

“Will is the only candidate in the election who seeks to democratize the workplace”

## University of California grad students demand higher pay and better conditions

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11 October 2022

University graduate workers on the US East and West Coasts, who are members of the United Auto Workers (UAW) union, are in the midst of contract struggles over the same issues, including the fight against poverty-level wages and the rising cost of tuition, housing, health and child care and other living expenses. Graduate student workers are the superexploited workhorses of the nation’s public and private universities, and the issues they face are universal.

As of September 30, 48,000 graduate students across the 10 campuses of the University of California (UC) system—including graduate student workers, academic researchers, tutors, postdoctoral scholars (postdocs) and other academic employees—are working either without a contract or under a contract that has been extended.

In New York City, adjunct professors at New York University (NYU) are currently participating in an ongoing strike authorization vote, after the UAW extended the previous contract by two months, with the new expiration set for October 30.

The UAW is holding mass meetings on the UC campuses, ostensibly “to escalate the campaign for a fair contract.” In reality, these are chiefly being used as a means to let off steam. If the union officials were really seeking to escalate the campaign for a fair contract, it would obey the age-old maxim of “No Contract, No Work!”

New York and California are the second and third most expensive states in the US, trailing behind only Hawaii. With grad students facing escalating prices of basic necessities every day, the UAW bureaucrats, led by incumbent International president Ray Curry, with a salary of \$272,000, have done their best to block a strike. With the mid-term elections approaching, Curry & Co. are particularly concerned that a strike by tens of thousands of grad students would quickly lead to a confrontation with their allies in the Democratic Party who are committed to a program of austerity and war.

Will Lehman, a Mack Trucks worker from Macungie, Pennsylvania and a socialist candidate for UAW president and has made a specific appeal to university workers to back his campaign to transfer power from the UAW apparatus to rank-and-file workers. On October 1, he told an online meeting of grad students, “The way forward won’t be found in an appeal to any Democratic Party politician or any politician from either of the two parties of the ruling class. It’s going to be through struggle.”

According to *Los Angeles Times* in *Times*, students across the UC system were denied university housing for the current fall semester due to shortages. Some campuses have resorted to squeezing three students into rooms meant for two, according to the *Times*. Many students who do not receive campus housing are effectively homeless during their studies, either sleeping in cars or “couch surfing” with acquaintances.

Although the system has a reputation for educating children of the elite, in fact, more than one-third of all graduate students, nearly 78,000 young adults, have family incomes of less than \$48,000.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to Dave, a sophomore in the Labor Studies program at UCLA, who spoke about the dire housing situation and other pressures students face.

“If you are an in-state student, it’s about \$34,000 a year before financial aid. That includes tuition, which is \$13,500 a year. And then there’s room and board, and that costs so much. It’s \$18,000 for room and meals to live on campus. Then there’s all the other costs, including California health insurance, personal transportation, books and supplies, all that stuff costs like \$36,000 per year.

“Now if you’re from out of state, it costs \$70,000! That’s why I didn’t go to a private university. I mean, my family is decently well off, but we’re not that well off, and we make just enough money to not get any needs-based funding. And because there was no essay to write because of COVID, and also there were no SAT tests and what not, I also didn’t get any merit-based scholarships either, so I had to go to a public university.

“But to be fully honest, I don’t understand how it’s a ‘public’ university, but it’s not free. Like imagine if K-12 was oh, yeah, it’s public, but it costs \$20,000 a year, right? People would be up in arms about that.

“I just learned that back in the ’60s in California, you could go to a UC or CSU university tuition-free. That’s amazing! If you had the grades and were qualified, you could go to Berkeley or any UC for free. It was called the California Master Plan, and high quality higher ed was accessible to all who qualified, tuition-free. My English teacher was in the first class that opened up at UC Irvine in 1965. She said it was so cheap, and she got a very good college education. It should be like that again.”

### Long COVID

In May, David contracted COVID-19 and spent 10 days in one of the

### Housing crisis

campus' isolation rooms. "I have Long COVID. I have a heart condition now from COVID because I got it really bad. Now I have brain fog and heart palpitations, when my heart is racing. It's hard to breathe sometimes.

"I was out for 10 days. I was in an isolation room here on campus. They would bring me my meals. If I needed a blanket, they'd bring it to me. But I had to stay isolated for 10 days. I don't know if those isolation dorms are still there, but I hope so if people get sick again.

"It's a little harder to walk up the hill, a little harder to walk upstairs. I could hardly walk. Anyway. I tried running up a hill, and it was no good. I have to walk slowly. I can't stay out in the sun. I can't really exercise anymore or any of that stuff.

"I went to the hospital that cost so much that my family had to give up our vacation plans. It cost \$10,000! I was in the UCLA Medical Center. Then I was saying, 'Damn, I wish this was free medical care.'

"No, COVID is definitely real. Before, I thought the whole thing about it was that it was overblown. I didn't believe in masks. I got vaccinated just because the school wanted me to, and I thought it was all like a plan by the government to control us, like all that stuff from Fox News. Then I got COVID, and I was thinking maybe this is real. Maybe I should have worn a mask all this time. Maybe I shouldn't have gone to that game with 70,000 people."

For graduate students at UC, the low salaries and rising costs make the pursuit of studies nearly impossible. According to *glassdoor.com*, graduate student workers can expect a base pay of \$39,494, with monthly rents for graduate student housing at around \$1,600 per month, meaning that after taxes, nearly all their salaries are absorbed by housing costs.

Another student, Avery, who attends San Diego State University, spoke with the WSWS about the cost of living there. She is a teaching assistant, an instructor for a General Studies course and a full-time graduate student. She is one of the California State University system's 10,000 graduate student workers who are members of UAW Local 4123.

Asked if her university employment was enough to pay her bills, Avery responded, "No, it's not enough. The university is very ambiguous and unclear with its pay levels, especially for those who are working unit-based appointments. Our wages are set for the semester, and we are not compensated further if we work more than our average of eight hours a week, which happens frequently. The wages that I do make are not enough to sustain myself, especially with the university constantly introducing arbitrary student fees and with inflation on the rise.

"My community assistant job requires that I work about 20 hours a week and provides my room and meal plan, but it has no monetary compensation, and workers are also discouraged from seeking outside jobs so that they can focus on this job.

"At the beginning of last year, the community assistant job found out that I was working another job on campus as a teaching assistant and asked that I step down from that position. I told them that I would not be able to put myself through my Master's program without at least both of those jobs, and they were still hesitant to allow me to have both of them out of fear that I wouldn't be able to dedicate myself fully to either."

## **"I have Medi-Cal"**

Avery also does not have any access to a decent health care program through her current university jobs. "This summer, there was an attempt by the administration to get rid of the affordable health care option for graduate students. Graduate students are required to have health care and submit proof in order to attend SDSU, and the university was trying to eliminate the only affordable option for low income, international working

students, and really, most students. It is still unclear to workers what was decided on this issue. I have personally managed to avoid opting into SDSU's required health care due to the fact that I have Medi-Cal, which is still not a great alternative."

Asked about the role of the United Auto Workers union, she responded, "I found the union presence to be very minimal on campus. I don't see them anywhere physically tabling or making themselves known to workers or students. I receive emails from them maybe once a month, but, overall, they are nowhere to be seen, and as a worker I don't feel represented by them."

Avery also remarked that the UAW had told her nothing about its upcoming presidential election. She did see the recent debate, however, held between socialist rank-and-file candidate Will Lehman and the remaining candidates representing the union bureaucracy and was impressed by what she saw.

"After watching the debate, it struck me that Will is the only candidate in the election who seeks to democratize the workplace and build strong rank-and-file committees to actually organize workers. In my past experience with the union, I have not seen it make significant changes to my working conditions. I hope that Will's plans can help to improve the conditions of workers and not allow the union to continue to exist as a bureaucracy with no connection to its members beyond the collection of dues."

The UAW recently put out a press release entitled "Our Working Conditions" (OWC), which paints a damning picture of the contracts workers are currently working under. The agreements have all expired and the UAW bureaucrats have, without a vote, unilaterally decided to extend them. (The postdoctoral researchers' contract expired two years ago.)

The OWC press release contained statements from members about their abysmal working conditions, including: not being able to afford to eat due to the miserly wages, paying 61-75 percent of income on rent, paying \$30,000 a year for child care, long commutes because of high housing costs becoming increasingly unaffordable due to high gas prices, insufficient family leave time, lack of affordable health care, as well as abuse and harassment.

In regard to each of these demands, the UAW has said little or nothing except the lies that the union is "committed to providing fair and competitive compensation." The previous contract contained 3 percent annual pay raises with a \$300 reduction in campus fees, and the new contract is expected to have similar miserly terms. With inflation running at over 8 percent since last year, this would ensure that graduate students and their families sink further into poverty.

The UAW also claims that they are "committed to providing GSRs (Graduate Student Researchers) with a variety of health and family-friendly benefits, including financial subsidies for childcare, pregnancy leave, family care leave, baby bonding leave, and other support for eligible student employees."

This is just so much bluster as it commits the UAW to absolutely nothing. Nowhere does it make demands that management has to accept before workers take strike action. Over a year ago, the postdoctoral students approved a strike by 97 percent, yet they are still kept on the job. Workers are kept in the dark about what is taking place in these secret, closed door negotiations, which are actually conspiracies between the union and university officials to impose rotten contracts.

## **Lessons of 2020 strike**

The WSWS urges grad students to learn the lessons of the 2020 wildcat strike that was begun by grad students at UC Santa Cruz and spread to

several UC campuses raising the demand for COLA, or cost-of-living adjustments, to be able to pay their rents. The grad students won the respect and widespread support from undergraduates and other sections of the working class.

This occurred in opposition to the UAW, which sought to pressure and isolate the grad students. Now, the very same issues are being raised two years later. The lessons of that struggle must be learned. Who was it that betrayed that strike? It was the UAW apparatus, which ended the powerful strike by diverting it into the capitalist court system, the National Labor Relations Board, citing Unfair Labor Practices. Nothing was achieved.

In order to achieve their demands, graduate students have to take control of their struggle out of the hands of the UAW bureaucracy and transfer it to rank-and-file workers themselves. They should support and vote for Will Lehman, the socialist autoworker who is running for UAW president and build rank-and-file committees to communicate with each other, prepare common strike action and appeal for the broadest support in the working class for this critical battle.



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