

“The UAW didn’t think there would be people pushing back”: University of California worker reviews experiences during six-week strike

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In November, 48,000 workers in the University of California system began the largest strike by higher education workers in the history of the United States. For six weeks, the low paid academic workers, who are the backbone of the giant institution, waged a powerful fight for substantial wage increases, cost-of-living protection and other demands. Like their low-wage counterparts at universities across the US, large numbers of UC workers live below the poverty line and rely on state assistance.

Despite the grad student workers’ determination to fight and the public support they won, the United Auto Workers (UAW) forced workers to accept a pro-management agreement that included an annual base salary of \$34,000, which is below the yearly cost of rent in many California cities. The UAW bureaucracy rejected strikers’ demands for a doubling of annual pay from \$27,000 to \$54,000, along with COLA to protect them from inflation. To add insult to injury, workers will not reach the \$34,000 mark until the Fall of 2024.

Numerous other concessions were made, including dropping the demands for \$2,000 per month in child care reimbursements, ending punishing fees for international student workers and increased accessibility for disabled workers. The UAW dropped the majority of the demands by the end of week two, leading to a direct clash between rank-and-file workers and the UAW apparatus. That latter functioned, not as a representative of academic workers, but as a tool of the UC Regents, Governor Gavin Newsom and the Democratic Party, and the corporate interests they serve.

Camila is a first-year graduate student at UC Irvine (UCI). Commenting on the deal the UAW accepted, she told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “I personally voted no, and I also campaigned for a no vote at UCI.”

She said the UAW bargaining team’s decision to drop COLA and dependent health care was “very disheartening.” She added, “Not a lot of that was carried over, if any at all. It did feel at one point that we were used. This is what we struck for, but this is marginal. Two percent of crap is still crap.” Even though the paltry raises are “still not enough,” she added, “we won’t even see any of it until at least October of 2024.”

Camila noted that the UAW bureaucracy used numerous undemocratic methods to silence the will of rank-and-file workers who wanted to continue striking until their original demands were met. She pointed to Zoom calls and bargaining sessions, which UAW officials limited to 500 people. The whole process, she said, “was inaccessible to the 48,000 workers we had on strike initially.”

Rank-and-file members, who demanded an end to the concessions and objected to the agreement, were accused of “bullying and harassing” bargaining team members because they made critical comments on chat groups. Camila countered, “Most of the people that were in the chat were

talking about COLA, dependent health care and other valid questions, and they were asking to be heard. They were silenced, and people had no idea how to contact the bargaining team. Many felt like they weren’t heard, and this was their best bet to do so.”

She continued, “In the Zoom meetings, our calls for a progressive stack were ignored,” she said, referring to demands that members with critical positions be given sufficient time to air their views and win support. “They would answer two or three questions, and then the zooms were all shut down. We were given weird messaging and told, ‘If you have questions, you should approach [local union officers] on the picket line.’ But not a lot of people were physically able to be there.”

Despite the groundswell of anger against the agreement, the UAW accepted it and quickly proceeded to a ratification vote over the holiday week December 19-23, when many workers were out of town. Mass membership meetings were not held, and the Brightline public relations firm worked overtime to churn out posts on social media and stories with all the major newspapers celebrating what was falsely portrayed as a “victory” for workers. Union representatives cynically told students to “focus on the positive of what came out.”

Camila was part of a widespread rank-and-file “no” vote campaign, which was prevented from using UAW resources—paid for by workers themselves—to defeat the sellout contract. By contrast, “yes” campaigners were given all the resources they needed to ram through the deal.

“There is a lot of resentment against those pushing for the ‘yes’ vote, especially because less than week later, we saw the news about Blackstone,” Camila said, referring to UC’s decision to invest \$4 billion in the real estate arm of the giant private equity firm.

“We don’t necessarily know too much about what was talked about during ‘sidebars’ with the UCOP (University of California Office of the President). The bargaining team as a whole tried to justify having sidebars with the UC, claiming it was helpful to have more context, but they will never make that public. Why are they having sidebars? Is that necessarily appropriate to a negotiation process that’s supposed to be completely public? I don’t think so.”

During the vote, workers became aware that some could vote on both the SRU (Student Researchers United-UAW) and the UAW Local 2865 contracts if they were or were ever going to be in both unions at some point in their studies due to current or future research funding. However, there were many questions on how this was carried out and communicated to the membership.

Camila told the WWS, “There was also a loophole that if you were an

ASE (Academic Student Employee) like a first-year like myself, and if you were told by a professor who was working with you that you may have funding in the near future, regardless of whether it's true or not, you were told you could vote on both contracts. That was true for me. I had already received by 'word of mouth' that I would be given some sort of research opportunity, and that is a proposal that is protected by the union.

"I did not realize I could vote in both, until a few days before the ratification vote started. Those who were campaigning for the 'yes' vote, who were a majority of the leadership and visible figures like stewards, they were already reaching out to people who they knew would vote yes and telling them they should vote in both units if they're ASE versus GSR (Graduate Student Researcher).

"Yeah, I voted twice, but that was because I have the ability. But not everyone could. So it was definitely a dirty trick. It was a dirty tactic. I know that."

UAW officials insisted that the deal they presented was the best workers could expect. At the same time, they said the only alternative to accepting the rotten contract was a "long haul" strike. This amounted to a threat of financial ruin for the struggling workers, given the fact that the UAW limited strike pay to the starvation ration of \$400 a week.

Despite this campaign to break the resistance of striking workers, a powerful campaign to reject the contract emerged across every campus. "Campaigning for the 'no' vote meant we had to fall upon a lot of mutual aid since we couldn't use the union's financial resources," Camila noted.

On the evening of December 23, the UAW announced the ratification of the deal, claiming that it had passed by 61.6 percent in UAW Local 2865 and by 68.4 percent in SRU-UAW.

After securing its deal, UC officials began a vindictive campaign to claw back wages they claim were mistakenly paid to workers during the strike. On January 13, academic workers and faculty received an email from the UC requesting that strikers sign attestation forms reporting the duration of their participation in the strike.

Many questions have arisen about the role played by the UAW in helping the UC identify strikers to dock their pay, particularly after the name of a legal adviser to the UAW, Kavitha Iyengar, was identified as the author of the attestation form.

"One of the first concessions was going from a guaranteed 12-month contract to keeping it at nine months. So the attestation forms re-traumatized us because they want us to pay them back. People try to save up for the summer months to get by, but they will be unable to do that." Camila said she expects to be docked \$950.

The UAW has responded by sending conflicting messages to strikers. At UCI's last monthly membership meeting, Camila reported, "The union said they would support any decision we make, but they weren't exactly telling us not to fill it out. They did tell us we could face disciplinary action if we didn't and that the UC has plans to go to our departments and ask them to report who was on strike."

After going through the UAW betrayal of their struggle, academic workers now face the prospect of being reported by the people they work for. "The person I was working for prior to going on strike did tell me, 'If you go on strike and they ask me, I'm a mandatory reporter.'"

The behavior of the UAW bureaucracy and the role they have played in aiding UC officials claw back pay from workers demonstrates the class interests the union bureaucracy serves. The UC Board of Regents is a veritable roster of the state's corporate and financial elite, and the majority were appointed by Governor Newsom and his Democratic predecessors. The \$4 billion investment in the predatory Blackstone Group is another example of the class interests these unappointed officials speak for. By investing in the private equity giant, the Regents have created a direct financial interest for the university to further exploit academic workers through rent increases.

The powerful strike—which united academic workers of all races, nationalities, genders and ages—demonstrated once again that the central division of society is class, and the basis for any progressive change is through the class struggle.

The development of the class struggle, however, requires building rank-and-file committees to empower academic workers against the corrupt labor bureaucracy. The aim of such committees is to abolish the corrupt union apparatus, transfer decision-making power to the rank and file and utilize the worker-funded resources of the unions to strengthen the fighting capacity of workers.

Camila agreed that the outcome of the vote would have been much different if the ranks had access to these resources. She also denounced UAW officials and those close to the union who called workers "right-wing" or "anti-union" for questioning the undemocratic maneuvers and concessions, adding, "This claim was used as a way to undermine our campaigning for a NO vote."

Those who worked to prove their loyalty to the UAW officials had self-serving interests, and Camila noted that the union apparatus was "like a mill for people who want to go into politics after they graduate, under the Democratic Party."

She said the UAW apparatus deeply underestimated the determination of the rank and file. "In my opinion, I don't think the UAW organized for a strike that would last more than a week. I don't think they really knew that it was going to get this far, and that there were going to be people who would push back."

During the strike, UC workers spoke with and read several statements from Will Lehman, a rank-and-file Mack Trucks worker who was running for UAW president based on a socialist program. Last month, Lehman submitted an official protest to the federally appointed Monitor overseeing the UAW challenging the results of the first round of elections. The protest exposed the deliberate efforts used by the entrenched UAW leadership, which previously opposed a direct membership vote for top UAW officers, to suppress the turnout in the vote in order to hold onto power.

Only 9 percent of the 1.1 million eligible active and retired UAW members cast their ballots, and UC workers had among the lowest turnout, with thousands unaware the election was taking place and never receiving ballots. The level of suppression is reflected in the appalling 2.6 percent voter turnout of the 48,000 strikers in Locals 5810, 2865 and SRU-UAW.

Camila told the WWSWS she also was never informed by her union officials about the ongoing national election, in spite of having attended a union rally last year. "I actually voted in the national election just because we saw Will Lehman's flyers. I had to request a ballot on my end. I didn't receive one."

UC workers, like their counterparts at The New School, Columbia and New York University, have passed through a bitter yet revealing experience with the UAW bureaucracy. Their struggle, which is far from over, has pointed to the need to build organizations, democratically controlled by workers themselves. It has also shown that their allies are not the budget-cutters and warmongers in the Democratic Party, which promote racial and gender politics to conceal their reactionary role, but the billions of working class people in the US and around the world being driven into struggle against capitalism and the social inequality, war and dictatorship it produces.



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