

UAW bureaucrats collaborate with UC to retroactively dock strikers' pay

Our reporters
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Less than one month after the historic strike of 48,000 academic workers at the University of California (UC), their employers, the UC Regents, are attempting to retroactively dock the wages of those who struck. Unable to distinguish between those who struck and workers who did not, wages were paid out to all members, who on average make \$2,200 a month. The vindictive maneuver, if carried out, will claw back about \$900 from the majority of workers who already live below the poverty line and are reliant on aid and food pantries.

The powerful six-week strike ended due to the betrayal of rank-and-file workers by the United Auto Workers (UAW) bureaucracy, which sabotaged the strike and accepted and pushed a contract that was favorable only to the UC. Now the UAW apparatus is helping the UC collect attestation forms that will be used to dock pay. The UAW wrote to the membership falsely claiming that “the University is entitled to such information, so you should answer truthfully and accurately.” The UAW’s notice merely said that members should include or change language in the form that would supposedly create an administrative hurdle for UC.

The academic workers and faculty received an email from the UC on January 13 requesting that strikers sign attestation forms indicating whether they had withheld labor during the strike and to indicate the time frame they struck. In McCarthyite fashion, faculty members are also being asked to attest to if they engaged in sympathy strike actions and withheld labor. One worker expressed fear that if attestation forms are not returned, the UC may ask faculty to name who was on strike.

The form includes the following language, “You are a member of a bargaining unit that has engaged in a strike at the University. Therefore, it is necessary that you confirm which days or hours, if any, that you withheld your labor during the work stoppage.” The stated deadline to submit these forms is January 23.

There are growing questions about the role played by UAW bureaucrats in helping the university dock strikers’ pay. One UC academic worker identified the author of the

attestation form as UAW official Kavitha Iyengar, who is apparently a legal adviser to the UAW. As recently as 2020, Iyengar served as president of the UC-wide UAW Local 2865 while pursuing her Ph.D. in Jurisprudence and Social Policy at UC Berkeley. She is currently on the Executive Board of Local 2865 as the Northern Vice President. This document authorship listing indicates at the very least that the UAW assisted UC in drafting this attestation form.

Furthermore, the legal basis for such statements is highly questionable. A similar form was distributed to UC faculty, who in many cases canceled classes in solidarity with the strike. In response, the UC Santa Cruz (UCSC) Faculty Association has filed a January 17 cease-and-desist letter arguing that UC’s action is illegal.

The role of the UAW bureaucracy in helping the UC Regents claw back pay from workers is further proof that this bureaucratic apparatus is entirely opposed to the interests of the rank-and-file members. As many workers have noted, the UAW’s debt-collecting was likely part of the deal that was accepted behind closed doors.

Facing a barrage of anger, Local 2865 has attempted to save face, tweeting from its official account, “No one in the union authored or agreed to this form. Kavitha’s name appears because she wrote on the UC’s document that it is unlawful to dock pay without consent—UC rejected this. If the university does move forward with unlawful pay docking, the union will fight it.”

However, workers have snapped back, noting the UAW apparatus’ loyalties are clear in the language it has used to coerce workers to complete the form, pointing out that the union’s communication to workers stated, “The University is entitled to such information, so you should answer truthfully and accurately.”

The UAW has responded by sending conflicting messages to strikers, encouraging them to truthfully complete and return the form; in others asking them to cross out sections of the form but still sign and return it; with others calling on workers not to return the form. There are no doubt concerns by the UAW apparatus that such blatant anti-worker

activities will spark a struggle they are unable to control.

This past week at a January 17 meeting of the rank-and-file membership, workers at UC Santa Cruz (UCSC) voted unanimously against submitting attestation forms. It is significant that UCSC was the epicenter of the 2019-2020 Cost-of-Living Adjustment (COLA) wildcat strike and where UCSC strikers voted in large margins against the current contract.

A student at UC Berkeley told the WSWs, “I received two emails: the attestation form from the university and an email from the union telling us to change some wording in the form. My faith in the union right now is zero. They are saying the school has a legal right to send this form to us, but if we don’t fill it out we should contact them.

“When the strike started, the union said that the university could dock our pay as a bargaining move but didn’t mention it could happen later. If our pay is docked, I am expecting the UAW to just say ‘we sent you strike pay’ and that’s it.”

Another worker at UC Irvine told the WSWs, “It is very political depending on the campus. Where UCSC voted to not fill out the forms no matter what, things at UCI are ‘neutral’ where they’re telling us that they will support whatever we decide, but that we should answer truthfully and lawfully. Several of the people I know that campaigned for a ‘no’ vote [on the contract] with me are willing to withhold answering the attestation forms. But myself and others have been explicitly told by faculty we worked for that we would be reported if they’re asked to do so.”

The workers also noted, “Both of the BT [bargaining team] members at UCI voted in favor of most concessions throughout negotiations, and we’re seeing the responses to attestation forms also follow that pattern now too and it seems like the current union leadership is assisting with attestation forms, whether through contractual agreement, I’m not sure. But since Kavitha [the legal adviser] was found within metadata on Qualtrics to be the author of one of the forms, it has heightened scrutiny from some factions of membership.”

UC workers are going through a critical experience, and the fight is not over. Just a month ago the largest strike in higher education in world history brought the powerful and multibillion-dollar UC system to its knees in California, the world’s fifth-largest economy. What this experience must make clear is that workers face not only the UC Regents—including Regent Gavin Newsom, Darrell Steinberg, the predatory Blackstone Group and the entire Democratic Party—but also the UAW bureaucracy, which has exposed itself as an obstacle to meeting the just demands of the rank and file.

All the central demands of the strike were betrayed by the UAW apparatus. The powerful strike could have and should

have continued until all the demands of the strikers were met, which included: an annual salary of \$54,000 year, an end to NRST (Non-Resident Supplemental Tuition) fees, \$2,000/month child care reimbursements, an end to the red tape for disabled workers, COVID-19 protections and health care.

This strike was sabotaged by the UAW bureaucracy, which used workers’ dues money to hire a PR firm and push for a “yes” vote on the sellout contract. As the rights of UC workers were being trampled on by a snap vote over the agreement that dropped all the central demands of workers, the same bureaucracy was riding roughshod over the democratic rights of all UAW members as it systematically suppressed voting by rank-and-file workers in its national elections, which was itself called due to a widespread corruption scandal that jailed a dozen leaders of the organization.

Socialist autoworker and candidate for UAW president Will Lehman filed a formal protest to the Monitor overseeing the election which outlined shocking revelations of widespread voter suppression, including the fact that more ballots were marked “return to sender” (110,000) than ballots cast (104,000) in the election, where only 9 percent of the entire membership voted. And the real participation by rank-and-file workers was closer to 6 percent.

The attestation pay back forms are only the most recent expression of the hostility of the UAW and trade union bureaucracies to the rank and file. Workers must organize themselves into rank-and-file committees to harness their strength across all campuses and take the power out of the hands of the bureaucrats. Join the UC Rank-and-File Strike Committee by emailing ucstrikerfc@gmail.com and read its latest statement.



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