

Graduate student union announces sellout deal before strike deadline at University of Southern California

Hong Jian**29 November 2023**

The Graduate Student Workers Organizing Committee (GSWOC-UAW USC) announced a tentative agreement for 3,200 graduate student workers at the University of Southern California on Monday, less than 36 hours before a strike deadline at the university.

The TA is a sellout. It would increase pay from only \$35,700 a year to \$40,000 a year, still below a living wage in the city of Los Angeles. The GSWOC-UAW USC called this a “major” concession by the administration on social media. In reality, it is a major concession by the union. It is \$3,000 less than the union’s own already inadequate wage demand.

The sellout at USC follows a similar deal at the University of California system last year, when the UAW shut down a six-week strike of nearly 50,000 graduate students. The strike ended with a contract that climbed down from the union’s initial \$54,000 salary demand to only \$34,000. To add insult to injury, wages will only reach that level by the end of the contract.

Conditions for graduate students at USC are dire. A recent union survey found that over 88 percent of graduate students at USC were rent-burdened, defined as paying more than a third of their income for rent. USC is a private university with net assets of over \$9 billion, and whose net revenue for 2022, according to tax records obtained by Nonprofit Explorer, was over \$5.5 billion. Annual tuition is \$66,640 at the university, which has nearly 50,000 undergraduate and postgraduate students.

The union’s original wage request for \$43,000 at USC a year is below the level defined as a living wage in Los Angeles by MIT’s living wage calculator, which found an individual in the city needed at least \$44,142 a

year.

An increase in pay of \$4,300 over a year for workers already in poverty will do nothing to keep them from using food pantries, going without needed medical care, or being able to have a decent life. This is not a number that will lift anyone out of poverty, and the university and union tops are well aware of this fact.

The contract will also not go into effect until next August, meaning graduate students will continue to work under their old wages until then. The new contract then goes to 2028, meaning USC grad students will be separated from their colleagues at UC when the latter’s contract expires in May 2025.

While the UC deal was similarly hailed by union officials as “historic,” the administration has simply violated the terms of the agreement at will. After the end of the strike, the administration retaliated against grad students by cutting programs. According to a recent report in *Chemistry World*, many graduate student workers have still not gotten their wage increases. According to the UAW itself, other terms of the deal are also being ignored.

But Neal Sweeney, UAW Local 5810 President, has not even hinted at calling grad students back on strike over the flagrant violation of the deal. Instead, he said complacently, “We’re not surprised that the university is resisting implementing the contracts—they are historic, very significant changes, and with that comes changing entrenched practices of the university.”

The inaction by the UAW officials at the University of California will only embolden USC administrators to pick and choose which terms of the contract they will honor.

The deal at USC was also announced only a few days

after the ratification of sellout deals in the auto industry, where the UAW strung out workers for months on piecemeal “standup strikes” which did not seriously impact production. Eighty percent of workers who remained on the job were forced to submit to speed ups, forced overtime, harassment and victimization including termination.

UAW President Shawn Fain and the rest of the UAW bureaucracy did everything in their power to suppress the vote in the union’s own presidential election, given that a socialist candidate, Will Lehman, campaigned on a platform of abolishing the bureaucracy and returning control of the union into the hands of workers themselves in the form of rank-and-file committees. Less than 10 percent of UAW members voted in the election, and more ballots were returned “undeliverable” than were actually cast.

The vast majority of graduate students were not even aware that an election took place. Lehman has filed a lawsuit to force the re-run of the election.

Shortly after the deal at USC was announced, the Los Angeles chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America predictably tweeted its congratulations, effectively endorsing the deal. This should be taken as a warning by graduate student workers about the real content of the deal, given the role of the DSA in suppressing the class struggle and bolstering the Democratic Party. Top DSA congresspeople voted last year in Congress to ban a strike on the railroads, and they have also voted repeatedly in favor of funding the US and Israeli war machines.

Graduate student workers can win their demands, but this requires that they prepare themselves for a fight not only against the administration but against the corrupt trade union bureaucracy. They should form a rank-and-file committee to organize a campaign to reject the contract, and demand strike action unless and until their demands have been met. Moreover, graduate students must link their struggle up with the growing wave of strikes and protests by workers around the world, as well as the powerful antiwar movement which has emerged against the genocide in Gaza.

Once organized, workers can then actually formulate *their own demands*, rather than settling for what the overpaid bureaucrats think they can get without too much fuss, what they can foist on workers, or what the university claims they can afford.



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