

As strike vote against police crackdown continues, students and educators oppose UAW stalling

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The strike vote by 48,000 University of California academic workers and members of United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 4811 continued into its second day Tuesday.

This week's vote is a result of the extreme anger over the response by the University of California Los Angeles administration and police, which allowed armed right-wing and Zionist counter-protesters to brutally attack the peaceful UCLA Gaza Solidarity encampment for over three hours with metal pipes, fireworks and pepper spray. These attacks were followed up with more violence by police, who used rubber bullets and flash bangs and arrested 132 protesters.

One academic worker, who wished to remain anonymous, told the WSWS,

I voted in favor of the strike. I think people want to do what they can to bring some visibility to the protests and the movement for divestment. There's certainly a leftover feeling of ineffectiveness toward the union from the last strike and a lot of that has to do with its bureaucracy for sure. Others have also said that the current union management used this call for action as a way to get reelected during last week's elections.

I can speak for myself and say that as students we believe in what we're doing and want to do something in reaction to the retaliation from authorities faced by our colleagues in other campuses and to make institutions accountable, but I also expect the union management to pull out a number at any moment.

In an interview with the WSWS on Tuesday, Sarah, a UC Irvine student involved in the People's University for Gaza, expressed support for the UAW grad student workers voting for strike action to defend the anti-genocide protesters. "That's how you stop it. That's how it is in all wars. It's with the working class and with the students ..."

Academic workers must cast the widest possible "yes" vote. This must be connected with the expansion of the struggle to the entire 400,000 active UAW members, including in the auto industry and defense plants.

The immense potential for connecting the fight against war with the fight against inequality and exploitation was shown by the start of a strike Monday by 6,000 University of Washington educators.

The enormous public support for the students was shown yesterday at a meeting of the UC Regents, who oversee all aspects of the expansive 10-campus and six-hospital UC system. In preparation for the meeting, which took place in Merced, police barricades and fencing were constructed around the meeting room where a discussion on the system's investments was a central agenda item for Tuesday.

The meeting began with an open threat that any disruption would be met with police escort and arrest. While only a dozen or so got to speak in person or via phone, the main sentiment was in support of the student protesters.

One man stated, "I've just been very disappointed with the way my alma mater has treated the protesters. These people have been protesting nonviolently peacefully and have very strong views."

One woman, who identified herself as a UCLA alumni, noted, "I'm kind of disgusted how UCLA's response has been to everything that's been going on. And I'm actually a little worried and sad, because I have a lot of mentees that are starting in the class of 2028, and I am terrified for them, just seeing how the school is handling everything. And I'm not proud to say that I went there."

Darlene Lee, a UCLA faculty and alumni, said, "I wanted to call to emphasize my support for the encampment students and faculty and to strongly support their call for divestment from all investments in the military-industrial complex. Educational funds should go towards education and community rather than war. And I also condemn the involvement of police and the police brutality that was subjected to students and faculty on my campus. And I support amnesty for all students, faculty and staff in the encampment protests."

In an attempt to whip up anger and turn the local population against the UC Merced student demonstrators and encampment, the Merced County Sheriff's Office closed all access to Lake Yosemite on Monday, ridiculously citing concerns of the demonstration growing, when a single portion of the lake is a half mile away from the campus. The arbitrary closure only further emphasizes the cozy atmosphere between law enforcement and campus administration.

Workers versus the UAW bureaucracy

Only through the mobilization of the working class, which creates all of society's wealth, can the genocide in Gaza and other criminal wars be stopped. At the same time, the broadening of the struggle will also give grad students the strongest possible position to resist attempts by the UAW bureaucracy to limit or prevent a strike.

Opposition to crackdown at UC Regents meeting

In 2022, the same UAW bureaucracy carried out a massive six-week strike by 48,000 UC grad student workers. COLA and other critical demands, including sufficient child care reimbursement, high quality and affordable medical coverage for dependents, the waiver of international student fees, significant improvements for disability access, COVID-19 protection and the defunding of police departments were all among the demands which were dropped entirely.

UAW Local 4811 has made clear that should they call a strike, it will be patterned after the “standup strike” last year in the auto industry. What this means is that only a fraction of grad students would be called out, limiting the strike’s impact and paving the way for a sellout. The strategy of the “standup strike” was widely opposed by autoworkers, and it was followed by a contract which enabled the auto companies to lay off thousands. Meanwhile, the UAW has made no attempt to even inform its members in the auto and defense plants that the vote is happening. This is because the vote would be widely supported by industrial workers, who would take it as a call to prepare action themselves.

Academic workers must begin organizing independent rank-and-file committees to ensure the will of the majority is carried out and to spread the strike to other sections of the working class.

A founding member of the Academic Workers Rank-and-File Committee at San Diego State University also condemned with the UAW’s betrayal last fall. He sent the following message to UC academic workers:

In solidarity with the rank-and-file workers of UAW 4811 at the University of California, I urge them to take proactive measures to form independent rank-and-file committees to unleash the power of their labor without limitations. Workers at UC must fight against the trade union bureaucracy of the UAW, which is openly aligned with the sitting president “genocide” Joe Biden. He has reiterated his unwavering support for the “right” of the state of Israel to pursue its criminal and genocidal national security policies.

The UAW is the leading supporter of the Joe Biden’s reelection and therefore will seek to defuse opposition to the genocide by any means possible. It has already announced its opposition to an indefinite and broader strike that involves workers in other critical industries.

If a strike is authorized, why should there be any such limitations to the strike action? The enforcement of a duration upon the strike only puts workers at a disadvantage against the administration. The end date of a strike should not be negotiated prior, rather the end of strike should only come when the demands of the rank-and-file have been met.

Similarly, a “stand up” strike means leaving portions of discontented workers on the job during strike action. Effectively this forces workers who voted to strike, to continue making profits for the administration and reduce the strike’s impact by remaining on the job.

Workers must organize independently and in solidarity with all laborers from all divisions on campus, from staff, to students, to faculty—the strike movements that arise from these independent committees will be indefinite, enacted across all divisions, and exacted to the maximum capabilities of the workers’ labor power. Only through the organization of democratically formed independent rank-and-file committees, can workers truly wage a successful struggle in opposition to university administration, the trade union bureaucracy, and the current genocide of Palestinians!

Workers are angry that the vote was already delayed by nearly two weeks after the brutal attack by counter-protesters and police at UCLA. This was for the purpose of buying time.

A UC Santa Cruz alumnus told the WWSWS that while he supports the protests, he is “suspicious” of the UAW vote. “A ULP (Unfair Labor Practice) was used to defuse COLA back in 2020 by halting the wildcats (see: 2020 wildcat strikes). Without this legal process UCLA would already be striking.” He also noted, “The stand-up model also seems flawed. A strike now that involves grades would be very effective against the UC. Like 2022 the UAW refuses to use grades as leverage.”

The 60,000 electronic ballots sent out yesterday to members also say that, “The strike will end on all campuses no later than June 30, 2024.” The vast majority of schools are out in a month and have commencement ceremonies mid-June.

It goes without saying, however, that the threat of police violence and the brutal acts being carried out on the Palestinian population will not cease at the end of June.

Identities of Zionist attackers revealed

Meanwhile, details are coming to light about the far-right Zionist forces that attacked the UCLA encampment. The online publication The Grayzone has obtained and published a list identifying many who played a leading role in assaulting the anti-genocide student protesters. Despite the fact that they confirmed the information had been sent to Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), no arrests have been made.

With disturbing parallels to the January 6, 2021 coup attempt, neither the LAPD nor the UCLA administration have released any details as to why the police stood down during the mob attack.

One of the demands which graduate students should take up is that the far-right Zionists who attacked the camp must be charged and arrested.

Just as in 2020 and 2022, students and workers are once again finding themselves confronted with the entire state apparatus—the Democratic Party, the UC Regents, the trade union bureaucracy, and the pseudo-left organizations such as the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), who occupy numerous positions of leadership within the UAW and whose purpose is to provide political cover for the Democratic Party and union bureaucracy.

But the power of the working class is greater than the apparatus, as long as workers have organizations which they democratically control and a genuine program around which they can fight.



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