“These living conditions are without dignity”: University of California academic workers begin powerful strike across 10 campuses

Our reporters
13 November 2022

On Monday, 48,000 academic workers throughout the entire University of California (UC) school system will launch a powerful, indefinite strike. Workers are protesting poverty wages and the soaring cost of living in one of the most expensive parts of the world. Academic workers, like all other sections of the working class, are increasingly burdened by the soaring cost of living and stagnant wages. In the United States, university student workers, many of whom are international students, are paid an average of $23,000.

The UC system is one of the largest employers in the state of California and is a multibillion-dollar enterprise. As the cheap labor that runs the expansive organization, UC workers are a powerful social force that is capable of winning all of their demands.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with academic workers over the weekend at UC San Diego and UC Irvine about the conditions they face and why they will be striking.

A third year Ph.D. international student in the Humanities said, “The strike on Monday is very important because my family and I have been living on poverty-level wages for more than two years now. The stipend simply cannot support a family of four, especially with our visa restrictions.

“I am barred from seeking other employment outside of my 50 percent [workload] in the university, and my partner cannot work at all. There is simply no way my takehome pay of $2,200 per month—and only with a 9-month guarantee—is enough. My rent is $1,500, utilities $150, food and groceries $400-500, not to mention school and medical needs for our kids. I am the only one in my family who has health insurance, and I pray every day none of them get sick or injured because we have no savings. I line up each week to get food from the pantry, where points allowance have been reduced. I have to beg for money from Basic Needs, just so we don’t get behind in rent.

“I am so sick of living like this and feel that as someone who works for the university [as a teaching assistant] more than 20 hours, not to mention everything I need to do for my research, these living conditions are without dignity.

“The general mood among my colleagues is that everyone is fed up and ready to strike. We are ready to fight even if that temporarily means we lose our wages. We are still doing what we can now for our students, but come Monday, we are dropping everything to go on strike.

“Our professors, both in coursework and who we TA for, have been really supportive, canceling our classes and urging our undergraduate students to support us.

“We just want liveable wages so that we can be the best instructors/TAs and researchers. Constantly worrying about food and whether money will be enough for rent and praying to the high heavens no one in your family gets sick or injured is simply unacceptable, especially when you see your bosses and administrators living comfortably, and in the case of the chancellors, in luxury. We are demanding that UC re-appropriates funds to give us the wages we deserve—$54,000 a year which is $4,500 a month pre-tax. And increased child care funding.”

An international graduate student at UC San Diego emphasized she will be going on strike because she is overworked. “I’m employed technically to work 10 hours per week but the work they give us is at least 20 hours per week. I have 200 students split among

© World Socialist Web Site

four teaching assistants (TA)."

She also explained the financial pressures and exorbitant tuition that keeps international students beholden to the low pay and overwork. "The University charges international students domestic tuition when we TA. This is the difference between $11,500 per quarter. There are three quarters per year vs. $6,000 per quarter in tuition."

She explained the paltry $1,300 that TA's are expected to live on is not enough. "I live in one of the smallest units offered by the university for $750 per month, and everything else has to be paid for with my remaining funds including electricity. The cost of food keeps going up, and as I prefer to shop at Indian markets the costs are even more outrageous due to the import costs," she said.

Another UC San Diego graduate student said she was getting kicked out of grad student housing in February. This is a major issue among many graduate students as they are only given two years of grad student housing. "I have a dog and pay $1,000 per month to live here, but I don't know what I will do once I enter the San Diego housing market where it costs $2,500-3,000 for a place to have a dog off-campus. … I make $25,000 per year and used to get CalFresh food stamps but was eventually denied because I earn a 'stipend' not a 'wage.' It was only $150 per month, which helped a lot with groceries."

Monday's strike also takes place as UAW adjunct professors at the New School in New York City may strike the same day, though workers at each university system report not having been informed about a strike at the other campus. The UAW apparatus regularly keeps workers isolated from one another in order to suppress their struggles.

Autoworkers, university academic workers and other workers in the UAW are currently voting in the first-ever direct elections for UAW international officers.

Will Lehman, a socialist autoworker running for UAW president, is fighting to give power to the rank and file and abolish the UAW bureaucracy. Earlier this month, Lehman held a meeting attended by graduate students and academic workers who are members of the UAW. During the meeting, Lehman pointed to the UAW apparatus's close ties to the Democratic Party as evidence that the bureaucracy is working to undermine workers' strikes across industries.

When a UC student worker pointed out that UAW Local 5810 (which includes postdocs and academic researchers) had reportedly extended its previous contracts with the university to delay a strike, Lehman said, "They're being strung out on contract extensions. And this is a typical UAW ploy. When a contract runs out, they keep workers on the job, while they're also appealing to the Democratic Party, which has absolutely no interest in advancing anything for the working class. The Democratic and Republican parties both are not representative of the working class. 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."

Lehman's campaign calls for workers in all industries to establish rank-and-file committees, controlled democratically by the workers themselves, to take control of their struggles, link up across workplaces, share information and coordinate common action. Workers at UC must begin establishing such committees themselves.

The UCI campus resident, Eric, spoke in support of Will's campaign. "I think the midterm elections showed there's a lot of people concerned about the nationalism that is being whipped up. Will Lehman is important because he's providing an opportunity for people like me who feel the two-party system has let them down."

UC Graduate students and academic workers: contact the World Socialist Web Site *for information and assistance to set up a rank-and-file strike committee. Email UCstrikeRFC@gmail.com, text* ?(619) 693-8152? *or fill out the form below.*

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site