department at Berkeley, where a salary raise of \$40,000 a year was announced as strike activities intensified on campus, even though grads in this department had not declared themselves strike-ready. A lesson here, to which we will return shortly, is that we should never discount the generalized pressure that militant, rank-and-file organizing places on administrators, who are likely to capitulate where and when they can with the least damage to their positions and profits. In any case, directly or indirectly, labor actions statewide won material gains for graduate students in diverse arms of the UC.

But these gains are not assured. This is evidenced by the \$7500 summer funding package that was announced by UCLA's Chancellor only to be rescinded some weeks later when the strike threat waned—and budget cuts loomed—with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although some departments granted summer funding to their own students, as in Sociology, this funding can also be cut at any time. And without further organization to secure all of these wins in our collective bargaining agreement, we can and should expect clawbacks like those at UCLA. Indeed, on November 23, 2020, the Graduate Division at UC Santa Cruz revoked the previous extension of the annual housing stipend to students through year seven, now limiting the stipend to students only within years one through six. This change to the terms of the housing stipend was not formally announced, nor was any explanation given other than that the state budgets had precipitated budget cuts.

In sum, unilateral "guarantees" from the University can be revoked just as abruptly and covertly as they are granted.

In the last weeks and months, we have witnessed the implementation of austerity measures across the university, buffeting the meager protections of unionized and non-unionized workers such as UC-AFT lecturers. We might even speculate that such cuts have not yet been made to graduate student workers because of our recent organizing. However, [we should be prepared for UC administration to continue to train its watchful eye on our level of militancy and coordination](#) in the coming months. Unless we are prepared to organize against further assaults on our rights and protections, we should expect them to take aim at graduate student workers as well.

The unevenness and insecurity of these concessions can be accounted for in part by varying levels of organization across departments and campuses. Further, there are almost certainly more wins of which we are not aware, an issue we can also attribute to a relative lack of coordination on certain campuses and in particular departments and divisions. These campuses are, in particular, Riverside, Merced, and Davis, as well as LA and Irvine to a lesser degree. The departments are often, but not always, in the STEM fields, indicating both existing resource inequality and the priorities of administrative counter-insurgency. Clearly, these are places where we must build power through rank-and-file organizing if our next labor actions are to be as powerful and effective as possible.

Two further trends seem likely given the distribution of the COLA wins outlined above. One is perhaps an obvious and hopeful one: that in departments and on campuses with relatively high levels of organization, workers were more likely to win concessions from the University. This organization often

looked like relatively large proportions of workers engaging in labor actions. Importantly, though, such participation was also frequently more modest: robust departmental, divisional, and campus-level communications infrastructures and worker relationships—the building blocks for a mass labor action—were often good indicators of capacity for successful struggle.

The second, unmistakable factor in the distribution of wins is, however, the budgets of individual departments and campuses, and their willingness to expend them to quell worker dissatisfaction. For example, extremely limited organization was achieved in the Baskin School of Engineering or amongst fellows of specific funding agencies, but these were nonetheless the sites of some of the most significant funding increases at Santa Cruz. Likewise for Cognitive Science at San Diego and Physics at Berkeley. It is possible that similar wage and funding increases were implemented in STEM departments across the state, but without relationships with workers in these departments, we do not yet know.

Both of these conclusions point to some key takeaways for our ongoing work of building student worker power this year. First, in order to make material gains in departments already struggling with limited student funding, **ROBUST ORGANIZATIONAL NETWORKS** that foster rank-and-file militancy are absolutely necessary. Second, while there is significant organizing within STEM departments on some campuses, there is a strong need for further work in these areas **STATEWIDE**.

Finally, we must understand that in addition to the material gains of the past year, we also made crucial organizational gains. We built substantial organizational networks and tools that have served as the foundation for our continued struggle. Individual departments have already seen increased success in organizing around other issues in their departments since the COLA movement, and these departmental organizing structures are increasingly being integrated into statewide structures. Statewide, workers are involved in diverse committees tackling a range of labor issues, and each is drawing both incoming and senior graduate student workers into the struggle. In other words, student workers in many corners of the university have been united through struggle, and have established robust systems of coordination, communication, and solidarity that did not exist prior to the 2019-20 academic year.

CONCLUSION

The unavoidable conclusion of our analysis is that **WHEN WE FIGHT, WE WIN**. But how, where, and when we fight is of great significance in ways that are not straightforwardly predictable or easy to calculate by measures like “supermajority,” or according to ideological attachments to abstract values like “democracy.” The primary lesson to draw from the COLA struggle is this: gains can be made by committed rank-and-file workers who find choke points within the University at which to disrupt its operations.

And perhaps more importantly, the actions of organized rank-and-file ripple and magnify across the manifold arms of the University in surprising and potentially energizing ways. The sudden contract wins of AFSCME and the K7 workers at Santa Cruz are only two examples. These wins only underscore that it is the most precarious workers who must engage in the most tightly organized and militant labor actions, when they do so **THEY CAN WIN**.

These lessons are in some senses counter to our expectations, and in others not. Fully grasping their nuance in each of our particular conditions will be the key to our future success. Taking note of the conditions and contingencies outlined above while we organize with other rank-and-file workers will be crucial. Recognizing them at play in our conversations with our comrades and coworkers in our department meetings and divisional town halls, or in our casual discussions of the impacts of the pandemic, the fires, the housing market, or the national and global political unrest on our work and our lives, is of incalculable importance to the work of building our power.

When we fought last year, we won; but there is so much more to win, and we must take every lesson we have as an opportunity to advance our struggle this year.

RAFA: RANK AND FILE ACTION

YOURS, IN SOLIDARITY

