

UC striker calls for supporting UAW presidential candidate Will Lehman: We must “build solidarity not just across 10 campuses but across sectors and geography”

Nancy Hanover
14 November 2022

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.

On the first day of the powerful strike by University of California academic workers, a striking graduate student teaching instructor and researcher at UC Berkeley spoke to the WSWS.

Nancy Hanover: What is the impact of this strike?

Taylor: Our strike has the potential to be the biggest strike in US history with 48,000 unionized workers across the 10 campuses. It's the first time that contracts expired for these four unions together: GSI (teaching assistants), academic student workers, tutors, readers and grad student researchers, another for postdoctorates and another for academic researchers. Before, I'd imagine, the union probably scheduled expirations to prevent strikes.

There's a lot of energy around our strike. The *Washington Post* came here to watch us put the picket signs together. There will be 8-10 different picket sites around the campus, and the plan for the opening day of the strike was to have 250 people picketing.

I also think there will be people joining the picket line who aren't on strike. I asked my research group to join me. It's very interesting, two weeks ago some of these people didn't know what a strike was.

NH: What are your concerns about the UAW's plans?

T: The UAW isn't mobilizing other workers, which is an incredible amount of missed opportunities. For instance, the Teamsters do a lot of package deliveries on campus, and I asked my union rep if have we contacted them for solidarity strikes. She said no. Why not?

I signed up for the union during orientation a couple of months ago; many people did. I heard about the upcoming

strike but wasn't receiving any emails, so I reached out. I met with the union rep. She gave me info and asked if I'd be a strike captain and take on 10 people. OK, I did that.

I asked her about union strategies to increase support. She told me we are part of a big international union with a lot of resources, and they will give us strike pay and union activities are up to us. We all have to show up, withhold our labor completely until the union reaches a deal with UC.

I asked her what would be an “acceptable” agreement. She said we have elected bargainers. When they think they have a deal worthy of a deal, they'll put it to a vote. Her sentiment was that this meant it was up to all of us.

In my reflections later, I thought about the fact that I didn't elect these people, and I don't know what their politics are. I have no idea what they would consider a good settlement and apparently they keep it a secret.

I do think they are calling for 7 percent wage increases, but the demands are different for each bargaining unit. Postdocs make very little, like \$52K. I make more than that! My rent is \$14K a year. If you conservatively spend twice that to live, then it's hard. Most people have debt they have to factor in.

Then there is the cost of transportation and child care for many. This area has one of the highest cost of living in the US. One of the demands is free Bay Area transportation. The university has a bus pass, but it's paid for by our fees. And if you live further away, it's slow and inefficient. BART [Bay Area Rapid Transit] is not covered by the university.

NS: Are you aware of the election to elect UAW International officers, or that your deadline to postmark your ballot is November 18?

T: A lot of firsts are happening, especially with the national election for UAW president. I only just found out about the election. I threw away my first ballot because I didn't know what it was. So I've read about it now on the

WSWS and requested a new ballot.

My vote is going to Will Lehman. A 50 percent wage increase sounds great. He has a great platform, to provide much-needed resources for us the workers.

Obviously power is in numbers. But it is unlikely our strike will get what's needed, because we probably won't get to decide. There is not a lot of transparency from the union, how their money is spent. I understand they have \$1 billion in assets, but we get only \$400 a week to picket 20 hours. That would cover only my rent. It's insane, I live in one of the most expensive places in the country, and that amount of money doesn't cut it.

In fact, that is precisely what we are striking against. We are running this university, while the president lives in a mansion. University administrators are making 100 times what we are making. The salaries are public; they're getting half a million, and workers are getting \$20/hour. That is not at all comparable to the market rate.

I have a friend in my cohort from Mexico. One of the demands is that fees and tuition remission must cover international students. This is not minor; we are talking like \$10,000. My friend, however, didn't really understand what this was all about because in Mexico his graduate and medical degree were all free.

We need free education here, absolutely. I explained to my friend about my experience as a Master's student. I couldn't see friends and family or spend money on entertainment because it would have meant going into debt. Higher education being free is a complete game-changer. We don't have enough doctors in this country, not enough people in public health and on and on. But it doesn't have to be that way.

NH: *What are your thoughts on Will Lehman's call for the formation of rank-and-file committees to coordinate your struggle and reach other workers?*

T: When we talk about solidarity, why should it end with our little piece of the union? The union reps and emails keep telling us what a large, international, powerful and well-resourced union we're part of. That's great, but what's the point of this huge operation if we can't benefit from it by organizing across the entire UAW when we're on strike?

We are putting a lot on the line to go on strike. My coworkers are concerned about damaging relationships with faculty who are critical for their research, their academic success and our future careers. My coworkers are also worried about docked pay/limited strike pay, missing classes, falling behind on assignments and letting our students down. But striking is the only mechanism we currently have to fight for better wages and benefits.

I fully endorse rank-and-file committees, and I think it's a huge tactical mistake (whether intentional or otherwise) for

the UAW to isolate our struggle from the struggle of other workers. It's Organizing 101 to get as much support and participation as you can for actions. We need to be able to make these types of decisions at the level of the workers. We're all demanding the same things—a decent standard of living in an increasingly hostile economy.

As student workers, we're at the bottom of a huge bureaucracy. The people at the top are making \$890,000 (in addition to having the UC system buy President Drake a \$6.5 million mansion) and haggling over our wages keeping up with inflation. It's already clear they are fine with putting us all into debt. We need support from all the workers in the union for this fight!

NH: *Do you see the UC strike as part of the global struggle of workers?*

T: Yes. We have the same basic needs—wages, benefits and safe working conditions that allow us to live decent and dignified lives. What's terrible to see is a coordinated effort by companies and governments to lower and lower wages and to roll back safety protections and benefits. It seems to me like students generally don't see the relationship because we're asked to think of ourselves as students, not workers.

In the UC system, there are so many different job classifications it's dizzying—and each one has different benefits, different pay scales and different unions (if they're unionized at all). So this makes it tough. It's my understanding that the lecturers (who are extremely underpaid) can't strike with us because of their union's no-strike clause. But with a huge strike like this, I see a real opportunity to build solidarity not just across 10 campuses or job classifications but across sectors and geography. We need to see that we all have a common goal and organize around that.

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