

Student Movement Developing in California

A student movement is in its birth pangs here in California. Originally conceived as a free higher education system, the University of California and the California State College systems have seen steadily rising rates over the last decades. However, nothing is as dramatic as the 32% fee increase that the Board of Regents (the systems' governing body) voted in on Nov. 19.

Already heavily indebted upon graduation, many students will be forced out of the state schools as a result of this increase if it holds. Others will be graduating with student debts of \$20,000, \$30,000 and even more. Thus it is that students are being forced to organize.

Events

Here is a partial glimpse of what is happening:

Within this state system are a series of two-year "community colleges". These are attended overwhelmingly by working class youth who cannot afford the four year schools. At one such college, Diablo Valley College (DVC), in a middle class and working class area in central California, students have been organizing a "Students for a Democratic Society" (SDS – the name of the largest and most radical student group in the 1960s and '70s) for close to a year now.

DVC SDS is part of a national organization, but at DVC it has organized some successful public events. Over the summer, they organize a public meeting aimed at the wider community. This was sparsely attended, but it gave many students some experience. Since then, they have organized a series of successful public meetings, including a debate on capitalism vs. anarchism vs. socialism. Another meeting was on the police murder of the Chicago leader of the former Black Panther Party, Fred Hampton. Hampton's son, Fred Hampton Jr. spoke at the meeting, which was very well attended. They also held a "Winter Soldier" meeting at which some Iraq War veterans spoke – veterans who oppose that war based on their experience there.

The main focus at DVC will clearly be the fee hikes, and this will be getting a big impulse from this week's events at the University of California, Berkeley (UCB), which was a center of the student movement in the 1960s and '70s but it has been largely quiet since then. Over the three days of Nov. 18-20, however, one of the unions on the campus called a strike. This was supported by the student groups on campus and many hundreds of students actively participated in a student strike.

32% Student Fee Hike

It was in the midst of this strike (Nov. 19) that the Board of Regents voted in the 32% fee increase, and this heated up the movement. On the night following that vote, a group of some 40 students snuck in and occupied one of the main buildings on campus. The police tried to break into the building to arrest and remove the students, but they were unable to do this. The result was a stand-off, with the students inside, the police clustered around a few of the building's entrances, and many hundreds of students gathered at each of the

four corners of the building. The intent was to physically prevent the police from removing the occupiers and as the day wore on, the mood hardened. One step the students took was to form locked-arm lines across the pathways and physically prevent anybody from passing through. This was largely symbolic, but it showed a resolve and willingness to defy the law that is impressive in this, the very earliest stages of the movement.

Movements of the Past

Over the last 25 years, California has seen the rise and fall of many student movements. There were student movements in support of the South African struggle against apartheid, in support of struggles in Central America, against various ballot initiatives, etc. Each of these movements rose and died away as the issues themselves did. However, in this case the movement seems unlikely to die away exactly because the issues themselves will only get worse.

In the youth movement of the 1960s, the capitalist politicians very consciously followed a policy that President Lyndon Johnson called one of “guns and butter”. Large sectors of the working class could expect better wages and working conditions yearly. This, along with the role of the conservative union leadership, helped keep the youth movement largely separated from the working class. (In addition, there was not much systematic effort to overcome these obstacles on the part of most in the youth movement.)

Now, however, things are radically different. Almost every sector of the US working class has experienced increased attacks over the last 20 years. This is especially true for public sector workers. In California, many of these public sector workers are being forced to take several days off per month (without pay), and are seeing layoffs and wage cuts. In other words, the attacks on students is simply part of a wider attack on all workers as well as many middle class people.

Fault Lines Within Movement

Already amongst the students there is a widespread recognition of this fact, and when the idea of spreading the movement beyond just students and even beyond the education sector, this is easily accepted by many also.

This is contrasted to a sector of the student leadership that seems somewhat fixated on the politicians, rather than on mobilizing an even greater sector of students and workers. This fixation will tend to be taken advantage of by layers of the union leadership, who will seek to use this movement to put pressure on but also to elect Democrats. In order to do this, the goals of the movement will be limited to what the liberal Democrats are willing to accept; in other words, this wing of the Democrats will in effect set the agenda for the movement if the movement allows it.

In these early stages, as the movement is just building, the most important thing is to focus on mobilizing youth and workers together out in the streets. In the main, this will amount to protests against and putting pressure on the corporate controlled Democrats and Republicans. Inevitably, though, the issue will tend to arise of elections. If we are not

happy with the ones in office, then there must be an alternative. The union leadership and its supporters amongst the students will, in effect, try to channel this towards electing Democrats. There must be an alternative to that in order to successfully resist that pressure. The alternative should be to elect representatives directly out of the movement itself and completely independent of the Democratic and Republican Parties.

This will tend to open up a conflict with the union officials and their supporters. Within the membership, though, the discontent with the leadership is massive. The issue of breaking from the leadership's dependence on the Democrats will tend to be linked with the issue of breaking from the leadership's view that the workers and the bosses have a common interest – what is known as the “team concept”.

These, then, will tend to be some of the main issues confronting this movement as it develops. The main point, though, is that the period of more or less unanswered attacks of the capitalist class seems to be drawing to a close just as the period of economic stability has also ended.