

Strike by 48,000 academic workers begins at University of California campuses

“The UC system has always tried to squeeze every ounce from their students and staff for the least amount of money”

Our reporters
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On Monday, 48,000 academic workers at the University of California (UC) system began an indefinite strike, spanning across the most populous state in the US. Postdoctoral and academic researchers, tutors, graduate student instructors and assistants are demanding increased wages and benefits to catch up with skyrocketing housing and other living expenses.

The strike has shut down online and in-person lectures, grading, research, and other university operations. The majority of professors have canceled lectures, while adjuncts, faculty, and undergraduate students have joined the picket lines in solidarity.

The striking academic workers are members of locals 5810 and 2865 of the United Auto Workers union and Student Researchers United (SRU-UAW), which was just recognized in December.

Striking workers at several UC campuses spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the issues in their struggle.

Lauren, a chemistry grad student at UC Davis said, “I moved into an apartment by myself. Unless you’re living in a house with numerous other students, about 75 percent of your paycheck goes towards rent.

“My parents have to help me out because it’s not enough for me to be able to buy groceries,” Lauren added, “and I’m living in Davis, one of the cheaper California cities. I can’t imagine people in San Diego or San Francisco even attempting to live.”

Shawn, a communications undergrad at UC San Diego, said he struggles with the high costs of living and bills. “I really resonate with the strike, because even before I was a student here, I was promised an ideal version of what the UC system would look like. I was promised support and benefits for being a former foster youth, but when I actually came here, my first year I struggled really heavily financially.

“I wasn’t able to pay for my class fees on time, and I got a

lot of holds. I realized that the UC system makes promises that it can’t really keep with trying to support students who don’t have any family income, so seeing the people here who are struggling to pay rent and pay bills, I really resonate with that. Even as an undergrad, I don’t make enough money for what I have to spend on bills this month.

“The UC system, at least going off of my experience, has always been a place that has tried to squeeze every ounce of work, time, energy, from their students and staff as possible for the least amount of money needed to go into it.”

Zhanè, a PhD student in the Anthropology Department at UC San Diego, noted that “Definitely the money is a big concern in my mind. Most of my income is going to living costs, bills, things like that. Pretty much at the end it’s like you either have a little bit left, or nothing at all, and you’re just kind of like, hopefully an emergency doesn’t happen, because if an emergency happens you literally have nothing.

“The health care coverage is contingent on you working, so if we are not TAing [teacher assisting] we are not getting any health care coverage. It’s tough for people because once they go on strike, they are without insurance for the time being. The union is helping with that, which is really great. But the university is basically like, if you are not working you are not getting any insurance.”

Ashlee, a grad student for five years in the Earth System Sciences department at UC Irvine, said, “Fifty percent of my paycheck goes to my rent every month. I live off campus in Irvine. The city is very expensive. It was during COVID that I moved, and it was good for me to get away and get some distance between work and my life. I’m paying \$1,350 for my half of the apartment.

“For me what’s important is standing with my fellow grad students in the Humanities and Social Sciences who are paid way less than us in the sciences. In my department, we make \$37,000 a year, which is one of the highest on campus. It’s

actually not much, but compared to Social Sciences and the Humanities, where they make \$20-21,000. All the Humanities grad students make about that much.

“We all have the same needs. If I’m struggling on my pay, I can’t imagine how much worse it is for them. There is a very big discrepancy between departments and between how many months a year you’re guaranteed funding. For some of them, it’s only nine months out of the year vs. a whole year. Not everyone gets a whole year of funding, but everyone should.”

On the first day of the strike, Will Lehman, the Mack Trucks worker and socialist candidate for president of the UAW issued a statement calling for the broadest mobilization of all UAW members and workers to back this critical battle.

Lehman said academic workers were engaged not just in a trade union struggle but a political struggle against both corporate-controlled parties. “At its center is the question: Who will determine how society’s resources are distributed?”

In California, this means a direct fight against the Democratic Party, which controls every level of government, from the governor’s mansion, to both houses of the state legislature to the UC Board of Regents. Governor Gavin Newsom and UC Regents were claiming there was no money to provide living wages to academic workers, Lehman said, under conditions in which the Democrats have handed over more than \$14 billion in yearly tax cuts to Silicon Valley, Hollywood and other corporate giants.

Therefore, “appeals for ‘justice’ directed at Governor Newsom and the Board of Regents are worse than useless,” Lehman said, pointing out that the board was made up of “a gang of corporate executives and Democratic Party operatives who have spent years slashing public spending and funneling money to big business.”

Instead, striking workers have to fight to broaden their struggle by appealing workers who are facing the same struggles. Lehman pointed to the demands by 110,000 railroad workers for strike action, the battle of 22,000 West Coast dockworkers who have been without a new contract since July 1, the walkout of UAW members at the HarperCollins publishing corporation in New York and the impending strike by adjunct faculty at the New School in New York City, who are also members of the UAW.

Allied with Biden and the Democrats, the trade union bureaucracy has desperately sought to prevent these struggles from coalescing into a powerful counter-offensive by the working class against austerity and social inequality.

To unite these struggles, Lehman said striking UC academic workers must form rank-and-file committees to oppose the efforts of the UAW bureaucracy to isolate the

strike, subordinate it to its maneuvers with the Democratic Party and starve workers into submission with poverty level strike pay.

The validity of these warnings has been demonstrated in the first days of the UC strike. UAW officials have limited the walkout to a “Unfair Labor Practices” strike, which prohibits workers from raising the economic demands that are at the center of their struggle. At the same time, union officials invited various Democratic Party politicians to speak at strike rallies across the university system—the very party that striking workers are engaged in an irreconcilable struggle against.

Also speaking were several union bureaucrats, including Lorena Gonzalez, leader of the California Federation of Labor, and officials from the California Nurses Association/National Nurses United. In July, the CNA/NUU rammed through a sellout contract covering 18,000 nurses across UC medical facilities, which did nothing to address chronic understaffing and exhausting schedules that plague the for-profit health care system and led hundreds of thousands of nurses to quit the profession.

This underscores the need for UC academic workers to take the struggle into their own hands by forming rank-and-file committees, which will outline their own demands, including inflation-busting pay raises, fully paid medical and childcare benefits. These committees must also insist that all negotiations with administrators be live-streamed and overseen by rank-and-file workers. At the same time, the committees should organize delegations to reach out to railroad and dockworkers, health care and public school workers, the 6,500 UC lecturers being kept on the job by the American Federation of Teachers, and all other workers, to prepare joint demonstrations and strike action.

Contact the Will Lehman campaign today to discuss starting a rank-and-file committee and share why you’re striking. For more information on Will Lehman’s campaign, visit WillforUAWPresident.org.



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