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USA

Graduate Workers Win a Strike; Starbuck Workers Organize One

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After five weeks on strike, the largest higher education strike in U.S. history and the biggest strike this year, 36,000 graduate workers at the University of California's ten campuses who belong to the United Auto Workers union reached a tentative settlement on December 16 that would give workers pay raises and improved health coverage and childcare benefits. While a majority of the union's negotiating team voted for the contract, a significant minority opposes it and has called on the membership to vote against it and continue the strike to win a better agreement. A group of 12,000 post-doctoral workers settled earlier. The 48,000 strikers affected some 300,000 students waiting for grades and about 70,000 for their graduation diploma, which has been a point of leverage for the union.

The tentative agreement would give these workers, depending on their location in the state, basic wages of \$25,000 per year immediately and between \$34,000 and \$36,486 by 2024. They would also receive \$2,025 per semester for childcare and 100% health coverage in many cases. The final vote is December 19 – 23.

Graduate workers, who have felt like serfs in the education system, have joined in a variety of unions and have been organizing around the country. They are not an easy group to organize given that universities have resisted organization by the graduates who work at dozens of public and private universities, are broken into many different job categories, are also dependent on their department heads for their jobs and for other income in the form of fellowships. Moreover, every two or three years the entire cohort of graduate workers moves on, leaving the university to take jobs in the public or private sectors, making it difficult to maintain membership and preserve organizational and political continuity.

Now, however, with support from major unions and driven by inflation, many are organizing, striking, and often winning. For example, at the New School, where 90 percent of classes are taught by non-tenured adjuncts and lecturers, many of them employed part-time, they won modest improvements in wages and health care benefits after a three-week strike.

Organizing drives in higher education are important for the labor movement for several reasons. First, because of the low rate of total unionization of the workforce at 10.3 percent in 2021, every victory is important. Second, these workers are demonstrating that strikes can be effective and that workers can win. Third, these graduate workers go on to other industries and services taking with them their union experience.

The same day that U of C workers reached a tentative agreement to end their strike, hundreds of workers at 100 Starbucks stores have begun a three-day strike to protest the company's unfair labor practices. Starbucks workers have won government supervised union representation election at 270 stores, about 80% of all attempts, but in response to union organizing the company has closed stores and fired workers, both of which are illegal. It has also legally offered improvements in wages and conditions in stores where union organizing is not taking place as an inducement for workers to reject union representation.

"They're doubling down on their union-busting, so we're doubling down, too," said Michelle Eisen, a barista from a Starbucks café in Buffalo, New York that was the first to vote for the union a year ago. "We're demanding fair staffing, an end to store closures, and that Starbucks bargain with us in good faith." Organizing Starbucks is a monumental task given that there are 9,265 company-operated and 6,608 licensed stores in the United States.

The Democratic Socialists of America is involved in graduate student unions around the country and has a solidarity

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campaign with Starbucks' workers and has mobilized its members to join the workers picket lines. No doubt a few of these workers will join DSA, which aims to become a working-class organization.

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