

# Thousands of University of Washington students rely on campus food pantry to stave off hunger

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Students attending the University of Washington (UW), located in the heart of Seattle, face increasing levels of food insecurity and general impoverishment. According to the latest study on food insecurity in the state conducted by UW and Washington State University, 10 percent of Washington residents experienced food insecurity before the coronavirus pandemic began, a number which nearly tripled to 27 percent in 2021 as a result of the social crisis induced by the pandemic.

At the same time, food insecurity has been compounded by crippling inflation, which peaked last year at nearly 10 percent, levels not seen since the 1980s, and currently stands at 6.5 percent. During the past year, and especially during the past few months, the costs of food, basic necessities, rent and fuel have all sharply risen and, in many cases, even doubled.

This miserable social reality is reflected on the UW campus. The WWSWS spoke with a worker at the UW food pantry who described the situation facing students. He stated, “Checkouts from the UW Food Pantry increased 192 percent [nearly tripling] when the autumn quarter of 2019 is compared to that same quarter in 2022. The UW Food Pantry was intended to be a short-term solution, as students found more livable conditions.” However, the worker explained that for thousands of students, “the UW Food Pantry must now serve as a long-term solution.”

The worker also revealed that “over the last Christmas holiday, the UW Food Pantry served 16,000 students and staff,” about a fifth of the combined student and staff population on the Seattle campus. Moreover, “It is not possible for the pantry to assist everyone, and it has been very hard to serve the whole

community. Only three to four days of food can be supplied for each student or staff member in need.” It has thus been necessary for the UW Food Pantry “to partner with other food banks to keep up with the rising demand for food.” What is more, “The rising cost of food has dramatically increased the difficulty of securing enough food.” The “UW Food Pantry must rely on donations alone to stock its shelves,” the worker said.

The student worker informed us that “of the visitors who check food out from the UW Food Pantry, the largest group are graduate students, at between 40 and 50 percent, followed by undergraduate students, faculty and staff, and parents and caregivers.”

The food insecurity crisis is compounded by the high cost of living on the UW campus. Rent, utilities and food cost \$19,950 over a nine-month period for a resident student, according to the UW website. But a teaching assistant working for the UW and working toward their master’s degree at \$2,586 per month pay, would be left incapable of paying for basic necessities, with the added cost of textbooks, transportation, personal emergencies, and various other supplies needed to complete their courses.

Graduate students must also regularly find a second job during the summer, as their salaries are often not paid during the summer months, when there are far fewer classes than during the main school year. The situation for undergrads is even worse. Those who work make an average of \$18.69 per hour, yet if living on campus, they have expenses of \$32,090 over a nine-month period. An undergraduate student working at this hourly wage for 15 hours per week would earn \$11,034, only about a third of what is needed, and

forced into \$20,000 of debt or more each year.

And neither of these wages come close to a living wage in Seattle. The living wage calculator from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology calculates that one adult without a dependent needs at least \$44,686 to sustain themselves in the city. An adult with a child, not uncommon among graduate students and even some undergraduates, would require an annual income of \$85,954 in order to avoid impoverishment. These costs mean that some degree of poverty is inevitable for thousands of undergraduate and graduate students.

It is worth noting that as of 2021 UW has a budget of \$8.82 billion, and an endowment of \$4.88 billion. Graduate student salaries make up about 1 percent of that budget. The harsh social conditions facing UW student workers stands in stark contrast to the wealth of UW President Ana Mari Cauce, who is currently under a five-year contract worth more than \$1.1 million each year. Behind her stands the university's Board of Regents, all appointed by Democratic Governor Jay Inslee or his predecessor Christine Gregoire. And the Seattle area is home to some of the most profitable corporations in the US, including Amazon, Boeing, Nintendo and Microsoft.

UW also closely collaborates with the US Department of Defense. The university's Applied Physics Laboratory has received funds from the US Navy for research connected with military applications since 1943, making it an institution with one of the longest standing affiliations with the Pentagon.

Responsibility for the plight of UW student workers also falls on the United Auto Workers (UAW). Over a period of 20 years, UAW Local 4121 has rubber-stamped every concession handed over to the university at the expense of student workers, while mounting no genuine struggle to improve the living standards of those it supposedly represents.

The union has also sought to isolate students from their fellow workers, as evinced during the ongoing UAW presidential election campaign. Turnout during the first round of voting was only 72 out of a potential 4,100 voters, a direct consequence of the suppression of information that a vote was even happening and fear by the bureaucracy that workers would be exposed and attracted to the campaign of Will Lehman.

Lehman ran on an explicitly socialist campaign to abolish, not reform, the UAW bureaucracy and to build

rank-and-file committees at every plant and workplace. Despite a virtual blackout of his campaign by the UAW and the court-appointed monitor to ostensibly enforce fair elections, Lehman won nearly 5 percent of the vote, including many among academic workers. This systematic effort to prevent student workers from voting during the UAW presidential election is not limited to the UW.

The UAW bureaucracy has engaged in a nationwide effort to exclude all dues paying rank-and-file workers from participating in the election. Among academic workers who pay dues to the UAW, only a minuscule fraction have voted. Among 11,000 California State University members, just 29 votes were cast. Amid 48,000 University of California workers, who were on strike during the first round of the elections, turnout was only 2.6 percent.



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