University of California academic workers: Replace the bargaining teams! Build rank-and-file committees to expand the strike and win our demands!

UC Rank-and-File Strike Committee
9 December 2022

The following statement was issued by the University of California Rank-and-File Strike Committee. To join the committee, email ucstrikerfc@gmail.com.

Dear Fellow Workers,

Our strike is at a critical turning point. We have maintained solidarity in the face of the duplicity and threats from the administration. We have won powerful support from undergrads, full-time faculty, and broader sections of the working class.

But nearly a month into the strike it has become apparent that the UAW bureaucracy, from the national down to the local level, is not working for the victory of this strike but for its defeat.

UAW officials are collaborating with administrators to divide and conquer us. Right now, postdocs and academic researchers are finishing voting on agreements endorsed by the Local 5810 bargaining teams, which includes a no-strike clause. If ratified, the UAW officials intend to force 11,000 Local 5810 members to cross the picket line of the remaining 37,000 workers. The two-year contract is another attempt to further divide our united struggles. The aim of this is to pressure the remaining workers on strike to cave in.

At the same time, the bargaining teams for academic student employees in Local 2865 and Student Researchers United (SRU) have dropped the demand for cost of living adjustments (COLA) and sharply reduced demands for increased base pay and child care reimbursement. They have cynically justified this by claiming that they “are legally required to give and take” and that it is impossible to win “open-ended” wage increases to match inflation. With every new concession, the UAW officials have the gall to tell us that “the UC is finally bargaining seriously” or we’re winning “historic agreements.”

The bargaining teams (BTs) have completely violated the trust of rank-and-file workers. They swallow whole the lies of the administrators that there is no money to provide substantial pay increases, plus COLA, and are indifferent to the open-ended wage cuts workers are suffering from inflation. Workers facing eviction and those drowning in debt to feed and house their families are treated as secondary concerns compared to the good graces of the National Labor Relations Board.

Throughout the strike, the BTs have consistently broken their pledge for open bargaining to the membership by meeting with UC bargainers in closed session. Hoping to avoid any accountability for their actions, they have concealed their votes from the rank and file. At the same time, they have sought to silence dissent.

It is the UAW and BT who keep insisting to us that our power is “limited,” and continue to attempt justifying ending the strike because there are “too few” people at the picket line. We are still striking and withholding labor! Many workers have stopped going to picket lines because they encounter hostility from UAW leaders for questioning the concessions that the UAW has already accepted.

This was proven earlier this week, when a striker said bargaining team members verbally and physically attacked her at the rally in Sacramento for holding up a sign opposing their concessions.

At its most basic, we academic workers organized this strike to fight for the right to a decent living in some of the most expensive cities in the country. From day one, local UAW officials bureaucracy, under direct guidance from the corrupt apparatus in the union’s misnamed

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Solidarity House in Detroit, have tried to tie our hands by isolating our struggle and limiting it to an unfair labor practices strike, which explicitly excludes our economic demands.

The contempt the UAW bureaucracy has for democracy has been on full display during the first-ever vote for UAW president and other top national officers. Desperate to hold onto power, the UAW apparatus did everything to suppress the vote. Large numbers of workers never received a ballot or even knew an election was going on. As a result, only 9 percent of the membership cast ballots nationally. Of the 30,000 members of Locals 5810 and 2865, only 950—or less than one-third of 1 percent—voted.

Despite this, Will Lehman, a Mack Trucks worker and socialist candidate for UAW president, won 15 and 13 percent of the votes of Local 2865 and Local 5810 members respectively, running on a program calling for the abolition of the UAW apparatus and the transfer of power to the rank and file.

It is our right and our duty to take bargaining and the entire conduct of the strike out of the hands of those more interested in protecting the financial concerns of the corporate executives and budget cutters on the UC Board of Trustees than ensuring every academic worker has enough to eat. The first step is the recall of the bargaining teams and the election of a new bargaining committee, controlled by the rank and file and committed to fighting for what we need.

The UAW bureaucrats argue the current bargainers were duly elected and must remain in place even though they have lost the confidence of the membership. This is a mockery of genuine democracy. We are engaged in a historic battle, and we cannot leave our fate in the hands of those working against our interests.

The replacement of the bargaining team is only one part of transferring the decision-making power from the corrupt UAW apparatus, manned by hundreds of highly paid bureaucrats, to the rank-and-file workers ourselves.

UC Rank-and-File Strike Committee, which was established earlier this week, has issued a statement calling for postdocs and academic researchers to defeat the UAW sellout contract and stand with the rest of the striking workers to win our demands.

This should include:

• The doubling of starting wages for teaching assistants and inflation-busting raises that ensure that we spend no more than 25 percent of our income on housing.

• Full Cost of Living Adjustments (COLA) that are pegged to the rise in consumer prices.

• Fully paid health care and child care benefits and guaranteed campus housing for the entire length of our programs.

• Job security and the most far-reaching protections for international students, disabled students and against the spread of COVID-19 and other infectious diseases.

At every campus, rank-and-file committees should be formed to organize regular mass meetings with open discussions and the polling of the membership. All negotiation sessions must be live-streamed and all bargaining team members subject to immediate recall by majority vote.

The civil disobedience stunts at the president's and chancellor's offices, and appeals to Governor Newsom and other Democrats, are worse than useless. The Democrats, including "progressives" like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and other congressmen in the Democratic Socialists of America, showed their true colors when they voted to make illegal a strike by 120,000 railroad workers and impose a contract on them that they had previously rejected.

To win real gains, we have to wage a real fight. We are part of the working class, and we must appeal to our class brothers and sisters among the railroad workers; the Los Angeles teachers and other public employees; the Kaiser and UC Medical Center nurses being overwhelmed with COVID, flu and RSV cases; the West Coast dock workers and other workers.

At the heart of our struggle, and the struggle of the whole working class, is the issue of who is going to control society's wealth and how it is distributed. The working class produces the wealth but faces a daily struggle just to survive. At the same time, the Democrats and Republicans find trillions for bank bailouts, corporate tax cuts and the reckless drive to war against Russia and China.

Our struggle can and must be won. But it requires that those whose lives depend on the outcome of the struggle, not UAW bureaucrats, have the final say.

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