

SPREAD THE RENT STRIKE

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RAFA: RANK AND FILE ACTION

Last year, graduate workers on every campus in the University of California fought for a Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA), including several wildcat strike actions. The university, we argued, must pay its workers enough to live where we work. Our labor actions [forced concessions](#) across the system, but nothing like the systematic response that this crisis demands. The likely return to classrooms means, for many of us, a return to the severe rent burden of coastal California. Even after the many upheavals of the past year — like a terrible law of nature — the facts reassert themselves: the wages are too low; the rents are too damn high.

Those who call UC their landlord in addition to their boss, however, could not afford to lose sight of this. In the deep and heavy months of the pandemic, administrators at UCLA, UC Berkeley, UC Santa Cruz, and UC San Diego announced rent hikes. It was not enough, apparently, to claw back a mere 60% of workers' wages in rent. All graduate workers should recognize in this the attitude that UC Labor Relations will take to contract bargaining next year.

For tenant-workers, the UC issues the pay check and collects the rent check, meanwhile harvesting increasing utility bills during online instruction. UC is boss and landlord, exerting pressure on both sides of the squeeze. The struggle against rent burden is, therefore, at once a labor struggle and a tenant struggle. As grad workers dispersed, fleeing the coastal rent

burden and bracing against job losses, higher bills, and family tragedies, the work of rank and file action and organization did not stop in UC Housing.

Residents of Berkeley's UC Village have been on rent strike for nearly a year. At UCLA, rent strikers have now withheld over \$600,000 in rent. Tenants of 1921 Walnut, a 112-year-old, rent-controlled building in Berkeley, have doggedly resisted eviction attempts since the UC bought the building last year. At UC Santa Cruz, residents of Family Student Housing organized for a year to win modernization of their internet network to the level of the rest of campus. We look to UC San Diego, next, where tenant-workers threaten a rent strike against [proposed rent increases](#) of up to 72%. And the ominous decision of the UC Regents to approve a high-cost and environmentally dubious building spree on UC Santa Cruz means surely that this struggle will spread there.

[Rank and File Action \(RAFA\)](#), the labor caucus emerging from the COLA struggle, bases our organizing in concrete actions against the boss and landlord. We believe that collective actions like these build trust and confidence among workers and tenants. UCLA's rent strike supports UC Berkeley's rent strike, which supports rent-burdened, precarious tenants everywhere.

THE POWER OF WORKERS AND TENANTS WILL COME FROM THE RANK AND FILE, OR NOT AT ALL.

SPREAD THE RENT STRIKE.

Find below accounts from the rent strikes at UCLA and UC Berkeley.

R A F A STANDS IN SOLIDARITY WITH RENT STRIKERS EVERYWHERE

01 UC Village (Berkeley) Rent Strike

As has been widely noted in agitational struggles among grad student workers across the UC, housing is at the core of contradictions that extend the burden of graduate student life to the point of nigh-impossibility. To put numbers on what this looks like at the UC Village, UC Berkeley-owned graduate family housing, a standard 2-BR housing unit in the Village rents for roughly \$1,800/mo. For a historical comparison, the same unit cost roughly \$500/mo in 1996. At present, the rental cost of a UC Village apartment is slightly greater than the take-home wages paid monthly to a graduate student instructor at Berkeley, a fact that's felt especially hard by those living in the village while acting as the sole source of income in their family. The university has put forth plans moreover to raise rental costs by 4%/yr over the next several years, to bring rental costs to local market rate (a market rate the UC moreover has a substantial hand in setting), despite explicitly advertising

UC Village as their responsible and affordable family housing option.

In light of this situation, many residents of the UC Village have been on rent strike for a nearly year long period extending back to early in the pandemic. At its peak, upwards of 30-40 residents were on strike, many if not most of whom were striking as a function of sheer necessity. Those organizing and involved in the strike initially demanded rent suspension, before shifting the demand (after months of silence from the UC) to rent debt expungement for those who have not been able to pay (for more on current demands, see the [petition](#) rent strikers have been circulating). So far, the UC has not offered any response to the demands of rent strikers and have recently been putting particularly stark pressure on those involved, claiming at the end of 2020 that they couldn't guarantee that in the new year they wouldn't start evicting residents, despite extant eviction moratoria. In





02 UCLA Rent Strike

The rent strike in UCLA's campus housing has reached a year. These student worker's have now withheld \$600,000 in rent from their boss and landlord.

Ninety-seven per cent of UCLA's tenants are rent burdened, meaning that more than 30% of their salaries goes to rent. More than a third of them, meanwhile, spend over 60% of their income on rent. A full quarter of them rely on credit to meet the rent check. The familiar Californian squeeze between stingy boss and greedy landlord here concentrates into a single figure, the overlord in a company town parading as a public institution, giving too little with one hand and taking back far too much with the other.

As the pandemic gripped, this dismal situation became impossible. Side gigs and lines of credit dried up. Family members lost jobs. Utilities bills went through the roof. UCLA Housing, meanwhile, has posted a multi-million dollar profit despite the pandemic, on the back of a handsome \$12.8 million the previous year. Underpaying your workers and overcharging your tenants, it seems, is a pandemic-proof profit model.

In response, we formed the UCLA Tenants' Union and collectively prioritized securing access to food, childcare, healthcare, and supporting our families. In the process, we formulated the following demands of UCLA Housing:

certain cases as well, the UC has been, in effect, paying itself by extracting rent payments directly out of student financial aid, that students, many of whom struggle to afford food, never see. And now the UC is attempting to push up the date that residents need to sign a lease re-agreement, which for rent strikers would immediately demand 25% back rent payment and being locked into a binding payment plan. These measures come despite the fact that the UC was specifically earmarked money in the CARES Act to cover rent debt and can apply for funds covering up to 80% of back rent owed through California's SB 91 Rental Assistance Program. When pressed on this, the UC has claimed it's unwillingness to use that as a matter of "equity" - one resident stressed that here solidarity was especially key, as one of the primary tactics that the UC uses is to force changes on a few and then to use the language of equity to justify generalizing those changes

across all residents. The UC has also justified threats of eviction as a matter of "fairness" to those on the UC Village waitlist, despite roughly 10% of on-site housing units currently sitting empty. If the UC's brutality and bad faith in this situation seem odd (even given what we know about the institution), especially considering what are relatively low on-site maintenance costs relative to total number of residents (and thus revenue taken in from rent), sources suggest the reason may be the cost of the UC Village's mortgage. Reports indicate that the UC faces exorbitantly high mortgage costs that banks are unwilling to renegotiate, as a function of severe financial mismanagement among the administration. The burden for the debt accrued in the UC Village mortgage is being systematically transformed into the personal debts of vast numbers of UC Village graduate student residents, at the cost of reliable access to basic needs, and in the midst of a pandemic.

1. CANCEL RENT FOR THE DURATION OF THE PANDEMIC.
2. ENSURE THAT NO MORE THAN 30% OF STUDENT WORKER INCOMES GO TO UNIVERSITY HOUSING COSTS WHEN IN-PERSON UNIVERSITY OPERATIONS RESUME.
3. STOP PRESSURING RESIDENTS TO SIGN ONTO PAYMENT PLANS.
4. GUARANTEE UNIVERSAL CONTRACT RENEWAL FOR RESIDENTS WISHING TO CONTINUE LIVING IN UNIVERSITY APARTMENTS, INDEPENDENT OF STUDENT STATUS IF RESIDENTS ARE GRADUATING.
5. GUARANTEE THAT NO HOLDS WILL BE PLACED ON STUDENTS' ACADEMIC RECORDS, INCLUDING ACCESS TO CAMPUS SERVICES, ENROLLMENT, AND GRADUATION IF THEY DO NOT PAY RENT.
6. CANCEL THE RENT INCREASE FOR THE 2020-21 ACADEMIC YEAR .

There has been no meaningful response to our demands. The strike continues.

UCLA Tenants' Union stands in solidarity with other UC tenancy struggles in San Diego and Berkeley, along with the plight of thousands of rent-burdened UC academic and non-academic workers across the UC system. Our situation is a crystalline example of a basic fact brought home to all during the COLA wildcat strikes last year: the UC does not pay its workers enough to live where they work. Anyone living in UCLA-owned housing is encouraged to join the rent strike. Please visit [the UCLA Tenants' Union website](#) or email cancelrentucla@gmail.com for more information, including a link to the Tenants' Union's biweekly meetings.

