

UC strike pits academic workers in battle against the Democratic Party

Rafael Azul, Norisa Diaz
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The weeklong strike by 48,000 student academic workers at the University of California has quickly escalated into a direct struggle against the state's Democratic Party establishment and the powerful corporate and financial interests it defends. At the same time, striking workers are trying to break through the limits imposed by the United Auto Workers apparatus, which has sought to contain the strike and reach a deal entirely acceptable to the budgetary restraints set by the Democrats.

The strikers at the 10 UC campuses are demanding the doubling of their starting annual salary up to \$54,000. Their current average salaries are \$24,000, nearly \$15,000 less than the yearly cost of an apartment in Santa Cruz and other California cities.

The university's Board of Regents, which includes Governor Gavin Newsom and an array of governor-appointed budget-cutters, multi-millionaire businessmen and union bureaucrats, has dug in its heels against the strikers' main demand for living wages.

The university's latest proposal would only increase the starting salary to \$27,880 ninety days after ratification. The offer also included a 7.5 percent increase for postdoctoral scholars, four percent for academic researchers, seven percent for academic student employees (teaching assistants, associate instructors, and teaching fellows), and 9-10 percent for graduate student fellows. The contract would then lock workers into three percent raises annually through September 30, 2027.

The proposed "raises" are, in fact, a cut in real wages. California's state inflation rate hit 13.5 percent in October, according to the US Congress Joint Economic Committee's inflation tracker, far higher than the national average of 7.7 percent. Californians pay the highest gas prices in the country, with a gallon selling

for \$5.34 last week, compared to the national average of \$3.70.

In a letter written to the chancellors of the ten universities, Michael Brown, the UC Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs, rejected the strikers' demands, claiming that it was impossible to pay workers enough to cover their housing costs.

Tying wages to the cost of housing could "have overwhelming financial impacts on the University," Brown declared. "One review of the Union's proposal predicts an annual unfunded obligation of at least several hundred million dollars, with inflationary pressure and no cap." Brown also rejected the demand that out-of-state students be charged the lower, in-state tuition rates.

Far from the pressing the workers' demands for a 100 percent pay increase, UAW bargaining committee members are retreating and telling strikers their cost-of-living (COLA) demands are likely going to be dropped. Union officials are parroting management's absurd claim that the university is unable to promise significant wage increases because their financial analysts cannot project into the future a doubling of wages.

They must take the academic workers for fools. The UC system has had no problem projecting tuition increases, or salary increases to top administrators, but they are meant to believe that the largest institution of higher learning in the world cannot do simple math!

There is plenty of money to meet workers' demands. The university's assets stood at \$152.3 billion at the end of the 2021-22 academic year. California, moreover, is home to some of the world's richest billionaires and corporations, including Apple, Alphabet (Google), Chevron, Oracle, Intel and Facebook. But both parties have spent the last four

decades slashing corporate taxes in half, reducing tax revenue by \$14 billion a year, or more than the total budget for student aid at the University of California, California State University and other state colleges.

The UAW bureaucracy, acting on the behalf of state Democrats, is determined to shut down the strike as soon as they feel they can. Earlier this week, UAW 2865 President Rafael Jaime said “there will be no business as usual” on UC campuses “unless UC stops its unlawful conduct, commits to round-the-clock bargaining, and reaches fair agreements.” He went on to clarify that the UAW was “not calling for undergraduates to boycott their classes, or for employees with no-strikes clauses and non-represented employees to take actions that could jeopardize their employment.”

To wage a serious fight, UC strikers must draw lessons from the last battle at the university, the four-month long grade boycott in 2019-20, which began at UC Santa Cruz, to demand COLA protection due to crushing housing and other costs. The struggle arose as a wildcat strike in defiance of the UAW bureaucracy, which sought to block the boycott, isolated the strikers and ultimately forced them back to work. Once again, the UAW is defining a UC strike as an “unfair labor practice” strike so it can try to call it off once university administrators supposedly resume “good faith” negotiations.

Striking academic workers—many of whom rely on food pantries for groceries—are in no mood to retreat. As one striker told WSWs reporters, the bargaining committee may be “considering removing the COLA clause,” but “we won’t ratify a weak contract.” Rank-and-file workers have also demanded open negotiations, which the UAW bureaucracy has tried to skirt. In a live-streamed session Wednesday, strikers denounced any retreat on major wage and housing demands, saying the UAW negotiators’ haggling over transportation passes was a complete diversion.

The struggle of tens of thousands of young people fighting for a future has generated popular support. Despite efforts by the American Federation of Teachers-affiliated faculty union (UC-AFT) to keep full-time professors on the job, many are cancelling classes in support of the striking academic workers, despite threats from the university. UPS delivery drivers, construction workers and others have also honored

picket lines.

On Wednesday, hundreds of resident physicians and fellows protested outside the UCLA Medical Center to demand better pay and working conditions for 22,000 health care workers. Protesters held signs with slogans that resonated with strikers who joined their protest: “Let us rest! Let us eat! Let residents make ends meet!”

The strike at UC, The New School in New York City and the strike authorization vote by Temple University students, along with the demands for strike action by 110,000 railroad and 22,000 West Coast dock workers, are part of the political radicalization of workers and youth against capitalism and social inequality.

What can or cannot be won will only be determined through struggle. It is critical that academic workers form rank-and-file strike committees to outline their own, non-negotiable demands for wages and working conditions, oversee all negotiations and prepare to countermand efforts by the UAW bureaucracy to sabotage the strike and impose a state-dictated deal. At the same time, these committees should deploy strikers to the docks, the rail yards, the UPS, FedEx and Amazon warehouses and other workplaces to prepare common action.

The campaign of Mack Trucks worker and socialist candidate for UAW president Will Lehman has found widespread support among striking UC workers. His fight to transfer power from the UAW apparatus to workers through the formation of rank-and-file committees is central to the struggle of UC academic workers.



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