

University of California academic workers counter efforts by UAW bureaucracy to sell out strike

Adam Mclean, Hong Jian
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As the third week of the strike in the University of California (UC) system comes to a conclusion, 48,000 academic workers continue to be locked in a struggle against the Democratic Party-run administration along with the United Auto Workers bureaucracy, which is abandoning workers' central demands and rushing to end the strike.

In negotiations this week, UAW bargainers accepted concessions that include dropping the demand for starting base pay from \$54,000 to \$43,000, halving the demand for child care support, dropping dependent health care, and removing all language supporting workers with disabilities. UAW bargainers had previously dropped the demand for cost-of-living protection (COLA).

UAW officials have tried various tactics to, as one rank-and-filer aptly put it, “gaslight us into accepting what the university wants.” These have ranged from blaming the workers for their supposed “weak bargaining position” by allegedly failing to show up on the picket lines in sufficient numbers, to claims that the strike is “losing steam.”

Union officials have also claimed that strikers demanding COLA and other critical pay issues are isolated, and a “silent majority” is opposed to a prolonged strike and happy to accept a more “modest” contract. At the same time, UAW officials have refused to poll workers and ignored results when the rank and file took the initiative to run polls themselves. UAW bargainers and their apologists even absurdly argue that lowering wage demands are only a “negotiating tactic to get management to come to the table.”

It should be recalled that when the negotiators blatantly defied the will of the membership by dropping cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) provisions last week, they did so with a similar excuse. They claimed it was a tactic to

preserve a contract with \$54,000 base pay. Now that the base pay has been cut down a further \$11,000, this stands exposed as a shameless lie given out to hide the UAW bureaucracy's duplicity.

Having lost credibility, UAW officials have organized various toothless publicity stunts, like occupying certain university buildings. At UC Berkeley, strikers occupied Eshleman and California Hall. When combined with the dropping of wage demands, these occupations amount to a transparent attempt to shore up the “radical” credentials of the local bargaining committees.

The livestreamed negotiating sessions and follow-up union caucus calls have become increasingly undemocratic. The ones open to public comment have been held late at night, and most are not able to host more than 500 people, a figure that has been regularly exceeded.

In the meetings, members have been unduly muted or occasionally blacked out, often without adequate explanation. Speakers with clearly prepared remarks who defend the union have been given preference. Bargaining Team (BT) members—who have become the target of the justified anger of the rank and file—have even taken the step of concealing their votes from the scrutiny of the members they supposedly represent, citing “harassment” from them.

At the meeting on Wednesday night, workers were livid over the climb-down on wages, with many, both in the chat and speaking on the call, calling it what it was: A monumental betrayal. With the union bureaucrats stating that it had to be done, as the strike was “losing steam,” many in the chat pointed out that the withholding of labor is what the strike is about and they haven't even taken the step of withholding grades yet—a move that would affect the university's bottom line.

An international graduate student at UC Irvine told the WSWS, “In a week or so, grading is supposed to start for the finals. That’s when the labor of graduate students who work as teaching assistants will be the most important, and the strike will have an even larger impact on the university. I haven’t been listening too much to the negotiations or caucus meetings, but I hear people are disappointed. They removed COLA from the bargaining table, which is a horrible thing because whatever raises we get without COLA will be washed out by inflation or increases in living expenses in the future.”

One of the first speakers at the meeting was an international student who spoke passionately, noting that “many of us are homeless.” He continued, “In October, I was almost homeless. I had to beg for money to keep a roof over my head. I come from a very poor country where I quite literally had to eat dirt because of how hungry I have been, and I do not want to have to return to that again. Not a single person in the rank and file should have to experience that, yet we are... We have a right to the bare minimum.”

Appeals to the bargaining team to change course and “do the right thing” are falling on deaf ears. The bargaining team answers not to the rank-and-file members, but to the UAW apparatus, which, in turn, is allied with the budget-cutters of the state Democratic Party.

The union bureaucracy, Governor Gavin Newsom and the Biden White House itself all recognize that the UC strike could be the catalyst for a far broader mobilization of the working class against the ravages of inflation and the bipartisan program of austerity and social inequality. That is why the UAW and the state Democrats are desperate to prevent the UC strike from spreading beyond the campus and encouraging other sections of workers—nurses, public school teachers, dock and railroad workers—to also rebel against the trade union bureaucracies and take matters into their own hands.

This is the significance of the WSWS’s call to build rank-and-file strike committees across UC campuses. To prevent a repeat of the sellout of the 2020 COLA strike, workers must build their own organizations to prosecute the struggle. The current bargaining team should be replaced with a rank-and-file strike committee, which will fight for the demands that workers need: a 100 percent increase in starting pay, COLA, fully paid health benefits and child care support, and support for workers with disabilities.

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The University of California Rank-and-File Strike Committee (UCRFSC), which was founded by academic workers this week, is calling on striking UC workers to turn to dock workers, autoworkers and railroad workers, health care workers, educators and other sections of the working class. It has also called for solidarity with the thousands of academic workers currently on strike in the UK and Scotland.

As students, educators, and researchers are striking in California, there are 115,000 railroad workers who are seeking to strike over these issues as well. They too are in a political struggle and confront both the Democratic Party and the complicity of their “own” unions. After the SMART-TD and BLET unions, the two largest rail unions, worked against the will of the membership over the last few months to avert a strike, the Democratic Party, including Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and other so-called “progressives,” intervened to block a strike and impose the same contract workers rejected.

“I know about the railroad workers,” a neuroscience grad student on strike at UC Irvine said, “They work under horrible conditions. They get no time off to be with their families. I absolutely support them.”

James, a political science grad student at UC Irvine, added, “All I know is that the railroad workers were asking for better working conditions. They were offered better wages, but they declined it because it doesn’t address the core issue. I think grad students should absolutely support them. I like the idea of their struggle merging with ours.”

These workers are fighting for the same basic things as UC academic workers, and their struggles should not remain separate. One of the main goals of rank-and-file committees should be to combine the struggles by different sections of the working class in a common fight against both parties of capitalism.



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