

UAW presidential candidate Will Lehman issues statement supporting University of California student employees strike vote

Our reporters
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Last week, academic student employees across the University of California system voted overwhelmingly to authorize a strike by 48,000 members of the United Auto Workers at one of the largest and most prestigious public university systems in the United States.

Three UAW locals whose members are graduate student researchers, teaching assistants, postdoctoral scholars, professional academic staff, Student Services and Advising Professionals and Research and Public Service Professionals participated in the vote. According to UAW Local 4811, more than 23,000 workers cast ballots, with 93 percent voting in favor of strike action.

With contracts set to expire March 1, academic workers are demanding wages and benefits that keep pace with soaring housing, food and transportation costs, as well as secure teaching and research appointments.

The strike authorization is part of a broader eruption of struggles among educators and other workers throughout California. It follows the four-day strike by San Francisco teachers and huge strike votes by educators in Los Angeles and Sacramento. On Tuesday, more than 1,000 skilled trade workers walked out at 22 campuses in the California State University system. In addition, 35,000 Kaiser Permanente health care workers in California and Hawaii have been on strike since January 26.

More than 1,000 members of Contract Faculty United-UAW at New York University are also currently voting on strike authorization.

The University of California system, which includes campuses such as the University of California, Los Angeles, the University of California, Berkeley and the

University of California, San Diego, employs tens of thousands of academic workers who carry out much of the teaching and research at the state's flagship public universities.

UC academic workers previously waged a three-week strike in May–June 2024 to oppose the violent crackdown on anti-genocide protests and the violation of free speech rights on campus. That powerful walkout was shut down by the UAW leadership after Orange County Superior Court Judge Randall J. Sherman issued a strikebreaking injunction, claiming—on the specious grounds—that the strike, not police violence, was causing “irreparable harm” to students’ education.

The latest vote comes as the UAW apparatus moves to contain struggles elsewhere. On Tuesday, the union announced a last-minute deal to prevent a strike by 3,700 graduate workers at the University of Pennsylvania. As of this writing, however, the union has not released the full contract language, and rank-and-file graduate workers have had no opportunity to review, discuss or vote on the agreement.

In response to the UC strike authorization, Will Lehman, a Mack Trucks worker from Pennsylvania and candidate for UAW president, issued a statement urging academic workers to take their struggle “out of the hands of the UAW bureaucracy” and place it under the democratic control of the rank and file.

“The overwhelming strike-authorization vote by some 48,000 University of California academic workers is a powerful expression of class anger,” Lehman said. “Graduate student researchers, teaching assistants, postdocs and professional academic staff sustain teaching, research and the daily functioning of the UC system while surviving on wages and stipends

that leave many at or near poverty in one of the most expensive states in the country.”

Lehman stressed that the struggle pits academic workers not only against university administrators but against the Democratic Party establishment that dominates California politics. Governor Gavin Newsom and the Democratic supermajority in Sacramento oversee a state that is home to more billionaires than any other in the US.

“The Democrats insist there is no money to meet the most basic needs of workers and students,” Lehman stated. “Yet they pour billions into corporate tax cuts and subsidies for Silicon Valley tech giants, Hollywood monopolies, energy conglomerates and the military industries.”

Many corporate executives and financiers sit on the UC Board of Regents, which governs the university system and ensures its alignment with Wall Street and the military-industrial complex.

Lehman urged workers to draw the lessons of their 2024 strike. That walkout, he noted, was initiated from below in response to police repression of campus protests against the US-backed Israeli assault on Gaza. The UAW delayed calling a strike and initially limited it to a handful of campuses. Only under mounting rank-and-file pressure did it expand the action.

When the UC administration secured a court injunction declaring the strike illegal, the UAW bureaucracy immediately capitulated and shut it down.

At the time, the Biden administration was overseeing a nationwide crackdown on campus protests, with Democrats and Republicans alike denouncing anti-genocide demonstrators and threatening funding cuts. Lehman pointed out that the UAW leadership aligned itself politically with the Biden-Harris administration, even as anti-genocide protesters were expelled from a UAW meeting endorsing President Biden.

Repression has intensified further under the Trump administration, Lehman said, pointing to the detention and deportation of international students for their political views and the expansion of Immigration and Customs Enforcement operations in major cities.

“The function of the trade union bureaucracy is to contain working class struggles and subordinate them to the political framework of the two corporate parties,” Lehman stated.

He cited the blocking of the strike at the University of

Pennsylvania as a warning of how the UC struggle could be dissipated. “After months of bargaining and a strike authorization vote, a last-minute tentative agreement was announced and the strike called off before the full contract language had even been presented to the membership,” he noted.

Lehman called on UC academic workers to form democratically elected rank-and-file committees, independent of the UAW apparatus, to oversee bargaining, demand full transparency and ensure that no strike is suspended without a full membership review and vote.

“Academic workers are part of a broader eruption of struggle—healthcare workers, teachers, logistics workers and manufacturing workers across California and nationally,” he said. “The objective conditions exist for coordinated action.”

Lehman, who is running for UAW president on a program of abolishing the union apparatus and transferring power to rank-and-file workers, argued that the fight for wages and job security cannot be separated from the defense of immigrants, democratic rights and opposition to war.

“UC academic workers have taken an important step,” Lehman concluded. “The task now is to ensure that this strike mandate is not dissipated. Build rank-and-file committees. Demand full democratic control. Link up with workers across the country and internationally. Take the struggle out of the hands of the bureaucracy and place it where it belongs—in the hands of the working class itself.”



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