

Strike wave of academic workers in US grows: 50,000 out at UC, New School

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17 November 2022

Over 1,600 part-time faculty members went on strike at The New School in New York City on Wednesday morning, joining 48,000 University of California graduate student workers, who walked out at the beginning of the week at 10 campuses across the state. The walkouts on both coasts are part of the largest strike movement by academic workers in US history.

Workers are outraged over the high cost of living and are demanding substantial pay raises and cost-of-living protections to offset years of low pay and the impact of surging prices. Strikers in New York City and California described having to rely on local food pantries because of skyrocketing grocery costs, paying well over half of their paychecks back to their universities to cover the costs of cramped campus housing and putting off having children because of the high costs of health and child care.

The adjuncts, who make up nearly 90 percent of the teaching staff at The New School, have not had a raise in four years, leading to a decline in real earnings of 18 percent. The prestigious private university—where average tuition, fees and housing costs are \$78,744—is only offering part-time faculty a 3.5 percent raise.

In 2019, officials from Academics Come Together-United Auto Workers (ACT-UAW) Local 7902 agreed to the reopening and extending of the previous contract, accepting a wage freeze and suspension of pension payments, supposedly to offset the financial impact of the pandemic. A few months later, the university, which was founded on the need to “solve the most pressing social issues of our time,” laid off 122 members, or 13 percent, of its administrative staff, giving them only one week’s notice before termination.

Today is the fourth day of the strike by postdoctoral and academic researchers, tutors, graduate student instructors and teaching assistants at the University of California, who are also members of the UAW. The determined strike has won widespread support from other sections of workers, including UPS drivers and construction workers who refused to cross striking workers’ picket lines at UC Berkeley and

other campuses.

A striking UC Santa Cruz teaching assistant described the crushing rent burden facing graduate researchers. “They don’t pay us enough. It’s around \$2,200 per month for TAs, for example. I split rent with my partner for a single-bedroom apartment. It’s \$3,600 per month, including utilities. That leaves \$400 for groceries, transportation, possible medications, etc.

“Meanwhile, I am not just TAing. I am doing research too, producing papers in the name of the UC, who like to flex my prestigious scholarships on their list of accomplishments. If they listened to our demands, we wouldn’t strike. It’s not us who want to block campus and prevent classes from happening; it’s the UC that refuses to use 3 percent of their total budget for wage adjustments. They would rather just see their system crumble and then blame it on the people striking. The UC knew damn well that this strike was gonna happen, yet they didn’t take any of our demands seriously.

“Working for the UC is like working for Amazon. Are you on the side of underpaid workers, or are you on the side of Jeff Bezos? In this country, education is already something for the elite, and the UC does not care about making it more accessible. They don’t care if you’re homeless, as long as you are paying tuition. They don’t care if you don’t have money to put your children in day care or preschool, as long as you produce data.”

A first-year humanities student at UC San Diego added, “I return 45 percent of my net pay to the university every month in order to live in graduate student housing, which is marginally cheaper than other apartments in my area. Living in student housing used to be quite affordable relative to off-campus options, but due to a massive rent hike last year, my roommate and I each pay \$1,080 a month for our place. Far too many UC graduate students are rent-burdened by the housing options provided by the university, while living elsewhere in the broader community remains financially impossible.

“Facing astronomical inflation and living on a tight budget, I know that every dollar counts, and I and many

others rely on our campus food pantry for a portion of our groceries each week. The line to enter the food pantry has been known to require over an hour of waiting at its worst. If students were able to comfortably afford to eat from the wages they earn, this time could be spent on teaching and research—the jobs that we are at the UC to do.”

Last week, graduate student employees in Philadelphia voted by 99 percent to authorize the Temple University Graduate Students’ Association to call a strike by 750 student teaching and research assistants. The strike vote follows 10 months of “unproductive negotiations,” according to the union, which is affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers.

The rebellion of university workers is part of broader movement of the working class, which includes the six-month strike by 1,300 UAW members at construction and farm equipment manufacturer CNH Industrial plants in Wisconsin and Iowa and 250 UAW members at the Murdoch-owned publishing giant HarperCollins in New York City.

In addition, 110,000 railroad workers and 22,000 West Coast dockworkers are pressing for strike action to fight for improved wages and an end to exhausting and unsafe working conditions. Despite the best efforts by the rail unions and the Biden administration to block a railway strike, momentum is growing for the defeat of the White House-brokered contract and a walkout, which would immediately turn into a confrontation with Congress and both corporate-backed parties.

This movement, moreover, is part of a broader international resurgence of class struggle, from the transit and refinery workers in France; metal workers in Germany; and railroad, health care and educational workers in the UK, where the new Tory government plans to release a brutal austerity plan today. In every case, workers are fighting demands for belt-tightening from capitalist governments that have found trillions for bank bailouts and the funding of the US/NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine.

In both The New School and University of California strikes, workers are in a direct battle with the UAW apparatus, which is aligned with the Democratic Party budget cutters. Behind the scenes, there is no doubt that top UAW officials are in discussions with California’s Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom to shut down the strike as soon as possible. Newsom is an officer of the UC Board of Regents and, along with his Democratic predecessor Jerry Brown, appointed 16 of the 17 members of the body, which is leading the attack on university workers.

The UAW has done nothing to inform, let alone mobilize its members behind the striking university workers, even though they make up more than 10 percent of the active

UAW membership.

In opposition to the sabotage by the UAW bureaucracy, Mack Trucks worker and socialist candidate for UAW president Will Lehman has issued a call for the full mobilization of UAW members and all workers behind the striking academic workers in the UC system and at The New School.

“I welcome this powerful struggle by university workers. The issues that you are fighting for—wage increases to fight inflation and secure a good standard of living so you can afford to keep a roof over your heads, have good food and health care, and raise a family—are what all workers want.

“Your battle can be won, but it will require mobilizing the broadest sections of the working class. First, this means forming rank-and-file strike committees to really empower yourselves. These committees should outline your own demands, including a 100 percent raise, COLA, fully paid health care and pensions, and the elimination of all fees. At the same time, these committees must oversee all negotiations, which must be live-streamed, and be prepared to countermand any efforts by the UAW bureaucracy to shut down the strike prematurely and impose a snap agreement.

“Appeals to the big business Democrats are worse than worthless. You must take your struggle from the campus to the factories, the docks, the railyards and beyond to build a powerful counteroffensive of the working class against austerity, inequality and war.”

Friday, November 18, is the deadline given by the Monitor for mailing in ballots for the UAW election to ensure that they are received on time to be counted. For more information on the campaign of Will Lehman, visit WillforUAWPresident.org.



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