

UC academic workers report major cuts to departments in the aftermath of six-week strike

Rena Cassimeda
1 March 2023

Two months after the six-week strike of 48,000 academic workers in the University of California system was prematurely shut down by the UAW bureaucracy, academic workers and the public university system are facing a new wave of attacks.

In a retaliatory move, according to reports from academic workers throughout the UC system, the university has advised major cuts to departments. The move by the university is meant to punish workers for striking. The cuts are being justified as needed to pay for the cost of raises outlined in the new contracts between academic workers and the university.

According to the University of California San Diego (UCSD) student newspaper *The Guardian*, a recent survey conducted by UAW 2865 indicated at least 89 departments across California campuses have reported plans to implement cuts.

The UC has not yet made any official announcements about the scale of the cuts, but according to a January 26 letter from UAW 2865 and 5810 presidents addressed to the UC president Michael Drake, the university has advised departments to reduce graduate enrollment by up to 33 percent and reduce teaching assistant positions by 30 percent.

Slides from a UCSD Physics department faculty meeting presentation, first made public by the *UCSD Guardian*, declare a “Likely Reduction in GSR and TA support” with a “26 percent [increase] salary [leading] to a reduction of about 19 GSRs from 91 to 72. And further that “without additional campus funding, 72 TA positions would be reduced to 46 TA positions (due to 55 percent salary increase).”

The UCSD Physics department report adds that not all TAs who apply will be granted positions, and recommends prioritizing first- and second-year students, instructing advisers to make clear that “support as TA beyond year 2 is generally not guaranteed and is strongly discouraged.” One

of the “silver linings” outlined is that the the program will become a “smaller but higher-quality, elite Ph.D. program”

Though focused on the Physics department, the report outlines a clear indication of what is to come as graduate student enrollment will shrink as undergraduate enrollment on the campuses continues to increase. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, UC is planning to increase its Fall 2023 enrollment of undergraduates by 4,200 students. This can only mean that the class sizes and burdens on existing and declining cohorts of graduate students will continue to increase.

The advised department cuts come two months after the end of the six-week strike of Post Doc researchers, Teaching assistants, graders, and others against the soaring cost of living in the face of high rates of inflation and wage stagnation.

All the central demands of striking academic workers, such as \$54,000 base pay, child care, disability access, COVID protections, access to affordable housing, and protection from reprisals and cost of living adjustments (COLA), were scrapped early on in the strike by the UAW bureaucracy, one after another. The rotten deal that was forced onto university workers failed to address their most basic demands to alleviate the pressures of the cost of living.

Many students face homelessness and many also face food insecurity. Most UC graduate housing communities have food pantries, which families use to survive. The pitiful roughly \$8000 raise in base pay for most academic workers is just enough to disqualify University workers from social assistance such as food stamps, and still falls well below the state minimum wage.

The contract has left parents still having to pay \$6,000 a year for childcare, even though salaries for most academic workers will only reach \$34,000 for the highest earners, which still falls even well below California’s state minimum wage. Workers will not see an initial incremental raise of 8

percent until April 1.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with Janice, a second-year graduate student from UC Irvine (UCI) about the aftermath of the strike, including the attempt by UC to claw back wages of at least \$900 from the majority of workers who already live below the poverty line. The wages were only paid out when the University was unable to determine who went on strike. The UAW is assisting the UC with the collecting attestation forms where workers are asked to indicate if they struck.

“The university is trying to get us to give back our pay to them,” she said. “I feel like we were being punished for striking. [The attestation forms] didn’t feel very fair.”

Regarding the budget cuts, Janice said, “I don’t know how much the professors know about this, but I do know that the Ph.D. funding is decreasing amongst the UCs in general. It is decreasing.

“The strike was supposed to even out the playing field. You know, we were supposed to be fighting for better terms, but it seemed like we were getting backlash from the school itself. So it doesn’t really make sense.

“The pay raise was not enough. No, it’s not keeping up with inflation. This is my second year living in grad student housing. So it’s been nice, but we do have rent increases every summer. But our pay hasn’t been going up. I mean, they should know how much we’re getting paid because we’re all students here. We do see rises in rent.”

Janice continued, “Grad students who have families have a harder time. I have friends who have families, and their spouses and children are on MediCal, the kind of coverage that people on welfare get. We were fighting for really important things like general health care, yes, while billions of dollars appeared out of nowhere to go to the war in Ukraine.”

The WSWS also spoke with Kelley, a graduate from University of Santa Cruz and supporter the UC strike. “The attestation forms are completely illegal and are clearly using language from the no-strike clause in the tentative agreement the UAW and the UC created to fire all students who participated and dock their pay.”

“The fact that the union is advocating for members to fill out an attestation form they wrote [which can be used] to fire all strike participants and dock pay shows how united the UAW is with the UC, considering the \$300 million shared funding source from the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) unites them.”

Kelley noted the contradiction between the looming cuts while the UC simultaneously plans to increase undergraduate and graduate enrollment in the coming years. A May 2022 multiyear compact between the Newsom administration and the University of California agreed to

increase undergraduate and graduate enrollment in exchange for significant increases in state funding to UC of 5 percent annually. According to the agreement, “The percent base increase for the 2022-2023 year should equal \$200,542,000.”

Kelley said, “I think the purpose of the current cuts to the departments are severing previous TA positions that participated in the strike and are docking stipends. It would be interesting to see how much tuition and campus rents increased compared to what the compact the Governor signed promised after the position and pay cuts in the UAW contract.”

The UC Regents and the Democratic Party in California have been at the forefront of attacks on public education and have been spearheading tuition hikes and eroding the California Master Plan for Higher Education. These attacks were exacerbated in the aftermath of the 2008 recession and included budget cuts and increased tuition in 2009, 2011, where police pepper sprayed student protesters, and 2014.

News of the planned cuts come as the Biden administration is overseeing significant cuts to food stamp benefits for 42 million Americans ranging from \$95 to \$235 a month per household. It is an indictment of the impoverishment that such numbers of UC workers rely on CalFresh and food pantries when the assets of the behemoth institution stand at \$1.68 billion dollars. While the working class is told there is no money for food or higher education, the US government, with the full support of the Democrats who oversee the UC Regents, has already spent \$110 billion on the war against Russia in Ukraine, which it plans to continue to fund through increased austerity.

The only way forward for the working class is to build its own leadership and political organs which are independent of both parties of austerity and war as well as the union bureaucracies. UC workers should join and build the UC Rank-and-File Committee, which was founded in the six weeks strike to fight for rank-and-file power and challenge the UAW bureaucracy which worked to impose the current contract. To contact the committee, email ucstrikerfc@gmail.com.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact