

Will Lehman calls for rank-and-file committees as UAW academic workers return to campuses

Our reporters
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Will Lehman, a Mack Trucks worker and socialist candidate for president of the United Auto Workers, issued a statement Tuesday to roughly 100,000 UAW academic workers returning to campuses across the United States, calling for rank-and-file committees linking university and industrial workers.

Academic workers now account for roughly one quarter of UAW membership. In recent years, graduate employees, postdocs, adjuncts and other university workers have carried out major strikes and repeatedly voted by overwhelming margins for strike action over wages, housing, insecure employment, immigration, democratic rights and the Gaza genocide.

“Over the past two years, graduate employees, academic workers, and the students they serve have been at the center of the opposition to the Gaza genocide and the attacks on immigrants and democratic rights,” Lehman writes. “Academic workers have also been among the most combative sections of the UAW membership—striking, rejecting sellout contracts and repeatedly colliding with a union apparatus that has worked to shut your struggles down and bolster the political establishment.”

The latest strike vote came at Columbia University last month, where roughly 1,000 postdoctoral researchers and research scientists voted by more than 90 percent to authorize a walkout. Their demands include an \$80,000 salary minimum, year-long appointments instead of precarious three- and six-month positions and increased childcare support.

The vote followed a months-long struggle by more than 3,000 Columbia graduate and undergraduate student workers, whose contract expired last year. In March, they voted 91.5 percent to authorize a strike, followed by an 82.2 percent vote to begin a walkout April 23.

Lehman writes:

At Columbia University, the UAW bureaucracy—led by Democratic Socialists of America members like Region 9A Director Brandon Mancilla, who cut his teeth betraying the Harvard graduate workers’

strike—has repeatedly worked to shut down the membership’s strikes and to impose sellout contracts over the opposition of the rank and file.

When Columbia student workers voted by over 90 percent to strike, the UAW threatened to withhold authorization unless the local watered down its demands. The same apparatus stood by while a UAW member, the Palestinian activist Mahmoud Khalil, was seized by ICE and threatened with deportation for opposing the Gaza genocide.

The demands targeted by UAW Region 9A included protections against ICE, removal of police from campus, restrictions on surveillance and divestment from weapons manufacturers and companies implicated in Israel’s assault on Gaza. The UAW refused to sanction the walkout or provide strike pay. By August, the bargaining committee had dropped the divestment demand. Columbia postdocs had also voted 98 percent to strike in 2023, but no walkout took place.

Lehman continues: “And it was the UAW bureaucracy that seized on a court injunction as the excuse to shut down the University of California strike against the police repression of anti-genocide protesters.”

The 2024 UC walkout began after police assaults on campus encampments and eventually involved tens of thousands of academic workers. This year, more than 40,000 UC academic workers voted 93.3 percent to authorize another strike. The UAW kept them on the job after their contracts expired March 1 and ultimately brought back a tentative agreement without calling the strike.

At Harvard, nearly 96 percent of participating graduate workers voted to strike and 4,000 workers walked out April 21. Teaching Fellows earning as little as \$18 to \$21 an hour demanded higher wages, improved benefits and protections for international workers facing ICE. The UAW ordered them back after 40 days without a contract. Nearly 1,000 full-time contract faculty at NYU also struck in March; UAW officials ended that walkout less than 48 hours later.

Budget cuts are also being used to offset nominal wage gains. At Cal State University, Long Beach (CSULB) department chairs have reported hiring fewer graduate student workers because of budget cuts, with some departments cutting graduate-student staffing by as much as half. UAW Local 4123 says its 2023–25 contract delivered pay raises of more than 10 percent, while CSULB has acknowledged a roughly \$15 million structural deficit. Reduced staffing leaves fewer graduate workers to carry the work, wiping out part or all of the benefit of higher pay through heavier workloads.

“My campaign fights for the unification of all academic workers—graduate employees, adjuncts, lecturers, postdocs—on a program of guaranteed living wages, full-time secure positions, and an end to the university’s role as an enforcer of political repression,” Lehman writes.

The UAW’s first direct election of international officers in 2022 demonstrated how thoroughly academic workers had been disfranchised by the union bureaucracy.

“Most of you, if the last election is any guide, don’t even know that a vote for UAW president and other top officers is now underway, or know much about Shawn Fain’s record, let alone the other candidates,” Lehman writes.

Only 104,776 ballots were counted out of more than 1.1 million eligible active and retired UAW members. At California State University, 29 ballots were cast among more than 11,000 Local 4123 members. At the University of Washington, 72 were counted among roughly 9,000 members. At the University of California, turnout was only 2.6 percent even though 48,000 academic workers were in the middle of their six-week strike. More ballots nationally were returned as undeliverable than were actually cast.

The timetable for the current election threatens to reproduce the same disenfranchisement. The deadline to request a replacement ballot is September 23. UC Davis begins fall instruction that day, while Irvine, UCLA, Riverside, San Diego, Santa Barbara and Santa Cruz begin classes September 24. Tens of thousands of UC academic workers on the quarter-system campuses will therefore be returning to work only shortly before the replacement-ballot deadline.

“I am the only candidate who opposes the escalating world war and Trump’s drive to establish a fascist dictatorship in this country,” Lehman continues. “My program calls for abolishing the UAW bureaucracy and transferring power to the workers on the shopfloor, through rank-and-file committees that unite workers in the US with their brothers and sisters in Canada, Mexico and around the world.”

Lehman rejects the portrayal of the radicalization on the campuses as separate from developments among industrial workers.

“Corporate politicians and media, along with the official ‘left’ in academia, falsely portray the working class as too conservative to fight for revolutionary change. I know firsthand that workers are seething just as much over social inequality,

endless wars, and the threat to democratic rights.”

At Nexteer Automotive in Saginaw, Michigan, workers rejected three successive UAW-backed agreements this spring, by 96 percent, 73 percent and 55 percent respectively, and voted 86 percent to authorize a strike. The UAW kept them on the job. In August, roughly 10,000 Deere workers rejected a company proposal to extend their contract another two years.

“Socialism cannot be won by pressuring the Democratic Party or any other capitalist party,” Lehman writes. “It is built by workers organizing independently and fighting for political power themselves, and that fight is exactly what this campaign is for.”

“The radicalization sweeping through the universities and the working class has so far found its initial expression in votes for DSA candidates,” Lehman writes. “But the program of Mamdani and others like him is not socialism—it is working within the Democratic Party to tinker at the edges of capitalism while the war, the dictatorship and the plunder of the planet proceed.”

“There is no socialism without the working class, without the fight for political power, and the expropriation of the oligarchs.”

Lehman concludes:

Your fight cannot be separated from that of autoworkers and other industrial workers—the same corporations and the same government stand against you both, and only our united strength can defeat them.

I am calling on you to build rank-and-file committees in every university, factory and workplace. These committees—controlled by the workers themselves, not the union bureaucracy—must serve as defensive organizations, the center of an anti-bureaucratic revolt, and the embryo of the self-government the working class will need to take power.



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