

Six-week strike of 48,000 University of California academic workers betrayed by the UAW

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26 December 2022

Academic workers at the University of California (UC) voted to accept new tentative agreements Friday, ending a six-week-long strike of 48,000 workers. The strike, fought primarily against the soaring cost of living, gave voice to large sections of the American and international working class who face high rates of inflation and wage stagnation.

While the United Auto Workers (UAW) has palmed off the tentative agreements (TA) as “historic” victories, the struggle of these 48,000 workers was in fact betrayed.

According to the UAW, the nearly 20,000 graduate students in UAW Local 2865, who teach on the UC campus, approved their TA with 11,386 voting yes to 7,097 voting no, or 61.6 to 38.4 percent. Workers in Student Researchers United-UAW (SRU-UAW), representing 17,000 graduate student researchers, voted 68.4 percent in favor of the contract.

The substantial “no” vote—especially for the graduate student teachers, who effectively run the day-to-day operations of many classrooms on the UC campuses—was significant.

Over the last six weeks, graduate student workers have been confronted not only with the utter contempt of the UC administration—run top to bottom by the Democratic Party—but also with the machinations of the UAW.

The strike began in November with a powerful explosion of anger, as grad students, living on take-home salaries of \$20,000 a year, fought for a Cost-of-Living-Adjustment (COLA) to fight inflation. California has one of the highest costs of living in the world, with prices for one-bedroom apartments well over \$2,000 a month at most UC campuses.

Almost immediately, however, the union bargaining team dropped the demand for COLA. This was followed by reducing the strike’s demand for a \$54,000 base-annual pay down to \$44,000. Ultimately, the UAW advocated for \$34,000 (and then, only after two more years of inflationary pressure).

The UAW quickly dropped other demands: disability access, COVID-19 protections, better dependent health care, more affordable child care and an end to the exorbitant fees for international students.

In response, a growing rebellion of rank-and-file workers took shape. At union meetings and in other venues, thousands of graduate students spoke against the UAW bargaining team, leading to a concerted effort to silence dissenting views.

In one incident, a graduate striker brought a sign to a UAW rally in Sacramento. The sign simply called into question the supposedly “historic” gains the struggle had made. She was reportedly verbally and physically attacked, as the UAW bargaining team sought to prevent her from holding the sign.

Critically, in early December, the UAW divided the strike, having 11,000 postdoctoral researchers settle separately with the university, in an effort at divide and conquer.

On December 1, a group of workers formed the University of California Rank-and-File Strike Committee (UCRFSC), which called on academic workers to organize independently of the UAW apparatus to coordinate and expand the strike. It urged that a new strategy was needed, based on turning to other sections of the working class to find allies in the fight against inflation and low pay.

Fearing resistance to the sellout contract that it and

the UC had prepared, the UAW promoted Democratic Party mediation. Governor Gavin Newsom called upon Democratic Sacramento Mayor Darrell Steinberg, a longtime enforcer of austerity and budget cuts, to broker the final agreements.

As the *World Socialist Website* warned, the UAW used Steinberg and a broader group of California trade union bureaucrats to end the strike.

They intentionally scheduled the vote in the days leading up to the Christmas holiday, hoping fatigue and confusion would stop a “no” vote. Still, nearly 40 percent of graduate student teachers voted against the contract.

Graduate student workers took to social media following the vote to express their hostility and dissatisfaction.

Jorge Cruz, a Ph.D. student at UCLA, wrote on Twitter, “This whole process was truly an eye opener in many ways: 1) the UC really doesn’t care about paying us a living wage 2) my union did a terrible job at bargaining.”

Anne Fosburg, a Ph.D. student at UC Santa Cruz, wrote, “I feel gutted. Yes, we fought so hard. Yes, we built real, unprecedented transformative rank and file power. But we also lost. We’re up against really powerful forces & I believe we fought as hard as we could but this contract is unlivable for so many. Devastating.”

Writing on Twitter, Fosburg continued, “This contract sacrifices marginalized workers, many of whom were the people putting in the care work, the reproductive labor that was the backbone of this strike (labor that the UAW never valued, never recognized).”

It is important for graduate student workers to understand that they did not lose the strike. It was betrayed.

The powerful movement of workers found sympathy among broad sections of workers: Railway workers, who had just had a contract imposed against them by the Democratic Party; K-12 teachers, who have faced multiple sellouts throughout the country in the last few years; and health care workers, whose strikes in California have been repeatedly sabotaged and stymied.

In the days before the vote, the rebellious attitude of graduate workers concerned the ruling class. The *New York Times* worried, “Will University of California Academic Workers End the Strike?” on December 22,

noting the “significant opposition” that had arisen at some campuses, including past wildcat actions.

The struggle of UC academic workers and academic workers across the country is far from over.

What is critical is that graduate students and other academic workers learn the lessons of these struggles. Above all, this conflict has demonstrated that the UAW apparatus is not on the side of the workers it claims to represent. Like in auto, where the union has conspired with the companies to impose sellout contracts, the UAW has, too, conspired with the UC to betray graduate students.

The massive UAW apparatus, composed of thousands of functionaries making six-figure salaries, exists for the purpose of subordinating workers to the corporations and the ruling class. The apparatus is a police force over the working class, as academic workers are beginning to experience firsthand.

This role was clearly expressed during the UAW leadership elections, the final stage of which corresponded with the UC strike. The apparatus did everything it could to suppress the vote and prevent workers from even knowing it was happening. Turnout was less than 10 percent. Among UC graduate students, it was only 2.6 percent.

In particular, the UAW apparatus did not want workers to know about the candidacy of socialist worker Will Lehman, who based his campaign on the fight for rank-and-file power against the apparatus.

The conditions that drove the struggle of UC academic workers will not abate. This coming year portends an enormous eruption of working class anger, including among academic workers, as the disastrous policies of the financial elite drive the economy into recession. The success, however, of this growing movement of workers depends on breaking free from the trappings of the union bureaucracy and their allies in the Democratic Party.

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



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