# 48,000 University of California academic workers in UAW facing contract fight

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September 30 marks the expiration of the contract between University of California and 12,000 postdoctoral (postdocs) and academic researchers who are members of United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 5810. While there is immense support for a struggle to win substantial wage increases to fight inflation, guaranteed access to affordable housing, full tuition coverage and expanded health benefits, and improve working conditions, the UAW has sought to block a unified strike and has extended contracts or forced workers to labor without one.

The 12,000 postdocs and academic researchers are part of 48,000 university workers across the UC system overall who will be working without a contract as of October 1.

Three UAW-affiliated bargaining units split workers across multiple campuses based on occupation. UAW Local 2865 is keeping tutors, readers and graduate student instructors and assistants on the job after the June 30 expiration of their contract. Local 5810, which is negotiating separate contracts for postdocs and academic researchers, has repeatedly extended the postdocs' contract, which initially expired in 2020.

Student Researchers United (SRU-UAW)—comprised primarily of graduate student researchers and research assistants—was only recognized by the UC administration last December.

The ongoing contract negotiations have reflected two central features about the challenges confronting workers within higher education. The first is the drive by the university administrations to slash compensation for academic workers despite California's high cost of living. The second is the deep integration of the unions, including the UAW, into the pro-capitalist Democratic Party.

The university has been intransigent in its opposition to the slightest improvements for academic workers. Despite this, UAW officials have perpetuated the myth that they are engaged in "negotiations." In reality, they are only working with the UC board of trustees and the powerful corporate and Democratic Party officials on it to get workers to swallow yet another contract dictated by the state's austerity regime.

The administration's initial proposal included an effective pay cut, with a proposed wage increase of 5 percent in the first year and 3 percent in the subsequent years, far below the 8.5 percent rise in the Consumer Price Index in the 12-month period ending in July.

The administration also proposed increasing dependent benefits for childcare from $1,650 to $1,875 per semester. Childcare facilities on campuses can charge in excess of $2,000 per month.

Following negotiations on September 13, UAW officials from the various locals reported that the negotiations remained at an "impasse." Sarah Arveson, vice president of UAW Local 5810, told the *Californian* that the administration has "attempted to claw back important rights and benefits for all academic workers, instead of moving on our proposals for fair compensation to address rent burden, climate-friendly commuting incentives, real protections against abusive conduct and bullying, and childcare subsidies, to name a few."

According to a survey of postdocs organized by Local 5810 in 2021, 86 percent reported that their childcare costs were over 10 percent of their household income. Seventy percent of postdocs qualified as "rent burdened," meaning more than 30 percent of their income went toward rent, and 57 percent reported that they had to give up or limit basic expenses due to rent costs.

But the UAW does not propose a single thing to

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mobilize university workers and broader sections of workers to fight. Instead, it is continuing negotiations behind the backs of workers. Another bargaining session took place on September 21 and one is scheduled for today, according to a Google form posted by Local 2865, but no details of the session have not been posted on the unions' websites or social media accounts.

The immense anger among postdocs and researchers found expression in a 98 percent strike authorization vote by postdocs in 2021, with 97 percent of student researchers in SRU-UAW voting to strike that same year. At the time of the SRU-UAW vote the UC administration was still refusing to recognize the union.

Hostile to organizing a real fight, particularly on the eve of the November mid-term elections, the UAW has continually promoted the idea that change can come by appealing to a section of the Democratic Party, ignoring the fact that the UC Board of Regents is headed by Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom, who also holds the power to appoint the majority of UC Board members.

On Wednesday, UAW Local 5810 will be holding a "Climate & Transportation Town Hall" alongside Congresswoman Katie Porter. Porter is an Elizabeth Warren-style Democrat, serving as deputy chair of the Congressional Progressive Caucus. According to her website, she wants to "create a competitive capitalist economy" in the US and serves as co-chair of the National Security Task Force where she helped pass legislation "requiring the Pentagon to incorporate climate security into strategies and security assistance programs with allies in the Pacific." In the current geopolitical context that could only be understood as incorporating environmental issues as part of the US wars against Russia and China.

Grad students and other academic workers at Columbia, New York University and other campuses have gone through bitter experiences with the UAW, including sold-out strikes. Among workers in the factories, there is a deep hatred for the corrupt UAW apparatus, which workers declare again and again "is in bed with the company."

There is increasing support among UAW members for the campaign by Will Lehman, the Pennsylvania Mack Trucks worker and socialist candidate for UAW president, who is calling for the abolition of the UAW bureaucracy and the transfer of power to rank-and-file workers.

In a statement to UC workers, he said, "I stand completely behind the fight of academic workers throughout California. Whether you make your living on a campus or factory every worker is being hit by the rising cost of living and mistreatment on the job.

"At the same time the UAW has completely abandoned the principle of no work without a contract, and attempted to divert mass anger back behind the same pro-corporate Democratic Party and at times even Republicans. The result has been devastating for workers across the board as millions of dollars of our dues money goes to the same politicians responsible for gutting social programs, including the funding for public education at every level.

"Any genuine fight against concessions and to address the ongoing environmental crisis requires a turn out to the entire working class in California and internationally. My campaign is based on uniting all workers—educators, health care workers, railroaders and dockworkers—in common struggle, which the union bureaucrats will not accept. It is for that reason that my campaign is prioritizing the building of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC)."

Will Lehman will be holding a meeting this Saturday at 1 p.m. Eastern (10 a.m. Pacific) to discuss his campaign and the fight to build a rank-and-file movement to abolish the UAW bureaucracy. Academic workers both within and outside the UAW who are interested in building a movement to empower rank-and-file workers are encouraged to attend.

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