

Three University of California academic workers charged with felony for chalking slogans on building

Gabriel Black
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Three academic workers from the University of California San Diego (UCSD) were arrested at their homes last week for their role in a May 30 protest against the UC administration and its plan to go through with wage increases included in the recent contract that was pushed through by the United Auto Workers (UAW) bargaining teams at the conclusion of a strike last year.

Jessica Ng, a postdoctoral researcher, William Schneider, a graduate student, and a third, unidentified, academic worker were arrested by UCSD police on charges of felony vandalism and conspiracy to commit a crime. The alleged crime stems from demonstrators writing messages in washable marker and chalk outside the Scripps Institution of Oceanography. Felony vandalism, in California, is a crime punishable with up to three years in state prison and a fine of up to \$50,000.

In an interview with KPBS News, Schneider said, “This is, in my opinion, very clearly part of a larger coordinated crackdown of union activities across the UC. UC has systematically tried to renege on the contract they signed with UAW and the graduate student researchers union.”

The fact that workers are now forced to protest for the enforcement of the contracts completely undercuts the UAW’s claim that the largest academic workers strike in US history—which involved 48,000 postdocs, academic researchers, graduate student instructors and other academic workers—ended last December with a “historic” victory.

The nearly 50,000 academic workers initially walked out in November, demanding adequate wage increases and a cost-of-living-adjustment (COLA) to meet

California’s exorbitant expenses, better healthcare coverage for dependents and protections against academic bullying. The UAW bureaucracy, however, rapidly abandoned the demand for COLA and settled for a \$34,000 starting salary down from the initial demand that workers in UAW 2865 receive a \$54,000 starting salary. The strike started as a joint action of workers inside UAW locals 2865, 5180, and Student Researchers United.

Many rank-and-file workers responded to the bureaucracy’s actions by organizing for a “no” vote, which resulted in nearly 40 percent of the workforce in UAW Local 2865 rejecting the contract. However, the UAW was able to ram through the contract by using its official channels to campaign for a “yes” vote while denying the same resources to those opposed to the contract. The UAW divided the struggle by having postdoc workers settle separately from graduate students, and also by preventing dissident members of the union from speaking out at Zoom meetings criticizing the contract. The UAW also hired Brightline Communications, a major Democratic Party PR firm to oversee its campaign for a yes vote.

The UAW apparatus early in the strike had also worked to disenfranchise its members by keeping them uninformed about the first ever national election for the UAW leadership. As a result, only 2.6 percent of the members of locals 5810 and 2865 voted in the first round of the election, and only 9 percent of the 1.1 million members and retirees voted.

At the time of the strike, Will Lehman, a socialist and rank-and-file autoworker, was the only candidate to challenge the legitimacy of the election given the extensive voter suppression. Lehman is currently suing

the Biden administration's Department of Labor and demanding that the UAW election be re-run in order for the entire UAW membership to be able to choose the leadership of the union.

Six months after the sellout agreements were forced through, it is becoming apparent that not even the inadequate "gains" in the contracts are being implemented. While the new UAW president Shawn Fain—who was supported by the Democratic Socialists of America—has carried out a policy no different than his predecessor, Ray Curry.

Many students and postdocs have also had their teaching load cut or their postdoc appointments reduced as a means for the UC to pay them less. Alex Wenzal, a bio-informatics graduate student, put together a web program that calculates the ongoing wage theft from UCSD. He calculates the total amount is now above \$6 million.

The refusal to pay higher wages through various loopholes and cutbacks is part of a broader move of the UC to retaliate against the new contract through major cuts to departments. A student worker at UC Berkeley has also informed the WSWs that there are ongoing concerns among his colleagues of retribution from certain faculty members because of the strike.

As many as 67 students at UCSD are currently facing academic disciplinary charges for other protests at UCSD. On May 5, dozens of students disrupted an alumni awards ceremony, again in protest at the university's refusal to implement aspects of the contract.

Students involved with the protest have faced allegations of assault and are concerned that the university will now seek to expel them.

Maya Gosztyla, one of the protesters, told the *San Diego Tribune*, "At first, I thought this was clearly a mistake. We livestreamed the whole event and nobody came near anybody. It is clearly an intimidation tactic. Being charged with assault even if you know for sure you didn't commit any crimes, that's a really scary charge to see, especially for someone like me who's now four years into my PhD and has about two years left."

According to the *Tribune*, the university's allegations of "assault" seem to be based on allegations that one of the protesters merely "bumped" the UCSD chancellor, and that another "took the microphone away."

In the face of these blatant attacks on academic workers, the UAW national headquarters has largely remained silent with no reference to the struggle of UC workers on the UAW website. On their official social media accounts the UAW has only shared a handful of articles on the arrest of UCSD academic workers, including a petition by UAW 2865 demanding the UC administration drop the charges and recognize the contract.

These protests are taking place amid a major upsurge of the working class with ongoing contract struggles at UPS, the West Coast docks and the Big Three auto companies, as well as an ongoing strike of 11,000 film and television writers.

The WSWs urges that UC workers join the UC Rank-and-File Committee, which was the only organization during the strike calling for academic workers to turn to dockworkers, autoworkers and railroad workers, healthcare workers, educators and other sections of the working class as a means of carrying forward the strike.

To join the committee, email ucstrikerfc@gmail.com.



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