

University of Washington researchers and postdocs strike now in fourth day

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Approximately 2,400 postdocs and research scientists/engineers at the University of Washington have been on strike since Wednesday. Similar to UW librarians who were poised to go on strike in January, postdocs and researchers are fighting for higher wages and benefits, as well as cost of living adjustments in Seattle, a city that has one of the highest costs of living in the United States.

The strike was called by United Auto Workers Local 4121, which was formed after a campaign among the postdocs and researchers by the UAW in 2019. This section of university workers are salaried staff, generally all with graduate level education, and who provide vital services to the university including performing research alongside professors and students, as well as maintaining and operating laboratories, machine shops and numerous other facilities at the institution.

At the same time, they are not able to afford to live in the city. A postdoc's starting salary is just under \$54,000 a year, and only exceeds \$60,000 after five years of work, about \$30 an hour. In contrast, a living wage in Seattle is somewhere between \$40 and \$60 an hour, depending on the neighborhood. Moreover, these workers often have a great deal of student loan debt; a master's degree on average costs \$80,000.

One of the key triggers for the strike is that as of the beginning of this year, the Washington State Department of Labor and Industries mandated that salaried employees who are overtime-exempt make at least \$65,484 annually. According to an article in Science, UW President Ana Mari Cauce argued that this is not financially feasible. While they complied with the law at that time for some post docs and researchers, those whose pay is funded by fellowships did not see raises.

Workers gathered today at a rally called by the UAW and were eager to fight. They were all aware of struggles of other sections of students and workers at the university and were in strong agreement with the proposal for a unified struggle, "like with the library workers." The UW Library workers were set to strike in January before it was called off by the UW Libraries Union, which said they had reached an agreement on a minimum salary of \$66,000.

The WSWS reporters visiting the picket line pointed to the fact that 6,000 graduate students at UW weren't striking, despite all being part of the same UAW local. One researcher commented that he "was both a graduate student and a researcher so he was both on strike and not."

This fact points to the treacherous role being played by the UAW leadership. Similar to postdocs and researchers, graduate students are a key component of the intellectual labor performed at universities, and a joint strike would be a major blow to the operations of the university.

The UAW, however, is focused above all on maintaining its dues base and channeling genuine struggles behind the Democratic Party. Many of those attending the picket were aware of the strike of 48,000 academic workers of the UC system that was prematurely ended by the UAW. Fewer were aware of the major cuts that have since occurred, including planned reductions of 89 percent of departments across all California campuses.

That the UC system was able to carry out such attacks was entirely due to the complete capitulation by the UAW, which did everything to isolate and undermine the struggle by the academic workers. The UAW refused to unify the strike of academic workers with the 150,000 autoworkers across the United States whose

contracts expire later this year. In an earlier period, it would have been unthinkable for one section of a union to go on strike without sympathy strikes called across the union and across the industry. Instead, the UAW left the UC academic workers strike completely isolated and is doing the same to UW academic workers.

it should be recalled that the UAW completely failed to inform workers at UW about the first ever direct election of top union officers last year, in which rank and file Mack Trucks worker Will Lehman, running as a socialist, won just under 5,000 votes. According to returns released by the UAW Monitor, UAW Local 4121, with 9,000 members, had just 72 ballots counted, a turnout of 0.8 percent. This was not because workers were apathetic, but because the UAW deliberately did not inform workers about the election, under conditions where a genuine socialist was on the ballot.

Several UAW members from the UW campus reached out to the Will Lehman campaign website and followed the instructions on how to get a ballot sent if they hadn't received one. All over the US there were cases of workers not receiving ballots or not receiving them in time to be mailed and counted.

A WSWS reporter discussing Will Lehman's campaign with striking academic workers was asked, "I only want to know one thing, are you for Trotsky?" He took several flyers after receiving an affirmative reply.

The WSWS encourages UW academic workers to study the lessons of the betrayal of the UC strike and the treacherous role played by the UAW apparatus. To carry forward their struggle workers must take the initiative by forming independent rank-and-file committees. These committees, controlled by academic workers, not union bureaucrats, should provide a democratic forum for workers to advance their own demands and organize an effective struggle, reaching out for support to faculty, non striking campus workers and broader sections of the working class.



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