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USA

48,000 Academic Workers on Strike in California

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Some 48,000 academic workers on ten campuses of the University of California walked out on strike on November 14 demanding higher pay and increased benefits in what is the largest strike in the United States so far this year.

It is also the largest strike in the history of higher education in America. The graduate student workers average salary is \$24,000 a year, which is not a living wage with the cost of rent for an apartment in the cities where the campuses are located averaging \$24,000 per year and \$37,000 in Los Angeles. And the inflation rate is currently over 7 percent, is eroding workers' purchasing power. Some students work second or third jobs, other sell their blood, and yet others have even become homeless.

The union is demanding an average salary of \$54,000 per year for most workers and \$70,000 for post-docs (who currently earn \$55,361) with a cost-of-living clause that would adjust for inflation. The union is also demanding \$2,000 a month for child care, expanded parental leave, and passes for public transportation. (Professors in the California Faculty Association whose salaries average \$85,000 to \$176,000 are not involved in the strike.)

Neil Sweeney, a post-doc in microbiology and president of UAW Local 5810, says the union is trying to make "transformational changes" that will improve workers' lives and also improve education and research. Contract negotiations had gone on for more than a year when the strike began, and the union has filed 28 unfair labor practice complaints for the university's failure to bargain in good faith. The university administration wants mediation, but the union wants to continue negotiating while striking.

Workers on strike, post-doctoral scholars, academic researchers, academic student employees (teaching assistants, readers, and tutors) and graduate researchers on the university's ten campuses spread over 500 miles from north to south. They are members of three local unions all affiliated with the United Auto Workers union (UAW). (In the United States, as industry shrank, various industrial unions began to organize academic employees at the country's universities who today are represented not only by the UAW but sometimes by the United Electrical Workers, the Communication Workers, or the United Steel Workers, as well as by the American Federation of Teachers or the National Education Association.) Striking employees such as teaching assistants do much of the actual teaching and grading at the university and without them many classes have been forced to close while students' final examination grades may not get done on time. Since going on strike, the UC workers have received the support of the California Federation of Labor that called for the cancellation of all events on campus. Teamsters representing UPS have said that they will not be making deliveries to the campus while the strike continues.

The Democratic Party governor Gavin Newsome has the biggest hand in running UC. The University of California is administered by a Board of Regents, 18 are appointed by the governor for 12 years, while others are top government officials. The regents oversee the \$43.9 billion budget, primarily coming from the state budget and student tuition of \$14,226 a year. University finances depend primarily on taxes on corporations, and California is home to some of the country's largest: Walt Disney, Chevron, Apple and Google, and many others. Yet these companies pay a flat tax rate of only 8.84 percent. Ultimately, the UC strikes must win concessions from the Governor and the state legislature which controls both the taxes and the state budget.

This huge strike, especially if it wins, could have a significant impact on other workers, in higher education and public employees. Together with the recent national strike by 2,000 workers in 100 Starbucks stores and the organizing at Amazon, we can see that younger workers are turning unions into fighting organizations.

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