

Student researchers in University of California system vote to join United Auto Workers union

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On August 5, the United Auto Workers (UAW) announced that the California Public Employment Relations Board (PERB) has verified that a majority of the 17,000 student researchers, spanning 10 UC campuses and Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory (LBNL), have voted to unionize with the UAW-affiliated Student Researchers United (SRU). This marks the largest unionization drive of academic student employees in UAW's history but represents a political dead-end for the UC student workers.

The card signing campaign to unionize began in fall 2020 and was completed on May 24 of this year when student researchers submitted over 10,000 signed union authorization cards to the California Public Employees Relations Board in Oakland, California.

Student workers, like workers in many industries, have been facing an increasing cost of living coupled with stagnating wages. The cost of living in California, for instance, is among the highest in the United States, especially in the metropolitan areas of San Francisco, Los Angeles and San Diego, home to many of the state's largest universities.

Graduate instructors, who have been in the UAW for more than three decades, routinely make less than monthly rent on a local one-bedroom apartment. The increasingly precarious living conditions faced by student researchers and workers in other industries has undoubtedly been a driving force for the UC students to organize.

Student researchers are extremely valuable to the UC system, as their labor secures more patents than any other university in the world and helps to bring in the billions of dollars in grant revenue needed for research.

However, student researchers in California were not

classified as employees of the UC system prior to 2017. This excluded them from collective bargaining, processing grievances, or even receiving workers' compensation from the UC system if injured.

In 2017, UC Berkeley graduate student Holly Gildea reported in *The Daily Californian* that she was "burned in a chemical spill in my thesis lab. I was shocked to learn that UC Berkeley would not cover my medical expenses under workers' compensation because it did not consider me an employee."

In 2017, the California State Legislature amended the Higher Education Employer-Employee Relations Act (HEERA) to classify student researchers as employees, which opened the possibility for student researchers to enter union membership.

UC student researchers have chosen to join the UAW under the sincere but mistaken belief that the organization would use its large membership and substantial financial resources on their behalf. In reality, the UAW will seek to play the same role which it plays among hundreds of thousands of autoworkers and graduate students, which is to negotiate sweetheart deals with management behind their backs, while seeking to suppress and isolate them. The UAW does not function as a "workers' organization" but as a labor police force opposed to the interests of workers they nominally represent.

The organization is consumed with unspeakable levels of corruption. Over a dozen former top union officials have pleaded guilty over the last four years to federal corruption charges stemming from accepting millions in bribes from Fiat Chrysler Automobiles (now Stellantis) and using embezzled union dues on lavish Palm Springs getaways. This includes two of the last

four presidents, Gary Jones and Dennis Williams. Former interim president Rory Gamble, who stepped down in June, was also reportedly under investigation.

This corruption, however, is a function of the social interests of the bureaucracy which controls this organization. The UAW commands more than \$1.2 billion in assets and sits on a \$790 million strike fund, which are used, not for strikes, but to finance the salaries of the apparatus. Last year, 450 out of 660 of its national staff at Solidarity House in Detroit made over \$100,000. The UAW also depends heavily on tens of millions of dollars in company money every year through labor-management “training” programs and other corporatist schemes, as well as its control of billion-dollar pension and health care funds, which give it a financial stake in the exploitation of the workers they claim to represent.

If the UAW is officially recognized, student researchers will be compelled to fight on two fronts, against both the university administration and its agents in the union. This is demonstrated by a review of the experiences of workers inside the UAW.

In July 2021, nearly 3,000 auto workers at the Volvo Trucks plant in Dublin, Virginia waged a five-week strike in which they thrice defied the union’s attempts to bully them into accepting sellout contracts. Workers were emboldened by the formation by a section of their coworkers of an independent Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee. The UAW finally ended the strike by forcing workers to vote again on the exact same agreement which they had rejected only a week before, claiming it passed in the re-vote by a mere 17 ballots. The new contract is a six-year agreement which maintains the hated two-tier wage structure and contains wage increases below the rate of inflation.

In March, Columbia University graduate workers in the UAW went on strike to demand increased wages, health care, third party arbitration and summer stipends. However, the UAW unilaterally ended the strike without a vote on the pretext that the strike was simply being put on “pause,” in order to isolate graduate students at New York University, whose own strike vote the union arbitrarily prolonged to buy it time to shut down the strike at Columbia. The UAW also encountered an incipient rebellion among graduate students, and Columbia grad students voted down an austerity contract in April.

In California last year, graduate student instructors defied the authority of the UAW at UC Santa Cruz and waged a bitter four-month-long wildcat strike against the University of California to demand cost-of-living adjustments (COLA) of \$1,412 per month to meet rising housing costs, which quickly grew into a full teaching and research strike. UCSC grad students, who defied threats of arrest and firing by UC President and former head of Department of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano, quickly gained support among their counterparts across the UC system, many of whom joined the strike.

However, the orientation of the COLA strike leaders towards pressuring the UAW to act on their behalf led them into a blind alley, and they eventually ended the strike and threw their support behind the UAW’s lame offer to hold a strike vote on an officially declared Unfair Labor Practices strike. The UAW ultimately did not even hold this strike vote, arguing that COLA organizers had not demonstrated that it would have sufficient support. Ultimately, the UAW allowed UC to fire as many as 80 strikers without any serious opposition.

Graduate students, having been proletarianized through decades of cuts and shrinking prospects for permanent university positions, face the same conditions faced by workers in the factories and warehouses, in the restaurants and cafes, both in the United States and abroad. This points to the need for them to link up their own struggle with those of the working as a whole.

Student workers at UC must learn from the struggles of the international working class, which points to the need for new orientation and organization. This is why the Socialist Equality Party and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) are fighting to form rank-and-file committees on campuses, schools and factories across the country, to mobilize the independent initiative of the working class independent of and in opposition to the pro-capitalist trade unions.



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