

The UAW cannot be trusted to oversee the University of California contract vote!

UC Rank-and-File Strike Committee
21 December 2022

The following is a statement by the University of California Rank-and-File Strike Committee (UCRFSC) on the ongoing contract ratification vote by 36,000 teaching assistants, student researchers and other academic workers. To contact the committee, email ucstrikerfc@gmail.com.

This week, 36,000 of us are voting on concessionary tentative agreements brought to us by the UAW, mediator and Sacramento Mayor Darrell Steinberg and the UC Regents. All of these parties are working in unison to get us to accept a deal that will keep us making poverty wages in some of the most expensive regions in the country. Our committee casts its NO vote along with tens of thousands of other strikers who are disgusted that the UAW bargainers would even bring this insulting offer before the membership.

The deal would ensure that we will continue to be rent burdened and includes “raises” which conveniently cut us off from Medi-Cal and food assistance, while not giving us enough to cover our health care and food costs. In addition, nothing is resolved for our disabled and immunocompromised coworkers who continue to face administrative obstacles for accommodations and continued threats to health posed by COVID-19 and the numerous respiratory and airborne viruses still circulating.

UAW bargainers dropped our demands for COLA by the end of week one, along with demands for \$2,000 child care reimbursement, better options for dependent insurance and the removal of NRST fees, which place terrible burdens on our international coworkers.

The UAW is working to divide us; we call for the absolute unity of all academic workers. We were told that everyone would be on strike until contracts were reached for all of us, but the UAW engineered a divide and conquer strategy to push through the contract for Local 5810. We call on the 12,000 postdocs and ARs to stand in unity with us and not cross the picket lines.

This week’s NO Vote campaigns have been led by the rank and file and we hope the experience has removed once and for all the mask of the UAW bureaucracy. The union officials are working against our cause and are resorting to deeply anti-democratic measures to silence opposition. They are also trying to impose this contract on us during the rush of holiday travel, with the voting deadline set for Friday, December 23.

Despite widespread opposition to the concessionary TAs, all the resources of the UAW apparatus are being mobilized to send out mass emails telling workers to vote for this sellout agreement, and, in so doing, undermine the democratic will of the membership.

This was expressed most clearly when Head Steward Connor Jackson told Local 2865 members, “Because a duly elected statewide body of our union voted to endorse a yes vote, it is now the official position of our union. As a result, membership lists and other resources may (only) be used to share information in favor of a yes vote, and to provide neutral information encouraging members to vote. This policy is consistent with how communications regarding the Strike Authorization Vote were

conducted, as well as previous SAVs and contract ratification votes.”

In other words, now that the “duly elected” union leadership has sold out the strike, our dues money, which has been collected on the dot every month, is being utilized to bully strikers into accepting this surrender. Not only are the UAW officials telling us how our dues money will be spent—without the approval of the membership—they are also censoring any dissenting voices.

On Sunday night, a UC Berkeley bargaining team member changed the name of an SRU Signal chat from “srU gotta be kidding me” to “SRU gotta vote YES!” After a firestorm of protest from rank-and-file student researchers, posting permissions were revoked for everyone except administrators. One UC San Diego striker concisely summed up the UAW’s current approach online, noting, “This is dictation and authoritarianism, not democracy.”

The UCRFSC has been warning of the anti-democratic nature of the UAW particularly in light of the recent UAW national general elections, where there was widespread voter suppression and ballot issues that resulted in turnout of only 9 percent of the entire membership—one of the lowest, if not the lowest, turnout for a union conducting direct elections in half a century. The turnout for locals 5810 and 2865 was a shockingly low 2.6 percent.

A 122-page protest filed by socialist candidate Will Lehman provides overwhelming evidence demonstrating that the UAW bureaucracy systematically suppressed voting by rank-and-file workers. Neither national nor local officials took any serious measures to inform the membership a vote was even taking place. Lehman’s protest documents how UAW officials spent far more resources to send get-out-the vote materials for Democrats running in the midterm elections than they did to inform UAW members about the union election.

Nothing was posted on the social media accounts of locals 2856 or 5810 to inform members that the national elections were happening. Regardless of who workers would have voted for, the protest by Lehman is on behalf of the entire membership, which was denied their democratic right to participate in a meaningful election that reflects the democratic will of the membership.

The only reason a national general election was taking place was because of the exposure of a “culture of corruption” in the UAW, which led to the jailing of a dozen UAW officials for fraud, theft and accepting bribes from the auto companies to push through sweetheart deals which cut the wages and working conditions of autoworkers. However, the federal government allowed the same entrenched bureaucracy, which opposed direct elections by the membership, to oversee the election.

The UAW is a union in name only and there is no way we can trust the UAW bureaucracy with the fate of our fight. This is why on December 19 the UC Rank-and-File Strike Committee issued a statement calling for removal of the entire bargaining team (BT), stating, “The existing bargaining teams have proven that they are loyal to the UAW bureaucracy and the Democratic Party, not to academic workers. They must be

removed and replaced by a committee, elected and controlled by the rank and file and committed to the demands we set out at the beginning of our strike.”

Less than two weeks ago, a supermajority of the bargaining team voted in favor (and behind the backs of the rank and file) to bring on board as mediator Sacramento Mayor Darrell Steinberg. The line of the entire BT was that Steinberg was not only neutral, but that he was on the side of workers. The UCRFSC was the only force that warned against these lies and has exposed Steinberg’s close ties to the UC Regents. Significantly, UC Regents President Richard Leib sits on the board of Steinberg Institute; this is only the most egregious of the many connections which prove the warnings of the UCRFSC.

Given the record of the UAW bureaucracy in trampling over our democratic rights it would be worse than naïve to entrust them with counting our ballots in the ratification vote.

That is why we demand rank-and-file oversight of this contract vote. No faction of the UAW leadership can be trusted to inform the membership, oversee the conduct of balloting and count and accurately report the results.

More specifically, we demand:

- Voting must be extended by at least 14 days, through the first week of January, to ensure adequate time for the full democratic process. Many international students are out of the country and most are not on campus and checking emails during the break. There must be time to ensure that anyone who hasn’t received a ballot can vote.

- The UAW must immediately lift the ban on using union resources, including email lists and social media platforms, for those who are building a NO vote against this contract.

- Mass membership meetings must be organized using UAW resources where we must be able to freely discuss the pros and cons of the contract. They must be organized online for the widest participation and vigorously advertised to all strikers.

- Every aspect of this process, from the organization of meetings, mass communication with the membership and distribution and counting of ballots, must be overseen by democratically elected rank-and-file workers, independent of the UAW bureaucracy, from each local at each campus.

- This democratically elected oversight committee will help to make available all aspects of the vote, from breakdown of turnout, to any discrepancies that show issues. We reiterate that oversight of the vote cannot be left in the hands of the UAW bureaucracy and its subordinates in the BT.

Voting down this rotten agreement is only the first step in the tasks before us. We must take measures to ensure that the forward direction of this struggle cannot be sidelined.

We call for the election of a new bargaining team of rank-and-file members, subject to recall at any time. The only contract we will accept is one which includes these non-negotiable demands:

- A minimum of \$54,000 in base pay

- Full COLA

- Child care reimbursement of \$2,000 per month

- Concrete language for full and timely accommodations for disabled students

- Reinstatement of free mass testing, and increased protections against COVID-19 infection

- Drop all Non-Residential Supplemental Tuition (NRST) fees

- UC housing rent capped at 30 percent of base wage

- Five years of guaranteed on-campus housing

- Full coverage for all dependents in UC health insurance

- Rejection of a tier system and attempts to pit some campuses against one another

The UC Regents and the UAW have underestimated our unity and commitment to fight for a better life for ourselves and each other. We also

fight for all our international coworkers, some of whom are too scared of retaliation to join us on the picket lines.

The burdensome \$15,000 annual NRST fees assist with the hyper-exploitation of international workers and are akin to indentured servitude in the many cases where they are forced to pay it themselves and return back to the UC their TA/RA wages to cover these fees. Additional pressure is applied to finish courses in the shortest amount of time, often while also doing other work and research. Many report being forced to take 16 courses in five to six quarters. As one recent letter from an international worker noted, “For many of us, our PhD programs are not just an academic training and a passion, but also quite literally our asylums.”

There is more than enough money to pay for our just demands. The UC Regents and the Democratic Party in California have been at the forefront of attacks on public education and have been spearheading tuition hikes and treating undergraduates as cash cows when higher education should be provided free according to the California Master Plan for Higher Education, which they have eroded.

To all that claim there is no money for such measures, we need only point to the tens of billions of dollars that the Democrats and Republicans have summoned into existence to fund the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine.

The way forward for our strike is not, as some suggest, simply to reject this contract and hope the union brings back a better one. The foundation for our victory must be an active turn to the working class and broadening our strike.

This includes the 120,000 railroaders who Congress and their unions sought to straitjacket, 22,000 West Coast dockworkers kept on the job without a contract for five months by the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), the 1,300 CNH agricultural and construction workers in their seventh month of an open-ended strike, and health care workers facing horrors of the tripledemic in the for-profit health care system. All workers want to fight, and we are fighting the same fight: for human need and thus against the parasitic profit interest of the capitalist system, defended to the hilt by the Democratic and Republican parties and the union bureaucracies.

To do this, we must build democratic, rank-and-file committees, completely independent of and opposed to the entire UAW bureaucracy. We call on all workers who agree with this perspective to contact the UC Workers Rank-and-File Committee today.

To contact the committee, email ucstrikerfc@gmail.com.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact