

RAFA: RANK AND FILE ACTION

No More False Alliances: International Workers in the UC

The response to the Trump administration's targeting of international students during the pandemic displayed the familiar tendencies of workers on the defensive, in a reactive mode. Amid the moral outrage, sloppy hot-takes, and airy condemnation of Trump and of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the majority of practical organizing saw UC graduate student workers align with UC administrators in sudden shared antagonism to the Federal Government. We, naturally, do not want to lose our visas and jobs; the UC does not want to lose a significant portion of its labor force, or its claim to a diverse and international research community. (The enduring connections between ICE and the UC hardly need to be rehashed here, beginning, of course, at the top, with former UC President Janet Napolitano's tenure at the head of Homeland Security.)

This unhappy alliance, although justified by a sudden and genuine threat to our visa status, betrays the short-termism that has plagued our organizing over the last decade. It blurs the historical and ongoing links between the UC and ICE, which will not vanish with a Biden presidency. Most of all, it conceals the fact that the UC administration remains the biggest threat to our visas. The latter point surfaced spectacularly during the wave of wildcat strikes last year, when hundreds of international workers across the UC stared down the implicit threat of deportation for taking collective labor action to proactively change our humiliating living and working conditions (a dozen UC Santa Cruz international workers were in fact fired for six months). But deportation threats are blunt instruments, to be rolled out when the situation is hot. To understand why international workers were so overrepresented in the COLA movement in the first place, we must examine the "business as usual" techniques that the UC has used all along to leverage the precarity of its visa-holding workers.

As the UC congratulates itself for its minor part in reversing the July ICE directive, its international student offices have instructed our departments to track down and report our location. Once identified, those abroad are issued with a threat to return by wintertime, or face termination. The purported reason (taxation problems) has not pushed the UC to surveil the location of its domestic grad workers, many of whom have moved far and wide to escape the coastal Californian rent burden. This haphazard and uneven (not to mention, discriminatory) outsourcing of ICE powers to UC officers is a timely reminder of the UC's position vis-à-vis its international workers and US immigration enforcement. One could be forgiven for thinking that international student offices on UC campuses exist to assist us with our visas and status. Yet events of the past year prove that, when it comes down to it, they are so many mini ICE outposts. International workers at Santa Cruz learned this beyond any doubt when International Student & Scholar Services, in an email with the subject line, "Immigration and Wildcat Strike," followed the UC's threat to fire strikers with this ominous advice:

Any actions that result in student discipline or arrest may have immigration consequences, both on your current status and on possible future immigration applications you may make in the United States. We urge you to make informed and rational decisions in the actions that you take. (February 7, 2020)

The Rank and File Action caucus has produced this [information sheet](#) for UC graduates on F1 and J1 visas. If you have questions, write to our international workers' council at international@rafa-uc.com.

In the face of these threats, international student workers were always at the front of the COLA movement. And yet at crucial moments of struggle, there was a commonplace and paralyzing sentiment among grads: international workers should "step back," because we are more precarious. Or worse: that any risk whatsoever should not be taken when we are involved. The conditions that made COLA important to us thus became an excuse to deter others from joining the fight. This was, to say the least, bemusing to those among us at the forefront of the COLA campaign from the

beginning, and to those of us who readily took up the fight when it arrived at our campuses. We were frustrated by those who used their fears about our vulnerability as reasons for not acting themselves. The most precarious visa holders among us already knew what risks they could or could not take. We wanted solidarity, not concern. And solidarity, as so many thousands demonstrated, meant joining the movement and swelling our numbers, displacing individual risk calculus with the simple truth that all of us are safer when we take collective action.

More importantly, the overrepresentation of international workers in the COLA struggle is not, on second look, counterintuitive in the slightest. Our basic conditions of employment on F1 and J1 visas mean that we distill precisely what is rotten about earning 50% of a low salary in some of the most expensive rental markets in the world. We cannot accept research or reader jobs on campus above a TA appointment; we cannot pick up supplementary income off campus without exposing ourselves to additional immigration risks. We have therefore always occupied the position that so many of our domestic comrades and colleagues are now entering, their side gigs drying up in a crisis economy. This position is one of the most fundamental contradictions within the UC model: that half of all instructional hours are delivered by a workforce that earns 50% of a bad salary, and whose combined wages account for merely 2% of the UC's operational budget.

This contradiction is not news to international students and workers: it is printed on the papers we present to border officials. Our immigration forms directly state that our sponsoring organization (UC) pays us dramatically less than we need for our living expenses. The math works out like this: We earn \$24,000 in one standard year, but require, according to our documents, more than \$30,000 for living expenses every nine months. Annualized, we need \$40,000 to live here, leaving us \$16,000 in arrears every year. This gap, we implicitly tell ICE, is resolved by mustering up \$16,000 of "personal funds" annually, despite not having the right to work off campus or accept more than a TA appointment on campus. The reality, of course, is that we live in sub-standard conditions, skip meals, and work cash jobs — constantly and variously imperilling our graduate study and our visas.

EXCERPT FROM AN I-20* FORM

FINANCIALS	
ESTIMATED AVERAGE COSTS FOR: 9 MONTHS	
Tuition and Fees	\$ 28,941
Living Expenses	\$ 30,651
Expenses of Dependents (0)	\$
Other	\$
TOTAL	\$ 59,592
STUDENT'S FUNDING FOR: 9 MONTHS	
Personal Funds	\$ 2,965
Fellowship	\$ 56,627
Funds From Another Source	\$
On-Campus Employment	\$
TOTAL	\$ 59,592

*An I-20 form administered by UC's International Services must be presented to immigration officials. Note that "Fellowship" includes tuition and fees.

Under pandemic conditions, the general position of UC grad workers increasingly approximates the pre-existing international grad. New and international lines of solidarity now beckon. The answer is not, of course, that we all need more work hours on campus or our side gigs back (our visas prohibit this in any case). It is simply that all UC workers must be paid enough to live where they work, pandemic or no pandemic. This begins, for grads, with the \$16,000 gap between our salaries and our living expenses.

Right now, as multiple forms of bargaining unfold between our union and UC labor relations, international workers across the UC are actively organizing the power to win what we need — rather than sluggishly teaming up with the admin. We recognize the real threat to our status and the kind of political force we can become.

THE POWER OF THE WORKERS

Fellow international workers, join our RAFA council (email: international@rafa-uc.com)! Domestic comrades, get involved with the organizing work of our caucus around the pandemic, the cost of living, and the cops (sign up: <https://rafa-uc.com/organize-with-us/>)!

WILL COME FROM THE RANK AND FILE, OR NOT AT ALL.