

University of California UAW members denounce voter suppression in UC contract vote and national officers election

Our reporters
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Four weeks since the United Auto Workers (UAW) announced the ratification of two separate tentative agreements formally ending the strike of 36,000 graduate student workers and student researchers at the University of California (UC), many academic workers have remained aggravated and distrustful of the conclusion of the largest academic strike in US history.

The strike began on November 14, with roughly 48,000 graduate student workers, student researchers, postdocs and academic researchers putting forward demands for COLA (cost-of-living adjustment), adequate child care reimbursements and COVID protections on campus. None of the four contracts rammed through by the UAW, met any of the strikers' central demands.

Hundreds of UC workers have signed petitions appealing the anti-democratic methods used by UAW local 2865 and Student Researchers United (SRU-UAW) to force through the ratifications. Strikers have also filed an appeal that alleges that the locals violated UAW bylaws. The appeal details that the UAW gave "insufficient notice to membership" about the vote, extensively used union resources to campaign for a "yes" vote, and denied resources to workers calling for a "no" vote.

The strike coincided with the first direct election for the UAW's national leadership. Will Lehman, a rank-and-file autoworker and UAW presidential candidate, has filed a protest with the UAW monitor detailing voter suppression throughout the election. Only 9 percent of the 1.1 million eligible voters participated in the UAW election. Among the 48,000 UC strikers only 1,200 ballots were cast, or just 2.5 percent. Lehman, who is the only candidate that filed a protest, is demanding that all candidates be allowed to participate in the runoff election, or that new elections be held.

The monitor has not responded to the protest, but recently held a debate excluding all candidates except Shawn Fain and incumbent Ray Curry, both lifelong UAW bureaucrats who each received less than 4 percent of the votes from eligible UAW members.

A Humanities graduate student at UC Irvine said, "I definitely think that both the vote to ratify the contract and the UAW election were heavily influenced by those at the top, and these same people played a role in determining the outcomes of these votes.

"For example, in the UC vote, resources were blocked from people wanting to mobilize in a 'vote no' campaign. In the UAW leadership election, many UAW members were not sent ballots or were not notified that there was an election going on.

"I've been talking with a lot of people since the strike ended. Many were remarking how we brought up the COLA issue because it was such a central demand, and we saw how it was immediately dropped. A lot of people were very dissatisfied and very frustrated with that because that was one of the bigger demands. There were other important demands such as COVID protection, disability protection and things like that that just got dropped quickly.

"And on top of all that, there was the whole undermining of the democratic process overall. We didn't have access to many of the resources as the people who were for the contract. We didn't have access to the same resources. But when we voted to go on strike, everyone had access.

"Will's campaign and protest exposed the same sort of things about the UAW. I mean, nobody really even knew there was an election going on. And we had several meetings during the strike with members from the National UAW. They came in to talk to us, and they

didn't tell us there was an election going on.

"Right now with the Fain-Curry debate in the UAW election, they used the word 'apathy' to blame the rank and file for the low turnout even though the bureaucracy deliberately didn't tell the membership about it.

"We had the same thing with our strike. The numbers on the picket lines started to drop, and then the union dropped the demand for COLA. Then the union was saying the rank and file were 'apathetic' and didn't care about the strike anymore. I don't think we were apathetic at all. If the union leadership was fighting for what was right, there would have been more people picketing.

"It was a sellout contract. The way our contract was pushed on us and the way the UAW elections happened where there was voter suppression, you can see almost like it was a premeditated outcome. They clearly wanted it to happen that way, obviously.

"Will's protest exposed how the union manipulated the election by not notifying people that there was an election, and in our case, the union was denying the resources to people who were against the contract and wanting to vote no on it. It shows that there was literally a decision being made before it was even being voted on.

"I must say, this whole experience of the strike was a very eye-opening experience. I learned that the people in the union are not for us. They know some of the most powerful people in California. Yes, it was definitely very, very eye opening."

Mariah, a remote reader at UC Berkeley with two other jobs, said about the strike, "At first I was really excited because I saw the potential of what the possibilities were, the great possibilities that could have come from this strike. I was calling people and texting people, encouraging them to withhold labor or participate in the strike. And then I started to notice how inaccessible certain aspects of it were, and a lot of people were being left out. We would have Zoom calls [for bargaining] and only 500 people would be allowed, but that's nowhere near the amount of people who had a voice in it.

"I was attending bargaining sessions and it was like they were just backing off what people wanted. Important points of bargaining having to do with housing, pay, child care. We really do have the leverage, so it was confusing to me. Then I got an email from Berkeley saying this is the final offer the UC is going to do.

"Then the union insisted yes, vote yes. There was a lot of advertisement for voting yes. I've studied social media for awhile and one of the biggest red flags are companies who spend a lot of money on advertisements.

"Rank and file members were insisting that we can get more if we withhold grading. I don't make most of my income from UC Berkeley, but a lot of people who have children or have disabilities were speaking out. The most vulnerable were insisting that this was a bad contract."

After some discussion about Will Lehman's campaign and the connection between voter suppression in the national election and the UC contract one, she responded, "I knew about the election, but I wasn't privy to the politics or who to vote for. What you are saying makes sense. Even if you look at the UAW's social media the whole comment section is damning. People are saying 'you sold us out' and 'you people are evil.' It is obvious that something is not how it is supposed to be, and that power is not really given to the people [in the rank-and-file]."

Anger has continued to build in California last week, after the UC administration sent out attestation forms. The university is demanding that workers self report on their activity during the strike, in order for the administration to dock pay.

Tyler, a graduate student worker at UC Davis, said, "The union is saying we are legally obligated to fill out the form, but that we should include a 'protest' saying we oppose this. These forms were never mentioned before, during the strike, and I think more people would have requested strike pay if they knew."

A number of workers on social media have shared screenshots showing that the form contains metadata, which indicates the form was originally drafted by a UAW legal adviser.

The WSWS encourages all academic workers opposed to the contract and actions of the UAW bureaucracy to join the UC Rank-and-File Strike Committee by contacting ucstrikerfc@gmail.com.



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