

University of California strikers determined to fight against poverty level wages

Our reporters

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As the powerful strike of 48,000 University of California (UC) workers nears the end of its first week, striking workers are expressing their determination to end poverty wages in one of the most expensive regions in the world.

The strike has won widespread support, with reports of UPS delivery drivers and construction workers honoring picket lines at several UC campuses.

Despite this powerful position, the United Auto Workers (UAW) bureaucracy is doing everything it can to defuse and sabotage the strike to keep it from upsetting the union's ties with the Democratic Party, which effectively runs the UC. The strike is being confined to an unfair labor practices (ULP) action in which workers are not allowed to raise economic demands and can only request that management "bargain in good faith."

At a livestreamed evening bargaining session last night, the first since the strike began, UC proposed a below-inflation 6 percent one-time raise, followed by 3 percent raises for the next three years. The official inflation rate remains above 6 percent, making this proposal a freeze in real wages for workers already struggling to make ends meet. The 22 UAW negotiators quickly changed the subject to subsidized transit passes, with UC matching student payments toward transit at up to \$30 per month.

Many of the over 200 students on the call denounced this evasion of their most basic demands for sufficient compensation. "Why are we talking about \$30 BART match this is stupid, we should be talking about food and rent!" wrote one student in the chat. Another declared, "I was gonna get to the construction site at 5am to shut it down but after seeing this economic proposal I may have to get there at 4 just to scream into the void for an extra hour before we get started."

Supporters of the campaign of Will Lehman for UAW president spoke with students on picket lines at several UC campuses and discussed the call for uniting the UC strike with auto workers and other workers across the country.

UC Irvine

Luis, a first-year grad student in chemistry, voiced support for his lower-paid colleagues. "I'm here also to support the grad student workers in the humanities. Because I'm in the sciences, I get paid more, and the difference between what we get compared to humanities grad students is quite big. I don't think that's fair. From what I've seen, it seems like they make a lot less than I do.

"The international students and out-of-state students have to pay a lot more for things compared to those of us who are from California. I think international students pay even higher than out-of-state students. They also have to deal with travel costs to California from a different country. But, you know, factoring all those things in, I think they just have a harder time. It's pretty expensive."

As in the auto manufacturing industry, the United Auto Workers contract at the University of California allows a vast gulf between tiers of worker, with graduate students in the arts and humanities making as little as \$23,246 per year. However, the maximum allowable pay for graduate students under the contract is \$43,119 per year, still a poverty wage in California.

Three first-year political science grad student workers at UC Irvine spoke to the WSWS. Mingiu, an

international student from Korea, said, “I think one of the biggest problems right now is that we’re not getting paid during the vacation months. That’s really huge. We get paid in July, and then we don’t get paid again until November. The reality is that many of us are getting side jobs outside of school, but for international students like us we cannot get side jobs to begin with. So we’re basically saving year round for the vacation months.”

Abhi, an international student from India, said, “The cost of living is very high here. In addition, the UC prides itself as this institution that celebrates diversity. And how is it actually showing up to support our TAs, our four-star researchers who have these identities? I guess we’re trying to get the UC to match with what its public messaging is.”

Savannah, a strike captain, also spoke on the housing crisis facing graduate workers: “These are really important issues. I mean, this is bigger than just our campus. This is the whole UC system-wide. We have students who are sleeping in their cars; we have students who are paying 40, 50, 60 percent of their income towards rent. And you know, this is such a prestigious, world renowned university system. That’s just not acceptable.”

Describing the difficult, highly skilled work graduate workers perform, she continued, “Teaching assistant (TA) duties vary drastically by what class you get. Some people don’t have a heavy workload. Some people are TA-ing three different discussion lectures, and they have to grade things every week. Some people even TA outside of their discipline. So you can then be a poli-sci student and have to TA econ. Then, you’re expected to learn econ, teach econ, and you’re getting paid \$22,000 a year in one of the most expensive places to live in the US.

“We’re really fighting for just the things that we shouldn’t have to fight for—child care, fair wages, workplace protections, public green transit, etc. And the university is trying to make it seem like we’re asking for a lot when we’re really not. It’s incredible. Yes, this is basic stuff.”

UC strikers have shown no shortage of fighting spirit, but militancy alone will not win their demands. The UAW showed that it is preparing to sell out and shut down the strike during the “bargaining” session Wednesday night.

To win, UC strikers must turn out to their most powerful allies, the working class. On the West Coast, 22,000 dockworkers have been working without a contract for months. Across the US, 120,000 railroaders have repeatedly voted down pro-company, union-endorsed contracts, drafted by the Biden administration. Kaiser nurses remain without a contract across northern California, and health care workers across the country are leaving the profession in droves as they are pushed to the breaking point by the fallout from a pandemic that continues to spread unchecked. Hundreds of thousands of UAW autoworkers would jump to strikers’ aid if they were informed about the strike and the issues academic workers are fighting for.

UC strikers must recognize that their struggle is a fight against the Democratic Party and the capitalist system as a whole. California is home to some of the wealthiest individuals and companies in the world. The claim that there is no money to fund decent living standards for university workers is preposterous. However, realizing UC strikers’ demands requires a complete break with the corrupt UAW apparatus and both big-business parties and the formation of democratically controlled rank-and-file committees fighting for the broadest possible mobilization of the working class.



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