

Will Lehman speaks to University of California strikers as rank-and-file rebellion grows against UAW bureaucracy

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On Tuesday morning, Will Lehman, rank-and-file Mack Trucks worker and socialist candidate for United Auto Workers president, spoke with striking University of California academic workers during several live-streamed discussions. Speaking from his home in Pennsylvania, Lehman talked with strikers at the UC Irvine and UC San Diego campuses about rank-and-file workers forming their own strike committee to take the leadership of the 10-day walkout by 48,000 workers.

In recent days, a revolt of striking workers has erupted against the decision of the UAW Local 2865 and Student Researchers United-UAW (SRU) bargaining teams to drop the demand for cost-of-living adjustments to be added to wage increases. This is in blatant disregard of the will of rank-and-file workers who are demanding COLA because of impossibly high housing, food and other living expenses.

As public comment was closing at the bargaining session between the UAW and UC on Monday night, students on the Zoom call erupted in chants of “No COLA, no contract!” Organizers muted everyone and shortly afterwards ended the meeting, triggering a firestorm of protests from workers.

Workers are now circulating a petition insisting that the COLA demand be retained, along with demands for a 100 percent starting pay increase for graduate student workers and a near 25 percent raise for post-docs. “Without an adequate COLA, many workers will not be able to live where we work,” the petition says, adding, “We will be forced to leave the UC.”

There is no doubt that the national UAW leadership, along with the Biden administration, are carrying out frenzied discussions on how to shut down the strike over the Thanksgiving holiday and ram through a contract in line with the Democrats’ austerity measures. They all fear

a victory for UC workers would inspire broader sections of the working class to revolt against the union apparatus and fight for inflation-busting wage gains.

In his discussions with striking workers, Lehman warned that the UAW bureaucracy wanted to sell out the current struggle like union officials did during the 2020 wildcat graduate student strike. Lehman called for the building of a rank-and-file strike committee to take the struggle out of the hands of the bureaucracy, and allow workers and students to fight for the demands they need.

One striking worker at UC Irvine told Will there is a lot of anger and frustration over the dropping of the COLA demand. He was also aware that the UAW bureaucracy prevented strike pay from being raised to \$500 a week at the UAW convention in the summer. “I have friends who are not striking because 400 a week doesn’t pay the rent.”

Will pointed out, “It isn’t just the UAW strike fund at over \$800 million which we should be in control of, but also the assets of the union which are at over \$1.5 billion.”

One worker at UC San Diego told Will, “We’re really upset about COLA being lifted. We feel like our voices are not being heard or uplifted. There is no real communication or accountability from the bargaining team ... COLA is why we are out here, it’s our main demand.”

Will urged strikers to begin establishing rank and file committees. “You the workers have to decide what your demands need to be. I’ve seen the call for a 100 percent starting pay increase to \$54,000—even that is not enough. What it needs to be is whatever is needed for a living wage in California. The state is the richest in the country, and has large numbers of billionaires. We reject the lie that there is no money to pay workers a living wage.”

“I agree with everything you’re saying,” a worker

responded. “Yes, a rank-and-file committee is what we need here.” She said this would win strong support from her fellow strikers.

A rank-and-file strike committee would create a new center of power, which would enable workers to countermand any decisions by the UAW bureaucracy to impose a government-dictated deal against the will of the majority. A committee would fight to unite striking workers with undergrads, other workers on the campus, like full-time faculty, maintenance and health care workers at the UC medical centers, in a common struggle. At the same time, it would appeal to West Coast dockworkers, railroad workers, and Los Angeles teachers who have been forced to stay on the job, months if not years after the expiration of their contracts.

The discussions Will Lehman was having with workers about a strategy to win their struggle was met with fear and hostility by local UAW officials. At UC Irvine, a UAW local official interrupted a video livestream where Will was speaking to a group of workers. The official told campaigners that “small separate groups were discouraged,” and tried to peel away strikers from the discussion. At UC San Diego, UAW officials claimed campaigners are not allowed to speak with strikers during active pickets. They told the Lehman supporters, “Make sure people know the UAW does not sanction his campaign.”

The efforts did not deter campaigners, however. In their discussions with Will, one worker said she had already voted for him. Several others said they had not received ballots from the UAW even though the postmark deadline to mail in the ballot expired on November 18. “I haven’t received a ballot to vote,” one striking worker at UC Santa Cruz wrote in a message to Will, “and I don’t know anyone who has.”

Lehman has filed a lawsuit against the UAW and the court-appointed UAW Monitor to fight for an extension of the deadlines to request and cast ballots, and to inform all members about the elections. The judge’s ruling in the case could be issued as early as today.

On Monday night, hundreds of student workers—if not over a thousand—attempted to join a live-streamed negotiation session and comment. The UAW bargaining team officials, one after the other, spoke against including COLA in the agreement. In public comments, however, student speakers argued passionately for COLA, pointing to the impossibly high cost of living in California, high tuition, the necessity of having a side job to live, and the effects of all these pressures on everyday life.

“We need to keep COLA, we cannot cave after a single week ... The UC will see that they can dog-walk us for the rest of history if we start caving after a single week ... You have hundreds of rank-and-file members here, telling you they want COLA in the contract. The bargaining team is supposed to represent what we want, not what the bargaining team thinks is going to be the quickest solution. We did not vote to strike so we could wash our hands of it after a week so we could get back to labs.”

Well aware that the rank-and-file is furious with them, the SRU bargaining team met on Tuesday and voted unanimously to put forward a motion for the entire UAW bargaining team that would hide from the membership the votes of bargaining members for all future votes. Denouncing “harassment” from the membership and supposed threats of physical violence, bargaining members from all locals voted unanimously in favor of the motion. As numerous strikers have pointed out, concealing the votes of elected officials is a major assault on the democratic rights of the rank and file.

Fearing that the union bureaucracy will not be able to contain this opposition, UC administrators have stepped up their attack against strikers and sought to sow divisions. Emails have also been sent out to students saying that students must continue with their academic work, warning that their grades, degree or thesis are at risk should the strike continue. International students on temporary visas have reported open threats from the university of deportation.

This struggle can and must be won. But this requires a real mobilization of the working class behind the strike and the combined efforts to strangle it by the Democratic Party-run university administration, Governor Newsom and the union bureaucracy. As Will Lehman stressed in his discussions with strikers, it is more urgent than ever to build a rank-and-file strike committee to take the conduct of the struggle into the hands of striking workers themselves.



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