

University of California workers fight to appeal UAW sellout contract, following anti-democratic union betrayal

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Hundreds of academic workers at the University of California have signed petitions to appeal the recent ratification of two tentative agreements following an anti-democratic vote orchestrated by the United Auto Workers (UAW) apparatus. The appeals provide documentation of how the UAW used union resources to ram through a “yes” vote, despite substantial opposition, in violation of workers’ rights.

The appeal attempt follows the betrayal of a six-week-long strike of 48,000 workers – the largest higher education strike in US history – by the massive, unaccountable apparatus that runs the UAW and the UC locals.

On November 14th, the 20,000 graduate students in Local 2865 who do most of the day-to-day teaching at grading at the University of California went on strike. They were joined by another 28,000 researchers who run the daily work of the laboratories central to the university.

The strike paralyzed operations on the UC campuses. About forty percent of graduate student teachers voted to oppose the tentative agreements that were brought by the UAW bargaining team, and to continue the strike.

But the appeal, signed by over three hundred workers, states that the “election was conducted in violation of Local Bylaws, the International UAW Constitution, and the UAW Ethical Code of Conduct.”

It charges the UAW apparatus with:

• Giving “insufficient notice to membership”

• “[O]penly and extensively utiliz[ing] official union resources (including staff, social media, email lists, membership lists, internal voting records, monetary resources, and more) to campaign for a “yes” vote.

• Denying the same resources to those calling for a “no” vote.

The appeal goes into detail about the ways in which the UAW apparatus abused its resources to ensure a “yes” vote in the lead up to and during the December 19th to December 23rd voting period. These actions include:

• The sending of mass emails recommending a “yes” vote by UAW 2865 and withholding the opinion of those opposed to the contract. These emails were sent on December 16th, December 19th, and December 23rd.

• The sending of mass text messages using a paid service encouraging a “yes” vote. Texts were sent on December 19th and paid for by union funds.

• UAW Local 2865 used twitter to promote 60 tweets calling for a “yes” vote – but none for a “no” vote. Similarly, used Instagram for the “yes” campaign, specifically targeting those against the contract with a “get the facts” campaign.

• UAW local provided a tentative agreement draft with errors. For example, it did not include the necessary bold font, which denotes a change to the contract language, around a new clause that says academic student employees may “be subjected to discipline or dismissal” if they respect other picket lines.

• UAW Staff leadership encouraged their colleagues and friends who erroneously received ballots to vote in the election, but were not eligible, to vote “yes.”

During this time, the UAW had hired a high-end public relations firm, Brightline Communications, to help ensure a “yes” vote. The appeal notes that “the form and content of UAW 2865 social media graphics campaigning for a “yes” vote during the contract ramification election bear a resemblance to those previously created by Brightline Communications.” The PR firm works for “Democratic PACs, labor unions and members of Congress.”

The information presented in the appeal only further confirms the hostile attitude the UAW has to its own

members. In addition to what the appeal mentions, the UAW apparatus tried to sabotage the strike by:

- Dividing it in early December, settling separately for over ten thousand postdoctoral researchers.

- Preventing dissident rank-and-file members from speaking at Zoom meetings throughout the strike.

- Calling for a vote in the days leading up to Christmas, with most workers off campus and many out of the state or country.

- Allegedly physically harassing a dissident rank-and-file protester at a rally in Sacramento in December.

- Dropping central demands of the strike – including around COLA, disabilities, parent workers, and international workers.

- Advocating for Democratic Party mediator, Sacramento Mayor Darrell Steinberg. Steinberg, a long-time austerity proponent, worked quickly to end the strike in collaboration with the UC, the state government, and the UAW.

The workers' appeal will now be sent to the United Auto Workers Public Review Board (PRB).

The PRB, however, is no neutral forum.

In 2015, the UAW held a contract vote for its Ford workers. The UAW claimed the contract passed by 51.4 percent.

A worker at Ford's Dearborn Truck Plant in suburban Detroit appealed the vote. In a letter to the WSWS, the worker explained, "The outcome of this contract vote was not legitimate. This is not the first time such things have happened at Local 600, and it doesn't just affect Ford workers."

The worker demonstrated evidence of at least 800 unaccounted for ballots at his plant, following panic that the "no" vote was strong enough to win. His request to recount the ballots was denied.

The UAW, over a year-and-a-half, rejected this worker's appeal eight times. The PRB said that if it honored the workers' request it would "disenfranchise the members who voted to ratify the agreement," dismissing worker's concerns over ballot stuffing as "procedural objections."

Workers at the University of California should also know that only weeks before their strike began, the UAW disenfranchised tens of thousands of academic workers of a chance to vote in the UAW presidential elections and hundreds of thousands of workers more broadly.

The fact that an election was even called was due to the explosive bribery scandal – showing UAW collaborating with car companies. The leadership of the UAW

campaigned against holding a vote in the first place.

In the election, only nine percent of the entirety of eligible voters in the UAW voted due to widespread attempts by the union to prevent access or even knowledge of the vote.

The UAW leadership's silence on the election had an impact. For example, at the California State University System, only 29 ballots were returned out of 11,000 members.

A chief concern of the UAW during this time was the candidacy of Will Lehman – a socialist candidate who called for a rank-and-file rebellion against the UAW apparatus. Lehman won 15 percent of the vote in Local 2865, at the UC campuses. However, only 921 votes were cast at that local. In mid-December, Lehman filed a formal protest with the court-appointed monitor overseeing the election. Lehman's protest shed light on the suppression of the vote of academic workers at UC, CSU and the University of Washington systems, where turnout was below 1 percent. (We encourage all UC student workers to read the report here).

The anti-democratic vote at the University of California strike expresses the increasingly hostile character of the UAW apparatus, and the bureaucracies that run the trade unions, to the workers they ostensibly represent.

As the cost of living rises, and the crisis of the global economy deepens, workers are ever more openly coming into confrontation with their employers. But as this happens, they too find themselves battling against their own unions, who have long ceased to be democratic expressions of the membership, and increasingly operate as a form of labor management.

Workers at the UC have formed their own rank and file strike committee designed to take the struggle out of the hands of the UAW apparatus for this reason.



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