Opposition by University of California strikers grows against UAW's dropping of COLA demand

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Opposition among striking academic workers at the University of California continues to grow against any efforts by United Auto Workers bargainers to abandon their core demands. On November 14, 48,000 teaching assistants, lecturers, researchers and other academic workers walked out to demand substantial raises, cost-of-living protection (COLA), increased parental leave and other improvements.

Last week, UAW bargaining teams announced in online caucus meetings that they had dropped the demand for COLA. In response, numerous rank-and-file workers began angrily shouting "No COLA, No Contract" before UAW officials muted them and rapidly shut down the meeting. Many strikers also called for the replacement of the bargaining team.

On Thanksgiving day, when pickets were closed for the holiday, UAW Local 5810's bargaining team released a video on Twitter claiming that "UC has finally made a serious offer to Postdocs that addresses major concerns." Bargaining members hailed a proposed increase in parental leave from 4 to 8 weeks and an $11,000 pay increase for postdocs by October 2023.

But several aspects of these claims are misleading. Under California law, parents are eligible for 60–70 percent of their income via the Paid Family Leave (PFL) for up to 8 weeks. This means the UC proposal simply puts them in compliance with state policy. As for the salary increase, this would quickly be eaten up by the soaring cost of living. California consumer prices jumped 13.9 percent between January 2021 and October 2022, according to the Congressional Joint Economic Committee.

A statement signed by 27 members of the UAW Local 2865 and Student Researchers United-UAW bargaining team acknowledges the widespread opposition to the dropping of the COLA demand and tries to defend this abject capitulation. Arguments from "some of our colleagues" that "it is too soon, and our strike is too strong, for us to 'start conceding,'" are misplaced and the result of failing to understand the "give and take" of the bargaining process. Moreover, strikers are being unrealistic if not selfish, they suggest, for demanding "open-ended" wage increases.

"[B]y bargaining now, while we are strong, we can use our strike power to compromise on our terms—and this strategy is working," they write. The "choice to prioritize definite wage increases instead of open-ended ones" was not made "out of fear or desperation" but was "an active step that we are confident will bear the strongest material gains in the final contract."

They conclude: "Our strike is historic, but our power is not infinite. Even if we could compel the University to accept uncertain year-over-year wage increases, we believe it would come at the expense of a critical increase to our base wage."

First of all, the demand for "open-ended" wage increases is absolutely necessary because inflation is "open-ended." Without cost-of-living protection pegged to the rise in living expenses, more workers will be forced to rely on food pantries, increase their indebtedness, face the risk of homelessness and put off taking their children to the doctor or having children at all.

Secondly, why are immediate wage increases counterposed to cost of living protections? Workers and their families need and have to fight for both. By arguing that COLA must come at the expense of base

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wage increases, the UAW completely accepts the lies by UC administrators and the governor that there is not enough money to meet workers' demands. There is no doubt that the UAW bureaucracy was given a set dollar amount by Governor Newsom and state Democrats, and it has no intention of challenging it.

What workers can or cannot achieve will only be determined through struggle. But the strike cannot be left in the hands of the UAW bureaucracy, which is aligned with the state Democrats that have spent decades slashing funding for public and higher education while handing billions in tax cuts and other handouts to Silicon Valley, Big Oil and other California industries.

That is why UC workers must for a rank-and-file strike committee to outline their non-negotiable demands and mobilize the broadest support in the working class to fight for them.

Jorge, a UCLA teaching assistant on strike, recently spoke to the WSWS about the bargaining team dropping COLA demands. "I would say the most important thing to me is the wage increase," he said. "Because the salary that they're offering us right now for current TAs, you can't really live off that. So I think for them [the UAW bargaining team] to backtrack on COLA would be a huge disservice to everything we've done so far."

"We're out here every single day, on strike, sacrificing a lot of what we're doing to be on strike and for them to make concessions on COLA, I would say it's unacceptable because that's the main reason why we're out here in the first place and to backtrack on that is a disservice to the work that we've done so far… I think a lot of us would be really upset if we concede to anything less than what we're asking for."

Jaime, a UCLA undergrad majoring in Statistics and Climate Science, said, "I was talking to my parents who were both chemistry grad students in the 1980s and 1990s, and I grew up hearing them, how they struggled to make ends meet, lots of stories about that. I was talking to my mom about the student strike. She said that they made $24,000 then, 30 years ago. That is what some of the strikers are being paid right now. That is not good. It was a big polarizing moment for me. It isn't like they have been raising the wages slowly, badly, not enough to meet inflation. Things were bad back then, and they are still there.

"I think that the pay issue resonates the most with me because of that personal connection, but the other issues are also critically important. Housing is a major issue. The UCs are paying their graduate students and then taking most of that back, which is really sleazy, really bad. Other issues are transportation, health care and day care."

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