

# Strike authorization vote coming for 40,000 University of California academic workers

**Marc Wells****19 January 2026**

Roughly 40,000 academic and research workers across the University of California system will vote February 5–13 to authorize strike action. The workers are members of United Auto Workers Local 4811, the Research and Public Service Professionals-UAW (RPSP-UAW) and the Student Services and Academic Professionals-UAW (SSAP-UAW).

This strike vote is unfolding amid a rapidly escalating and explosive wave of working class opposition across the United States. In Los Angeles, 35,000 teachers in United Teachers Los Angeles will vote January 27–29 on strike authorization, alongside some 30,000 school support workers in SEIU Local 99.

In Minneapolis, a general strike is set for January 23 in response to Immigration and Customs Enforcement terror, following the killing of Renée Nicole Good. In New York City, 15,000 nurses are already on strike against hospital chains and state-backed austerity, while 31,000 Kaiser Permanente nurses in California and Hawaii are preparing strike action.

These struggles express a growing objective tendency toward broader, unified class action, culminating in a general strike, in defense of democratic and social rights, driven by conditions of deepening inequality, repression and war.

Graduate student workers at UC occupy a critical position within this emerging movement. Over the past several years, they have repeatedly shown a willingness to challenge both management and the union bureaucracy itself. They have threatened to escape the confines imposed on their struggles by the UAW apparatus and merge with wider layers of the working class.

Core academic negotiations center on successor contracts for Graduate Student Researchers and Academic Student Employees, whose 2022–2025

agreements followed the massive academic worker strike of 2022. That strike was compelled by intense pressure from below, as tens of thousands of graduate workers confronted impossible living conditions amid soaring inflation and housing costs.

UC graduate students live, in many cases, at or below the poverty line. Wages remain far below the actual cost of living in California's major metropolitan areas. Many workers spend well over half of their income on rent, often sharing overcrowded apartments or commuting long distances while juggling teaching, grading and research loads that routinely exceed contractual limits. A statewide Legislative Analyst's Office summary, using 2023 survey data, reported that about 8 percent of UC respondents said they had been homeless.

Food insecurity is widespread. Some rely on campus food pantries or skip meals altogether. Healthcare costs, international student fees, childcare expenses and visa-related vulnerabilities compound the hardship.

The workers involved are essential to the education of hundreds of thousands of students across the UC system, as well as to the functioning of critical scientific research. They include teaching assistants, tutors, readers and graders, instructors, funded PhD and master's researchers, postdoctoral scholars, professional researchers and project scientists. They also include academic counselors, financial aid officers, student services advisors, research administrators and public program coordinators.

Their immediate grievances remain fundamentally unchanged from 2022, which was sold out amid widespread opposition. Low wages, job insecurity and layoffs, barriers to career advancement and reclassification and the lack of protections for international workers persist and have worsened under

the present political climate.

In that six-week strike, 48,000 academic workers demanded cost-of-living adjustments tied to inflation and housing costs. Facing mounting pressure from below, the bureaucracy moved quickly to shut the struggle down, dropping core demands, isolating postdoctoral researchers and imposing a settlement that left workers on unlivable incomes.

Nearly 40 percent of graduate student teachers voted against ratification, a significant rebuke that signaled the emergence of rank-and-file opposition. The vote was held during the holiday break to depress turnout, prompting calls from UC students for a re-vote and denunciations of the process as illegitimate.

During that strike, the UAW also held national leadership elections with a turnout of less than 9 percent. The bureaucracy deliberately suppressed turnout, in particular to prevent the campaign of socialist autoworker Will Lehman, who ran for president on a platform of abolishing the bureaucracy, from gaining a wide hearing. Turnout among UC academic workers was only 2.6 percent, in spite of the fact that they were on strike at the time. Lehman later filed suit against the Department of Labor, which oversaw the elections.

Opposition at UC resurfaced even more sharply in 2024, when graduate students walked out in protest against the police rampage on UC campuses targeting Gaza solidarity protests. That strike expressed not only opposition to state repression but a broader identification with democratic rights and opposition to imperialist war. The UAW bureaucracy moved to limit the action, obeying a court injunction and ordering workers back on the job, openly aligning itself with the state.

Bargaining for the current contracts began in July 2025 in open sessions. The union and UC management exchanged proposals on wages, fee remissions, housing relief, workload protections and workplace language, with talk of merging ASE and GSR contracts. SSAP and RPSP are negotiating first contracts covering professional staff in advising, financial aid and research support roles.

At the same time, the UAW has forced workers to continue working without a contract while delaying even a strike authorization vote. It has announced tentative agreements on numerous contract articles

without circulating them to the membership, weakening workers' leverage and suppressing rank-and-file oversight.

Behind this bargaining process stands a far deeper political crisis. Democratic rights are under sustained attack, from the criminalization of protest to the terrorization of immigrant communities by federal agencies. These attacks are inseparable from the drive toward war and the dismantling of social programs.

The central lesson of the past period is that meaningful struggle cannot be waged through the existing union apparatus. Graduate students must consciously organize themselves as an independent force. This means forming rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled and independent of the UAW bureaucracy and the capitalist parties, to assert control over demands, strategy and alliances.

Such committees must orient outward, linking UC graduate workers with K-12 teachers, healthcare workers, logistics workers and others now entering struggle. The aim must not be a symbolic protest or a narrowly defined ULP action but the conscious preparation of a broader movement that can converge with the developing strike wave and the growing calls for a general strike.

Graduate students embody a concentrated expression of social anger, political awareness and internationalist sentiment. Their struggles over wages, housing and democratic rights are inseparably bound up with the broader fight of the working class against austerity, repression and war. The essential task is to consciously organize and direct this force as part of a unified movement of workers across industries and regions. The building of an independent, socialist movement of the working class is an urgent necessity, not only to prevent another sellout, but to halt the deepening descent into social crisis.



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