

University of Washington librarians and publishing workers set to strike

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Around 130 librarians and publishing workers at the University of Washington (UW) in the Seattle metro area are ready to launch a second strike on Wednesday, January 25 if an agreement is not reached. The workers, who are members of the UW Libraries Union, voted to authorize a strike by 94 percent in November. The workers are fighting for higher wages to meet the rising cost of living in one of the most expensive cities in the United States.

The workers voted to establish the UW Libraries Union, which is affiliated with the Service Employees International Union Local 925, in June 2021. University administrators have refused to agree to terms on its first contract with the union, although negotiations have been going on since October 2021.

In October 2022, a year after negotiations started, the union authorized a one-day strike with pickets across all three campuses. Over 50 workers participated that day, according to the *Seattle Times*.

The dragging out of contract negotiations has further eroded the living standards of the UW librarians and workers at UW Press, the university's academic publishing unit. Many employees have not seen any raises since prior to the pandemic. Since then, the cost of living has increased at least 11 percent. The average rent for an apartment in the Seattle area is \$2,324 and like the rest of the country, gas and groceries have become more expensive because of inflation. Prior to negotiations, staff typically got a 2 percent increase each year, which effectively meant a deep cut in real wages.

University administration has used the establishment of the union to justify the wage freeze. "The employer is required by law to maintain the status quo for wages and working conditions until there is an agreement with the union," wrote UW spokesperson Michelle Ma. In reality, the administration has a financial incentive to drag negotiations out for as long as possible.

"We've been in contract negotiations for over a year," Conor Casey, head of the Labor Archives of Washington at UW, said to the UW publication *The Daily* in November. "That's not normal... a lot of the reason for the timeline is because they haven't come to the bargaining sessions prepared or engaged with [our] proposals."

"We are embarrassingly out of touch in terms of our starting pay for librarians, even for regional peers," Casey said. "Community college librarians get paid \$20,000 more per year to start. Their contract is nine months, and they work a 30-hour week, whereas we work 40 hours a week [for 12 months]."

On April 1, 2022, Jason Sokoloff, Head of the Foster School of Business Libraries and member of the UW Library Union bargaining team, wrote a guest editorial for *The Daily*. In it, he said, "With billions of dollars in funding, UW routinely touts its position among the world's leading research institutions and its library as the 'heart' of the university. Probing past the rhetoric, though, it is clear that we are laboring under cardiac arrest. While the UW may be in the top 10 for research, the librarians and library professionals who keep the heart pumping don't fare as well."

Going on 20 years as a worker at UW Press, Beth Fuget told *The Daily* that ULWA has lost 20 percent of its bargaining unit in the last year. Fuget said that most comparable university publishing houses get over twice the funding that UW Press gets. "[Not only are we] understaffed compared to most of our peers, our workload is unusually heavy," Fuget said. "We publish a lot of award winning books, but it's largely because of the unpaid overtime of [our] staff, and that's not fair, and it's not sustainable."

During the strike on October 13, UW Libraries administrators indicated that they would welcome mediation by the state's Public Employment Relations Commission (PERC) to "help" the bargaining process.

Union officials promoted this as a sign that the university would start to take the bargaining process seriously. The parties have had 35 virtual negotiation sessions in total and nine with PERC mediators since the one-day strike last October.

PERC is not a neutral body. All three of its members were appointed by Democratic Governor Jay Inslee, who has diverted billions from public education and other vital services to hand over massive tax cuts to Boeing, Microsoft and other giant corporations. Every level of government in the state is run by the Democratic Party, which no less than their Republican counterparts, has been spearheading the attack on academic workers, including at the University of California to The New School in New York City.

UW administrators have been posting the latest updates to negotiations online, and as of January 10, 2023 the two parties seem to be far apart on salaries. The university has proposed a minimum salary of \$60,000 for an assistant librarian, while the union has countered with a minimum salary of \$72,000. Most professional librarians are required to get a master's degree, and the current average student debt for those who have a master's is \$80,000.

With no raises in three years, the library employees are in no mood to compromise. But to fight they need a new strategy to unite all UW workers, across the various unions, and broader sections of the working class, including Seattle area teachers, who have been engaged in fight against austerity and social inequality.

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UW workers need to form rank-and-file committees to outline their own nonnegotiable set of demands, including inflation-busting raises and Cost-of-Living Adjustment (COLA) protection. These committees will transfer decision-making power from the SEIU bureaucrats to rank-and-file librarians and UW Press workers.

This is necessary because the highly paid officials in the SEIU and other unions have an unbroken record of betrayal and collusion with big business. This includes the recent sellout of the strike by 48,000 teaching assistants, researchers and other academic workers at the University of California. Despite the determination of striking workers and the popular support for their struggle, their struggle was shut down by the United Auto Workers bureaucracy, which signed a deal that ignored all of the workers' demands to end poverty-level wages, for COLA and other protections.

At the University of Washington, thousands of members

of UAW Local 4121, which includes UW graduate students, post docs and other student workers, were not even informed that the UAW was holding its first-ever direct election of top officers due to the exposure of widespread union corruption. As a result, less than 1 percent of the 9,000 UAW members on UW campuses voted in the election.

Fearing that it would be thrown out of power, the entrenched UAW leadership deliberately suppressed the vote, leading to a turnout nationally of only 9 percent of the 1.1 million UAW members who were eligible to vote and a current "runoff" between two long-time bureaucrats. Will Lehman, a Mack Trucks worker and socialist candidate for UAW president, has issued an official protest against this travesty and is calling for a rerun of the election.

During the University of California strike, Lehman urged academic workers to establish rank-and-file committees. "You, the workers, have to decide what your demands need to be. I've seen the call for a 100 percent starting pay increase to \$54,000—even that is not enough. What it needs to be is whatever is needed for a living wage in California. The state is the richest in the country and has large numbers of billionaires. We reject the lie that there is no money to pay workers a living wage."

The same can be said of Seattle and the surrounding area, which has become a center of wealth and billionaires with Boeing, Microsoft and Amazon leading the way. The last four decades have seen an attack on public education throughout the nation as banks and other private institutions continue to enrich themselves while the wages of the working class have been suppressed. At the same time, the Biden administration is squandering billions on the military and the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, which threatens to erupt in a nuclear World War III.

The determination of UW workers to fight for decent living standards is part of a growing, worldwide movement of the working class. To win this struggle and take forward the fight to defend the right to high-quality public education, rank-and-file workers must take the initiative into their own hands.



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