

University of California strike in danger as UAW promotes Democratic Party mediation

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Academic workers at the University of California are now more than one month into a historic strike—the largest ever in higher education in the US.

The initially 48,000-strong strike of teaching assistants, researchers, and postdocs has expressed a powerful mood of rebellion and intransigence. Facing impossible conditions, with salaries of roughly \$2,000 a month in one of the most expensive places in the world, graduate student workers speak for broad sections of the working class in their rejection of their poverty existence.

Standing against these workers, however, is not simply the University of California system but the United Auto Workers (UAW) bureaucracy. At every step along the way, the UAW local bargaining teams, under the direction of national union officials, have sought to sabotage and demobilize strikers. They have removed central demands from the bargaining table, including Cost-of-Living Adjustments (COLA), and signed a separate deal covering 12,000 postdocs and academic researchers, in a transparent effort to divide and weaken the strike. Union officials have also sought to silence criticism from rank-and-file workers by preventing them from speaking at meetings and physically blocking them from expressing their opposition at protests.

In response, academic workers have begun to rebel, flocking to alternative chat and meeting groups aimed at countering UAW misinformation and scare tactics. Workers across the campuses have formed the University of California Rank-and-File Strike Committee, which has called for the throwing out of the bargaining team and the election of a negotiating committee controlled by the ranks and committed to fight for their demands. The UCRFSC has also called for strikers to appeal directly to broader sections of the working class to fight the Democratic Party-controlled UC administration and its austerity demands.

UAW officials know if they were to bring back the University's insulting offer, it would inflame workers and lead to an overwhelming "no" vote. Because of this, the bargaining team has enthusiastically agreed to Governor Gavin Newsom selecting a so-called pre-impasse mediator. The UAW officials hope the Democratic Party's mediator will give them some cosmetic improvement they could dangle in front of workers to

try to ram through a ratification vote.

At the same time, the UAW and the rest of the union apparatus in California are desperate to prevent the UC strike from being a catalyst for a far broader movement of the working class against persistent inflation and the bipartisan assault on public education and other vital social programs.

This strategy was on full display Wednesday morning at UCLA, where the UAW organized a rally outside a quarterly UC Regents meeting. The event began with a UAW organizer explaining why they had chosen the venue. "We have entered mediation, and we have to keep the pressure on, and that's why we're rallying here today," she said.

She added that the UC Board of Regents has a "direct line of communication with the UC Office of the President" and "they [the UC Regents] have the ear of the governor, Gavin Newsom, who is also here today." Most importantly, she concluded, "they have the power to persuade the UC Office of the President to bargain in good faith and agree to a good contract for graduate workers."

This is utter nonsense. Governor Newsom and the UC Board of Regents are not neutral mediators. They speak for the most powerful corporate interests in the state, which are determined to gut public and higher education.

Who are the Regents the UAW is telling striking workers to appeal to? Here are just a few of the figures that populate this board:

- **Richard Leib**—an ex Lockheed Martin executive involved with charter schools and the intelligence services.

- **Peter Guber**—the CEO of Mandalay Entertainment, past executive of Sony Entertainment, with a net worth around \$1 billion.

- **Maria Anguiano**—an ex-consultant at Barclays Capital and Deloitte involved in the lucrative Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) national charter school system, and the anti-public education Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

- **Ana Matosantos**—appointed this year by Newsom, Matosantos is the ex-director of the California Department of Finance, where, under Brown and Schwarzenegger, she orchestrated historic budget cuts. Likewise sat on the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management and Economic Stability Board, at the appointment of President Obama, imposing a brutal

austerity and privatization program on the island.

• **John Pérez**—cousin of former Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa and another former Democratic Speaker of the State Assembly, spent seven years as a political advisor for the United Food Commercial Workers union before becoming the political director of the California Labor Federation. His bio on the Regents’ site boasts that while he was speaker, he “eliminate[d] the structural deficit that left California’s budget imbalanced for more than a decade, and successfully passed back-to-back balanced, on-time budgets that resulted in across-the-board upgrades in California’s credit rating.”

Along with **Governor Newsom**, another “ex officio member” (automatically a regent by virtue of their role in the state government) is **Tony Thurmond**, the Democratic State Superintendent of Public Instruction. Elected with the support and funding of the California Teachers Association, Thurmond played a major role in ramming through sell-out contracts during the Los Angeles and Oakland teacher strikes in 2019.

These figures are hostile to public education. They are ultra-rich businesspeople and political operatives, with a track record of budget cuts, austerity and privatization. They represent the trinity of multi-millionaires, Democratic Party politicians and union officials that run the state of California.

It is folly to believe these people, who are spearheading the assault on academic workers, can have a change of heart.

A union speaker from UC Irvine told Tuesday’s rally, “Because of us, the governor has stepped up and has recommended an independent mediator who has experience winning fair contracts for labor movements.” But just who is this “independent mediator?”

Darrell Steinberg, the current Democratic mayor of Sacramento, has been appointed by Governor Newsom. But Steinberg is far from “independent,” he is a member of the advisory board of the UC Davis Chancellor and a longtime Democratic Party operative.

Last year, Steinberg worked out a mediated deal between Kaiser Permanente medical foundation and the National Union of Healthcare Workers (NUHW) to end the two-month strike by 2,000 mental health workers in Northern California. The deal he proposed included a 13 percent pay increase over four years, far below the current rate of inflation, and the expansion of labor-management committees, which are designed to cut costs and increase productivity.

Last month, the railroad unions promoted Biden’s Presidential Emergency Board (PEB) as an “independent” force in the railway strike. The PEB sided fully with the railway companies, proposing a contract without any sick days and below-inflation rate raises. This was the basis of the tentative agreement that was rammed down workers’ throats by the Biden administration, aided by the support of “progressive” Democrats Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a member of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), and Bernie Sanders.

Indeed, the DSA has played a similar role in the UC strike,

calling on “Gavin Newsom [to] intervene and let the Board of Regents know that he will not tolerate unfair labor practices in our state!” Such statements have nothing to do with a socialist perspective of uniting workers against the corporate interests controlling the UC. Newsom is a pro-corporate politician with family ties to the Getty, Pritzker and Fisher business fortunes. He is the very force academic workers are striking against.

Several officials from other unions also spoke at the rally, including Yvonne Wheeler, the president of the LA County AFL-CIO, who recently replaced Ron Herrera, whose racist conversations with Democratic LA City Council members became a national scandal. Another speaker was Cecily Myart-Cruz, the president of United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA), which betrayed the 2019 Los Angeles teachers strike. The UTLA abruptly shut down the strike and gave teachers only a few hours to vote on a contract that sanctioned school closures and privatization. This did not prevent Myart-Cruz from speaking endlessly about “solidarity.”

Clearly “solidarity” for the union bureaucracy means something entirely different than what it means for working people. What “solidarity” is there in, for example, sending a quarter of the strikers back to work when the rest have not won a contract, as the UAW has done?

Workers must fight for actual solidarity. This means reaching out to LA teachers, West Coast dockworkers, health care workers, rail workers, and other UC workers and preparing joint action against both corporate-controlled parties and their program of austerity and war. Such solidarity can only be achieved in a rebellion against the union bureaucracy and the expansion of rank-and-file committees as new centers of workers decision-making power.

The struggle of California academic workers has won enormous sympathy. Right now, tens of thousands of workers are withholding grades, causing widespread disruption to higher education in the state. Grading deadlines have been pushed back to around the New Year throughout the UC. The UC clearly hopes a settlement will be rammed through by then.

The way forward is not to roll over for a union sellout but for workers to take the struggle into their own hands.

To get involved with the University of California Rank-and-File Strike Committee, email ucstrikerfc@gmail.com.



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