

California State University academic workers begin struggle as contract expiration looms

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The contract for over 10,000 academic workers across the California State University (CSU) system, a vast institution composed of 23 universities across the state, expires September 30. The workers entering into struggle are Teaching Associates (TAs), Student Assistants (SAs), and Graduate Assistants (GAs). They are the cheap labor who run the behemoth system, the largest institution of higher learning in the United States, with some 460,000 students and over 56,000 faculty and staff.

The workers are nominally represented by the United Auto Workers (UAW) local 4123, which long ago signed off on poverty wages that are at, or barely above, minimum wage. Conditions are nearly identical across institutions of higher learning. The CSU struggle is part of a broader fight breaking out by academic workers across the globe to recoup decades of concessions in wages, healthcare, working conditions and deep attacks on public education, such as the cuts at West Virginia University, where PhD programs such as mathematics and the entire department of World Languages are being erased.

The struggle of academic workers at the CSU system is significantly taking place as autoworkers, also represented by the UAW, have begun their battle against the Big Three—General Motors, Ford Motor Company and Stellantis North America, where workers are demanding an end to the hated tier system as well as significant wage increases.

Autoworkers are fighting not only the companies, but are in a struggle to break free from the restraints of the UAW bureaucracy, which has kept 90 percent of workers on the job despite the membership voting 97 percent to strike. The majority are still laboring, making profits for the corporations, while most of those now on strike are those at facilities at the very end of the auto supply chain. UAW President Sean Fain claims a newly invented “stand-up strike” somehow gives workers greater leverage by keeping the majority of the auto workforce laboring under

expired contracts.

Autoworkers from Michigan to graduate workers in California face the same struggle and should be fighting together.

Rising costs of living, driven both by the growth of university fees, and by inflation generally, are pushing already vulnerable students into evermore precarious situations. Academic workers report being more dependent on food pantries, skipping meals and unable to live on minimum wage incomes in some of the most expensive regions in the country.

Natalie, a graduate student worker at a Southern California CSU, told the WSWs that workers are demanding an end to the low wages and lack of sick leave, which is not guaranteed by the university.

The UAW bureaucracy has not put forward any concrete demands regarding pay or sick leave, with Natalie confirming, “I have not seen a number they are asking for,” adding that in her department graders make minimum wage and GAs and TAs make a dollar more than minimum wage.

She works three jobs to make ends meet—two jobs on campus totaling no more than the limit of 20 hours. One pays her the region’s minimum wage of \$16.30 an hour and the other is for \$17 an hour. Her third job is tutoring off campus making \$19 an hour. Natalie said that in her eyes, “For graders, the least the university can do is \$22 or \$23 an hour, and TAs should be higher than that! I don’t think anyone makes that right now.”

“Tuition and parking are huge—we get a partial tuition waiver, but not completely. With tuition increased recently, the CSU is saying it’s the first time they raised it in years, but they have raised fees every year. I get my tuition waived but I still pay \$1,000 in fees every semester. So it’s not actually a full tuition waiver because we have to pay fees. People don’t realize the level of work we do. We do all the grading, our labor is really

undervalued.”

The CSU system has put forward an insulting 4 percent total in raises; the same so-called raise in its previous two-year contract in 2020, had only 2 percent wage increases for each year of the contract, totaling a 4 percent raise. With recent 6 percent increases in tuition and annual increases in fees, the CSU system has recouped all of the paltry raises and more from the already underpaid workforce.

The CSU system, as a result of persistent cuts to public funding faces a \$1.5 billion budget shortfall built on the lie that “there is no money” for education, despite the fact that Biden and Congress have already approved \$137 billion in spending on the US/NATO war in Ukraine, including \$70 billion directly on weapons.

Two weeks ago, the California State University Board of Trustees, which is composed of 25 members—five ex officio, and 20 appointed—voted unanimously for a multi-year plan to raise tuition 6 percent for the upcoming school year, and by a total of 34 percent by the end of the plan. This move makes “public” college, already difficult to afford, even more inaccessible for working class families.

“It is shocking that we have created a culture where people don’t expect tuition to be raised. ... Somewhere along the way we gave people the impression that this system is magically going to create money to sustain itself,” said CSU Board of Trustee Leslie Gilbert Lurie.

The tuition increase and callous comments from Lurie has been met with a wave of anger by students on social media who are facing increased rent, cost of living, food, inflation and stagnant pay—poverty wages Lurie, the board and the UAW have sanctioned in their contracts. The board claims it has not increased tuition for years, but does not mention the annually increasing “fees.”

While the board insults students for justifiable anger over tuition costs, the reality is that many students are going hungry. “Food insecurity is a big issue, the lines are so much longer than anything I have seen before. The demand is a lot higher, there are more rules now on how much you can take. There is a bigger demand so we don’t get as much to supplement our groceries. ... A lot of students use the food pantry, it’s more prominent because everything is so much more expensive now.”

Natalie added, “The campus meal plan gives the students \$26 a day but a meal will cost \$15 so its really hard to make it and they need to supplement with meal plans. It’s really just a clever way for the university to make more money. The funds don’t roll over so the

university gets the money they don’t use, and if you go over by a dollar its a way for the university to make a dollar on top of that.”

Showing a desire to fight, rallies took place across three campuses last week, from San Francisco State to San Diego State University and CSU Long Beach. Academic workers, however, were informed by the UAW bureaucracy not to mention striking. Why, despite the strike by autoworkers, has the union bureaucracy refused to call for a united strike until academic workers are paid a living wage?

Despite the attempts by Fain and the UAW bureaucracy to keep autoworkers on the job, independent action is being taken, workers are building their own rank-and-file committees, independently and democratically run by workers to build for an industry-wide strike involving all autoworkers, throughout the US and also Canada and Mexico.

Academic workers must learn the lessons of the UAW struggle and take up the fight to build their own committees to ensure their fight is not betrayed, as has been done to tens of thousands of academic workers throughout the UC system, who were forced to drop all their major demands by the union bureaucracy, including COLA.

The UAW bureaucracy has already proven its role in violating the democratic rights of rank-and-file members of Local 4123. In last year’s UAW presidential election, only 29 votes were cast from that local out of thousands of eligible voters. The UAW bureaucracy made no effort to contact the membership to inform them of their right to vote. Academic workers on the West Coast were particularly blocked from voting by a system which a federal judge said “kind of cut out the membership.” The aim was to stop younger workers from voting for rank-and-file socialist candidate Will Lehman, who won 25 percent of the vote from Local 4123. Lehman is presently suing the Biden administration to demand the election be re-run with full notice to the membership.

The CSU academic workers must organize to determine what their non-negotiable demands are. To learn more about building a rank-and-file committee on your campus contact the WSWs today.



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