UC ACADEMIC WORKERS: BUILD A RANK-AND-FILE STRIKE COMMITTEE TO PREVENT A SELLOUT BY THE UAW BUREAUCRACY!



BY WILL LEHMAN
Mack Trucks worker and rank-and-file candidate for UAW president

Are you a student or academic worker at the University of California? Contact me to share why you're striking and what your working conditions are like.

Dear Fellow Workers,

The strike by 48,000 academic workers in the University of California system is a historic struggle that requires the support of all workers. Your fight for the doubling of starting wages, cost-of-living protection and affordable housing, health care and childcare resonates with millions of workers across the US and throughout world.

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But a warning must be made: If your strike remains in the hands of the UAW bureaucracy it will be isolated and betrayed like the 2020 COLA strike and so many other struggles.

Strikers have already informed me that the Student Researchers United has dropped the demands for COLA and annual wage increases, defying the will of their own members and breaking ranks with striking workers in other unions.

At the same time, UAW bargainers have increasingly held secret talks with management, ignoring demands by rank-and-file workers that every bargaining session, in full, be live-streamed to the membership.

This has provoked a firestorm of opposition with strikers denouncing the bargaining committee and insisting, “No COLA, no contract!” Increasingly there is a sense that rank-and-file workers must take control of the situation or the strike will be betrayed.

Picket at UC Berkeley

The officers in the UAW locals are currently under enormous pressure from the UAW “Solidarity House” apparatus to drop everything and shut down the strike. The union bureaucracy cannot tolerate academic workers winning major wages raises and COLA because it will encourage autoworkers and other workers in the UAW and beyond to demand the same. It would give an enormous impetus to the rank-and-file rebellion that is already underway, and which is an existential threat to the privileged positions of the pro-company police force that runs the UAW.

But this is precisely what is necessary. I urge striking UC academic workers to follow the lead of autoworkers, railroad workers and educators, who have formed rank-and-file committees as a new center of democratic decision-making and workers’ power.

At every campus, academic workers should elect representatives to a rank-and-file strike committee, which will compile a list of non-negotiable demands and oppose any efforts by the UAW apparatus to push through a contract dictated by the state Democrats and the corporate and financial interests they speak for.

The aim of these committees must be to transfer the power from the UAW apparatus to the rank and file. They must prepare to countermand any attempt to shut down the strike, including over the Thanksgiving holiday, on the basis of meaningless promises of an improvement in “negotiations,” and without guarantees that the demands of strikers are met.

Workers must demand that all striking UAW members at UC and other locations be paid their lost income out of the $800 million strike fund, which is financed through workers’ dues money.

At the same time, the broadest appeal must be made to all workers in the UAW and beyond. There is immense support for your struggle, and the more workers know about it, the more this support will grow.

In the last several days, full-time faculty workers have cancelled classes in defiance of the faculty union, affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers. Janitors took action into their own hands after AFSCME officials did nothing about UC management ordering them to work on the holidays, and they forced them to rescind the order. Resident physicians and interns who protested at the UCLA Medical Center want to fight, alongside UC academic workers.

Absolutely no confidence, however, can be placed in the UAW apparatus. It is controlled by a corrupt group of highly paid officials who live off our dues money and exist for the sole purpose of selling us out.

Autoworkers in the UAW have a long and bitter experience of betrayals at the hands of the apparatus. I was on strike at Mack Trucks in 2019, and during my election campaign I have spoken to workers who have been on strike over the last three years at General Motors, Volvo Trucks and John Deere, along with workers currently striking at CNH Industrial, HarperCollins and The New School.

Lehman speaking with striking workers at the New School in NYC

In every case, workers have found themselves not only in a struggle against the corporate bosses and the government, but also their servants in the UAW bureaucracy, which isolated their struggles and put them on starvation-level strike pay.

The UAW is holding its first ever election of its president and other top officers. It is only doing this because of the massive corruption at the top, which led to the jailing of two former presidents and other top UAW officers who embezzled union dues and accepted corporate bribes in exchange for signing sellout contracts.

This is an apparatus that gives millions of dollars to the Democratic Party because it relies on the union bureaucracy to suppress the class struggle and impose the dictates of the corporate and financial elite. As your struggle shows, the Democrats, no less than the Republicans, are the enemies of the working class.

The UC Regents' governance board, which oversees collective bargaining and compensation issues, consists of Governor Gavin Newsom and a gang of Democratic Party budget-cutters, multimillionaire corporate executives and highly paid union bureaucrats. These are people who claim there is no money to pay us enough to keep a roof over our heads.

We, as workers, must take matters into our own hands. This is why I urge you to form rank-and-file strike committees to countermand any efforts of the apparatus to shut down your struggle and organize an appeal to the broadest layers of the working class.

In the working class, there is an immense reservoir of support. Just this week, tens of thousands of workers in the largest railroad union voted to reject a pro-company contract pushed by the Biden White House and the leaders of the SMART-TD union.

Tens of thousands of pilots and other airline workers have voted to reject contracts and authorize strikes in recent weeks. On the West Coast, 22,000 workers have been kept on the job since July without a contract. In every section of the working class, there is a desire to fight stagnating wages, mounting inflation and increased exploitation.

UC academic workers: Your struggle can become the starting point for a broad offensive in the entire working class! But only if you take the initiative yourself! Don't let your strike be betrayed and shut down! Form a rank-and-file strike committee to formulate and fight for your demands! Turn out to the entire working class!

JOIN THE FIGHT FOR WORKERS' POWER!

Get involved with the rank-and-file campaign in the UAW elections.

willforuawpresident.org/get-involved