

“Will’s campaign gives me the idea that there is a challenge to the existing union structure”

University of California grad student describes life under great stress

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The World Socialist Web Site interviewed a graduate student teaching assistant (TA) in the Sociology Department at the University of California, Irvine (UCI). He is one of 48,000 grad students, members of the UAW, whose contract has been extended past the September 30 deadline by the union. Earlier this month, rallies were held on all 10 UC campuses in which there were overwhelming votes for strike authorization. His name has been changed to protect his anonymity.

Kimie Saito: *Could you describe exactly what you do as a TA?*

Stephen: My duties as a TA change each quarter. It all depends on the professor I’m assigned to work with. My easiest quarters have been with lecturers, who are probably sympathetic because they don’t have great contracts either.

Working for a lecturer one quarter, I had to attend three lectures every week, lead a discussion section for three classes of 30 students each for four weeks out of the 10-week quarter, and grade midterm and final exams using the Scantron machine. That was a pretty light load.

Probably the hardest quarter I had was with a professor who asked us to attend three lectures every week, lead a discussion section for three classes of 30 people every week of the 10-week quarter, and grade 90 two-page essays eight out of the 10 weeks of the quarter. The essays were particularly exhausting to grade, as you had to give a detailed score using a rubric and write a couple of personalized comments. During that quarter, I often graded until midnight on weekdays and had to spend several hours grading on the weekends as well.

The worst quarter I had was during the pandemic, when a professor from another university basically had us teach her class for her, while she taught a couple classes at her home university. We had to set up our own webpages on Canvas, the university’s online course space. We ran three discussion sections of 30 students each, 10 weeks out of the 10-week quarter.

We had to proofread and edit the midterm and final exam. We had to post guest lecture videos. We were in charge of creating spreadsheets for the students’ grades and preparing them to be sent to the registrar. On three occasions we each had to grade 90 student essays. And the professor basically didn’t do anything. She just posted videos on the internet at the beginning of the quarter and had students watch them.

Other than that, she didn’t interact with the students. We met with her once a week on Zoom, but she was always late coming from the gym, with some excuse or another. She was the one who bullied me during the pandemic when I caught COVID and took Emergency Paid Sick Leave, pressuring me to work and telling me I was harming the students’ education by getting sick and unfairly pushing my work onto the other TAs.

KS: *What are the most important issues for graduate student workers? What are your family’s needs?*

S: To me, housing is the issue that I’m most concerned with. The quality of the housing and the price of the housing are not great. If it was cheaper, it would make other areas of our lives easier. And also the stress of trying to get things fixed and fighting with the administration, the landlord, all the time is just draining. If I didn’t have to deal with that, that would be a big relief.

And child care would be the other one. It’s really hard to get your kids into the university’s day care. They do offer a subsidy, and it’s better than nothing. I think they give you like \$1,100 per quarter. And in the summers they don’t.

Then they have a weird cutoff thing. Like I taught a course for \$4,000, or you might get \$5,000 from your department. But you need \$6,000 to qualify for child care. That just doesn’t make any sense. People should just get paid more, and that’s a really frustrating thing. It’s not very family-friendly, I would say.

KS: *Can you describe your family?*

S: It’s me and my wife, and we have two kids: a four-year-old boy and a one-year-old girl.

KS: *And you did try to get them enrolled in the Early Childhood Education Center?*

S: Yes, we live in the graduate student housing in the Verano complex. When we called them, I think we were three or four months ahead of time trying to get on the waiting list, and the person just laughed at us on the phone. She said it was going to be over a year. And talking with other people and our neighbors, it took them over a year to get in. But we can’t wait a year.

So then we got local students to come to our place, but that got quite expensive. It depends on the person, but it could be somewhere between \$12-15 an hour just for our son, before our daughter came along. It started being not worth it. Then we reduced the hours to a couple days a week. And then I think we realized then that my wife had to quit her job to take care of the kids. It seemed like a good trade off.

Many grad students are posting babysitting ads to try to get help with day care.

KS: *So you’ve lived in the graduate student housing all this time. Could you describe the conditions?*

(The Verano complex houses mostly grad students and grad student families. They were built between 1966-1977, over 50 years ago. A two-bedroom unit runs from 627 to 900 square feet; a four-bedroom is 1,090 square feet.)

S: The Verano housing was built in the 60s and 70s. There’s one thing

that does creep me out, and that is on the back of the contract, because they're so old, originally they had lead paint on the walls, and they were also built using asbestos. You have to sign a document basically saying that you acknowledge that, but then they say that unless you drill into the walls, the lead paint shouldn't be a problem. And the asbestos has been treated, but still you're having to sign something.

I didn't mind before, but now with the kids, I do worry for their sake. Is it good to live in these old places for six years?

So the biggest problem we have is the flooding. When we moved in, it was like every winter, every rainy season, it would flood under our front door. And you could tell this was a regular problem because you could see that the carpet near the front door was sectioned off and was different from the rest of the apartment. So I think that they had to rip it off multiple times. I'm pretty sure they knew about the problem, because it would flood there. And it was so bad that we had to put flip flops down like little islands to walk across because it was just puddles of water. I don't think it's great to live in a place that has stagnant water.

Then I tried contacting the management about it. At one point, they brought in sandbags, but that didn't really work, to be honest. And you're having to move those things back and forth every time.

Then I started reading up on the law, and I found that flooding is a violation of tenants' rights. So I contacted some people who provide legal aid, and they guided me through the process of pressuring the university to make a change. But the university would drag its feet on everything, and the person I was emailing kept changing. No, you have to contact this person, then another and another. Promises to come out in a week, and months and months go by, and nothing changes.

So I had to increase my threats. Eventually I was citing law codes, like Code 617C. I told them I was going to withhold rent until they fixed it. And as soon as I started doing that, they started reacting.

They came and eventually replaced the concrete, and then they tried to get us out of the apartment. And I really believe they would have moved us out and put someone else in. Still, when I walk my son to school, there's an apartment with a bunch of sandbags in front. I see it every day, and I feel I should tell them, "You shouldn't have to live like that." Yes, that was very frustrating.

And another thing about that, when they ripped off the carpeting, there was something really black there. I asked, "Is this black mold?" So they said they'd bring out an environmental hazard inspector, but they replaced the carpet the day before the guy came. They replaced the carpet! They were kind of hiding it. So then I showed them pictures. The landlord said, "There's no way that's black mold." The environmental guy said, "Wait, it could be." Then they said if it's covered, it's not a hazard to you.

KS: How much do you pay in rent?

S: We're paying between \$1,550 to 1,560 in rent every month. It's just the stress of dealing with that, making all these phone calls, pressuring people, having them come to your apartment, and it's just exhausting. And you want to be concentrating on other things. I didn't expect to have to read the law.

I get \$2,200-\$2,400 a month in salary, not in the summer though. It disappears in the summer. I didn't know all that when I first came to the department. But the department will kind of help you. When we first started out, they didn't give me much money. They'll give you a couple thousand dollars in the summer, like a fellowship. During the pandemic, they started to increase it in the summer. We got \$5,000 in the summer, which was awesome. But that's the department. I don't know if every department does that.

And then more recently I started teaching during the summer. But then that takes a lot of energy and begins distracting you from your research.

KS: What about medical insurance?

S: The university provides me with medical care. But my wife and two children are not covered. So we have to pay out of pocket for that. If you

want good health care, it's very expensive. Because we don't make much money, we qualify for Medi-Cal.

We lost access to one pediatrician, and the places that will accept it are some of these shady urgent care places. Recently my son had a bad cough, and there was no place we could go. The only place that would take our insurance was this urgent care. They recommended this really powerful over-the-counter cough syrup. We gave it to him once, and he was knocked out.

I got really nervous, and I ended up calling CHOC [Children's Hospital of Orange County]. They said, "You should never give that to children. For the past 10 years we haven't been doing it. We saw a decrease in heart attacks after we stopped doing it." Then she said, "That advice is really dangerous." Those are the kinds of places that accept our Medi-Cal, and we worry and ask ourselves what are we subjecting our children to.

Every month my wife has to pay a monthly fee. And for our two children, we had to pay something like \$27 a month. But recently we had been reevaluated, and we haven't been getting any bills, maybe after we had our daughter. We had to pay a small fee for office visits for urgent care, something like \$10.

We still pay a lot for my wife, and it's discounted, but still. I understand too if I'm the employee, and they do kind of say they're family-friendly. "We support families," they say. But it's different having a playground vs. providing insurance or something. That would make a big difference because that's one of our biggest expenses.

KS: How has inflation affected your lives?

S: Irvine is a very expensive place to live. With the gas prices and inflation, we've definitely noticed everything going up. I was at the grocery store and just bought five things, and I said to myself, "What?"

Anyway, we've changed our lifestyle definitely. One of our friends lives in Anaheim, about 20-25 miles away, and we try not to see them as much because it's a long trip, a lot of gas. And then with food and stuff, when they opened Tanaka Farms to the students, that was awesome. We were able to get fresh veggies, fruit and healthy food. If I had more money, I would buy healthier food for our kids, but we don't. All right, okay. This will be good enough, I guess, I hope.

We can't afford organic. And then you read all the stuff about pesticides and chemicals and all this crazy stuff. But there's nothing we can really do about it.

We used to spend about \$100 a week on groceries. Then we noticed it went up to \$150. It feels like that. We just buy less.

As far as driving, we definitely try to drive less. We used to drive the kids to the beach or go to another park. But now, we just say we'll just take a walk around Irvine or our neighborhood.

KS: Can you describe what it was like when your family had COVID-19?

S: It was at the end of January and beginning of February. I guess it was the Omicron wave. My son brought it home from school and gave it to my daughter, and then my wife got it, and then I got it. The university said you could take two weeks of leave for COVID, taking care of sick kids, quarantining. Kids couldn't go to child care; nobody could go shopping. I was taking care of sick kids and my wife, and then I got sick. I had to answer 10 phone calls and answer to protocols and rules to get this time off, and I was so exhausted I didn't feel like dealing with that. The university did make two food deliveries. They didn't charge us, and that was very nice.

KS: I understand that one of the main issues is the harassment and abuse from PIs. (PIs are principal investigators, or professors who are research advisers.)

S: When I was originally contacting one of the professors to get this leave, it took so long for her to respond, and I had to talk to another administrator. It was taking days and days. It's called Emergency Paid Sick Leave, and one professor said I should assume that it'll be approved

after 4-5 days of back and forth. And I asked her what leverage do I have with my professor that I'm TA-ing for if it's not approved? Then I started talking with the union, and they encouraged me to take a hard stand on that, that this was an emergency.

Then I told my professor that I'm taking a leave, I'm taking two weeks off. But she kept emailing me, asking me to keep doing work. "Oh, could you grade these papers? Could you have a Zoom meeting with me to update me on what we have to do?" I said, "No, no. I'm on leave right now." Then it escalated, and she was telling me I was having an attitude problem. It got crazy. Then the professor chose two other TAs to pick up my slack, but then I felt she was trying to pit us against each other. I didn't want the others to take over my work. That's not fair.

Later in the quarter, the professor accused me and was being very nasty to me. It felt like she was yelling at me because she was sending me emails in all caps. She was saying I was undermining the undergrads' education; I was being selfish by taking time off. That was really hard. I started cc-ing other administrators so they could see what she was doing, and she was getting really very aggressive. Then I got the union involved. I said I was going to file a grievance if she kept harassing me, and then she stopped.

That was so stressful because what's the point of taking a sick leave if I have to work, and then I get yelled at for taking it.

KS: You were involved in the 2020 strike. What do you remember about it?

S: Yes, another TA I was working with was reaching out to all of us, and she was trying to get us involved. There were four of us, but one TA wasn't interested. We basically contacted our professors and told them we weren't going to participate in the class and that we were going to contact our students to let them know that we were demanding a cost-of-living adjustment, the COLA campaign. Then we all went to a big rally at the flag pole. I brought my family, and other TAs were there.

The professor I sent the email to was sympathetic, but he didn't say anything. Maybe he couldn't. Then I was trying to email my students using my private gmail account, but that was blocked. And then I tried emailing from my UCI account, and that was bouncing back. So we couldn't tell the undergrads what we were doing.

But there was barely anybody from my department participating, and then I started to feel like if they're not doing it, am I going out on a limb? There wasn't full participation, definitely not. You have to have a big strike in order for it to work. But if only one-third or less people are doing it, it's not.

Eventually the whole strike ended up with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) over an Unfair Labor Practices complaint. That was what the UAW said we should do.

Well, two years later today, we're still fighting for the exact same things. Yeah.

How do you get a movement going, getting people to put themselves on the line, to feel empowered to make a change? Nothing's changed here. We're still fighting for the same things: COLA, medical care, day care, against harassment from our PIs. And the chancellor of UCI lives in the big house on the hill.

KS: What do you think about Will Lehman's program?

S: It gives me the idea that there is a challenge to the existing union structure. Since I've been here, not that much has changed. I'll get emails or I'll bump into someone from the union, and they'll say we're having this speaker. But year in and year out, I don't notice much change.

But here, okay, someone is saying, "I'm going to try to change things." That immediately caught my attention.

When you talk about rank-and-file committees, I'm not exactly sure what that would look like. I'm definitely open to getting grad students more active, people trying to make more of a difference. I'm definitely ready to listen to that, and I love the idea of uniting workers all over the

world.

Our union, nobody stops you or asks your opinion to have a discussion about an issue. When I first got to UCI, we had an orientation meeting with the union. They came and had us sign cards saying our dues would be automatically deducted. I really don't even know how much dues I'm paying. But it's being squandered.

When Will said that the Democrats and Republicans are both corrupt, and we can't count on either of them, when I saw that, I thought, okay, this is interesting because I am tired of that setup too. Nothing's changing. When someone recognizes that, I'm a little more interested.



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