UAW negotiators agree to mediator to impose deal on striking University of California workers

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The strike of 48,000 academic workers at the University of California is in great danger, following the ratification of two tentative agreements covering the academic researcher (AR) and postdoctoral section of the workforce. United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 5810 agreed to the deal as part of the UAW bureaucracy's deliberate effort to sow divisions among strikers and shut down the increasingly rebellious walkout.

So far, the strike—the largest by educational workers in US history—has won enormous support from the working class, as well as students. Living under the burden of a monthly $2,000 paycheck in one of the most expensive places in the world, graduate student instructors are being compelled to fight for their right to live.

Postdocs and ARs voted electronically on two separate tentative agreements throughout last week. The ratification of the agreement, which includes a no-strike clause, means that 12,000 members of Local 5810 will be compelled to cross the picket lines of their fellow academic workers who are members of two other UAW locals, which have not reached agreements.

The aim of the UAW bureaucracy is to exert as much pressure as possible on the remaining 36,000 strikers, who, importantly, include graduate student instructors withholding grades.

While union officials claimed both contracts passed by substantial margins—79 percent for the AR contract and 89 percent for the postdoc contract—less than 5,000 members out of 12,000 voted. The mass abstention was an expression of the widespread disgust with the treachery of the UAW.

Prior to the vote, the University of California Rank-and-File Strike Committee (UCRFSC) called on postdocs and researchers to vote "no" on the contract and collaborate with other striking workers to remove the UAW bargaining committees and take control of the struggle into their own hands.

"That's crazy! What happened to solidarity?" a graduate student teaching assistant (TA) told the *World Socialist Web Site* following the vote. "This entire time I was under the impression that we all were going to stay together. No one was going to leave the strike until we all had a contract. That's the whole point of solidarity."

The striking worker continued, "I'm shocked. Their contract definitely does have some good things in it, but it also isn't that great, and it's not what they originally asked for. We still have the academic student employees and the TAs, which is the largest union, and we don't have a contract yet. So it's unfair."

On the same day the agreements were passed, the UC administration announced that the remaining bargaining units, UAW Local 2865 and Student Researchers United (SRU-UAW), had accepted pre-impasse mediation. The move, which originated from the University, will likely place Darrell Steinberg—a longtime Democratic Party operator and mayor of Sacramento—as the so-called independent mediator.

According to a message sent by the locals, both bargaining teams overwhelmingly voted in favor of mediation with the decision passing by 12-7 among Local 2865's bargaining team (BT) and 15-4 among SRU-UAW's BT. The surrender to the university's demands is another move to sabotage the strike.

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Steinberg, who is close to Governor Gavin Newsom, will dictate a contract that is wholly in line with the austerity program of the state Democrats, who control every level of government, including the UC Board of Regents.

Even at this late date, workers are still in a powerful position to prevail, but only if they expand rank-and-file committees throughout the University system to countermand the undemocratic decisions of the UAW bureaucracy and impose the will of striking workers.

The bulk of the workforce, graduate student instructors, are now entering Winter break withholding grades. Graduate students do the majority of educational work on the university campus. While the union has endlessly talked about its "peak power" passing and the need to settle, the reality is that graduate students are in a position to win enormous support from other sections of the working class for their demands.

Far from expanding the strike, however, the UAW is working to clamp down on opposition from the rank and file. Last week it sent out several memos to the membership seeking to delegitimize opposition to the bargaining team as "anti-union." It also reprimanded its members for expressing their discontent on social media and told them to keep it in official union channels. Before that, a rank-and-file member reported that she was physically assaulted at a rally in Sacramento for bringing a sign criticizing the proposed contract as a sellout.

The supposedly "dissident" faction of the bargaining team is arguing that mediation is only a distraction, and that the "Rank and file should only see in this development a sign that they have shifted power away from all who would prefer a business-as-usual contract." How exactly inviting a corporate Democrat to oversee negotiations is a step forward for the rank and file is left unexplained.

UC strikers must be on guard against efforts by the UAW to send remaining strikers back to work as soon as they reach a tentative agreement, overseen by the mediator. This is exactly what ACT-UAW Local 7902 did to 1,600 striking adjunct professors at The New School in New York City over the weekend. After reaching a mediated deal, the UAW officials called off the strike before part-time faculty members even had a chance to see, let alone vote on a contract.

The situation can still be reversed, but time is of the essence. To carry forward this struggle, two things are necessary.

First, it is essential to take control of the struggle out of the hands of the corporatist trade unions. The Bargaining Team should be immediately disbanded and replaced with a democratically elected team by the rank and file and committed to fight for what the strikers need. This can and should be done through a mass strike meeting.

The bargaining teams' conduct in the strike is not an accident but a consequence of their ties to the Democratic Party and through them to the ruling elite. The UAW bargainers have not been merely ineffective, they were directly responsible for the gutting of workers' demands.

Second, in order to actually win their demands it is essential to expand the struggle to other sections of the working class. Graduate students and academic workers are not alone. Millions of workers across California, and around the world, support the strike. Rent and debt are unbearable burdens for the entire working class.

The UC Rank-and-File Strike Committee has called for a turn to dock workers, autoworkers, railroad workers, health care workers, educators and other sections of the working class in the US and internationally. Workers everywhere confront the same basic conditions, and face the same class enemies.

Just as the UC strike is up against the Board of Regents, the Democratic Party's chosen representatives of finance capital in the University of California, the railroad workers have been prevented from striking by a congressional injunction, supported by the Democrats, including the likes of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Uniting the struggle across different layers of the working class is necessary if anything is to be won.

The UC Rank-and-File Strike Committee calls on their fellow workers to build independent rank-and-file strike committees to see this forward. To join, email ucstrikerfc@gmail.com.

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