

University of California strike begins second week: “We need a society that works for everyone, not just the capitalists at the top”

Our reporters
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Today marks the beginning of the second week of the strike by 48,000 academic workers in the University of California (UC) system. The action is the largest strike of academic workers in United States history, pitting graduate student instructors (GSIs), postdocs, researchers and other academic workers against the Democratic Party-controlled UC administration and Board of Regents.

The strikers, who are members of the three different locals of the United Auto Workers (UAW) union, are demanding a 100 percent salary increase—from an impossibly low \$24,000 a year to \$54,000—to address California’s skyrocketing rents and other living expenses. The strike has galvanized workers throughout UC’s 10 campuses and far more broadly.

The UAW bureaucracy is attempting to smother the strike as it did the 2020 wildcat strike and grade boycott by limiting the action to an “Unfair Labor Practice” work stoppage, not a strike over economic demands. This would allow the UAW bureaucracy to shut the strike down any time it claims management has resumed “good faith negotiations,” even if UC administrators continue to reject the workers’ just economic demands.

However, it is precisely the paltry wages and exorbitant costs of living and hunger which have driven academic workers into struggle. But workers have reported to the WSWS that UAW bargainers are already suggesting they are ready to drop the demand for a cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) to increase wages in line with inflation.

Anger is mounting as workers continue to be left in the dark about bargaining. On Sunday night, UAW bargainers canceled a planned livestream bargaining session for student researchers at the last minute. The bargaining committee arrogantly justified its secret talks with management by declaring, “We had to close the zoom room because the university wanted to have a chat with our bargaining team before writing an on-the-record proposal. The university wanted to discuss concepts that we proposed this past week as part of our wage proposal. We had a lot of questions for them, too. The conversation was productive, and we hope that this results in them responding with an actual proposal very soon.”

If the bargainers really represented striking students they would have replied to management’s request for backroom talks with the statement: “You can go to hell. Anything you have to say to us, you can say in front of our membership.”

But that is not what they did. Instead, they entered into talks behind the backs of striking workers. This shows the contempt of the UAW apparatus for rank-and-file workers. Livestreamed talks are for show. When there are issues of real substance, these will be discussed behind closed doors.

This only underscores the necessity for striking workers at every campus to elect representatives to a rank-and-file strike committee, which will oversee all negotiations, ensure all talks are livestreamed, and empowers the membership to countermand any undemocratic decisions to ram through a bogus agreement, which ignores their essential needs.

There is no doubt that the leaders of the UAW, American Federation of Teachers, California Labor Federation and other union bodies are already involved in intense talks with Governor Gavin Newsom and Biden’s secretary of labor to shut down the strike as soon as possible. Speaking on behalf of powerful corporate interests, the Democrats, like their Republican counterparts, fear that the UC strike and academic workers’ bold demands for a 100 percent raise and COLA will be a catalyst for a broader mobilization of the working class.

This includes more than 110,000 railroad workers who continue to vote down Biden’s pro-company contracts, and 22,000 West Coast dockworkers who have been kept on the job for months due to a conspiracy by the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) bureaucracy and the Biden administration. The United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) has also kept 35,000 educators on the job for more than four months after the expiration of their previous contract.

UC strikers are in no mood to surrender. Despite the sabotage by the UAW bureaucracy, the strike is spreading and gaining momentum. Faculty and lecturers across the 10 campuses soon joined the picket lines, canceling classes en masse to support the striking workers. For the 6,000 lecturers this was done in direct defiance of the UC-American Federation of Teachers (UC-AFT), which along with 13 other UC unions continues to order their members to cross picket lines.

Significantly, this past week UC workers with the American Federation of State and Municipal Employees (AFSCME Local 3299) at UC Davis received a letter from the UC administration requiring that they work holidays. AFSCME workers represent the largest workforce on the UC campus with 30,000 Service and Patient Care Technical workers who perform critical custodial and culinary services for the campuses and the five UC Health Centers. Upon learning of this mandate, workers at UC Davis crowded into an administration building to confront bosses who hid from them. Within 48 hours the holiday work requirement was rescinded. This quick reversal speaks to the immense power of the current struggle, but also points to the need for united action. Fearful of a larger struggle, the UC administration essentially made a determination that they will wait until after the strike is over to try to impose the mandate.

Last week, 200 resident physicians, interns and fellows marched in front of the UCLA Medical Center to demand a substantial improvement in wages and conditions for 22,000 UC health care workers.

The UC strike is also encouraging other academic workers across the country to fight. Overwhelming strike votes have been cast by teaching and research assistants at Temple University and full-time faculty at the University of Illinois-Chicago.

Last week, over 1,600 part-time faculty at The New School in New York City, also members of the UAW, launched a strike to demand a contract after not receiving a raise in four years. On Monday, the private

university issued an ultimatum to striking workers insisting that they accept a “final” offer, which includes a 1.8 percent yearly “raise,” or it will be unilaterally imposed tomorrow.

Will Lehman, a Mack Trucks worker and socialist candidate for UAW president, who visited The New School picket line on Saturday, is fighting to unite union members across regions in a common fight. He is also insisting that strikers get full pay from the UAW’s more than \$800 million strike fund so they can sustain their fight against the deep-pocketed UC administrators.

“It’s literally nationwide and we really have to stand with each other,” Mia, a striking adjunct professor at The New School, told the WWS. “It’s not one over the other. We all have to band together. We’re all standing together with the people in California, as well as everybody that’s on strike here in New York.”

Strikers at various UC campuses spoke with WWS reporters about the issues in their struggle.

Julie at UC-Berkeley said, ‘A huge reason why a lot of us are rallying behind this cause is that the vast majority of us are rent burdened. I am on strike not just because it would benefit me to make more money. I really care about making this a better working environment and making this a more accessible career path for other people.’

She added, “It’s just not feasible for a lot of people to go for five years and not get paid very much. I know people who have to use food banks. It’s really awful.”

“We are all going to the food pantries,” Abbey, who was picketing at UC-San Diego, said. “They have them on campus because they know how students are struggling. They have even reduced the amount you can get from the pantry because so many students have to use them. Instead of increasing supply, they decrease the amount you can get!”

Abbey added that student workers were striking because of increased housing costs and the lack of COLA. The 2020 wildcat strike led by UC graduate student instructors was over precisely these issues.

Cynthia, a student from India at UC-Irvine, observed, “I do remember the 2020 wildcat strike over COLA, which was sold out by the union. We have to see how the bargaining committee works. If they don’t take what the UC offers, then the union has to keep bargaining. If the union settles for something we don’t want, there’s going to be a lot of dissatisfaction.”

Sebastian is an international graduate student from Peru at UC Irvine and a teaching assistant in the Physics Department. He told WWS reporters, “I’ve been in the program for two years. Inflation is worse now. They don’t take that into account. They don’t base our salaries on inflation nor living costs, food banks. It should all be included in what we get.”

A physics researcher at UC-Berkeley, who wished to remain anonymous, said, “The rent’s been going up 10 percent a year and the university isn’t matching that with pay, so we’re just taking big pay cuts.”

Asked about uniting UC strikers with dock and railroad workers, Los Angeles teachers and Kaiser nurses, the UC Berkeley researcher said, “People are living under the same system with inflation going up and we have no choice. It would be good for all workers to try to create a fairer society that works for everyone, not just the capitalists at the top.”

The WWS also spoke to both Sam and Casey at UC Berkeley. “It’s so expensive to live here,” Sam said. “I came from Texas, and so it’s kind of like a big gap in terms of cost of living. We came out here to support grad students and help support postdocs and other departments who are getting paid below living wage. I know friends who have struggled with budgeting their money to get food week by week.”

“I know people at other UC campuses who have to get food stamps to afford groceries,” Casey added. “We also have a grad student pantry on campus that a lot of people go to. The university knows we are struggling to buy food. So, they just choose to solve it not with money but with a

food pantry.”

He continued, “More than half my stipend goes to rent, so I’m definitely rent burdened and if for whatever reason there is a delay in my paycheck, I would not be able to pay for rent. This is a very big problem. It hasn’t happened to me yet, but I know people who are on different grant supports, and especially when transitions between semesters and summers occur, there can sometimes be a delay. When that happens they just have to go into their emergency fund, pay for rent for like a month or two and then hope that money comes through. If you are rent burdened and cannot afford food then that would affect your performance and productivity and even the money we bring to the school through grants and fellowships.”

Casey added, “The university’s proposal of a 3 percent increase is very insulting to the labor we are performing and I also don’t like the fact that the different departments and students in different disciplines are getting paid a different amount. For us in the biosciences, we get paid one of the highest wages of the grad students, which is still barely making ends meet.

“Within the UC system,” Casey said, “the chancellors are getting raises and adjustments for inflation, but they do not think that cost of living should be a factor for us when setting wages. That is very hypocritical and insulting.”

There is no lack of money to meet strikers’ demands. California is the fifth largest economy in the world and home to the largest number of billionaires. As of March 2022, 186 billionaires resided within the borders of California. But the Democrats, no less than the Republicans, are determined to make the working class pay for endless bank bailouts, corporate tax cuts and military expenditures for war against Russia and China.

There is no lack of determination on the part of the strikers, but it is crucial that they take the leadership of the struggle out of the hands of the UAW bureaucracy, through the formation of a rank-and-file strike committee. This committee, which will be under the democratic control of academic workers themselves, must outline the demands academic workers need, not what the governor, the UC regents and big business claim they can afford. At the same time, this committee must link up the UC strikers with workers across the campuses, the state, the US and internationally to fight for unified action to win these demands.



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