

48,000 California academic workers strike for higher wages

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An estimated 48,000 academic workers walked off the job on Monday, disrupting activities at one of California's largest public university systems [Jeff Chiu/AP Photo]

Los Angeles, November 15 (RHC)-- More than 48,000 academic workers in the University of California system have gone on strike over what they say are unfair labour practices and low wages. Researchers, postdoctoral scholars, teaching assistants and other employees headed to the picket line on Monday, launching what they describe as the largest academic worker strike in U.S. history. The move is expected to halt activities within the University of California system, a network of 10 public universities and more

than 280,000 students.

“Our material conditions have been so bad for so long that a lot of people have run out of patience with the university,” Janna Haider, a graduate student in the history department at the University of California, Santa Barbara, told Al Jazeera over the phone.

Haider is the recording secretary for the Santa Barbara branch of the United Automobile Workers 2865, one of the unions representing academic workers. It stated that 98 percent of workers voted in favour of strike authorisation in early November.

“We make about \$23,000 a year, and that’s unlivable in many parts of California. When I get paid, half of my paycheque immediately goes to my landlord, and I’ve gotten used to saying a little prayer when I swipe my card to buy groceries,” Haider said.

The strike takes place during a time of growing labour unrest in the United States, as workers vie for a larger slice of the economic pie and push back against labour conditions that have placed many under strain, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Among the workers’ core demands are salaries of at least \$54,000 a year for graduate-student workers and annual cost-of-living increases. The union is also calling for increased job security, greater accessibility for workers with disabilities and additional assistance for students with children.

A report issued by the University of California student group United for a Fair Workplace found that 92 percent of graduate-student workers felt burdened by their rents, spending upwards of 30 percent of their paycheques on housing. Half reported paying more than 50 percent. A number of labor organisations, including the California Teachers Association, took to social media to show their support for the strike.

“Solidarity with the 50,000 University of California academic workers on the picket lines today,” the association said in a Twitter post today on behalf of its 300,000-plus members.

In a statement, the University of California said that it plans to ensure that classes continue and denies that it engaged in unfair labour practices. It claims to have been “generous, responsive to union priorities” and that it was committed to “continuing to negotiate in good faith and reaching full agreements as soon as possible”.

With final exams just several weeks away, the statement warns that the strike could “adversely impact students and other members of the UC community.” Striking graduate students have countered that their work is essential to the functioning of the University of California system and that low wages, paired with large workloads, have put workers and students alike under growing strain.

Kevan Antonio Aguilar, an assistant professor of history at the University of California, Irvine, told Al Jazeera that he was joining the picket line to show support for the graduate workers, saying that “extremely precarious” conditions left many living under the poverty line.

“Perhaps more than any previous labour conflict at the UCs, faculty are becoming increasingly more vocal about their support for the strike,” he said, adding that some instructors had cancelled lectures in solidarity with the strike.

California contains nearly 250 four-year universities and nearly 140 two-year schools, making it home to the largest number of higher education institutions in the US, according to the data firm Statista. Many schools in the University of California system are located in areas with high costs of living and tight housing markets such as Los Angeles, the San Francisco Bay and San Diego. Students there struggle to afford housing, pushing some into homelessness.

After decades of declining unionisation, the U.S. has seen a recent uptick in labour activity across a wide range of professions. Workers at the coffee chain Starbucks have petitioned to unionise in dozens of locations across the country, and more than 15,000 nurses went on strike for three days in the state of Minnesota over what they described as low pay and staffing shortages.

Workers for Amazon scored their first successful unionisation at a warehouse in New York in April, but workers voted down a similar effort at another warehouse in upstate New York in October. “Many of those striking at the UCs have come of age during a time when mass collective action has exposed the growing disparities experienced throughout the United States,” Aguilar told Al Jazeera.

“The surge in unionisation in this country speaks to a growing sense that collective action and solidarity are the most effective means to bring about a more equitable and more just society.”

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