# Union calls off University of California lecturers strike at eleventh hour

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Wednesday morning, the University Council-American Federation of Teachers union called off a strike of more than 6,000 University of California (UC) lecturers across nine university campuses only hours before the two-day walkout was scheduled to begin.

Following the pattern set in recent weeks for over 32,000 Kaiser Permanente healthcare workers and 60,000 International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees entertainment workers, the union justified the abandonment of strike action by announcing that a tentative deal had been reached with management.

The union has released few details of the purported deal, but claims that, "This contract revolutionizes the first six years of a lecturer's career at the UC." The union statement cites supposed improvements in job security through multi-year contracts with an improved review process, as opposed to the current unvarnished casual labor arrangement. There is no mention of improved wages, benefits or working conditions.

This is an abject betrayal of the lecturers, who voted by 91 percent to authorize the strike in opposition to the UC administration. The lecturers are non-tenured faculty who teach nearly half of all courses in the UC system, including undergraduate and graduate-level classes. Although they are Ph.D. scholars with just as much talent as tenured and tenure-track faculty, they are paid an average of $19,000 a year in salary, with 35 percent lacking health insurance and many relying on food stamps or other government support to get by.

Lecturers were given no opportunity to study the proposed deal or to decide for themselves whether to accept it and call off their strike.

The very fact that the UC-AFT framed this strike as an "unfair labor practices" action tied the hands of the workers. Unfair labor practice strikes can only demand that management "bargain in good faith," making it impossible to raise demands related to wages, benefits or working conditions. Once the university proposed a deal, thus "bargaining in good faith," the UC-AFT had a legalistic excuse for calling off the strike.

This betrayal is doubly significant given that doctoral and post-doctoral researchers are both conducting strike authorization votes until Friday, November 19. Post-doctoral researchers are taking a strike authorization vote under the same bankrupt unfair labor practices framework, while student researchers are citing UC's refusal to recognize their recent unionization with Student Researchers United-UAW. Conditions for many student and post-doctoral researchers are similar to those faced by lecturers.

Dante is a freshman student who heard about the rally from his teacher. He came to show his support for lecturers and other staff saying, "When the staff and students are not guaranteed a job next year, that does not bode well for the quality of my education. The university should provide for them."

He noted how the UC administration was going to take away a housing stipend for T.A.'s that would have taken off at least 30 percent of their living costs. Child care, Dante noted, was also especially expensive for families, costing at least $1,500 every month at the university day care.

Tragically, Dante lost his father, a worker at the NASSCO shipyards, to COVID-19. "COVID has led to a growing polarization in society," he said, "We see who it has hit the easiest, and who it has hit the hardest, mainly, the poor and working class."

Marcus and George also heard of the protest from one of their teachers and came to show their support. Marcus said that, "It's incredibly unfair that they don't get tenure just because they're lecturers." George added, "If anything, there should be scrutiny of the

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higher ups and how much they are paid. The UC system has been mistreating students and faculty for a long time.”

The two students went on to list the myriad problems at the school, including faulty infrastructure, from internet to water fountains, capacity limitations at cafeterias and gyms, and skeleton crews on many university services.

George noted the way that COVID has changed the quality of his education saying, “It has certainly declined since the pandemic, it seems less and less effort is being put into the classrooms and lessons.”

William O'Brien, a retired professor of Literature at UC San Diego for 35 years, spoke to the WSWS about the struggle of the lecturers. “This is an important little battle in the larger one, which is the brutal corporatization of the university,” he said. “Public institutions want to limit and eliminate tenured faculty, and replace them with underpaid lecturers. The university is filling itself up with part-time workers who don’t get benefits and make slave wages. The university also knows how to use the union against the workers. After a certain amount of time, a lecturer can rightly become eligible for job security, but what the university does is hire them just short of that, and then let them go.”

O'Brien referred to a longtime friend who has a Ph.D. and has been struggling as a lecturer for 25 years. “She holds down 2-3 jobs at different campuses and doesn’t know if she has a job from semester to semester. It’s horrible.” In addition to the precarious situation lecturers find themselves in, he also noted, they must often travel constantly via public transportation or car.

“The current strike is a fight against the corporatization of the university, which is increasingly exploiting low-wage workers. Every action against this, including the present strike, is welcome. Lecturers deserve more, much more than even what they are asking.”

It is no accident that unions at University of California, Kaiser Permanente, and in the entertainment industry are calling off strikes at the last minute on the basis of vague tentative agreements. Rank-and-file workers at agricultural equipment manufacturer John Deere are continuing their strike after rejecting two contracts backed by their union, the United Auto Workers (UAW).

The unions clearly fear that once a strike begins, they may not be able to stop it until workers read and vote on a full contract.

To carry this struggle forward, UC lecturers must recognize that the UC-AFT, like the UAW, IATSE, and the rest of the unions, is on the side of management. We call on UC lecturers to form a rank-and-file committee to fight for their demands. Such a committee must reach out as broadly as possible to researchers and university workers, as well as workers in health care, entertainment, manufacturing and logistics.

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