

Strike of 48,000 academic workers in California enters third day

Our reporters

16 November 2022

Today marks the third day of the strike by 48,000 academic workers throughout the University of California (UC) system. The strike involves postdoctoral and academic researchers, tutors, graduate student instructors and assistants in the United Auto Workers (UAW). The academic workers are demanding adequate pay and benefits to address the immense and soaring cost of living in California.

The strike is already the largest university strike in US history and includes half of the roughly 100,000 academic workers in the UAW. It is taking place as more than 1,700 part-time faculty and UAW members at the New School in New York City will begin a strike on Wednesday, joining the 250 HarperCollins workers already on strike in the city.

In an effort to smother opposition, the UC administration on the first day of the strike requested that a mediator be brought in. Ryan King, a UC spokesperson, said in a statement Monday, “At this time, we believe that the best path to an agreement is with the aid of a third-party mediator.”

UAW officials have so far rejected the proposal for a mediator, but they have opened up the pickets to various Democratic politicians. The strike is, in fact, pitting academic workers in direct conflict with the Democratic Party, which controls the UC Board of Regents and California politics at the state and local level.

Reporters from the WSWs spoke with striking university workers, many of whom expressed concerns over the cost of living and intimidation from academic advisors. They also declared their solidarity with workers in the humanities who are regularly paid less than their counterparts in hard sciences.

Will and Richard, UC San Diego graduate students in the physics department, said workers were demanding a

100 percent increase in their wages. Richard told reporters that he lives in Santee, noting that the high cost of rents force him to live out of the city of San Diego. Monthly, he said he brings home \$2,500 and is concerned particularly for the high costs of insurance for himself and his partner.

Will noted that he and his partner currently live in graduate student housing, but they are only guaranteed access to this housing for two years. When they are forced out of the lower-cost graduate student housing, he said he could face a situation where rent consumes nearly 75 percent of his current salary, and that rents in the region are often \$3,000 a month. Off-campus housing also comes with the costs of commuting, including purchasing a car and the high cost of gas.

Will also stressed the importance of academic accountability and the fair treatment for academic workers as being one of his major concerns in the strike. He noted that many of his colleagues have been gaslit or face deceit from their PIs [Principal Investigators, or lead researcher in a grand project]. PIs can claim ownership over the work of grad students, and there are protections for academic workers. The overall process, he noted, was entirely unfair, with grievances often going nowhere.

Megan, a second-year graduate student in psychology at UCSD, said that one of the main reasons she is striking is because she wants to see more protections given to academic workers, particularly at the hands of PIs.

“We have no protections from academic bullying,” Megan said. She explained that serious grievances that have been filed for abuse or from a PI claiming ownership of a TA’s work have fallen on deaf ears. “For raising a grievance, I have instead been kicked out of my lab, my entire degree is at risk. Sure I would like

to be paid more, but because of this issue I will not be finishing my degree here. I currently live in graduate housing. My job and housing are at risk.”

Like many academic workers, Megan said that her ballot to vote for UAW president was never received. “I did not receive a ballot to vote in this election, which is a shame because I would very much like to vote. I think all ballots should be sent out to every single member in the union. The system for sending out ballots needs to be refined. I would like to vote for Will [Lehman], but I cannot without a ballot!”

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

Reporters also spoke with a number of undergraduate students who were out supporting the strike. Sam, a third year UC San Diego marine biology undergraduate student said, “I’m in support of the striking graduate workers because every person deserves a living wage. I’ve grown up poor and have recently been homeless; no one should have to experience the stress of living paycheck to paycheck and knowing you cannot make ends meet.”

YB, a fourth-year grad student in the UC Irvine Math Department, said, “I also work a second job tutoring, but that’s also a whole other can of worms. It’s definitely a second job.

“I live off campus. Actually I started as a Master’s student so I didn’t get guaranteed housing. So I had to find a place off campus. So when I transferred to the Ph.D. program, they didn’t give me anything. So I’ve been living off campus in Irvine the whole time. It’s difficult for a grad student. I can barely afford it. We also have student debt, credit card debt.”

Orion came with three of his friends, all undergraduates, to support the grad student strike. “I’m an undergrad in the School of Humanities,” said Orion. “I major in African American studies with a minor in Film. We’re all seniors.

“We have a stake in this grad students’ strike,” he said. “We’re all from different parts of the university as well. So the fact that we’re all feeling this at some sort of level shows that it’s not specifically aiming towards one school or one major. It’s all of us. So that’s why it’s important that we come here and stand in solidarity because there’s strength in numbers.

“We are all one voice, and we’re all being exploited to a certain extent, even just paying tuition. In-state tuition is \$16,000, but out-of-state tuition is like \$60,000 [a year]. For in-state students, that’s over \$5,000 a quarter, just tuition.

“We actually live off campus, and that’s another big thing. We’re feeling that stranglehold because we’re paying a ridiculous amount of money for rent. And it’s only because the process of trying to get on-campus housing is very difficult and also very limited.

Leah, a first-year undergraduate in sociology, said: “These graduate students/TAs are completely overworked. They are working overtime and still not getting paid a living wage! How do we make sense of that? The university is basically pocketing off their labor. The TAs give so much of their time and knowledge to us, and the money they are currently paid is not equal to the amount they put in! They deserve so much more.”

While the striking graduate students represent approximately 12 percent of the entire active UAW membership, the UAW apparatus is doing nothing to mobilize broader support in the working class for the struggle.

The UAW bureaucracy has spent decades enforcing concessions contracts on autoworkers. It turned to “organizing” graduate students in response to a declining dues base produced by the destruction of hundreds of thousands of auto jobs. It is absolutely opposed to a united struggle of academic workers and autoworkers.

In the course of the UAW elections, the apparatus has done everything it can to prevent workers, including academic workers, from even knowing that an election is taking place. It is particularly concerned over the surge in support for the campaign of Will Lehman, who is calling for the abolition of the bureaucracy and the transfer of power to the rank and file.

For more information on the campaign for Will Lehman, visit WillforUAWPresident.org.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact