

Over 10,000 University of California researchers petition for United Auto Workers union membership

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On May 24th, University of California (UC) student researchers submitted more than 10,000 signed authorization cards from all ten UC campuses and the UC-operated Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory (LBNL) to the state's Public Employee Relations Board in order to establish Student Researchers United-United Auto Workers (UAW). If approved, the union will represent more than 17,000 higher education workers across the University of California campuses and LBNL.

Graduate students, like workers in other industries, face increasingly desperate conditions. Colleges and universities across the country have cut a total of 650,000 jobs since February 2020, a 13 percent reduction of all higher education workers. Graduate workers, teaching assistants and research assistants have also come under fierce attack.

Like many educators in California, UC graduate students face stagnating wages and soaring rents, struggling to make ends meet in one of the most expensive states in the country. In many cases, the average monthly pay of student workers is less than the average price of a one-bedroom rental unit in the area. A report by Center for the Transformation of Schools at UCLA revealed that 1 in 20 UC students experience homelessness.

Amid rising housing and food costs, the cost of living is increasing rapidly. At UC San Diego, housing costs for incoming graduate students are expected to increase by between 35 to 85 percent.

Like countless other universities across the nation, UC is aggressively pushing for a full reopening plan for the 2021 fall quarter despite the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, endangering students, staff and faculty.

There is no doubt that under such conditions, the student workers in the UC system cast their vote in favor of the unionization effort under the impression that the UAW—with all of its vast financial resources and hundreds of thousands of members—will be an ally in their fight for better living conditions.

In reality, assuming the union drive is ratified by the state government, student researchers will find themselves conducting a fight on two fronts, against both the university administration and the UAW.

UAW is not a “union” in the traditional sense but a cheap labor contractor and industrial police force, whose institutional interests are inextricably hostile to the workers it claims to represent. It has collaborated for decades with the auto companies in enforcing plant closures and wage cuts, while integrating itself financially with the auto companies through its control of corporate stock, and participation in joint labor-management committees.

The UAW controls more than \$1.2 billion in assets, including a nearly \$800 million strike fund which it uses as a slush fund for the bureaucracy, hundreds of whom earn “earn” 6-figure salaries. Top union officials supplement their incomes with direct corporate bribes of the type revealed in the recent federal corruption probe which brought down more than a dozen UAW officials, including Dennis Williams and Gary Jones, the last two presidents of the union.

In recent years, the UAW has sought to offset the decline in its dues base among autoworkers by expanding into graduate students. The union now has more than 50,000 members in the UC system alone, more than its total remaining membership at General Motors, a tenth of what it was in the 1970s.

The role of the UAW among graduate students has been the same as among autoworkers. In 2019 and 2020, the UAW intervened to put an end to a four month wildcat strike of thousands of UC graduate student instructors, which including many nonunion workers including graduate researchers. The union shut down the strike by dangling the prospect of an officially sanctioned unfair labor practices strike but ultimately refused to even call a strike vote.

The UAW played a similar duplicitous role this year in strikes at Columbia University and New York University (NYU) in Manhattan. At Columbia University, 3,000 graduate student-workers went on strike early this year, for over a month fighting for decent pay, health care, job projections, and other benefits. At every turn the UAW worked in collaboration with members of the bargaining committee to sell out their struggle, trying to ram through a sellout contract which was soundly voted down. In response, the UAW unilaterally declared a “pause” to the strike, effectively ending it without a vote.

Meanwhile, the UAW deliberately delayed a strike vote at NYU while it tried to shut down the strike at Columbia. In the beginning of May, the UAW shut down the strike right before the final grading period, when it would have been most effective, and rammed through a contract which not only failed to provide living wages for the student workers, but also gave more power to the university administration, allowing them to offset wage increase through job cuts.

The experience of the UAW is the same in all of the official unions. Based on “America First” nationalism and support for capitalism, the unions long ago became transformed from defense organizations of the working class into instruments for the suppression of the working class. Over the past year, amidst mass death and social misery produced by the ruling class response to the pandemic, the UAW and the other AFL-CIO unions have done everything to keep workers on the job, making them jointly responsible for mass infections and deaths in the workplace.

Workers all around the world are looking for a way to fight back. To wage a successful struggle, however, new organizations are needed to fight against not only the company but the betrayals of the unions.

Even as the petition is being considered by the state

of California, over 3,000 workers at Volvo Truck are in an open rebellion against the UAW’s attempt to enforce a sellout contract at the company’s New River Valley plant in Virginia, voting overwhelmingly against a sellout contract brought by the union. The UAW has been compelled to resume a strike which it had abruptly halted early last month.

The leading role in this rebellion has been played by the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee, which has worked to mobilize and develop opposition to the contract and demand a resumption of the strike. But while the UAW bureaucracy intends to isolate and starve workers on the picket line into submission, the Committee is fighting to expand the struggle and unite Volvo workers with their brothers and sisters across the world in order to bring the auto giant to its knees.

UC researchers will be compelled to follow their example and form rank-and-file committees of their own. Such committees should raise demands such as a cost of living adjustment of at least \$1,412 per month, as well as protections against widespread expectations of grueling working hours and the whims of research advisors.

Most importantly, such committees must connect as broadly as possible with other sections of the working class, including K-12 educators, autoworkers, and Amazon workers to fight for a socialist leadership in the working class, linking the battle for all workers’ social rights to a worldwide political movement.

We encourage all UC research who agree with this perspective to contact the SEP and IYSSE today.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact